

THE EFFECT OF MENTORING ON THE UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES AT A PUBLIC RESEARCH INSTITUTION

A Thesis

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Graduate and Professional Studies in Education

Abstract  
of  
THE EFFECT OF MENTORING ON THE UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE OF  
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*Statement of Problem*

African American men account for only 12.2% of total postsecondary enrollment—inclusive of both community colleges and 4-year institutions—nearly 3% less than the number of African American women enrolled (15.5%) in 2015 (Digest of Educational Statistics, 2016). Being underrepresented at a large research university can have a detrimental effect, particularly on students of color. They often feel isolated and question their academic abilities (Chesler, Lewis, & Crowfoot, 2005). Often, without a sense of community, a student’s educational attainment can suffer. To build this community and to improve student connectedness and involvement, a range of student support services are commonly provided by universities to address both student academic and social needs. Student groups built around common interests and shared goals can be an effective way to connect with others on campus (Dubois, 2014). Past studies have also shown a positive and significant correlation between mentoring relationships and academic persistence (Brittian, Sy, & Stokes, 2009; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Nora & Crisp, 2007; Satyanarayana, Li, & Braenky, 2014).

### *Sources of Data*

This qualitative study included personal interviews with four African American/Black male undergraduate students at a large, public research institution. The purpose of the study was to better understand the impact, if any, that participation in a mentoring program specifically designed for African American/Black male students had on their undergraduate experience. The study focused on a student's educational experience before and after participating in the mentoring program.

### *Conclusions Reached*

Overall, participating in the mentoring program positively impacted the students' undergraduate experience by providing a space in which they felt comfortable discussing barriers they felt on campus, felt a sense of community and brotherhood, and learned necessary skills for student success. Participating in the program enhanced the students' campus engagement by validating their negative experiences on campus, provided positive counter spaces, allowed for positive interactions with staff and faculty, and increased the students' sense of belonging.

\_\_\_\_\_, Committee Chair  
Virginia L. Dixon, Ed.D.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the following amazing people in my life:

To my mum and dad: thank you for showing me what perseverance looks like and that with hard work and dedication I can accomplish anything. Thank you for always supporting me and encouraging me to never give up.

To my brother and sister, Denesh and Sonya: thank you for showing me what true strength is. I know I can keep pushing and moving forward because I see you both doing it every day.

To my niece and nephew, Anoushka and Krishan: thank you for being the two biggest blessings in my life. You motivate me to do better and be better. I love you both to the moon and back.

To Dr. Rich Shintaku: thank you for making me believe I could do this. Your support and guidance throughout this process have been invaluable, without which I would not have made it through. Thank you for your encouragement and insightful observations, thank you for pushing me to do better.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background**

Compared to their White counterparts and to African American women, Black males enroll in colleges and universities at lower rates, and their numbers continue to decline (Brittian, Sy, & Stokes, 2009). Black men account for only 12.2% of total postsecondary enrollment, inclusive of both community colleges and 4-year institutions. This is nearly 3% less than the number of Black women enrolled (15.5%) in 2015 (Digest of Educational Statistics, 2016). Both college enrollment levels and college graduation rates continue to diverge between African American men and women (Ewert, 2012). In response, both education researchers and the institutions themselves have found it critical to identify factors that contribute to the successful retention and graduation of Black male students. While their academic success is influenced by a variety of factors, having a strong and committed mentor through critical points in higher education is high among them (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007). Establishing a relationship with a mentor can significantly improve the retention and persistence of African American students, especially African American men in higher education (LaVant, Anderson, & Tiggs, 1997). Developing a mentor-mentee relationship increases the connection a student feels toward the university, contributes to feelings of belonging, and increases the likelihood of student retention (Mason, 1998).

Nora and Crisp (2007) highlighted the importance of mentoring as a resource to successfully combat the declining graduation and retention rates for African American males in higher education. The need for resources, such as mentoring for African American males, is vital, as this group consistently faces sociocultural and academic challenges when pursuing a higher education degree (Cross & Slater, 2000, 2001; Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2000). Though institutions of higher education are currently working diligently to diversify their student and staff populations, African American students at historically White colleges and universities (HWCU) have long found themselves at odds with policies and practices developed for White men (Bush, 1997). Coupled with this is a faculty population and pedagogy that is slow to adapt to the diverse experiences, which students are now bringing with them into the classroom. With some variation across and among states, the priorities of the United States higher education system have long been attuned to the educational needs of the upper middle class and to White men in particular (Bush, 1997).

Due to both structural inequalities and differences in K-12 preparatory outcomes, African American students must navigate a system stacked against them when beginning their collegiate career. At HWCU, Black students are more likely to experience racial isolation, both within the student population and compared to the faculty, thus impeding social integration, which is linked with a student's likelihood of persistence and ultimate graduation (Tinto, 1993). Having a strong and reliable mentor through this experience helps significantly offset some of the negative impact of this structural inequality and

allows for the opportunity to address individual student needs while contributing to overall student success. Past research has further supported that fostering mentoring relationships is positively correlated with increased persistence and degree completion among African American male students (Brittian et al., 2009).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Being underrepresented at a large research university can have a detrimental effect, particularly on students of color, causing them to feel isolated and question their academic abilities (Chesler, Lewis, & Crowfoot, 2005). Often without a sense of community, a student's educational attainment can suffer. To build community and to improve student connectedness and involvement, a range of student support services are commonly provided by universities to address both student academic and social needs. Student groups built around common interests and shared goals can be an effective way to connect with others on campus (Dubois, 2014). Past studies have also shown a positive and significant correlation between mentoring relationships and academic persistence (Brittian et al., 2009; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Nora & Crisp, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012; Satyanarayana, Li, & Braenky, 2014). The present study builds upon this finding with the following research questions:

1. What effect does participating in a mentoring program specifically designed for African American males have on the academic experience of undergraduate African American male students?

2. How do African American male students describe their campus engagement after receiving the support of being mentored?
3. Does participating in a mentoring program specifically designed for African American males help offset the perceived negative effects of attending a large research institution where African Americans are underrepresented?

### **Significance of the Study**

African American students are underrepresented in higher education (LaVant et al., 1997; Tatum, 1997; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). While specific pipeline and yield programs and targeted outreach can increase their enrollment, once they arrive on campus, other tactics are needed to support their persistence toward graduation. By highlighting the experience of students participating in mentoring programs specifically designed for African American males, in contrast to mentorship programs targeting underrepresented minority (URM) students in general, or which are open to all students, this study aims to contribute to and support the body of literature currently in existence around the effects of mentors on diverse students. This study also hopes to inform educational administrators and practitioners regarding the potential impact of targeted mentorship programs, specifically for the population of African American males on campuses where they are vastly underrepresented.

While reform is needed in the current system of education, guidance and encouragement from a trusted source and assistance navigating educational pathways can

help students thrive in an academically rigorous environment such as college (Darling-Hammond, 2007). A student needs to be made to feel like they matter, that their education matters, and that they have something to offer intellectually to succeed. Other stressors, such as societal pressures, familial obligations, and financial worries can also be addressed through guidance and training (Dubois, 2014).

The findings from this study may be used to help leaders in education understand the challenges certain groups of students face when attempting to navigate their educational pathway. Moreover, it can assist in creating solutions that will remove barriers to their education and lead to academic success and persistence to graduation.

### **Definition of Terms**

#### **African American/Black**

Both terms are used interchangeably throughout this study to refer to persons of African descent born in the U.S.

#### **Barriers**

Factors that can impede a student's academic progression such as, but not limited to, low socioeconomic status, a lack support, and discrimination

#### **Codeswitching**

The broad definition is "the switching from the linguistic system of one language or dialect to that of another" (Code-switching, n.d., para. 1). However, for the

purposes of this study, the definition is the ability of non-Whites to change their speech in an effort to assimilate into society.

#### Mentee

Person (student) being supported and instructed by someone who is familiar with a situation

#### Mentor

An experienced and successful person who can provide counsel, instruction, and guidance and facilitate the academic advancement and/or career development of the person identified as the mentee (Blackwell, 1989)

#### Microaggression

“Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271).

#### Persistence

A student’s determination to complete the requirements to attain a degree from an institution of higher education (student’s choice)

#### PWI

Predominantly White institution – any college or university that has over 50% enrollment of White students

## Retention

Institutional measure of persistence

## Structural Inequality

Inequalities embedded in the foundation and function of an organization that builds up one group of individuals over others

## Underrepresented Minority (URM)

Those who identify as African American / Black, Filipino, Hmong or Vietnamese, Hispanic / Latinx, Native American / Alaskan Native or Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander (UCSF, n.d.)

## Zero-Tolerance Policy

“A nondiscretionary approach that mandates a set of often-severe, predetermined consequences to student misbehavior that is to be applied without regard to ‘seriousness of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context’” (Aull, 2012, p. 182).

## **Organization of the Remainder of the Study**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature focused on mentoring, barriers that impede academic progress, and the importance of fostering a campus climate that positively engages all students. Research methodology and design are described in Chapter 3, and Chapter 4 presents the data

analyses and findings. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a summary of the study and implications for further research and professional practice.

## Chapter 2

### REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

Research documents that African American males have low enrollment rates in colleges and universities. This can be caused by many factors, such as academic and financial as well as by social barriers, that can impede their educational attainment; though a student may attain admittance into a college or university, they can struggle to persist once on campus, and many are not retained. Typically, the lack of retention is because the barriers they face prior to their enrollment still exist, and they may have less support and may not know where to find resources to help provide needed support once enrolled (Nora & Crisp, 2007). The purpose of this study was to explore the impact, if any, of how a specific resource, such as mentoring, can be utilized by the target population to improve their undergraduate experience and increase retention and persistence to graduation. Mentoring can help students acclimatize and increase their sense of belonging on campus by helping them form connections with their peers, faculty, and staff, as well as by showing students how to utilize academic and student services to help decrease barriers they may be facing (Mason, 1998)

While support services exist on campuses, students may not be aware of them. Sometimes, even if they are aware, some may not feel welcome enough to be able to access resources. Prior to providing resources to this group, it is important to study why

the resources on campus may not be enough to support them. Many of the barriers students face are often left unsupported by the institution to which they belong, causing a lack of engagement. Additionally, this can also become a hindrance to academic progress if left untreated. Once barriers have been identified, providing tailored programs such as mentoring designed specifically for African American male students could positively impact student retention and persistence to graduation by increasing their engagement on campus, supporting them holistically, while helping them breach barriers that could negatively impact them. Programs would need to be created within welcoming spaces that make students feel comfortable and safe in their vulnerability as they seek help (Dubois, 2014).

For institutions to create effective programs for students, it is important to be able to identify and understand what barriers students are facing. African American males are often experiencing barriers unrecognized by the institutions they attend. This chapter investigates the barriers African American males face when underrepresented on campus, as well as how this can negatively impact their academic success. Campus engagement has been linked to positive academic outcomes, such as persistence to graduation. Support services, like mentoring programs, have been shown to increase persistence.

This chapter provides a review of the literature explaining the theoretical frameworks of departure theory and of Black identity development, barriers to education, mentoring as it relates to academic persistence through campus engagement, and the

importance of creating a campus climate free of microaggressions, an environment that would be conducive to student persistence and retention.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

### **Theory of Departure**

Over the course of the past four decades, the factors impacting student retention have remained some of the most popular and significant areas to study in higher education (Swail, 2004). Retaining students, especially through their first two years, has remained a struggle for higher education institutions and one that especially negatively impacts students of color. While enrollment rates for the collective group of students of color are comparable to that of their White counterparts, the enrollment rate of students who identify as Black or African American is still comparatively low. In addition, African American students have significantly reduced access to prestigious 4-year universities and graduate compared to that of their counterparts (Swail, 2004). Tinto (1993) determined that academic challenges, failure to make a decision about one's academic or career goals, and being unable to acclimatize intellectually and socially to college life are the three main components that lead to student departure from an institution. In his Student Integration Model, Tinto (1975) theorized for a student to persist, they must be formally and informally academically and socially integrated on campus (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's theory (1975) has developed over time to be more inclusive of the diverse experiences of the current student population. For example, earlier renditions argued that to successfully transition to college, a student needed to sever all ties with their pre-collegiate communities; however, this has since been found to be untrue (Tinto, 2006). The strength of a student's connection with their previous community is now understood to be crucial to their persistence while in college (Tinto, 1975). The theory has also been expanded to encompass the whole student, promoting a more holistic approach to student development to inform what a student needs to persist. For example, the needs of a single-parent, transfer student will not necessarily align with those of an incoming, first-generation freshman. How well institutions are able to proactively identify and support these differences will directly impact the persistence and academic success of students on their campus (Tinto, 2006).

Tinto established that for a student to persist, they must feel socially and academically engaged on campus. Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) found that African American students benefited more than White students from increasing their engagement in educationally effective activities. That is, although African American students at the lowest levels of engagement were less likely to persist than their White counterparts, as their engagement increased to within about one standard deviation below the mean, they had about the same probability of returning as White students. As African American student engagement reached the average amount, they became more likely than White students to return for a second year.

Mentoring programs can help increase engagement by building the connection some students do not feel towards their institution. By building community ties and validating the student's sense of belonging on campus, mentoring programs directly support student success. Representation also matters, especially for underrepresented students, as it is important that students can identify with the faculty and staff with whom they interact (Cujet, 2006). Such representation is not always easily achieved, as many institutions are still working to diversify their workforce. Due to the limited population, faculty with whom students may benefit from interacting may not teach courses many students are required to take for their majors (Lee, 1999). Targeted mentoring programs can directly connect students to staff and faculty on campus that they may otherwise not have had the opportunity to meet. Fostering a relationship with faculty or staff members on campus can increase a student's connection to the institution, making their decision to persist less daunting and more manageable as they feel supported during their academic career (Tinto, 1987).

### **Model of Black Identity Development**

Since William E. Cross introduced the model of Black Identity Development in 1971, it has led to the discovery of how racial identity, especially within the African American community, is crucial to an individual's mental health, wellness, and self-confidence. Black Identity Development, or Nigrescence Theory, has been revised since Cross developed it in 1971, yet the original version is still widely used to explain the

process of development in five stages: Pre-counter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment.

The theory explains that during the Pre-Counter stage, individuals identifying as African American or Black have unconsciously internalized many of the negative stereotypes perpetuated about Black people, which causes them to have an anti-Black, pro-White viewpoint (Cross, 1991). Depending on which stage of Black identity development a person is in, attitudes toward being Black within the Black community can vary to the extreme, from embracing being Black to being anti-Black (Ritchey, 2014). The prevalent characteristics of this stage present when a person has unwittingly assimilated and “favor[s] a Eurocentric cultural perspective” (Cross, 1991, p. 193) and favors Whiteness over their own Black culture and identity.

A person is within the Encounter stage when they experience racism, either on a personal or systemic level, that causes them to reevaluate their lives up until the present. Experiencing instances of racism, such as being rejected by their White counterparts, can cause the realization that no matter how hard one tries, they are not considered an equal by those who identify as White. Thus, as a person of color, they can never truly achieve Whiteness. This causes an intense focus on their Black identity and what it means to be part of a group negatively impacted by racism. In the Immersion-Emersion stage, a person delves into learning about Blackness and surrounds themselves with symbols that identify their culture while simultaneously rejecting any symbols associated with Whiteness. While the “Eurocentric cultural perspective” (Cross, 1991, p. 193) was

favored during the Pre-Counter stage, in this phase it has been replaced by one that glorifies African heritage to the extreme, often disparaging White people and culture. The Immersion phase is when a person consciously decides to learn about their history and culture supported by others who share the same identity (Cross, 1978). In the Emersion phase, negative feelings toward White people and culture decline as a person's exploration into Blackness causes Black love and self-confidence to increase (Cross, 1971).

During the Internalization and Internalization-Commitment phases, being secure in one's Black identity makes befriending White people once again a possibility, as well as building solidarity with other groups who also experience oppression as people of color. The distinction between those who have internalized their new identity and those who internalize and act within their new identity is the fifth and final stage of Internalization-Commitment (Cross, 1978).

It is vital for institutions to have a thorough understanding of student development, as identity development and conflict have a significant impact on student departure from a campus, specifically for Black male students (Harper & Quaye, 2007). Black students, especially when vastly underrepresented on campus, can face factors such as racism and racial isolation that severely hinder their identity development and can lead to low persistence and graduation rates (Harper & Quaye, 2007). Goodstein and Ponterotto (1997) found that Black students with a higher ethnic attachment also had higher self-esteem. Developing a positive racial identity during the internalization phase

is linked with academic success; the student has confidence in who they are and their own ability (Bakari, 1997). Thus, it is crucial for institution members to understand the stages of Black identity development so effective services, including but not limited to mentoring, can be developed and utilized supporting quarterly retention and timely graduation (Ritchey, 2014).

### **Barriers to Education**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), approximately 20.4 million students are enrolled in colleges and universities across America, out of which approximately only 14% identified as Black. Having such a diminished presence within the campus community, academic experiences such as campus engagement are crucial for student success (Wood & Ireland, 2014). A student's race, socioeconomic status, neighborhood, and school location can all effect how successful they will be in their attainment of a higher education (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Many of the factors impacting persistence and retention are connected. For example, a student's race is often related to where they live, what school they attend, if they graduated high school, where they go to college, and how educators and their peers perceive them. This, in turn, can affect the way they view themselves (Wood & Ireland, 2014). Family support is crucial to the academic persistence of African American males. The support they receive is vital in their perseverance when they encounter challenges on campus, be it academic or social. The experiences African American male students have

in and outside of the classroom can have an impact on their academic success and cause them to forgo pursuing their degree.

First-generation students are especially susceptible to outside influences, as they may have less familial support. Often times, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are not supported in their decision to pursue higher education because their families may want them to start earning to help support the family. Parents who have not attended college are less likely to know how to support their student in navigating their college experience (Nora & Crisp, 2007). Students with parents who have a college degree are more likely to promote the importance of attaining an education and are able to prepare their student in ways that parents without a college degree cannot.

Once on campus, utilizing student services can help mitigate some of the barriers by providing support in academic, financial, and social areas, but only if students choose to take advantage of them (Bush & Bush, 2010). Many African American males face challenges when navigating the pipeline of education. They do not persist to graduation due to factors such as lack of support from faculty and administration, low sense of belonging due to a negative campus climate, and financial and socioeconomic challenges (Swail, 2004). While stuck in a system working against them, a student may choose to pursue their education past earning a high school diploma. Having thus decided it is important or having chosen a profession that requires a degree, they therefore implicitly accept the importance of further education.

A competitive, public 4-year university can cost about \$20,000 to attend (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016b); this can be a major factor when deciding to attend college. While many grants, scholarships, and other financial aid are available, taking out loans and increasing student debt is not particularly attractive to students. With increasing tuition costs, many students are left with unmet aid, which they then have to supplement through their own funding, whether that be through increased loan debt or by employment opportunities. Working while going to school full-time can negatively impact a student's grade point average; cause them to fail classes, which can lead to increased time in school which increases debt; or it can cause a student to drop out altogether (Harper, 2012).

Those of the population who are labeled as at-risk and who hail from neighborhoods that do not possess the economic capital to invest in their schools are unprepared academically. Attending an institution where they are vastly underrepresented, they are also culturally unprepared, and left to decipher a second curriculum that is crucial for them to understand in order for them to be successful in higher education (Strayhorn, 2012). While resources such as mentoring programs exist that can benefit African American males, they are the least likely students to take advantage of them (Bush & Bush, 2010).

Being academically unprepared for college can also lead to low persistence rates for this community. The cause for this can again be linked to their socioeconomic status (SES) and the community in which they were raised. Due to No Child Left Behind

(NCLB) introducing high-stakes testing that widened the achievement gap in K-12 public educations, especially for communities of color and low socioeconomic status, many students are ill equipped for higher education. This type of testing caused the curriculum that is taught to become very narrow. The unequal distribution of funds penalizes high-needs schools that serve underperforming students, instead of offering more resources with which to educate their students (Darling-Hammond, 2007). This negative impact is felt primarily in urban communities, where subjects such as art, music, and social studies are nonexistent, as resources are allocated toward test preparation; it causes disengagement, as students are neither invested nor intrigued with their education. They are not learning to become critical thinkers through relatable material that resonates with their life experiences being taught through a multicultural lens that uses current events and movements to make learning tangible (Emdin, 2016).

Due to the detrimental effects on the education of low SES students and students of color in primarily urban areas, many educators and community members, i.e., parents, resisted this mandated way of teaching. In protesting the restrictive curriculum, the disparities in education were highlighted between the poor, diverse urban neighborhoods and those that were primarily White, living in affluent, suburban communities. Whiter, richer students were able to attain a much more robust, well rounded education that far better prepared them for continuing on to college than their counterparts in less affluent urban areas. Incentives to keep scores high means schools keep underperforming students out, which also decreases their access to an education. Without having more

resources and an educational system that works for them instead of against, African American students will remain underrepresented in all levels of higher education (Darling-Hammond, 2007). This can also cause students who are not fully prepared for the rigor of higher educational course work to take longer to graduate, if they do at all.

### **Zero-Tolerance Policy**

Coupled with receiving a lower standard of education, students also have to contend with zero-tolerance policies that focus on punishment-driven consequences. Such policies disproportionately target African American students, pushing them out of school and their academic pipeline. Zero-tolerance policies criminalize a student's misbehavior in the classroom, which can include minor offences such as tardiness, absences, not following directions, and talking back to or questioning authority, in this case, the educator (González, 2012). Prior to the implementation of zero-tolerance policy, tactics such as suspension or expulsion were only utilized when a student severely misbehaved. In the early 1980s, in-school suspensions became a popular way for students to remain up-to-date with their studies while still serving their punishment (Insley, 2001). By the early 1990s, this changed and zero-tolerance policy came into effect, being used as the primary way to discipline students no matter the severity of their behavior.

Aull (2012) explained that while school violence was decreasing, zero-tolerance policy was being implemented at an increasing rate. The media's coverage of the Columbine school shooting had some impact on this because the way in which the event

was portrayed belied the statistics that school-related violence was dropping (Insley, 2001). Originally, zero-tolerance policy was intended to be used in the event a student brought and was caught with a firearm on school property as outlined under the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 (GFSA) (Simon, 2006). A student could be expelled for up to a year and referred to the juvenile system. However, due to a discretionary clause, cases could be reviewed and the sentence modified on a case-by-case basis. As such, states could choose not to expel students and those who were expelled had the option of continuing their education through alternative means (Insley, 2001). Under the GFSA, zero-tolerance policies were not intended to be used in cases when a student behaved poorly while on school property.

Zero-tolerance policy, supposedly in place to keep students safe from the threat of school violence, increased the threat towards students. As a direct result of this policy, more students were losing direct access to their education at a formative stage in their lives. They were being pushed instead into the criminal justice system as juveniles. This phenomenon has been described as the school-to-prison pipeline, and the number of students being referred to the juvenile justice system for school-related infractions only increased once a stronger police presence on campuses was established. As zero-tolerance policy was implemented, school officials repeatedly chose to ignore the discretionary clause to review sentencing on a case-by-case basis, and also chose to ignore the fact that the policies were in place for a specific purpose. Rather, they chose to implement severe consequences to any minor infraction that happened while the

student was on the premises and even some when they were not, i.e., truancy (González, 2012; Insley, 2001; Simon, 2006).

Being suspended or expelled can have detrimental consequences. Students miss out on vital lessons, causing them to fall behind or be forced out of attaining their education all together (Skiba, 2000). Thus, their occupational options are limited, often leading them to a life of crime in and out of the criminal justice system, sometimes as elementary school students, all because they were severely punished based on the color of their skin and policies in place being used out of context. Children are being robbed of their futures and sent from the classroom into jail cells (Fowler, 2011). The most vulnerable students are the most targeted—those who are homeless, differently abled, in foster/family care, from low-income families—those who need additional support are being turned away and turned in (Skiba, 2000). Research supports that the students of color and differently abled students have been disproportionately impacted by zero-tolerance policies and are now vastly overrepresented in the juvenile and adult justice systems (Fowler, 2011; González, 2012; Raible & Irizarry, 2010; Smith & Harper, 2015).

Schools in lower income areas have a high teacher attrition rate, as they experience burnout at a rapid rate (Raible & Irizarry, 2010). Oftentimes, inexperienced teachers are placed in underfunded schools and lack the necessary skills with which to manage a classroom. Their inexperience, combined with the pressure to perform and increase test scores, limits their ability to provide a rich, exhaustive education to the underprivileged children in their classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Students from

low-income communities are also more likely to be dealing with substance and alcohol abuse, could be involved in a gang, be a teen parent, be homeless or in foster/family care, or have an undiagnosed mental illness. These attributes factor into how engaged a student will be in the classroom, if they attend at all. Inexperienced teachers are less likely to be able to recognize the behavioral symptoms that students may be exhibiting and support them accordingly (Howard, 2003). Zero-tolerance policies make it easy to be able to remove the problem instead of solving it, as they criminalize students for behaviors caused by extenuating circumstances, most of which are outside the child's control. Family composition, parental education level, socioeconomic status, poverty, lack of community infrastructure, lack of healthcare, and lack of adequate educators are all factors that contribute to the likelihood a student will enter the school-to-prison pipeline (Insely, 2001). The negative impact of zero-tolerance policies will be felt for years to come. The policies, intended to protect students, have caused students of color to be disproportionately discriminated against and deprived of their education, forcing them into the juvenile justice system and pushing them toward a life of crime. By depriving them of their futures, society is deprived of its future contributing citizens.

### **Stereotype Threat**

Stereotype threat is yet another barrier that affects African American student success and is caused when an individual is concerned with affirming a negative stereotype regarding the group with which they identify (Steele, 1997). As academic aptitude is not something widely associated with African Americans, students who

identify as African American are at greater risk of experiencing stereotype threat (Kellow & Jones, 2008). Stereotype threat is only a barrier if the student is aware of the negative stereotype being perpetuated. If a student is unaware they are expected to do poorly, then they are unaffected by this phenomenon (Steele, 2010). If someone repeatedly tells the student they are not good enough, eventually the student will believe it. African American students have been especially pushed aside in the field of education and have not been allocated adequate resources to succeed. The pressure for a student to overcome negative stereotypes causes extra stress and self-doubt. Finding or creating a community where they feel safe and supported can help quell these doubts and help the student succeed (Dubois, 2104).

### **Mentoring**

Many different definitions of mentoring can be found in the literature. While researchers have attempted to create a universal definition, it does not currently exist. The most common superficial definition is a relationship between two people in which one can share their expertise with the other, guiding them to achieve their goals and be successful (Jacobi, 1991). Some researchers believe that without a concise, widely acknowledged definition, it becomes difficult to measure what elements are integral to the evaluation of successful mentoring (Merriam, 1983). Definitions of mentoring not only vary over different fields of study, but variation also occurs within the same field (Jacobi 1991).

From a business point of view, importance is placed on the mentor's level of influence and power. Fagenson (1989) described a mentor as a person with power at the company who watches out for another, provides advice and credits another in front of other powerful people. Emphasis is also placed on age, describing the mentor as being someone who is older than the mentee, in a more experienced role at the organization, or who takes on a paternal role when guiding the inexperienced (Kogler-Hill, Bahniuk, Dobos, & Rouner, 1989). However, even within the same field, where many other researchers have defined the mentor as an older person with more influence positioned higher in the organizational hierarchy, Roche (1979) simply defined a mentor as "a person who took a personal interest in your career and who guided or sponsored you" (p. 15).

In the realm of higher education, a successful mentor is defined by their ability to guide and teach their protégé. While Blackwell (1989) referred to the mentor's senior position, exceptional accomplishments, and distinction, Shandley (1989) made no reference to the mentor's position but instead defined mentoring as a planned communication between a minimum of two people that cultivates the advancement and progress of the mentee using the mentor's experience to guide the mentee. Most of the definitions within the context of higher education also stress the importance of the mentor being a role model to their protégé (Harvey, Ambler, & Cahir, 2017; Levinson, Kaufman, Clark, & Tolle, 1991; Moore & Amey, 1988; Schmidt & Wolfe, 1980; Shandley, 1989).

Much of the research on mentoring in higher education describes a professor mentoring a student, whether undergraduate or graduate, and assisting them with their ambitions and introducing them to others who can help them advance academically (Moses, 1989). Nelson and Stephen (1999) also defined a mentorship as “refer[ring] to all the individual guidance faculty often have to give students to ensure their success, and it has special relevance to the support and guidance various disadvantaged populations have needed as they entered the academy in increasing numbers” (p. 162). However, Johnson (1989) suggested the mentor could be a faculty member, staff member, or student who engages in a mentoring relationship with the mentee(s). Ideal mentors should also possess certain qualities such as being kind, intelligent, empathetic, supportive, and ethical (Johnson, 2002).

Mentoring relationships can differ from person to person, and engaging in a mentoring relationship can happen both formally and informally. Formal mentoring is usually facilitated through a third party in which the mentor would have access to programmatic material that focused on enhancing the mentee’s skills (Muschallik & Pull, 2016). Informal mentoring relationships have been described as “volunteer relationships, [that] are initiated by the mentor or student, and [can] take on various forms such as informal conversations over a meal, telephone calls, letters, emails, or office visits” (Jones, 2002, p. 11). Informal relationships that occur spontaneously are shown to be more successful than formal one-to-one relationships that have been assigned (Burke, 1984; Fagenson-Eland, Marks, & Amendola, 1997; Ragins & Cotton, 1999), making

mentoring relationships more effective when facilitated rather than mandated (Russell & Adams, 1997). While mentoring is traditionally a one-to-one relationship (Dansky, 1996), group mentoring is a type of formal mentoring that also has its benefits (Huizing, 2012). Without using more resources, i.e., increasing the number of mentors, group mentoring is able to reach more students and gives them the opportunity to not only build a relationship with the mentor, but also with each other, helping them establish community among themselves, which otherwise might not exist (Herrera, Vang, & Gale, 2002).

De Janasz and Sullivan (2004) highlighted that in the changing landscape of academia, using the traditional method of having only one mentor is insufficient. With the growing scope of education, Mathews (2003) concurred, stating there are greater benefits from receiving mentoring from more than one mentor. Girves, Zepeda, and Gwathmey (2005) suggested that traditional methods of mentoring are not always inclusive of minorities. They recommended utilizing the networking method of mentoring. When designing a networking mentoring program, participants should be committed to fostering an equitable climate for success. A group of volunteers facilitate the program, keeping the group focused on their objectives and providing support, and they should be able to filter in and out seamlessly without interrupting the progress of the group. In the realm of education, this would be a group of faculty/administrators who facilitate a mentoring group of students who would continue supporting each other as the facilitative members of faculty/administration could be interchanged. The onus would be

on the students, so this method is essentially a hybrid of peer, group, and formal mentoring (Haring, 1999).

Henriksen (1995) explained the importance of peer mentors and described how mentors are vital to improving campus climate for students, as they provide necessary support systems because as students themselves, peer mentors can be experiencing similar situations as the students they are mentoring. Peer mentors may be able to empathize in a way that older mentors cannot. Peer mentors are especially important when mentoring students of color, as mentors of color can be difficult to find due to demographics of faculty and leadership positions on campus.

Mentoring can assist African American students in being successful in higher education (LaVant et al., 1997), though some researchers believe the support should come from mentors, which can include faculty, staff, or peers, who share the same race as the mentee (Cuyjet, 2006; Ross-Gordon, 2005). While research supports that having a mentor increases retention by engaging the student and helping them feel more connected on campus (Mason, 1998; Tinto, 1975), it can be difficult to find mentors to whom students of color, including African American students, are able to relate. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2016a), 78% of faculty at universities identified as White, 6% were Black, and only 3% were Black males. However, students who are able to develop a mentoring relationship with a member of the faculty or administration described higher levels of satisfaction with their undergraduate experience

and were prone to graduate in contrast to those who did not have a mentor (Hughes, 1987; Moore & Toliver, 2010).

Creating a space for African American students means more than just admitting them. In addition to ensuring they have a presence on campus, resources need to be allocated to hire more diverse staff, faculty, and administration with whom students can identify and relate (Brittan et al., 2009). Tinto (1975) stated that being socially and culturally connected on campus increases retention, persistence, and graduation rates. Nora and Crisp (2007) posed that mentoring increases the connection a student feels on campus and assists them in being retained until they graduate. Mentoring in any of its forms, whether formal, informal, group, or peer, contributes positively to both a student's social and academic experiences (Nora & Crisp, 2007).

Many studies on the mentoring of at-risk undergraduate students concentrate on the areas of persistence, retention, and graduation, emphasizing the benefits of being mentored regarding the academic success and social integration of first-generation students, rather than examining how students perceive being mentored. Ishiyama (2007) conducted a study, gathering data from 33 oral interviews with subjects participating in a formal mentoring program designed to create a pipeline to graduate school for first-generation and low-income and or African American students. This study addressed how participating students enrolled in a primarily White institution viewed their mentoring experience. Ishiyama's study was based on a framework utilized in a previous study by David Lopatto (2003). In Lopatto's study, the responses were sorted into two categories:

Structure and Consideration items. Structure items referred to the mentor's ability to support the student's academic activities, whereas Consideration items were based on the mentor's ability to meet the social and emotional needs of the participants. Students in Ishiyama's (2007) study were asked three sets of questions, either open-ended or indexed, relating to what the mentor's role should be from the point of view of the student, what benefits they should receive from participating in the mentoring experience, and what a "good" mentoring experience is. The study compared how African American, first-generation/low-income/continuing students perceived mentoring in contrast to how White first-generation/low-income students perceived mentoring.

Based on Ishiyama's (2007) results, first- or continuing-generation, low-income African American students placed a higher importance on consideration items, thus placing a higher value on having a personal connection with their mentor than their White counterparts. However, first- or continuing-generation, low-income African American students who had participated in the program for over a year, deemed structure items more important, valuing the mentor's ability to provide them with research experience and career support. The structure items were tangible items that would build the student's professional portfolio in contrast to having a personal connection with the mentor. After a year of support, perspective shifted.

Ishiyama (2007) also studied the responses from the students who shared the same race as their mentor. Interestingly, students who had a mentor who identified as the same race had lower expectations for personal support from their mentor than students who

were in a mixed race mentoring relationship. While it should be noted that out of the 33 student participants, only five mentoring dyads consisted of same-race pairings, it is surprising that given the amount of literature supporting mentors sharing the same race as their mentees, in this instance, the students who did share the same race as their mentors felt intimidated and more pressure to excel because of their mentor's achievements (Ishiyama, 2007).

White first-generation, low-income students only placed importance in the structure items, whether beginning the program or completing it. The benefits they felt they should receive centered on professional and academic growth and did not fluctuate while participating in the program, unlike their African American counterparts. This could suggest that African American students had a higher level of growth while participating in the program in contrast to what they valued at the beginning of the mentoring program in terms of the mentor's role and what benefits were more important. Their concept of what was important changed considerably from when they entered the program to when they completed it. When describing a "good" mentoring relationship, the White students used descriptors that emphasized how knowledgeable the mentor was in their field, while African American students prioritized how much the mentor invested in the wellbeing of their mentee (Ishiyama, 2007).

In contrast, White (2013) studied two formal mentoring programs. One was a dialogue series into which participants needed to be invited by a current member; the other was a mentoring program in which students could apply for either a staff, faculty,

or peer mentor. The purpose of creating these programs was to positively impact student retention and persistence to graduation. The objective of the dialogue series was to engage students, identify barriers negatively impacting their retention, provide a safe space for students to discuss issues freely, teach students leadership skills, get students more involved on campus, and develop one-on-one mentorship between students and other students, faculty, and staff on campus. Participants comprised students from all levels of their undergraduate career. The mentoring program utilized a questionnaire to assist in identifying a compatible mentor who shared the same interests. Once matched, the mentor and mentee are provided with the contact information of the other so they may set up a convenient time to meet. To be selected as a peer mentor, students in their Junior or Senior year would have had to complete the mentoring program as a Freshman to be eligible. Peer mentors were matched to mentees the same way they were matched to faculty and staff (White, 2013). Due to low representation of Black males throughout various fields of education, utilizing peer mentors is critical to the success of the program to ensure there is an adequate supply of mentors for interested students.

White (2013) found that mentoring impacted the students positively in a variety of ways. Experiencing mentoring, students were able to learn about the culture of the university and were also able to learn about themselves. This helped solidify their own identity, being comfortable being Black in a climate where they might not feel accepted and they were then able to understand how to better engage on campus. Many stated that mentoring helped them with networking and their career aspirations not only with

logistical help in the form of resume building and interview preparation, but also with gaining the knowledge that they should be making connections to faculty on campus and how to go about doing that. Without this lesson, many participants said they would not have known to do this, let alone how to. All the participants identified a specific situation from their experience with the mentoring program that led to personal growth and that positively impacted their experience on campus. For example, many students found acclimatizing to campus difficult. They felt as if they did not belong, but after being connected with a mentor and hearing the perspectives of others around them, they were able to build community and create spaces where they did feel like they belonged and were able to integrate themselves on campus (White, 2013).

Some educators feel that assigning students with mentors who identify as African American can be a quick solution for the attrition rates of African American males in higher education. This can be difficult, as most institutions do not have a vast pool of African American male faculty or staff to pair with students (Wilson, 2000). While studies have shown that matching the race of a mentee with a mentor has led to increased satisfaction and student support, it would be beneficial for institutions to train faculty and staff who do not identify as African American, focusing on cultural competency, communication, and building community to help support this population. This would also help create an environment for African American students and students of color to thrive (Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005).

Mentors can help create awareness and navigate cultural differences to ensure students feel safe so they can be open to new experiences (Terrell & Hassel, 1994). Creating a trusting relationship enables African American male students to ask for support from those who can help them advance both socially and academically (LaVant et al., 1997). Many African Americans who choose to make their education a priority have done so because a family member, a mentor, or an educator who supports them models this (Dubois, 2014). However, encouragement is not enough. Students must also understand how to navigate higher education once there. High schools must be equipped to provide college planning support and training on the application process for colleges (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Financial aid training and other life skills should be taught to help students make the transition to higher education. Students need to be prepared for living alone and taught to seek out their educators' attention. It is important for student success that they have faculty engagement, that the support does not end once they attend college, but that they find new mentors who will continue to encourage them (Wood & Ireland, 2014).

## **Campus Climate**

### **Leadership**

Populations on campus often interact with many professionals in the realm of higher education. Faculty, staff, administration, students, all hold various leadership positions on campus and utilize different leadership styles. As there are many behavioral

implications on which leadership style can be based in various positions, leadership is best described by looking at what elements make up a leader. While these leadership styles include aspects such as autocratic and bureaucratic, in higher education, styles such as transactional and often times transformational are highlighted the most. Transactional leadership is described as a style in which the leader defines the goals and motivates their followers by using a reward-based system. In contrast, transformational leadership is proactive and utilizes the leader's enthusiasm and belief in a vision that creates buy-in from their followers. Transformational leadership is concerned with innovation and changing an organization for the better, while transactional leadership seeks to improve upon the existing structure of an organization without making significant changes. At the university level, effective leadership discourages an authoritarian leadership style, favoring more of a collaborative approach utilizing a transformational style that includes mentorship (Mitchell & Cunningham, 1990).

Leaders set the tone for an institution. It is important to have leaders on campus who foster a welcoming campus climate. As stated previously, two common themes emerge when researching leadership in higher education: transactional and transformative. Leaders with transactional traits provide motivation and guidance to their constituents by assigning objectives within groups with clear goals. Transformational leaders are more visionary, engage constituents, and ask them to put aside their own agenda and do what is best for the group while working together toward a shared goal (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Leadership can also be described as a direction, movement,

or progress responsible for leading the institution in a new direction, creating new initiatives, and reorganizing the structure of an institution to improve quality (Hallinger, 2003).

Effective leaders are those who have a positive impact on the large and small scale of an institution. Those who are unable to provide the desired results are seen as ineffective. Leadership may not always come from those in power; Bateman (2008) showed this when describing leadership during Hurricane Katrina. He described the main components of leadership as “problem solving and decision-making” (p. 302) with a solid “foundation of competence” (p. 302), characteristics which the then Mayor of New Orleans and FEMA’s top-ranking officials lacked when it came time to take care of the city in the wake of this disaster. As it became clear that effective leadership was not forthcoming from those who held positions of power, others filled the need created, showing the importance of shared leadership (Bateman, 2008). This is similar in higher education. If an institution has toxic leaders who are not making the best decisions for both the institution and the students, others must step in to fill the gap. Bateman (2008) stresses the need for leaders who understand the importance of planning and being prepared, not simply reacting to the issues that arise. Offering support services like mentoring programs in higher education is a way to be proactive in neutralizing the detrimental effects of poor leadership and a negative campus climate. Mentors can help students navigate an environment, that was not necessarily created, in a way to help them succeed (LaVant et al., 1997).

## **Structural Inequality**

When higher education institutions were initially created in the United States, they were not done so with all students in mind. The structure for resources and support services geared towards the success of students of color was not planned, as students of color were nonexistent on college campuses. Higher education institutions were created to educate White Christian males, though as time progressed and women and students of color were permitted admission, the initial educational framework that ensured the success of White male students remained unchanged (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). As Bush (1997) stated:

Because some Blacks today have greater access to this society than their ancestors, they should not lose sight of their profound message, that the educational system in the United States was never designed to inspire nor elevate African American people. (pp. 113-114)

It is this truth that causes many of the struggles faced by African American students and other students of color enrolled in higher education institutions.

Structural inequality arises when the needs of one group of students governs the resources expected to serve all students. Using White students as the standard for services and program development does not meet the needs of students of color. Institutions assume that any student is able to persist to graduation in an environment that caters to the needs of the White male student (Smith, Altbach, & Lomotey, 2002). The dismal numbers of African American males enrolled in higher education leads to these

students feeling isolated and disengaged from a campus that does not recognize the difference in their needs based on lived experiences. The lack of recognition of these differences by the university and a failure to create a more inclusive environment for all students also contributes to the structural inequality on campus. It becomes just one more barrier that African American students must overcome to be successful (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

Structural inequality is not limited to support services in academia; it can also include the teaching style of a faculty member. Stassen (1995) studied the idea that the way an organization is structured can impact the positive or negative way African American students are viewed. Analyzing the results of 941 White faculty members collected from six different universities, Stassen concluded that the structure of an institution governs how faculty teach at that institution. Factoring in the complex issues surrounding race, teaching a diverse group of students can prove difficult, making the educational experience of students of color less than ideal (Stassen, 1995).

This negative experience in the classroom can have detrimental consequences on the persistence of students of color to complete their undergraduate degree. Institutions that lack diversity within their staffing of faculty and administration may not understand the importance of creating new structures for success, as it would take time, effort, and resources that the institution may not want to spend. Supporting efforts to diversify resources that are made available for students of color could benefit institutions' efforts to teach students who differ in learning styles (Shultz, Colton, & Colton, 2001).

Persistence plays a key role in whether a student graduates. Increasing African American male students' level of engagement on campus can be a critical factor in motivating them to successfully complete their degree. Students who are not engaged on campus, those who do not feel socially connected or feel accepted by the campus climate, find it difficult to persist to degree completion (Mason, 1998; Roach, 2001).

### **Microaggressions**

African American students are not playing on a level playing field with their White counterparts. Encountering microaggressions throughout their daily lives interferes with their academic persistence and their emotional well-being. Some examples of microaggressions are when a Black student is not invited or not allowed to join a study group or completely ignored in class. Another is if a Black person is followed in the store by the sales clerk. Some are quite blatant, such as when someone remarks that they do not speak like a Black person, "you sound so white/articulate." Having to endure racist and negative remarks both in and out of the classroom at a prestigious higher education institution is detrimental to their academic career. As Pierce (1995) explained, "In and of itself a microaggression may seem harmless but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence" (p. 281).

Racial tension and poor campus climate can force students to derail their academic path by changing majors, switching schools, or dropping out altogether. Experiencing constant microaggressions can cause students to experience high levels of

stress in a climate that is not conducive for learning. When students fight back against such negativity by creating counter spaces where they can create a network of support, they are made to feel as if they are intentionally re-segregating themselves because other “White” spaces are not good enough for them (Solorzano et al., 2000).

When searching for support through services offered by the university, be it financial aid, housing, or counseling, many African American students seek others who identify the same, as they trust they will be treated better than if they attempt to seek support from a White person. Having a smaller population of students who identify as African American on campus can lead to a feeling of invisibility in classrooms and on campus. Students feel as if professors do not see a need to address concerns led by African American students because there are so few of them in higher education spaces. These feelings of invisibility and inferiority can lead to poor performance as the students become disengaged with the subject matter. Being treated like a poor student can be internalized and become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Steele & Aronson, 1995). It is the responsibility of the educator to ensure that this does not happen and yet, due to their own biases, they can be the first ones to perpetuate this phenomenon and cause the students they are responsible for educating to fail and even drop out of school all together (Solorzano et al., 2000).

### **Rationale for the Study**

Black males are underrepresented in higher education due to factors such as structural inequalities and differences in K-12 preparatory outcomes. To combat the decline of their college enrollment, it is imperative to identify barriers that Black males face in their pursuit of a college degree. It is also crucial for institutions to identify issues that both positively and negatively impact the retention and persistence of Black male students once they arrive on campus. While academic success is affected by many intersecting factors, mentorship is a way that institutions can retain this population and help them persist by increasing their engagement on campus and their sense of belonging. Being underrepresented on campus, Black students are more likely to experience racial isolation. A mentoring program specifically for Black males can assist in offsetting the negative impact racial isolation can cause, providing students with a community and helping connect them to necessary resources. Understanding the impact of a university-sponsored mentoring program specifically designed for Black male students can help administrators identify the positive and negative factors affecting students' educational attainment. Additionally, further understanding of the factors black males face can help create innovative solutions to assist in removing barriers to education and lead to their academic success and persistence to graduation.

### **Summary**

African American males have a diminished presence in higher education due to a multitude of factors that stem from the beginning of their academic journey. Many of the barriers students face are outside of their control, such as race, family composition, parental education level, socioeconomic status, poverty, lack of community infrastructure, lack of healthcare, lack of adequate educators, all of which lead to an insufficient education. They are thus left ill prepared for pursuing a degree in higher education. Once on campus, students still face many barriers that can impede their persistence to graduation such as a hostile campus climate, leadership that does not prioritize the students' needs, microaggressions in and out of the classroom, and financial barriers.

Resources such as mentoring programs exist on campus to help mitigate barriers that students face; however, students must be aware of them and feel comfortable accessing them for them to be effective. Students who do not feel supported on campus and who lack campus engagement are less likely to persist than those who are socially and academically integrated. A positive campus climate includes specific resources to help students acclimatize to being on campus and maintain their responsibilities as a student. Positive interactions with peers, staff, and faculty can bolster confidence and keep students motivated to complete their degree. It is especially beneficial to provide support to African American males who have low representation in higher education to increase their engagement on campus. Developing tailored

mentoring programs for African American males can help create a space for them in higher education and create a climate in which they can thrive.

## Chapter 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact that a university-sponsored African American male mentoring program has on four African American male students at a large public research university. Specific research questions included:

1. What effect does participating in a mentoring program specifically designed for African American males have on the academic experience of undergraduate African American male students?
2. How do African American male students describe their campus engagement after receiving the support of being mentored?
3. Does participating in a mentoring program specifically designed for African American males help offset the perceived negative effects of attending a large research institution where African Americans are underrepresented?

#### **Research Design**

This qualitative study included conducting in-person interviews with African American male undergraduate students to understand the impact, if any, of participating in a mentoring program specifically designed for African American male students. This was focused on their perspectives on their undergraduate experience. The study focused

on a student's collegiate experience before and after participating in the mentoring program.

### **Setting of the Study**

This study was conducted at a large public research university in the northern region of California, which for the purpose of this study is referred to as North Research University (NRU). The university had 36,441 undergraduate students enrolled in fall 2017 (NRU, 2017). The campus profile based on gender comprised 59% of students who identified as female and 41% who identified as male. Based on the overall student population of the campus comprising 4% African American/ Black, 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 35% Asian/Pacific Islander, 21% Hispanic, 26% White, 2% unknown, and 12% International, NRU cannot be considered a primarily White institution. It is important to note, however, that African American students are the second smallest population on campus at 4%; their numbers are only 2-3% larger than those of American Indian/Alaskan Native and students whose race/ethnicity is unknown.

### **Population and Sample**

The population of this study included all undergraduate African American male students who participated in the mentoring program specifically developed for African American male students. The study utilized convenience sampling whereby only students who had participated in the mentoring program were contacted to request an interview. Participants in the study were recruited from North Research University (NRU) during the year 2017. Participants identified as undergraduate African American

males who had previously participated in a mentoring program for African American males on campus. Students self-selected to participate in this study. The four participants were all upperclassmen in their third or fourth year of college, one of whom identified as a transfer student; the others started their collegiate experience at NRU. Originally, the researcher collected data from five participants; however, one decided not to be included in this study. Table 1 describes the demographic information for the remaining four participants in this study.

Table 1  
Study Participants' Demographic Information

Name	Major	Class standing	Transfer or Freshman Applicant	When they participated in the mentoring program
Ralph	Environmental Science	4 <sup>th</sup> Year Graduating Senior	Freshman Applicant	End of Freshman Year
Rick	Political Science, Psychology double major	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year Senior Standing	Freshman Applicant	End of Freshman Year
Ron	Food Science and Technology	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	Freshman Applicant	Beginning of Junior year
Mike	Theatre and Dance	4 <sup>th</sup> Year	Transfer Applicant	Middle of Junior year

### **Data Collection**

The researcher requested the assistance of the student affairs professional who facilitated the mentoring program. They agreed to forward the invitation to participate in the interviews and the informed consent letter to the students who had participated in the mentoring program. An email message was sent to students, who then self-selected if they wished to participate in the study by contacting the researcher. Data were collected from four participants.

### **Instrumentation**

In-person interviews were used to collect data for this study. The students who self-selected to participate in this study were each contacted by the researcher to schedule a convenient time for the interview. Each interview was scheduled for 60 minutes and held in a private conference room on campus to ensure both confidentiality and convenience for the participants. Before beginning the interview, the researcher reviewed the informed consent form with participants and requested written consent in the form of their signature to confirm consent in participation of the study (see Appendix A). The interview began once the form was signed. Questions centered on the participants' undergraduate experience before and after participating in the mentoring program (see Appendix B). They were also asked about their pre-college experiences and perceived barriers they may have had to overcome. Participants were given the choice to skip individual questions if they did not feel comfortable providing a response. If at any time the participant did not want to continue, the interview was terminated. A

recording device in the form of a password-encrypted secure mobile phone was used to record each session. Once the interviews were completed, the data collected were transcribed and coded into themes. All participants were assigned a pseudonym and all data were kept on secure devices to protect confidentiality.

### **Limitations**

Inherent to qualitative research design, this researcher's findings are directly tied to the lived experiences of the participants who were interviewed. These findings are not intended to be generalizable to students outside of this program or at other institutions. Further, the relationship that is reported between student success and the student's experience within the mentoring program cannot be interpreted as a causal relationship. However, this research does align with the literature in supporting the assertion that mentoring does positively impact student engagement and the undergraduate experience. Therefore, it can lead to improved student outcomes. The researcher's own positive experiences with having a mentor could contribute toward bias on the subject, though significant effort was taken when coding and analyzing interview data to mitigate this effect.

## Chapter 4

### DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to identify the impact, if any, of a university-sponsored mentoring program on the undergraduate experience of African American males at a public research institution, specifically a mentoring program developed for African American males who are underrepresented on campus. This study aimed to determine barriers students face that negatively impact their educational attainment and how experiencing mentoring mitigated these factors once on campus.

#### **Results**

##### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

As a result of the interviews, several themes emerged relative to the research questions:

1. Impact of mentoring
2. Barriers faced prior to enrolling in university during K-12 schooling
3. Challenges encountered on campus
4. Interactions with students and faculty on campus
5. Student Success

**Impact of mentoring.** All four participants echoed similar positive experiences with mentoring prior to and after enrolling in college. One emphasized that their enrollment into university was due to mentors they had during their K-12 experience, while two noted it was through familial modeling that the importance of higher education was internalized, and the fourth had both an academic mentor and familial support.

***K-12 experience.*** Ralph and Rick both grew up in two-parent households in middle class areas. Ralph grew up with two older siblings and Rick also grew up with a sibling and the additional support of his grandparents. Ralph described the importance of education being instilled from his parents, stating:

My parents both went to college themselves . . . That's where initially, I believe when they were having kids, their thoughts and mind frame was "You're going to go to at least the equal level of education I went to or better" so that's what happened between me and my siblings. One of them went to an Ivy League, another went to an HBCU and then I came here, NRU which is notably very, very good. Altogether, K through 12, my schooling, and in the household [education] was always preached about.

Rick's AP Physics teacher reinforced the importance of doing well in school and rewarded Rick with gift cards for high-achieving students, sponsored by a parent group. The AP Physics teacher was also instrumental in getting Rick involved in the Black Student Union on his high school campus, which then led to him wanting to get involved

when he arrived on the university campus. Rick also shared his parents' view on the importance of education growing up:

It was a definitely a big focus. It was a huge focus. It was really expected that you graduate high school, it was big that you got A's. We were pushed really hard, me and my sister, both. It was expected that you go to college, not just college, you had to go into a [prestigious four-year university]. It was expected very highly. My parents both have attended college, but neither have a four-year bachelor's degree. So, I would be the first to have a degree.

Ron grew up in a two-parent household in a low-income environment and was the youngest of 17 siblings. While out of his parents, only his mother had attended community college, all of his siblings had attended some form of college. He stated:

Education is the number one thing my parents stressed. They always told us "learn as much as you can and do your best but realize that everything you learn is not true, and you determine how much of it is true for yourself." But they weren't saying, "You go to college." But I guess there is this weird, unspoken kind of thing. It's like we kind of knew that we were going to apply to college without anyone saying, "you should do it."

Mike grew up in a single-parent household with his mother, in a low-income environment as the only child; however, he has several cousins he regards as siblings because of how they all grew up together. In regard to his education, he stated:

The biggest impact on my education was the fact that all of my teachers told my mother, “He’s very intelligent.” I think that made the biggest difference in my education because it gave me confidence in my academic abilities. She always made sure I had the best, even if it was in a crappy district, she made sure that I was in a good school where I would get a quality education. My mother always supported whatever I wanted to do academically.

Mike also joined a non-profit organization after graduating high school that teaches life skills to youth and community building. Their objective is to keep youth off the streets and steer them away from a life of violence. The non-profit provides funding opportunities to students who complete the program. Once Mike completed the program, he secured enough funding to attend his school of choice, but had previously declined to attend due to limited funding. It was at the behest of one of his teachers in the program that prompted him to call and find out he was able to be re-enrolled for late admittance and was able to go. He credits that conversation for being enrolled in college and would not be here now, if not for that valuable advice.

***Mentoring program.*** All four participants positively associated with the mentoring program. How they each connected with the mentoring program on campus varied, yet all four had some connection to the Black student affairs professional who conducted the program. They also all were involved in other support programs, a student organization, or were personally contacted at the time they enrolled to be part of outreach to transfer students under the retention initiatives on campus.

Ralph shared that the program helped him be more successful on campus because he was able to connect with a mentor one-on-one and in other ways:

The program definitely helped with the mentor-mentee-ship. It offered a lot of personal guidance. Any mentee can come to any mentor about a personal problem like how they're getting off track. How the mentor guides them and gets them right back on track that's what helps take away the distraction from at home or things outside of what you need to do on campus. Without my mentor, I feel that definitely, I would have been a lot more stressed, unbalanced, less informed, less wise about a lot of things that carry into being a student on the university campus.

Ralph also emphasized that having a shared cultural history strengthened the impact of the mentorship he received. Having a mentor that was also a Black man meant Rick could delve deeper into problems they could "relate to through historical events that go deeper than the skin." He felt that with people of different ethnic groups, shared understanding did not exist past the surface level. It is very shallow and does not delve into the historical impact on the way things are now. He stated that having a shared cultural history "helps show incentive for self or self-worth and that's hard to find in other community groups and especially when you're not a part of that group. It helps make the displaced more placed in a sense" (Ralph).

Rick described that the most impactful moments from the mentoring program came from the seminar and the events that the program facilitates:

[The class] has been good. I've liked that a lot, I've gotten a lot of information from that. Just the camaraderie has been good and opened my eyes to a lot of things. One big thing we found out that the Black faculty here face a lot of the same things we do as students. We had a former dean of the college of Microbiology or something like that. He talked about how people—he'll give a speech and they'll be like, "Oh my god! That's so amazing." It was not that amazing, it's just because –it's amazing for him to do because people don't expect much. This was really life changing for a lot of us because we were like that man is a dean of the college. He didn't have anything else to prove and he still also faces these kinds of things. That really changed the way I look at things. I think that [knowing I wasn't the only one experiencing this] was a really positive thing it helped me on my educational journey.

Ron shared that he first connected to the mentoring program as he was getting out of class. He decided to go by the Student Success Center for Black students because he knew there would be other Black people there and was intrigued because he only saw other black men, a rarity on campus. The student affairs professional who conducts the program welcomed him to join so he did. He shared that through the mentoring program, he was able to connect with needed resources and a community of other Black males on campus with similar shared experiences. He stated:

[Participating in the mentoring program] gave me a confidence boost; it made me more confident and prepared us for professional settings and how to present

ourselves more professionally. I know there is always something I can learn from other people. I think one of the main things that I got out of the seminar was that we often ignore our own health. Our own mental health and we need to have the community and other people like us to discuss it among because they are the ones who are really going to understand, empathize to where they actually know.

You're not going to feel comfortable talking about something that has to do with race with another person that's not your same race or someone who doesn't identify as a person of color, but around Black people you don't have to worry about censorship so I can actually say what I feel instead of trying to change the words I use which might not portray exactly what I'm thinking.

Mike also shared that through the mentoring program he learned much about self-care, having over extended himself since arriving on campus in his third year. Mike is employed at the university, volunteers as a stagehand, and takes the maximum number of units a student can take in an academic period. He also shared why he felt mentorship on campus was important for him, as he came from a single-parent home and was raised by his mother:

I didn't grow up with both parents and I think it's important that we have positive examples like that on campus. Especially for males. I mean there are lots of positive role models. In fact, there are more Black women in education than there are Black men. I think it's equally as pertinent to have Black male examples on

the college campus, to be able to emulate and to be able to go to for advice and problem solving and things like that.

He also attributed the mentoring experience for wanting to give back to his community, saying:

That program, it gave me a stronger sense of what I want to do in the community. To give back to the community by helping students gain access to higher education and encouraging students to be high achievers academically and let them know that they have potential and that the stuff that they go through is not an illusion, but— I want to be a resource, so to speak, or create a resource where there aren't resources so that more of us can have access to higher education, so that more of us can become educated and those disparities can lessen in our American system.

*Mentors on campus.* Through the mentoring program, each participant felt he had gained a one-on-one mentor in the form of the student affairs professional who facilitated the program. However, they also discussed the need for networking and connecting with others on campus. On the importance of finding mentors on campus and his reason to participate in the program, Ralph stated:

I chose to participate because the community for black leadership on campus is very small. I thought about how it would give me more introductions to other black colleagues on campus. At the same time, I was notified that I'll be able to meet a lot of the faculty that I may not be taking classes with because I am an

environmental science major and I won't necessarily be able to meet a lot of the Black faculty that maybe in African American studies or Sociology, and there's not too many Black faculty within the whole STEM area. It gave me a chance to meet faculty and also a chance to connect with difference colleagues that I could relate to by face value in a sense. Also, being able to know when just going through the day-to-day problems that Black men do go through and being able to relate and being able to have opinions and just converse on that level about life that is outside of education. That's what made it more important for connecting with the program and with different mentors.

On the topic of the importance of networking, he stated:

I definitely knew that at this research institution, it's about a lot of networking and who better to network with, than someone who can actually relate with you, prior to you even speaking to them. For me, I guess that might make me a lot different than other individuals, but I knew right away that I wouldn't be able to make it through this university alone so I sought out help and guidance.

Rick discussed how the events facilitated through the mentoring program connected him to other Black administrators and faculty on campus and helped him foster individual connections with them that he otherwise would not have been able to access.

He stated:

I went to an event and then a lot of the Black administration were there and counselors. So, then I was like, "Okay they're right here, and they're talking to us

and they're here to help us. So, I'm going to reach out to them even further." So, I would say that was a real spark. A lot of the access was "Okay they are right here, I can approach them." I got to meet several of them on a more intimate basis off campus. I would say if I didn't really have that I wouldn't have really known who to go to and sit down with. I couldn't just walk into an admin building like, "Hey can I meet people?" No.

Ron also explained that the mentoring program reminded him of the importance of networking on campus stating, "I have to build connections with different faculty around campus because my resume might be good, but if I don't know the right person, it's not going to matter, so it's just more so making sure I keep making connections."

Mike also liked that the program connected him to other Black faculty on campus:

The good thing about the Black Male seminars, you were introduced to Black faculty members and classes, and I had the opportunity to take classes surrounding Black issues. I was encouraged to take an African-American literature class, and enjoyed that very much. We wrote a research paper on *Black Lives Matter*. I enjoyed that process very much. I was struggling at that time with my confidence in my ability to write a dissertation if I ever had to do that in grad school. Through that, I realized that I could do it.

**Barriers faced prior to enrolling in university during K-12.** All the participants described various barriers they experienced during their K-12 educational experience from poor schooling to microaggressions and racism they encountered

growing up, as well as financial barriers. When there is poor schooling, additional supplemental education is needed for student success, which was Ralph's experience:

In order for my success, it was a lot of outside of the school. Public school can only do so much, which is to get you on their curriculum and just matriculating through. But at home is where [the importance of education] was ingrained in my mind about what needs to be done . . . Either, I was going to do public schooling alone and maybe not excel, but doing more learning when I got home, that helped me advance beyond what my school can offer.

He also described that going to a school in a low-income area with a large migrant population meant having a peer group that was not invested in educational attainment and that it negatively impacted him.

Rick looked back positively on his K-12 experience, which included having a strong support system at home, going to private school where he felt he received an exceptional education, and being free of economic barriers at that time. However, there were some experiences on which he reflected differently, now having a broader perspective and being able to reflect on the past:

I would say that a lot of times now after coming to college, being more educated, there are a lot of times I wish I could go back thinking, "Oh, I really should not have tolerated that" or what they were teaching at the private school, was either really wrong and inaccurate or very biased. I just accepted a lot of cases of implicit racism that was going on that I just went with because I didn't really have

the knowledge of the source due to misstatements or even the knowledge of myself and history. But I feel that a lot of people have this experience when they come to college like “oh, wow! That’s what they meant all the time, this is really what happened, this is what I was taught.”

Growing up, Ron had a difficult time reconciling his faith and the lessons he had been taught at home with what he was taught in school. Through his faith-based studies, he learned to not just accept things that were taught but to question the validity of it to be sure it was true. The difficulty came when discussing items taken as fact by his peers. He would question things saying, "You know, doesn't that seem weird. Isn't this- this is more likely to be true?" He described the interactions, “They would say ‘No, man, you just don't like white people,’ or, ‘Man, it's just facts.’ It wasn't a debate. It was just voicing opinions.” Having a large family and support system helped mitigate the tension he sometimes felt with his peer group at school. He also referenced another barrier being others’ perceptions of him. He felt they were doubting him and his ability to succeed academically. He also spoke about how he only remembered one counselor encouraging him in middle school and then did not remember any encouragement from figures in high school, so family support was crucial to his success.

Mike explained that the barriers he experienced were from having a difficult time growing up in a single-parent, low-income household, moving around a lot, and attending many different schools. His relationship with his mother was tumultuous, though through all the ups and downs, his education was always a constant on which he could rely. Due

to changing schools frequently when younger, he was unable to secure a friend group and still struggles to connect with people presently. He recalled it was in middle school, when he attended a predominantly Asian school, that he became aware of racism and the fact that he was experiencing it. He recalled that in high school he overheard some students talking about their college dorm roommate selections saying, "I don't want a room with a Latino person, I don't want a room with a Black person."

**Challenges encountered on campus.** Upon their arrival to campus, all participants faced challenges on campus, many of them in the form of racism and microaggressions on campus. This was further emphasized, as there is a low representation of Black males on campus. Ralph explained some of the problems he faced being a Black male on campus describing "the feeling of being in class and you're the only one who looks like you. Or, walking on campus, and having individuals literally cross the sidewalk before getting to you whether its guys or girls, gender doesn't matter, it's more so they see [my] ethnicity and just switch over."

Rick explained experiencing stereotype threat, which can be caused by being part of an underrepresented community on campus:

This constant feeling where you're in a class and there are less than 10 Black students in a class of 300 or so. You feel like you carry on a larger weight than any other student might. That leads to a lot of increased anxiety and/or apathy. Either you, just give up thinking, "I don't really care, it's not that big of a deal." Or, you feel more anxiety because you feel you have something to prove. Being

the only black student, that has its psychological effects. You get the isolation and then you feel tokenized and all these things, and your cognizant of those things. I think that's the biggest thing that gets me is that I know this is what's happening. This is my reality. I know this is why my professor thinks I'm coming to office hours because I'm struggling, not for networking. I know that it's assumed by my classmates, even the comments like if I talk loud in classroom like, "oh, man he's really smart." I got to know that not everyone gets that comment. That's why you wish there were more Black people here to show more and to be more represented.

Rick also had an interesting take on feeling isolated within the Black community on campus, before he was involved with the mentoring program, when he would try to seek out his community. The events were primarily run by Black female students and so even though the events were for the Black community, they were geared towards interests of female students. It is what drew him to the mentoring program and to help create events that brought out more male students.

Ron also discussed the negative impact of being underrepresented on campus and the pressure he experienced because of it:

I feel this weird pressure of needing to break all the stereotypes that Black people have because there's not many other Black people to do that here. I have to make sure I'm always— I guess it's a good thing because it makes sure that I'm always professional and serious and not ignorant. That's good practice. But I feel extra

pressure, and then if I don't do well in class, as one of the few Black guys, the only Black guy to answer, and if it's the wrong answer, then it's just, "Oh, you know, see Black people are this way or that way." I like to represent to the best of my ability, and having a Black community helps me balance all that. Though that's part of the pressure because people are looking at you in a certain way, and you feel that you can't step out of this mold that they're placing on you because otherwise, you'll make everybody look bad.

Ron explained another negative impact of being underrepresented on campus is losing his sense of Blackness. He shared that he involuntarily adopts the behaviors of others around him and he recognizes it is not how he usually acts or feels and that is uncomfortable. When he has community with other Black people, he has a sense of understanding because he feels they understand his experience just based on the fact that they share the same skin color. He stated:

I feel a deeper connection with them. I need to keep this because I can't just disconnect from everything that happened to Black people. I can't hang around with different people and then just not – because I know other communities. If I'm hanging out with a group of White guys they are not going to talk about Black struggles, or how people – or not even struggles, but successes. They're not really going to talk about Black people. I like to focus everything around Black and Brown people, people of color in general. But if I'm not exposed to different

ideas that revolve around people of color, then I feel like I'm losing my Blackness.

As a transfer student from a predominantly White university, Mike did not experience culture shock when transferring to NRU because he was used to seeing even less representation on his previous campus:

I feel good here. I think it was necessary for me to go to Nebraska and then to come back here because it made me appreciate how things are here even more. Even though there's 900 African American students on campus compared to what? 22,000 plus students, that's not a problem for me because I came from a school with like 10 or less. Numbers so much aren't – it's a problem, statistically, and in the broader context, but for me, it's not a huge issue. It's just where I feel most comfortable. But I've always been surrounded by a very diverse group of people. Going to Nebraska was a learning experience. With that knowledge, I brought that here, I feel good here.

His experience at his previous school, however, was not a pleasant experience. He felt marginalized, unaccepted, tokenized, and discriminated against within his major and in his general education classes. It is why he decided to transfer out after his sophomore year.

**Interactions with students and faculty on campus.** Participants described their experiences with being stereotyped and tokenized by faculty and students on campus and the feelings of isolation this caused.

Ralph described his interactions with faculty and classmates on campus:

When you approach professors, there is a certain way you have to speak, just because right away your color is different, a different pigment. Another one is when you want to connect with group projects with different students, why are you the only one who doesn't have a partner? Or why are you the last one to be chosen to get a partner? Why when you raise your hand in class the professor speaks to you in a different tone? Those are just a couple of things that other ethnicities and races do not really tune into but as a Black man, you see that there's a lot of opinions about, towards Black men, just people's innate thoughts on you before actually getting to know you. I feel different minority groups at times definitely have to tune into what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. But I feel for white people, or of that race, there's a lot more leniency. Since a lot of the faculty at times are of similar race and ethnicity, they can relate there. They don't really see any differences in how they communicate. So, things are able to go a lot smoother.

Rick described his experience with classmates, being tokenized, and having feelings of isolation:

As a Black student, there are very few groups that would reach out to you. People usually reach out to people who they think would boost the group, who they think is smartest, so there are very few groups that would reach out to you for the basis of being a Black student. Then, when they do, you feel tokenized because they

don't really consider what I have to say or I'm just here because they don't want to say no. It increases isolation, you just want to do things on your own. You want to prove everybody wrong. So, you're not getting – everyone else has a lot of the study groups and you want one but you feel like you're not wanted or the token, so you do it alone and that affects your performance.

He spoke about his experience attempting to join a particular research group where even though the application did not call for it, he provided a cover letter and resume. He was told they would forward his application to the appropriate person. However, after consistently following up with them, he found out that they had never provided his information to that person. He was finally accepted; however, he is the only Black researcher in his lab. He says he knows of other non-Black students who are invited to be in groups, but that has never been his experience. He also described his interactions with his professors as being a barrier due to assumptions they make based on his skin color:

I've been to a professor's office hours and I was eating candy off his desk and he said, "Yes, go ahead and take some, I know you have workouts." I don't have workouts, I'm not an athlete. But that was an assumption because I'm Black, I must be an athlete. That kind of stuff starts to get at you mentally and psychologically, especially when it happens more than once and frequently. So, I think that's another barrier as well.

Ron admitted to having blocked out instances of microaggressions felt while interacting with faculty and students on campus saying:

I felt there were probably a lot of those instances. But I feel for me to say, “Man, they're stereotyping me.” It happens all the time, for me to let it affect me, that's the reason why I kind of ignore it. I have to choose what I let affect me right now. But I felt like a lot of instances, freshmen year is when it all happened.

He said he is the one that organizes study groups because he knows he wants the benefits of having one, and does not wait for others to include him. He noted it is always female students of other communities of color that agree to work with him first and then they would bring in other students who would identify as White.

Mike spoke about having been overlooked for parts in plays by his professors on the basis of being Black when he was at a university in Nebraska. He also shared an instance when he was included on a sports team in which everyone was given names after Greek or Roman gods, but without even asking him they made his “Pan” who is a satyr, half man, half goat even though there were other “human” gods to choose from. Mike attributed this to the fact that he was the only non-white group member, so they paired him with the god that is half animal. Once he transferred, he felt he is treated much better on this campus, though acknowledges that things are not perfect:

Just because we're here at NRU doesn't mean that we're likely to be successful.

Getting in here was the first step. The next step is staying here. A lot of students are on academic probation or they are at risk of being suspended or something like that. I thought coming on campus, “Oh there's a black guy there. There's a black girl there.” There's more people than I've seen on a college campus from

my experience so we're doing great. I realized quickly that that was not the case. That's why I think these mentorship programs are important to steer people in the right direction who don't know their way.

**Student success.** All the participants in the study attributed the mentoring program with being able to push through the negative stereotypes to which they had been subjected on campus. The program helped them mitigate some of the negative affects they were feeling, taught them skills to deal with negativity, and provided a space and community that lifted some of the feelings of isolation they felt. Ralph described his experience as improving after participating in the program due to what he was taught:

I definitely became more comfortable with where what I was seeing or interacting with and it wouldn't throw me off what I was here to do. Also, I realized code switching, knowing different types of terms to use around different individuals. That was all taught within the program and led me to become more successful in what I wanted to do or where I felt my goals were within the rest of my years in college.

Rick described how having a space where Black males can come and freely discuss issues they are facing on campus is extremely helpful in dealing with the misperceptions of others. The mentoring program and events had a positive impact on him and he also found having a designated student space on campus for Black students beneficial too. But he sometimes grappled with what is meant to have to share this space with people who do not share the same background:

There are few of us, our history, the things we face is very much exclusive. It's like, people want to come into the Black spaces and to events we throw because it's fun. But then, when there's a hate crime they don't want to come to those rallies and stuff. But they want to come when it's all cool. It's like a lot of people are here in the Black center because they are in research or study groups but they don't have to face the reason why we have a Black center but they're using the benefits of the Black center. That has been what I have been thinking about. Being Black I guess you say comes with different benefits. This group that you are able to be a part of. But everybody has those benefits for their own groups and second of all like those benefits are there because of certain oppression we face. You want to take from the benefits but not having experienced the oppression and that to me just becomes co-opting.

Ron also found having a designated Black space on campus and a sense of community beneficial:

I love the idea of a Black center because I come from a community where it's really only Black and Brown people, so I was always used to that, a lot of Black people around me. But when I came up here, I was just like, "Oh, man, where are all the Black people?" So, with a Black center, I feel like I interact with more Black people and keep my sense of Blackness, I won't drift off and lose myself because I'm rooted pretty deeply in the Black community. I can't lose myself, and the Black center gave me an idea and like a sense of Blackness that I could keep.

Being in the Black community, around Black males specifically, it just gives me a sense of brotherhood. Because I don't feel like I connect with many other people, so if I want this connection, because I had a lot of brothers growing up, I just feel like, "All right, you know, these are my new brothers now," and I just like the feeling. It keeps me motivated and inspired.

He also spoke about the necessity of code switching, how he had been utilizing it, and how he felt about having to continue to do so even when he felt he should not have to anymore:

It's pretty annoying, but it's not too much of a hassle for me. I don't know if it's because I've been doing it for so long. I don't feel super pressured or anything. But I do feel like, the whole idea behind me doing that is because, "I know you have this stereotype about me. It's unfortunate that you have that stereotype, but it's even more unfortunate that I have to try to disprove it." But then, I feel like they are still are going have a stereotype even though I prove them wrong.

Sometimes I think, "Man, how worth it is it like going through all this? Just for you to probably still believe in the stereotype although I gave you a counter-example." So, it's pretty annoying, but I think my parents raised me . . . They always told me, "This is how people are going to look at you, this is how they're probably going treat you so it's up to you."

Mike also discussed having a designated space for Black students and how he liked when other communities came and shared in the resources because he felt Black people are forced to be apart:

That's important for any student of any color to have. Especially any marginalized community to have resources available to them, especially by people who understand what they're going through. It's important because of the system that we live in and the racial system that we live in and the things that we have to go through every day as African Americans, so I think that's important to me to have that home base. I know that this is a designated Black space but it's open to everybody but especially as a Black male that was very helpful and useful to me, especially given my relationship with my mentor. It's a good opportunity for cultural interaction because outside there's not really much of that. I mean Asian kids and the White kids it's very homogenous at times well, a lot of the time. It is even with us. I feel like our homogeneity is a response mechanism. I feel like we are pushed away and forced to be amongst ourselves. For a long time, I don't feel like I fit in with Asian kids, but it makes me happy to see like a few Indian students come through here, or a few Latino students come through here and utilize to read and utilize our resources because I mean after all we all come from the country Africa at the beginning of our ancestry. I think it's important to have that cultural interaction. That's what I love to see.

All participants felt the mentoring program helped them be more successful in their academics, they also attributed different resources as having a positive effect.

Ralph was taught at home that if he needed help, he needed to be proactive and go seek out resources that would help him with his needs. To be successful, he said:

Don't be afraid to speak and get help. A closed mouth doesn't get fed. What that meant is when you need help, you have to open your mouth and get it. When you need resources, when you need guidance, at all different levels of the playing field, something that you're not informed about, you have to go find the information yourself.

Time management and school and life balance had become a struggle for Rick into his sophomore year. Having been a student athlete in high school, he was used to having to dedicate time to his studies. Employing those habits, he did very well in his classes during the first academic period on campus because he devoted all of his time outside of class time to his studies. By his second quarter, he realized he was not as involved as he could be and was missing out on opportunities on campus. Then he became overly involved:

Second year I really struggled with that. I found myself overbooked, double booked for things and then missing a lot of engagements that I had said I would come to because I was doing something else. I looked, "Oh my god, I got to have two things at the same time the same day." (Rick)

He was also employed since his freshman year. He said he learned how much he could manage when in his sophomore year, but originally had a hard time giving anything up because:

I think, I was much more on the level of like I want to be like Black excellence, I want to keep doing stuff, I'm going to do as much as possible. I'll say most of it is like . . . especially dealing with any programs around black men is like, "come to more, get more involved, don't just hibernate away." (Rick)

At the end of his Junior year, Rick finally felt as if he had achieved a healthy balance, though he said it still hurt him to turn down a good opportunity for the sake of maintaining his newfound balance, but he will.

Being actively involved in his community is very important to Ron and he attributed having a Black community on campus as a reason for his continued success on campus:

It's important to be proactive, and reach out for help academically, and make sure you reach out to your community because you might not know that that's what you need. Like, how sometimes I don't know that's what I need. So, they need to be proactive about going out and finding your community.

Mike attributed his mentor for helping find him a stable living situation. The one in which he was placed when he arrived on campus was not compatible with his needs. Now that he is in a stable environment, he is able to focus on his academics and not on outside factors that were a distraction. He said, "Definitely having a stable living

situation as well as having taken advantage of counseling resources, so I can just keep a clear mind and not keep things bottled in and also time management.” In addition to counseling services and learning time management skills through the mentoring program, he also utilized other success centers on campus, mainly the center for Black students.

He stated:

I feel comfortable coming here. If I need a place to study because I'm really particular about where I study. I know that I can come here. It's quiet yet it's social at the same time and I know people here and just being around people that look like me, I didn't know how important that would be but ever since being in Nebraska, I understand the importance of how much it can impact you just being around people who look like you. You know that there are people around you who understand what you're going through and they're willing to advocate for you and connect you with resources that you probably wouldn't otherwise get on campus.

### **Discussion**

Several common themes became evident when analyzing the responses of the participants. Each student positively associated with their mentoring experience; each felt they had experienced some barriers to their education within their K-12 schooling. All experienced challenges on campus in the form of microaggressions and negative

interactions with students and faculty, and all mentioned strategies they felt were essential for student success.

Mentoring was important, as it provided a safe space for Black males to discuss issues they experienced on campus that they would otherwise not feel comfortable sharing. While there were many events put on for the Black community, many are run by women, so even within the diminished Black population on campus, the spaces for Black males was even smaller. Participating in the mentoring program gave the African American students access to experiences and mentors they otherwise would not have had while on campus. It opened up their networks and gave them more resources to be able to tap when needed. Having a space to discuss issues and hear from more experienced professionals in higher education about the issues they faced helped show students they were not alone and validated their experiences. It also provided them with an outlet and strategies to alleviate some of the barriers they faced. All four participants claimed that participating in a mentoring program contributed to their success on campus. Two participants attributed mentoring to their desire to pay it forward and go back to their communities to help others succeed in their endeavors.

All four participants faced various barriers during their K-12 schooling. Three experienced racial barriers, being treated differently due to their race, or having to deal with racist attitudes or lower expectations due to being Black. Two felt the difficulties of growing up in low-income areas due to poor schooling or financial barriers in pursuing higher education. All four were fortunate to have family that prioritized education and

emphasized the importance of it. For one, reinforcement came from teachers at school, but for the other three, familial support was crucial in their success during K-12.

When asked about any challenges, the three students who arrived on campus as freshmen described a hostile campus climate in which they frequently encountered microaggressions, being stereotyped, tokenization, and isolation. Being vastly underrepresented in classes, labs, and spaces on campus negatively impacted their undergraduate experience, as the pressure to perform academically and represent their entire race led to increased anxiety and feelings of isolation. The transfer student had a slightly different experience. Due to his previous enrollment at a predominantly White institution, and the negative experiences he had there, when he arrived on campus, comparably, his experience at NRU was positive.

Three of the four participants shared negative interactions with students and faculty on campus. They felt the experiences not only negatively impacted their experience on campus but also hindered their academic growth, as they did not experience the same rate of inclusion into study/research groups as other students who were not Black. They felt they were overlooked based on assumptions made about their intellectual ability because of their race. Being treated differently by faculty who do not have the cultural competence to communicate with this population made it difficult to make connections, as did being stereotyped as an athlete or struggling student and not being seen as an individual. Microaggressions can so severely impact a student's academic achievement that one student admitted to forcibly blocking out these instances

because of the frequency at which he was experiencing them. If he tried to examine how he felt, he would not have the capacity to focus on his academics.

While all four participants claimed that mentoring contributed to being successful, they also highlighted other resources necessary for success as a Black male on campus. Finding a community on campus with shared cultural values, having a designated space on campus for Black students, time management skills, and proactively asking for help when needed are all essential for student success. One student also mentioned having a stable living area so he did not have any distractions pulling his attention away from his studies. Utilizing counseling services and other centers for student academic success were also mentioned. All the participants seemed determined to not just succeed but to excel, even at the detriment of their mental and physical health. This could be attributed to the pressure they felt to represent their community and not confirm negative stereotypes regarding the Black community.

### **Summary**

This chapter provides the findings from semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with four African American male students who had participated in a mentoring program specifically for African American males at a public research institution. Participants in this study were all upperclassmen, in either their Junior or Senior year at the time of the interview. Three students were admitted as freshmen and one transferred from a predominantly White institution after completing his Sophomore year. Participants were

asked about their campus experience before and after participating in the mentoring program, what barriers they felt they had to overcome to attend university, what barriers they faced on campus, and what strategies for student success they felt were necessary as an underrepresented Black male on campus. The common themes that emerged from the interviews included the positive impact of mentoring, barriers to their education pre- and post-enrolling in university, negative interactions with students and faculty due to racial biases, and strategies for student success.

Participant responses showed that experiencing mentoring has a positive impact on African American males' educational attainment. The mentoring program created a space to explore and unpack issues that Black men face and helped alleviate barriers to education created by experiencing microaggressions on campus. Knowing they were not alone in their experiences and finding a community on campus decreased negative feelings of isolation and allowed students to be engaged on campus and perform better academically. The program allowed students to connect to Black faculty with a shared cultural history, facilitating their relating to each other without negative stereotypes forming that prohibit professional relationships, and decreasing the impact of negative interactions with non-Black faculty. Participating in the mentoring program impacted their overall student experience positively, providing students with one-on-one mentorship, networking opportunities, peer mentoring, and a sense of brotherhood and community.

## Chapter 5

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to better understand the potential impact of participating in a university-sponsored mentoring program on the academic persistence and social integration of four African American male students at a large public research university. Specific research questions addressed were:

1. What effect does participating in a mentoring program specifically designed for African American males have on the academic experience of undergraduate African American male students?
2. How do African American male students describe their campus engagement after receiving the support of being mentored?
3. Does participating in a mentoring program specifically designed for African American males help offset the perceived negative effects of attending a large research institution where African Americans are underrepresented?

The results of the study suggest that participating in the mentoring program has a positive effect on the undergraduate experience of African American males who are underrepresented on campus. Participants attributed being able to effectively navigate a negative campus climate to having participated in the mentoring program. The program not only provided a space where students were able to process the negative experiences

they had encountered, but their experiences were also validated by peers, senior faculty, and administrators. The validation decreased the feeling of isolation and helped socially integrate students on campus, allowing them to focus on their academic obligations.

By interviewing African American males currently enrolled at a 4-year research institution, the researcher planned to identify how participating in a mentoring program impacted a student's undergraduate experience. Did it help mitigate the perceived negative effects of being underrepresented on campus and how did it help with a student's campus engagement as it relates to educational attainment and persistence to graduation? Analysis of the findings collected from the interviews is included in Chapter 4. The themes that emerged from this study include the positive impact of mentoring, barriers to their education pre- and post-enrolling in university, negative interactions with students and faculty due to racial biases, and strategies for student success. Data for this study were collected from one-on-one semi-structured interviews with four African American males who had participated in a mentoring program for African American males.

### **Conclusions**

Due to the continued decline of Black males enrolling in colleges, it has become critical for researchers and institutions to identify factors that contribute to the retention and persistence of Black male students. Academic success is influenced by a multitude of intersecting factors. However, having a committed mentor can improve retention and

persistence by increasing student engagement and a sense of belonging. As such, mentoring can be an important resource to combat the declining graduation and retention rates for this population. Diversifying their student, staff, and faculty populations should also be a priority for higher education institutions, as it is difficult to provide adequate mentoring or support services when the population needed to fulfill these roles does not exist. Peer mentors are crucial to the success of mentoring African American students, as staff and faculty mentors can be scarce. Due to both structural inequalities and differences in K-12 preparatory outcomes, Black students are underrepresented on many campuses and are more likely to experience racial isolation. Having a mentor to help support and guide them through this experience can significantly offset some of the negative impact of this structural inequality and allows for the opportunity to address individual student needs while contributing to overall student success.

Based on the data collected in this study, participants felt prepared for the rigors of attending an institution of high academic caliber due to the familial support they received regarding their educational attainment during their K-12 experience. Parental involvement was crucial to all participants' academic success during this time. Two participants also credited their preparedness to having mentors during their K-12 experience, and two also were enrolled in supplemental education programs, one of which funded one participant's college tuition. This student had previously withdrawn from attending because he was accepted but had insufficient funding. Many of the barriers the participants faced once they arrived on campus were based on negative

interactions with other students and faculty members who perpetuated negative stereotypes and racial biases. This negative campus climate led to increased feelings of isolation and concern regarding their sense of belonging on campus. Participating in a university-sponsored mentoring program specifically for African American males helped mitigate these barriers by creating a space for African American students to build community.

Participating in the mentoring program also allowed access to Black faculty and administration with whom the students otherwise would not have had the opportunity to connect. Learning that higher level administrators face similar situations to them validated the experiences of the participants and allowed them a space to process the implications of dealing with negative racial interactions on a frequently recurring basis. It helped validate their presence on campus and reinforced that they did indeed belong and deserved to be there. All four study participants attributed their success to having participated in the program, and three out of the four added that developing a one-on-one mentor-mentee relationship was particularly beneficial when needing additional support, advice, and guidance. Participants also described enhancing networking skills as being another benefit of participating in the mentoring program. This was especially helpful when attempting to apply for research opportunities or ingratiating themselves to non-Black faculty members on campus who, from their previous experience, more than likely held some implicit racial biases against Black students.

Overall, participating in the mentoring program positively impacted the students' undergraduate experience by providing a space in which students felt comfortable discussing barriers they felt on campus due to the fact they were Black males. Additionally, they noted the need for a sense of community and brotherhood and necessary skills for student success. Participating in the program enhanced the students' campus engagement by validating their negative experiences on campus, provided positive counter spaces, and allowed for positive interactions with staff and faculty, which increased the students' sense of belonging. The program also increased campus engagement by hosting events for Black males that were created by Black males with their interests in mind. This literally created the spaces for Black men to engage with each other and with others on campus in a space where they felt they belonged and were not trespassing. The mentoring experience also helped students with the perceived negative effects of attending an institution where Black students are underrepresented by connecting them to resources and helping them focus on self-care. One of the resources the students especially appreciated was having a designated student success center for Black/African/African American students on campus. It is a space where they know they will always be welcome and where they can be their authentic selves, free from judgment.

## **Recommendations**

While this study was concerned with the impact of mentoring for Black males at a public research institution, new questions emerged that could benefit from additional study. The following are recommendations for further study:

1. Since this study collected data from only four participants, data could be collected from more students to further investigate the impact of mentoring on the undergraduate experience, persistence, and particularly how African American undergraduate males combat the negative campus climate of microaggressions and racist incidents they experience on campus. Other variables that could be included with a larger sample size include:
  - a. Major
  - b. Class level
  - c. Gender identity and gender expression
  - d. Type of student
    - i. Transfer student
    - ii. First generation/Second generation
    - iii. International
2. Further study could be conducted to compare the experiences of different cohorts of the mentoring program.
3. Further study could also be conducted measuring if there is a different impact when a student receives mentoring earlier or later in their academic career.

4. Further study could also be conducted on the experiences of African American graduate and professional students, as well as faculty or staff at a public research institution.
5. Further research could also be conducted at different institution types with other underrepresented populations.

### **Recommendations for Professional Practice**

Along with recommendations for further research, a number of recommendations could be considered for professional practice. The following are recommendations for professional practice to help combat the declining rates of African American males and positively affect their success in college:

1. Create dedicated space on campus
2. Allocate funding for resources that support the retention and persistence of this population, such as:
  - a. Mentoring programs specifically for Black males
  - b. Permanent funding to adequately staff the designated student center
  - c. Training programs for students to become peer mentors
3. Increase resources to enhance outreach and recruitment of more African American students
4. Develop partnerships with local K-12 school districts to create pipelines to college
5. Develop programs to increase parental/familial involvement

6. Enhance career counseling/advising specific to this population
7. Explore and develop pipeline programs to graduate/advanced degree programs
8. Active recruitment of diverse staff and faculty, particularly those who identify as Black
9. Recurring mandatory cultural competence training for faculty, staff, and students to address racial bias and microaggressions on campus
10. Develop and implement accountability measures when acts of racial bias occur on campus.

APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

## Informed Consent

**The Effect of Mentoring on the Undergraduate Experience of African American Males at a Public Research Institution**

You are invited to participate in a research study which investigates the impact of participating in a mentoring program for undergraduate African American male students at a large public research institution.

I am a graduate student at California State University, Sacramento, in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Master's program. The purpose of this research is to better understand the potential impact of participating in the [REDACTED] mentoring program on the academic persistence and social integration of African American male students at [REDACTED]. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to answer questions regarding your undergraduate experience before and after participating in the mentoring program. Your participation in this study will last approximately 60-minutes. The session will be a recorded interview.

Risks associated with this study are not anticipated to be greater than those risks encountered in daily life. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Measures taken to insure your confidentiality include keeping the data on a secure computer and not distributing it to anyone. The data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked location and will be destroyed after a period of three years after the study is completed. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project please call the Office of Research Affairs, California State University, Sacramento, (916) 278-5674, or email [irb@csus.edu](mailto:irb@csus.edu).

If at any time during the interview you choose not to participate the interview will be terminated. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about the research, at [REDACTED] or e-mail at [avaetaahluwalia@csus.edu](mailto:avaetaahluwalia@csus.edu)

**If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me to schedule your interview time. All interviews will be conducted at the [REDACTED] for [REDACTED] unless other accommodations need to be made for your convenience.**

Thank you for your consideration,

Avaeta Ahluwalia

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Questions

1. How did you connect with the mentoring program and why did you choose to participate?
2. Describe any barriers you feel you are facing while attending this university, if any?
3. Describe your K-12 experience. Were there any barriers you felt you had to overcome in order to attend university?
4. What was your transition to campus like? Please describe your experience before participating in the mentoring program.
5. What is your college experience like presently, after participating in the mentoring program, compared to when you first joined the university?
6. In what ways has participating in the mentoring program impacted your experience on campus?
7. What is it like attending a large research university as an African American male student?
8. What strategies for student success do you feel are necessary as an African American male student on campus?

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