

**INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT MECHANISMS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES AT
COMMUNITY COLLEGES: A MIXED METHODS STUDY ON THE PERCEPTIONS
OF SUPPORT MECHANISMS FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS AT COMMUNITY
COLLEGES**

by

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Clyde Wilson Sanders Pickett, Ed.D.

University of Pittsburgh, 2017

This study contributed to the greater understanding of institutional support mechanisms for African American male community college students. The goal of this study was to add greater contributions to the support to the academic success of African American males, ultimately leading to the completion of a degree or certificate program. Utilizing the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework of Harper (2010, 2012) and Wood's (2012) Conceptual Model of African American Male Success, influenced by Mason (1998), this study aimed to expose and document what institutional support mechanisms were most influential and impactful in the pursuit of a degree or certificate program. Utilizing research, answers to the following questions were pursued: (1) What institutional support mechanisms did African American male students identify as most influential in completion/graduation at community colleges? (2) Based on student feedback, what additional steps can faculty and staff take to support African American male success in a degree or certificate program? and (3) Based on student feedback, how can researchers support African American male student success and completion at community

colleges? To examine this question, three (3) focus groups (10 students), three (3) one-to-one one interviews, and a random distribution of a 27-question survey to 50 students was executed.

Keywords: African American males, academic support, community colleges, retention, completion, student support, degree completion

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DEDICATION

The culmination of my study and this process is dedicated to my first teacher, Earlene Sanders, my mother. Words will never be able to fully capture just how important, valuable, and meaningful your love, time, and guidance have been to me. I am forever grateful to the Most High for allowing me to be your son. Anything I have accomplished in this life is directly related to your mothering and love. Thank you!

To my beloved children, Destiny P, Alex, and Gerail, I love you. You remain my motivation and my work as an educator is to make this world a better place for you and your children. I hope the completion of this process serves as motivation for your own goals. All my love...

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 POSITIONALITY

I self-identify as a Black, heterosexual, cisgender male, educator. I grew up in a predominately Black, lower socio economic status, and urban neighborhood. It should be noted that throughout this document, I use the term Black and African American interchangeably. I have lived extended periods of time in the Southern United States, the Midwestern United States, and the Eastern United States. In addition to conducting research on the experiences of African American males at community colleges, I currently serve as a chief diversity officer at a community college. Prior to my current appointment, I served in the same capacity at another institution, helping to support the promotion of inclusion and working to prioritize institutional support for diversity initiatives. I also have served as an adjunct instructor, program administrator, and student affairs officer at institutions of higher education.

My experiences working to address policy and programs to support diverse, undergraduate student experiences ultimately led to my interest in conducting a mixed methods approach research study to learn more about the experiences of African American male students and what institutions could do additionally to provide methods of support for this population. In my work, I have engaged in many conversations with staff and faculty who share the desire to support the positive outcomes of these students, but often share a sense of helplessness or lack of

connection in working to provide the appropriate support. Through my work examining policy and executing strategic planning processes, I explore several ways to promote support for better outcomes for all students, including African American males. Conversations with students about their experiences on campus, and reflecting on my own undergraduate experiences, I entered the research project with the hope of developing a better understanding of what institutions were doing well to provide support for this student population.

In my role as a senior administrator, I began asking myself broader questions about campus climate, faculty engagement, student experience, and institutional commitment to the dedication of resources to support these students. By examining the limited research and data on this student population, I was motivated to seek greater information on institutional responsibility. I sought to establish better understanding on the narrative of these students and the importance of the exposure to their success. I was motivated to find out what institutions might be able to do to provide direct support of these students.

As educators, we should be committed to learning more about the populations we serve and the factors that lead to their success. We should work to understand that their experiences are varied and the pathways to their academic success is not monolithic.

As I began to reflect more deeply on this study, I asked myself questions about my personal experiences and the role positionality played in review of the research and interaction with the subjects. Drawing upon the Milner (2007) Framework of Researcher Racial and Cultural Positionality, I examined the ideas of researching the self, researching the self in relation to others, and shifting from self to the system to gain greater insight into the potential impact of positionality on my study. In examining these subjects, I also set out to identify the potential dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen, along with examining the concept of convergence.

1.1.1 Researching the self

In examining the concept of research of self, I understand that my experiences as a Black male educator, passionate about the positive academic outcomes of Black male students, impacts my interest and motivation on this study. Reading countless articles and studies that focused on the deficit narrative and connection with African American males made me intentionally focus on successful students and examine what was working and what had value.

My own cultural experiences with higher education and at times feeling like I had no direct access to express my concerns with senior leadership, led me to utilize direct focus groups and one-to-one interviews to provide students a voice. I wanted to provide an opportunity for them to share their experiences and concerns and to be heard.

It should be noted that the seen danger in terms of positionality of this study, is my cultural self-identification of African American male. I wanted the outcome to be unbiased in review of the data, even with the cultural and racial similarities of participants. The unforeseen danger in this research was my role and relationship with the site institution of the study. As I serve as the institution's chief diversity officer, I had to be conscious of the potential bias that could manifest because of my duties to the institution.

1.1.2 Researching the self in relation to others

My own cultural experience of growing up Black in an urban area led to a greater understanding of the racial and cultural backgrounds of the study participants. It should be noted that I also live in the same neighborhood as some of the subjects and have direct interaction with them through my role at the institution. While I do have some common experiences in racial background and

culture, it should be noted that I did not attend a community college, but rather a 4-year institution to complete my undergraduate study.

In examining the seen dangers of this study, I was required to seek balance in negotiating my own personal interest in working to provide support for these students, while allowing them an opportunity for transparent dialogue. I did not want participants to feel uncomfortable about sharing experiences and information on support mechanisms that were not beneficial. An unforeseen danger to this study involved subjects sharing information that negatively impacted programs and services for which my office had a direct oversight and/or connection.

1.1.3 Shifting from self to system

Race, racism, and culture all significantly impacted this study. Institutional racism in higher education, the P-12 pipeline, and in broader society have had a devastating effect on the African American male experience in society. The subject of race and the gap in academic outcomes for the subject population was the genesis of this study. Statistically, African American males are the lowest achieving students in terms of educational completion at community colleges. Systemic barriers, including academic preparation and affordability of higher education, have long been issues impacting African American males. As institutions have sought to better promote inclusion; conversation, or an interest convergence on assisting student populations, have emerged. Institutions are offering more exposure to providing support for all student populations, including African American male students. To advance this work, we must work to advance the research literature to validate and provide a voice to those who have often been silenced, misinterpreted, misrepresented, and placed on the margins (Milner, 2007).

In a report titled. “*The Educational Experiences on Young Men of Color*,” Lee and Ransom (2011) espoused that the pathway men of color take after high school is grossly represented in unemployment, incarceration, and death. Whether it is the rise of the prison industrial complex, incidents with law enforcement—including the murders of unarmed black men at the hands of law enforcement, the high rate of suspensions of children of color in the K-12 pipeline (Noguera, 2003), or the challenges of graduation for African American males (Kimbrough & Harper 2006, Harper 2008, Wood 2013), we find ourselves in a critical state of affairs relative to the experiences of African American men in America. Research documents the impact of racism, classism, and oppression in relation to the experiences of African American males in education (Harper, 2008). Society currently affirms that African American children, including black males, are incomplete copies of Western European white children (Delpit, 2002).

The mounting debt of inequity—including the economy, moral components, and civic engagement—leave us with an education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Society, including educators, should try to acknowledge this debt exists and should work to make a commitment to the passing on of power, insight, influence, and support to this population that has been traditionally marginalized and disenfranchised. Leaders in education should be proactive to promote support and educational success. Stakeholders should try to understand that African American student achievement is dynamic and complex (Pruitt, 1997). African American male student success and excellence does exist in post-secondary education (Harper, 2015), however the influences of power, class, identity, and racism disproportionately shape the normative idea of Black underachievement in academic outcomes (Harper, 2008, Strayhorn, 2012). Educators at all levels should consider a candid look at the impact of institutional and societal commitment in relation to outcomes of success for African American males.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Research indicates that African American men are often unable to pursue a better quality of life because they leave colleges before they graduate (Flowers, 2006; Glenn, 2007; Hagerdon, Maxwell & Hampton, 2007; Pope, 2006). Scholars declare that underrepresentation of African American male college graduates has serious repercussions on the nation (Hagerdorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2007; Harris & Wood, 2013; Lee & Ransom, 2011). These repercussions include economic strife due to restricted access to career pipelines and unemployment, mass incarceration, widespread health disparities, and a lower quality of life. In community colleges around the United States, significantly less African American male students are receiving degrees when compared to all other groups of students (Harper, 2006, J. F. L. Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008; Strayhorn, 2012). According to the National Center of Education Statistics, nearly seven million students are enrolled in community colleges (Sydney & Dillow, 2015). Of these students, 15 percent are African American. While the enrollment of African American students at 2-year institutions continues to rise, the degree completion rates do not match that growth. African American students account for a dismal eight percent of degrees awarded at 2-year institutions. At public 2-year institutions, only 11 percent of African American men enrolled complete their degrees in three years (Snyder & Dillow, 2015).

Often, African American males transition to hubs of higher education ill-prepared for the rigors of post-secondary education and perform academically at disproportionately lower levels

when compared with other student populations (Lindo, 2006). A significant contribution to this challenge is the lack of appropriate information to provide insight into the intricacies of the Black male student (Wood & Palmer, 2013). A lack of attention and engagement by faculty, staff, and administrators (Wendt, 2014), and the inability to establish connections to the campus environment are additional factors of influence (Harper, 2006). To address and overcome these and other barriers that impact degree completion and academic success of African American male students, institutions must be committed to the allocation of resources, the development of intervention programs, and the promotion of research and data initiatives that seek to increase the persistence and completion rates of African American male students.

There are many challenges that community colleges and their leaders face, one of the most daunting is the improvement of the academic success and completion of African American male students. Provided that community colleges enroll more African American male college students than any other post-secondary institution type in the United States (Luke, 2012), African American men represent only 4% of the total undergraduate enrollment in the United States and only 40% of those students go on to graduate (Strayhorn, 2012).

African American males find ease in accessing community colleges; graduating from those institutions is another story. This population of students often finds itself in the lowest tier of performance for most measurable educational outcomes (Wood, 2013). Whether it is GPA, graduation rate, or enrollment in remedial education courses, African American males find themselves the lowest performing students at community colleges (Wood, 2013). Hagerdorn, Maxwell, and Hampton (2007) assert that the retention of African American male community college students is among the lowest of all ethnic groups. Similar to four-year institutions,

community colleges are struggling to find ways to increase success rates of racial and ethnic minority students (Wood and Palmer, 2013).

A review of historical research can document the achievement gap and long struggle of African American males in educational pursuits; however, limited research exists to support the success of African American males in higher education (Harper, 2008). We know little about what attributes are most influential in positively impacting the educational outcomes, including graduation and completion, for this population of students. Post-secondary educational scholars and practitioners interested in working to positively impact the completion of African American males at community colleges must begin to focus studies on students who have successfully navigated the community college system. We need better insight and information on students who have been successful to help illuminate the path of education for others. These students can provide better insight into what we must adjust as practitioners to assist this population.

2.1 INFLUENCES ON SUCCESS

Research documents that faculty interaction with African American male community college students is essential (Wood, 2013). Students who have at least one hour of interaction per week with faculty persist at a higher rate than their counterparts who do not have that interaction (Wood, 2013). Mentoring is also an essential support intervention for the success of college students. Research has shown that when implemented properly, these programs can be successful at helping students to persist and graduate (Brooks, Jones, and Burt, 2013; Campbell, Smith, and Dugan, 2012). Opportunities for direct mentoring provide access for student participants to have someone to help influence and guide their pursuit of education. Research documents that African

American male students who have models of success (Harper, 2014) are more apt to be successful in educational pursuits.

Active student participation is also an essential component to academic intervention program initiatives and college student support. Students must buy in and be invested in terms of time and interest for a program to find traction and offer support. Research and data infer that the experiences of African American males in higher education include the lack of participation in and support of academic and engagement initiatives (Harper & Davis, 2012). Community college students are less socially and academically integrated into institutions and are more likely to experience stress (Wood and Palmer, 2013). Research further supports that these students are culturally isolated in their environments and are hesitant to actively participate in activities that do not consider and respect their identity (Noguera, 2003). In terms of successful outcomes, the students who are most active or engaged persist and achieve at higher levels (Harper, 2015). Black men come to college having already been socialized to devalue engagement (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006). In several educational settings, there is a shortage of black male role models and mentors on campus who actively and strategically promote engagement (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006).

Given the current challenges to the academic success of African American males at community colleges, educators and institutions must seek to promote opportunities for institutional support of these students. Practitioners need to actively examine what support factors are most impactful and of benefit to the education outcomes of these students. Educators and institutions alike must use data and research to examine the most impactful sources of support and allocate time and resources to these mechanisms.

2.2 PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

While research can document the achievement gap and the long struggle of African American males in educational pursuits, limited research exists to support the success of African American males in higher education (Harper, 2008). We know little about what attributes are most influential in impacting the educational outcomes positively, including graduation and completion, for this population of students. Post-secondary educational scholars and practitioners interested in working to positively impact the completion of African American males at community colleges should try to begin to focus studies on students who have successfully navigated the community college system. This commitment is paramount in shifting policy and identifying institutional resources and best practices to close achievement gaps and work to assist students with positive academic outcomes. Educational practitioners should be motivated by the desire to seek informed interventions to assist students with success. More simply, we need better insight and information on students who have been successful to help illuminate the path of education for others. These students can provide better understanding into necessary adjustments in practice and procedure to assist with improvements in outcomes.

While African American student populations are significant in size and degree, certificate completion rates plague institutions and are a significant challenge. Whether it is GPA, graduation rates, or enrollment in remedial education courses, African American males find themselves the lowest performing students at community colleges (Wood, 2013).

Educators at community colleges have a front row seat to the academic struggles of African American male students in this setting. Limited scholarly endeavors have been dedicated to paths of success for African American males (Wood, 2013). The current research and existing literature tend to focus on Black male hopelessness and underachievement in academic pursuits

(Harper, 2012). Poor success among community college students in terms of persistence, graduation, achievement, and transfer has led to a criticism of these institutions (Wood, 2012). Research is needed to examine the experiences of students and institutional support that might assist with promotion of success and ultimately degree and certificate completion.

The current gap in research and the struggles of African American male students is a direct influence and motivator for this problem of practice study. This study seeks to engage in an investigation to examine the experiences of African American male students at an urban community college in western Pennsylvania to gain better insight into the factors that impact successful academic outcomes.

Utilizing the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework of Harper (2008) and Wood's (2012) Conceptual Model of African American Male Success, the identified goal of this study was to find common attributes and experiences regarding institutional support that helped contribute to the educational success of African American male students. It should be noted that for the sake of this study, institutional support mechanisms are defined as college/university sponsored programs, initiatives, and individuals at the institution in place to offer support and guidance.

Upon completion of this study, this body of research will help support this population of students and will help influence institutional programs including initiative that directly support African American male student success. This information should be of particular benefit to institutions and educators who want to further assist African American males with their educational pursuits in postsecondary education that lead to completion.

2.3 CONCEPTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The primary frameworks for this investigation are the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework of Harper (2010, 2012) and Wood's (2012) Conceptual Model of African American Male Success influenced by Mason (1998). Created originally for qualitative study, and grounded in perspectives from sociology, psychology, gender studies, and education, Harper's framework is guided by a belief that despite what is consistently reported in media, peer reviewed academic journals, and research reports, there are many Black male students who achieve elevated levels of academic preparation, support, and motivation, which enables them to succeed (Harper, 2015). The framework is intended to identify policies, practices, structures, and factors that contribute to the success of Black male students (Harper, 2008). The framework places emphasis on reframing deficit-oriented research questions regarding students of color and their trajectories (Harper, 2012). A visual representation for the framework can be seen in Figure 1.

The Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework of Harper (2007, 2008, 2012, 2014) can be used to guide inquiry by researchers, educators, and administrators to better understand Black male student success in college by focusing on the experiences and perspectives of students who are successful in educational endeavors (Harper, 2012). Informed by three (3) decades of literature on Black men in education and society, the framework inverts questions that are commonly asked about educational disadvantage, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, disengagement, and Black male student attrition (Harper, 2012). It includes some questions that promote exploration to better understand how Black undergraduate men successfully navigate their way to and through higher education (Harper, 2012).

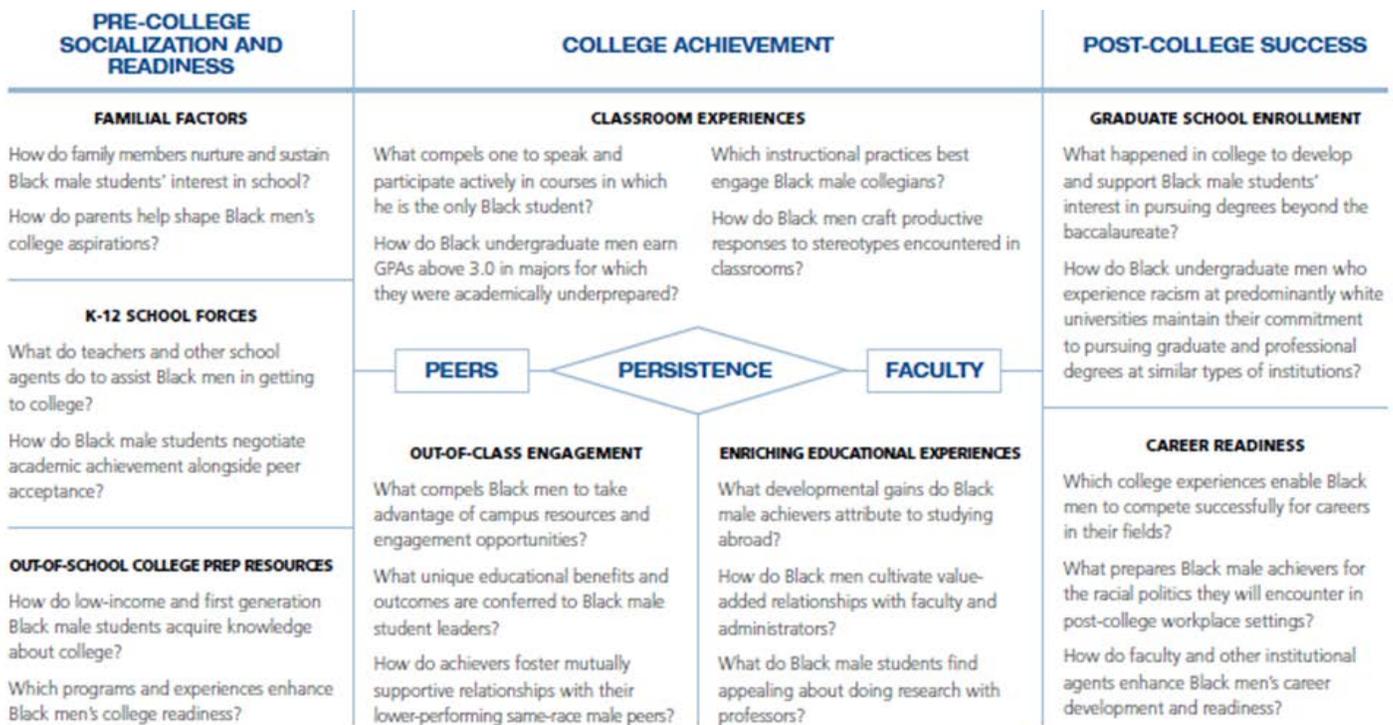


Figure 1. Harper: *Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework*

This study utilized Harper’s framework to create specific types of questions for African American male community college students regarding institutional support mechanisms that are most influential and impactful on the path towards success and completion of a degree or certificate program. The study included questions related to the major categories in the framework, as shown in the examples below:

Collegiate Achievement (Classroom Experiences)

What additional steps can faculty take to support your engagement in the classroom?

Collegiate Achievement (Out-of-Class Engagement)

What institutional programs were most supportive during your time of study?

Collegiate Achievement (Out-of-Class Engagement)

What compels Black males to take advantage of the college’s support services?

Enriching Educational Experiences

How can African American males cultivate stronger relationships with faculty and staff?

In addition to the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework of Harper, this study utilized Wood's (2012) Conceptual Model of African American Male Student Success to help shape the investigation. Wood's model identifies the influential factors that influence academic success for African American males at community colleges. These include institutional, personal, academic, and psychological factors (Wood 2012). Shaped by research of Mason (1998), this conceptual model influenced the investigation by helping to guide the appropriate questions to explore the subject of support. This model assists with information on pertinent factors of support for the student participants to help better understand the institutional factors that influence African American male student success.

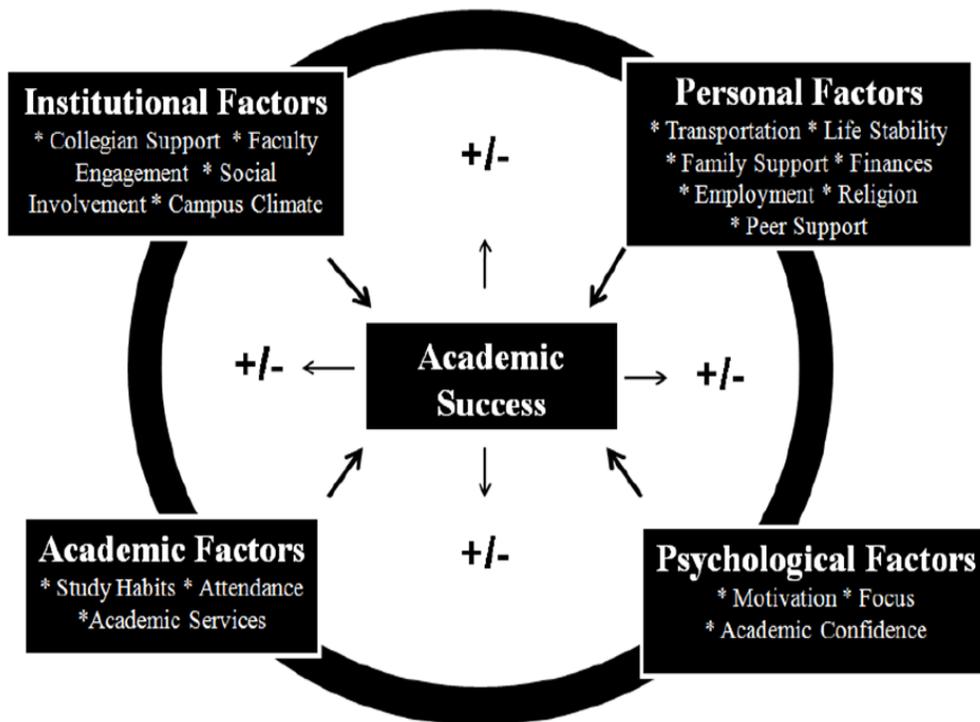


Figure 2. Wood: *Conceptual Model of African American Male Success*

The major categories in Wood's model include: *academic factors*, *institutional factors*, *personal factors* and *psychological factors*. These categories relate to the categories in Harper's

model. Specifically, each of the six (6) categories profiled in the Harper model that relate to community college student success folds into the four (4) category factors of success in the Wood model. The models are interconnected in providing better insight into pathways of success for African American males. Each of the models articulates the relevant factors to promote academic success and/or persistence.

This study utilized Wood's framework to create specific questions regarding institutional support mechanisms impacting the four (4) factors influencing the academic success for male students of color (Wood, 2012). Included below are questions related to the four (4) major factors impacting academic success in the framework:

Institutional Factors

Did you take advantage of faculty office hours?

Personal Factors

How helpful were relationships with fellow classmates (friends)?

Academic Factors

How helpful was participation with a study group?

Psychological Factors

What suggestions do you have for future African American male students to improve their experience?

2.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While their presence at community colleges is common, African American male students often find themselves in the lowest tier of performance for most measurable educational outcomes

(Wood, 2013). Whether it is GPA, graduation rate, or enrollment in remedial education courses, African American males are the lowest performing students at community colleges (Wood, 2013). Limited research has been dedicated to exploring the paths of success for African American male students (Wood, 2013). Given limited research, more data is needed to provide better understanding of Black male community college students; and to assist practitioners with ways to develop their academic needs (Wood and Palmer, 2013).

The focus of this study was to examine the institutional attributes African American male students most identify as influential and impactful on their path to success. This study allowed students to offer input on the influence of the following factors:

- *Faculty and Staff Support/Relationships*
- *Institutional Support Services*
- *Institutional Climate*
- *In-Class Engagement*
- *Out-of-Class Engagement*

In undertaking the task to examine the experiences, support mechanisms, and strategies to promote academic success in terms of completion of degree and certificate programs for African American males at community colleges, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1.) *What institutional support mechanisms did African American male students identify as most influential in completion/graduation at community colleges?*
- 2.) *Based on student feedback, what additional steps can faculty and staff take to support African American male success in a degree or certificate program?*
- 3.) *Based on student feedback, how can researchers support African American male*

student success and completion at community colleges?

Exploration of these questions can further assist in improving and promoting the body of literature and research on African American males at community colleges. This essential information assists with unlocking much needed data to assist staff and faculty with creating and promoting programs and services to assist this population with their educational journeys.

2.5 GAPS IN EXISTING RESEARCH

While there is a growing body of work to examine the educational experiences of African American males in higher education, limited scholarship focuses on African American males at community colleges. Most of the current research is focused on African American students at four-year schools (Strayhorn, 2012). Limited scholarly endeavors have been dedicated to paths of success (Wood, 2013). The current research and existing literature tends to focus on Black male hopelessness and underachievement in academic pursuits (Harper, 2012). Given limited research, more data is needed to provide a perspective and understanding of black male community college students to assist practitioners on ways to develop solutions to their needs (Wood and Palmer, 2013).

The existing literature and scholarship to address the concerns of African American males tends to focus on Black male hopelessness and underachievement in academic pursuits (Harper, 2012). The assumptions related to hopeless and underachievement fail to address the examples of success exhibited by some African American male students (Harper, 2015). The gap in existing research for African American males in community colleges negatively shapes the student perceptions of faculty and staff. By example, if an African American male is uninvolved,

lacks engagement in the academic process, or fails to seek services at the college, staff and faculty may internalize that African American students are generally disinterested in the educational process. This thought process fails to take into consideration the experience of students who are actively engaged and involved and recognizes what institutional factors must be addressed to engage and serve the students in this population.

Significant scholarship must examine new theories, models, and research to address the unique experiences of African American students. By committing to learn more about this population, we can work to progress their experiences and break down barriers to their success.

3.0 APPLIED INQUIRY PLAN

Utilizing questions framed in the Anti-Achievement Deficit Framework of Harper (2007, 2008, 2012, 2014) and influenced by the Conceptual Model of African American Male Student Success of Wood (2012), this study engaged a population of African American male community college students to examine institutional support identified as most influential in assisting African American male students in their pursuit of completion of a degree or certificate program. The goal of the inquiry was to foster a more robust understanding of institutional support including faculty engagement, program support, and initiatives that yield academic success, engagement, and completion. The study was comprised of a series of three (3) focus group interviews, three (3) one-to-one interviews, and a survey comprised of 27 questions. Participants in this study were required to be African American male students in at least their second year of study, nearing the completion of a degree or certificate program.

The goal of this inquiry was to foster a more robust understanding into the academic experiences of African American males by developing data driven interventions to promote support to help advance positive student academic outcomes.

3.1 INQUIRY SETTING

The setting for this inquiry was a large multi-system community college in western Pennsylvania. Founded in 1966, the institution has an enrollment of over 35,000 students and offers more than 170 degree and certificate programs. The institution has articulation agreements with over 30 colleges and universities facilitating credit transfers in 87 programs of study.

With four (4) campus locations and four (4) educational centers, the institution is one of the largest educational providers in Pennsylvania. The institution has the region's largest career and technical education center and has been identified by both state and federal elected officials as a hub to promote job training to meet the regional workforce needs. The college aspires to promote quality and affordable access to associate's degrees and job training to meet regional workforce needs, while it also serves as the primary source for community education.

In addition to the broad scope of programs and mission, the college boasts a diverse student population. Roughly 26% of all students self-identify as being from a diverse background. The institution has the largest African American male degree-seeking student population in the region and the fourth (4th) largest population in the state with nearly 1,700 students. A regional leader in higher education diversity and inclusion initiatives, the college has received several national awards for its work in diversity and inclusion.

It should be noted that the college is supported by one system-wide president who provides overall strategic leadership for the college. Direct management at the college's four (4) campus locations is provided by an on-site campus president. Each of the campus presidents is assigned one of the four campus educational centers to support and provide guidance. The campus presidents have support in the operations of their campus location by an administrative team that includes an academic dean, a dean of students, and a business officer. Additionally, the

college falls under the same academic governance system, board of trustees, and its faculty and support staff are supported by independent union systems.

3.2 STAKEHOLDERS

This study stands to further support the body of research on African American male students at community colleges. As such, practitioners who work to support their needs and labor to expand research and practice to assist this population are an identified stakeholder. The population of African American male students pursuing education and training at community colleges is also identified as stakeholders in this study. The faculty that work in classrooms to meet the instructional needs of this population is an important stakeholder in this inquiry as they are on the frontlines of instruction to assist this population with positive academic outcomes.

Additional stakeholders include community college staff, administrators, community organizations, resource groups, and researchers that work to provide greater understanding for support for African American male college students. It should be noted that family and friends are also significant contributors to the success of this population and thus are major stakeholders.

3.3 APPROACHES

The approaches to complete this research study involved a series of three (3) focus group sessions lasting approximately 1.5 hours, three (3) one-to-one interviews lasting approximately 1 hour, and a random selection of 50 surveys comprised of 27 questions that were distributed via

email to the college's African American male student population. Each of the participants in this study was required to be an African American male student in at least their second year of study, in good academic standing with the college, and nearing the completion of a degree or certificate program.

3.3.1 Focus groups

The first approach to support this study was a series of three (3) audio recorded focus group sessions lasting approximately 1.5 hours. The participants in the three (3) focus groups that supported this study were selected at random by self-participation. A distribution announcement regarding the opportunity to participate in the focus groups was sent to the college's African American male student population via email and posters advertising the focus groups were placed throughout the college's locations. Participants' at all four (4) campus locations and centers were given an opportunity to participate in the focus group sessions by responding to either the email or the information listed in the flier. Dates were selected for the three (3) focus groups sessions, as were sites for these sessions. The identified sites for these sessions were Campus A, Campus B, and Campus C.

Campus A is the college's largest campus with approximately 10,000 students. The campus is located near the downtown area of a major metropolitan area in western Pennsylvania and is considered a traditional urban college setting. College A has the most diverse population of students at the college and the largest population of African American male students.

Campus B, the site for focus group number 2, is the college's 2nd largest campus with approximately 6,000 students and is located on the eastern part of the county for which the

college resides. Campus B is considered a more traditional college campus and is in a suburban area. Campus B is the college's hub for science and health education career studies.

The final site for focus groups to support this study was Campus C. Located 16 miles south of Campus A, Campus C is in a rural area and has a population of approximately 4,500 students. Campus C is in a formerly strong industrial area and has been significantly impacted by population decline.

3.3.2 One-to-one interviews

The second method of inquiry for this study was a series of three (3) audio-recorded one-to-one interviews lasting approximately one (1) hour. The one-to-one interviews were executed by involving participants who had previously participated in one of the focus group sessions after responding via email or call to the advertising for this study. Participants were interviewed for an hour and given an opportunity to share further insight into their experiences at the college and provide information on the most influential institutional support mechanisms during their time of study.

3.3.3 Surveys

The final method of inquiry for this study was the distribution of a 27-question survey. The survey asked participants to rate the level of support each for each question asked using a 6 point Likert scale. The scale responses are below:

- 6- Very Helpful
- 5- Often Helpful

- 4- Somewhat Helpful
- 3- Rarely Helpful
- 2- Not at all Helpful
- 1- No Experience

To support this study, 50 surveys were selected at random to provide support to examining the college's most influential institutional support mechanisms. The survey was distributed via email to the college's African American male student database using the Qualtrics system at the University of Pittsburgh.

4.0 RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This study was executed to examine the institutional support mechanisms a group of African American male community college students most identified as influential and impactful toward their pursuit of a degree or certificate program. The outcomes of this body of research will help support this population of students with success and will help influence institutional programs and educators in the support of African American male student success. This study sought to answer the three (3) research questions as way to advance support and research for this population.

Research question 1 asked, *what institutional support mechanisms are most influential in assisting African American male students with completion/graduation at community colleges?* The resounding themes having explored the topic via focus group, survey, and one-to-one interviews involved the availability of academic support centers, supportive and engaging relationships with faculty and staff, and supportive relationships with an academic advisor.

A paramount need for institutional support identified by the students in this study was the availability of learning support centers to assist with tutoring, writing, and positive academic outcomes. The students identified the need for flexible hours at these locations and staffing that was welcoming, hospitable, and free of judgement. The students identified that these support locations helped to meet the needs of their course requirements and assisted with providing guidance and counsel on assignments. Students in all three (3) approaches to study identified that

central tutoring centers like the institution's learning commons (a central writing and tutoring center), as well as the math café (a central tutoring place for math) were essential to positive academic support. The students remarked that at times, the lack of available hours had negatively impacted support to their study. Students in both the focus groups and interviews discussed the positive impact of certain staff in the learning commons and math café and the positive impact toward the completion of a degree or certificate program. The following direct quotes represent this assessment:

"The learning commons is my go to place for help! They make sure to take the time to help me prepare for class and will not stop until I'm comfortable with the material."

(Focus Group Campus B)

"Ms. Ashley will take the time to help as long as you need her. I know after math, I can always go ask for help if I need it." (Focus Group Campus C)

"As much help as I get from the learning commons, I just wish more of us (African American males) would take advantage." (Focus Group Campus B)

In the survey distributed to student participants, 75.86% of respondents indicated that the learning commons was very helpful or often helpful in their experiences at the college for institutional support. 65.5% of respondents indicated the same for the math café.

While the students identified the college's learning centers as a primary place for support, they too expressed concern with the hours associated with these centers. The students remarked that the centers should be open on weekends and for extended hours to meet the needs of their work schedules. Many of the students stated that the limited hours of these centers could negatively impact the academic journey of African American male students who were just beginning their studies.

The second item identified by students as most influential for support included a supportive and engaging relationships with college's faculty and staff. During the focus groups and interviews, each of the students made sure to mention by name the individuals at the college who had been most impactful and supportive during their time of study. Each of the students indicated that these relationships were influential in their academic success. It should be noted that the college has a system-wide support program for male students of color called the Men of Merit Initiative (MMI). Several the college's staff who volunteer to support the initiative were listed as individuals who were supportive to students during their time of study.

The last item identified by students as most influential for institutional support included a supportive relationship with an academic advisor. It should be noted that the site college for this study does not utilize case management advising. While the students are assigned a faculty advisor, they are not required to meet with students. Students go to a central advising office to register for classes and to seek counsel on the selection of courses or information on the completion of a degree program. Students often meet with a different advisor during each visit as this center is staffed by adjunct faculty members and available faculty who choose their schedules.

During the focus group sessions, a number of students expressed their concerns with the advising process at the institution. The students remarked that it was just as important to develop a relationship with a "good" advisor as it was essential to selecting courses and understanding the program of study. The students commented that a "good" advisor made all the difference in the world in advancing program of study. They further stated that a "bad" advisor might place students in the wrong classes and that they were often uninformed on programs of study and

paths to completion. The following are direct quotes from both the focus group sessions and one-to-one interviews regarding interactions with advisors:

“Getting a good advisor is the most important thing in graduation. I have the same advisor I go to every time. Mr. Don knows everything and works to help me graduate. The advisor I had before Mr. Don picked the wrong classes for me and set me back a year in my degree. I was heated! You have to make sure you have the right advisor because there are a lot of bad ones, you know?” (Student Interview)

“I have never seen the same advisor twice during my time of study. It makes it tough because I never know if I’m taking the right classes or not.” (Focus Group Campus A)

“You have to make sure that you stay on top of your advisor and ask them questions. A lot of them don’t know every major.” (Focus Group Campus A)

“I took classes at Campus A and I will tell you that they don’t know what they are doing. Since I came to Campus B, I always get good advice on classes.” (Focus Group Campus B)

The concerns regarding interactions with advisors was also expressed in the survey distribution. 35% of respondents indicated that their interactions with advisors were rarely helpful or not at all helpful. These responses affirm the sentiments that were expressed during the focus groups and interviews.

Research question 2 focused on what additional steps faculty and staff can take to support African American male success in the pursuit a degree or certificate program. Utilizing information garnered from the focus groups and one-to-one interviews, it should be noted that students identified that faculty and staff can serve as primary points of contact and mentors for them during their pursuit of study. The students identified that a mentor or individual at the

institution was essential not only in their journey toward completion, but also in their recruitment to the institution. The students each discussed the need to have liaisons of individuals they could look to for support. The students candidly discussed the need for more African American male faculty and staff. The students stated it would be nice to connect with someone of a similar background who “could understand” their journey and assist them during their time of study. While the students did express the desire for support from men of color, they went on to say that anyone who was dedicated and willing to provide support was of value. As one student indicated in the focus group at Campus A, *“As long as you care, that’s all that really matters”*.

On more than one occasion, the students discussed a specific administrator who they saw in the community who helped introduce them to the college. They indicated this person was essential in attracting them to the college as he volunteered with a local African American male leadership development program designed to assist male students of color. The students remarked that this person not only helped them get into the college, but also was a primary point of contact once they arrived. The following are direct quotes registered by the students:

“If we had more people like Mr. Wilson, we would have many more Black male students here.” (Student Interview)

“As soon as I arrived here I sent Mr. Wilson a text and let him know I registered. He made sure to check on me.” (Focus Group Campus A)

“I can say that Mr. Wilson is always there asking questions and making sure I get access to the right people I need to.” (Student Interview)

It should be noted that the individual the students referred to (Mr. Wilson) is an administrator at the college responsible for diversity initiatives.

The sentiments expressed by the students underscore the need for faculty and staff to work to establish meaningful relationships with the college's African American male students. Faculty and staff should be intentional in reaching out to provide support for these students by first working to develop relationships during professional exchange in job responsibility.

An additional step faculty and staff can take to assist African American male students is to encourage engagement and participation in institutional support programs. The existing body of research on African American males at community colleges shows that engagement is essential to outcomes. A number of students involved in this study indicated they were not involved in any of the college's existing support mechanisms. An example of this includes 45% of the study's survey respondents who indicated they were not involved with clubs or organizations at the college. To further support that idea, 60% of the survey respondents indicated that the college's African American male initiative was at the minimum somewhat helpful, yet 30% indicated they were not involved in the program. These statistics indicate the need for faculty and staff to further support student involvement and engagement at the college.

Research question 3 examines how to inform the current gaps in research to better support African American male student success and completion at community colleges. Utilizing the data in this research study and sharing information including outcomes, are tools to support answering research question 3. Practitioner research like this study can further assist institutions with a better understanding of what they can do better assist this student population. As the research of Harper (2012) indicates, institutions must be mindful of allowing African American males to illuminate clues to their own paths of success. Once we have that research, we must put it into use to further support students and make conscious effort to expand the body of data and

research on this population of students. These gaps are further addressed in the discussion and conclusion.

4.1 STUDENT INTERVIEWS

In the series of one-to-one interviews to support this research study, the three (3) students interviewed were given an opportunity to share information on their educational journeys and the factors they identified as most influential on their path toward attaining a degree or certificate program. These interviews were executed to further illuminate research questions one and two and to offer context to the experiences of African American male students at the college. These interviews sought to gain greater clarity on suggested improvements with faculty and staff support and the support mechanisms that were most influential to the pursuit of completion.

To further support research question 1, each of the students were given an opportunity to share what institutions could do to better provide support for the journeys of African American male students. While each of the students listed varied factors as being the most impactful on their personal success, all three (3) discussed the college's African American male initiative (Men of Merit or MMI) in our conversation regarding influential institutional factors of support. Each of the students provided a narrative and rationale for why they selected what they chose as being most influential and all mentioned that specific programs like MMI were helpful as they focused on African American males exclusively.

The first student interviewed, Benny, was a 22-year-old, fourth-year, political science major who attended Campus A at the time of the interview. Benny indicated that he was in his third (3rd) year of study and soon to complete a degree in the fall of '15. Benny indicated that

during his time at the college, he worked full-time to help cover the cost of his education. He was an active participant in the college's MMI program, business club, and Black Student Union. He indicated that he had frequent interactions with faculty and staff due to his participation in clubs and organization and was now well on his path towards success after a difficult first year of study. His responses regarding faculty and staff interactions directly inform research question 2 examining faculty and staff support.

Benny indicated that he had failed several classes his first semester, but after finding his rhythm, he was soon to finish an associate's degree program and had plans to transfer to a large urban comprehensive four-year institution located in the same city in the fall of 2016.

When asked about the most influential factors of success, research question 1, Benny identified institutional factors such as the learning commons as most influential to his success. He referenced that students "need to take advantage of what they are paying for." He discussed openly his concerns with advising and the inconsistency in the advising schedule. He talked about the need for the institution to offer more consistency in advising relationships and schedule. He stated, *"One of the main reasons, I got behind and the main reasons I'm not on track is going from a really bad advisor to now having a good one. That made all the difference in the world."*

When asked about what African American male students could do to further assist with their own paths toward success, Benny stressed the importance of being involved. He stated that there were many organizations that could help students if only they took advantage.

The second student interviewed, Clark, was a 19-year-old, second-year, criminal justice major at the time of his interview. Clark transitioned to the institution immediately from high school after he exhausted his other plans for a career. He explained that his first career choice

was the military, but he was rejected due to health reasons. Upon completion of an associate's degree, Clark plans to transfer to a nationally accredited historically black institution located in Washington, D.C. His ultimate goal is law school.

When asked research question 1, the most influential factors of support, Clark referenced his relationships with staff and administrators at the college. He explained how he arrived at the college in need of development education courses for math and writing, but was able to advance through those courses with assistance from the learning commons and math café. He proudly talked about his 3.3 grade point average and how he continued to excel in class. He talked about the supportive environment at the college and the importance of familial support. Clark discussed his involvement in the MMI program, and general engagement in campus life as factors that have contributed to his success.

When asked about what African American male students could do to further assist with their own paths toward success, Clark talked about the importance of meeting individuals like Mr. Wilson at the college. He stated that having the right relationships was important to success and outcomes.

The third student interviewed, Larry, was a 46-year-old, fifth (5th) year, general studies social work major at the time of his interview. Larry indicated that this was his second time trying college, but it was his first time being successful. He indicated that despite bouts with homelessness and challenges to his health, he was a Dean's List student with a 3.7 grade point average. Larry indicated that he *"took advantage of every institutional support mechanism possible"*. This included the learning commons, the math café, TRIO programs, and the Men of Merit Initiative. He indicated that while MMI was helpful, it was not as strong as a similar program at another institution he attended in eastern Pennsylvania.

When asked about the most influential factors of success, the subjects talked at length about personal drive and motivation. Larry discussed the importance of using opportunities to “change” his life around. He talked about the influence of personal drive, focus on career, and previous hardships being significant factors for his success.

When asked about what African American male students could do to further assist with their own paths toward success, Larry talked about the importance of perseverance. He said that students had to “*Man up or give up!*” He talked at length about trying to expose others to the college and to institutional support mechanisms, but how many of the people he approached were not patient enough to see higher education through. In his last semester of study, Larry intends to transfer to a large urban comprehensive four-year institution located in the same city in the fall of 2016 to study Social Work.

4.2 EMERGING THEMES

In the review of data for this problem of practice study, there were several emerging themes that were illuminated in examining the information garnered from the focus group sessions, surveys, and, one-to one- interviews. These emerging themes included a distinction between individual versus institutional support mechanisms, availability of resource support, and varying levels of participation by African American male students.

For example, in response to research question 1, participants in this study made considerable effort to make a distinction between the importance of individual support mechanisms in comparison to institutional support mechanisms. The students underscored while there were institutional support services available to students, nothing was more important to the

success of African American male success than the individual support they could get from mentors, family, friends, the community, and their self. The students remarked on multiple occasions that they had all the tools to be successful, but must have the initiative to get it done.

The following direct quotes represent comments that affirm this position:

“The school can offer everything they can to support us, but if we don’t want it for ourselves, it ain’t going to happen.” (Focus Group Campus C)

“This is something we have to choose to do, MMI can help all it can, but unless we support each other, nothing else matters.” (Focus Groups Campus B)

“I can have all the help in the world, but unless I choose to do this on my own, it will not happen. I learned that at the end of the day, this is on me. I chose to do this for me.”

(Student Interview)

These comments affirm the idea that for the subjects, collective group responsibility and individual support was not only an individual support mechanisms, but also a significant influential factor in academic success. The subjects shared that individual support including perseverance was just as important as any institutional support mechanism.

The second emerging theme in response to research question 1 was the availability of resource support. Subjects in the focus groups and one-to-one interviews shared the importance of an increased availability of resources. They discussed the importance of scholarships to support students and the necessity for flexibility in hours for available institutional support including student life and faculty office hours. A review of the survey data affirms this position. 60% of respondents indicate no experience with institutional scholarships and 40% indicate no involvement with college support mechanisms. Additionally, 50% of respondents report no experience with study groups, a known tool to support better academic outcomes.

The final emerging theme from the data for consideration was the importance of student participation and engagement. The subjects in the study identified the importance of participation as a critical support mechanism. These responses directly support research questions 1 and 2. The subjects noted that there were a host of African American males who were their friends and/or classmates that were not involved or engaged with any of the various institutional support mechanisms present of the school. This information is supported by survey data as 40% of respondents report no experience with student life staff and 40% report no involvement with college support mechanisms.

4.3 LIMITATIONS

There were several limitations to this study. Time constraints should be listed as one as this project was executed over a 6-month period. Future studies may seek to expand the time for data collection and data coding given the large size of the institution and population of students.

Another limitation is the population of student participants. It should be noted that the large multi-system college has four (4) campuses and four (4) centers. Future studies may seek to facilitate interactions at each campus location and each campus center.

The final identified limitation in the small sample size of interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Future studies may lend to broader data. A richer data set might help reinforce the assertions of this inquiry and work to further expand the limited body of research on this population of students.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Educators know little about what attributes are most influential in positively impacting the educational outcomes, including degree and certificate completion, for African American male students. Limited research exists to support the success of African American males in higher education (Harper, 2008). Practitioners, including educators at all levels interested in working to positively impact the completion of African American males at community colleges, should begin to focus studies on students who have successfully navigated the community college system. Better insight and information on students who have been successful in the pursuit of education to help illuminate the path of education for others is needed. These students can provide better insight into what we must adjust at institutions to help others succeed.

Utilizing a mixed methods approach research study designed to examine the most influential institutional support factors for African American male college students in the pursuit of a degree or certificate program, this study sought to answer the following questions:

What institutional support mechanisms did African American male students identify as most influential in completion/graduation at community colleges?

Based on student feedback, what additional steps can faculty and staff take to support African American male success in a degree or certificate program?

Based on student feedback, how can researchers support African American male student success and completion at community colleges?

In examining the data in this study including 50 surveys, three (3) one-to-one interviews, and three (3) focus groups, students identified the availability of academic support centers, supportive and engaging relationships with faculty and staff, and supportive relationships with an academic advisor as primary sources of support. These factors serve as primary sources of review for educators to examine and potentially expand to support African American male community college students.

The following research questions emerged in the process exploration of this study:

- 1.) *How can we better promote individual support affirmation to support positive academic outcomes for African American male students?*
- 2.) *How can institutions expand the available areas of resource support to African American student needs?*
- 3.) *What can institutions do to further promote support engagement by African American male students?*

Moving forward, educators should seek to provide answers to emerging research questions. They should work to explore opportunities to share information on the institutional factors that support success for this student population of students. Ultimately, research must expand and institutions must be intentional in allowing African American student populations and opportunity to share voice and perspective.

5.1 BROADER IMPACT ON PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

The information compiled to support this study are the foundational first steps in starting further work to examine and better understand the experiences of African American male students at

community colleges. While the focus of this study sought to better understand influential institutional support mechanisms, researchers and institutions must be more attentive to seeking the perspective of these students to better understand paths of success and to utilize the research and data into practical application.

Problems of practice examinations like this study seek to further push practitioners into direct involvement in research. These examinations help to expand the current gaps in research and add to the potential of growing the body of work to examine the educational experiences of African American males at community colleges. Most of the current research is focused on African American students at four-year schools (Strayhorn, 2012). Limited scholarly endeavors have been dedicated to paths of success (Wood, 2013). The current research and existing literature tends to focus on Black male hopelessness and underachievement in academic pursuits (Harper, 2012). Given limited research, more data is needed to provide a perspective and understanding of Black male community college students to assist practitioners on ways to develop their needs (Wood and Palmer, 2013).

5.2 DIRECTIVES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Moving forward, institutions must commit resources to examining the experiences of African American male students who are successful in educational endeavors. By garnering feedback from those who are most successful, we can help shape and influence the policies and support services needed to assist these students. Community colleges can use information to facilitate Black male academic and psychosocial development (Wood and Palmer, 2013). Use of this

research and data is essential if we are to work to close the achievement gap and work to assist students with positive educational outcomes.

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