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Understanding the role of faith in decisions to persist in college for first-generation Black male students

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Minority access to post-secondary education has been a priority for college admissions departments since the late 1960's. The good news is that many of the strategies used have been successful. By the beginning of the 2008/2009 academic year, the admissions rate for White and Black students was approximately equal. ("The persistent racial gap," 2009). However, there continues to be a large gap in the retention and graduation rates for these ethnic groups. According to the U.S. Department of Education, graduation rates for those who entered college in the fall of 2001 and who earned their degrees within six years were 59.4% for White students, and 40.5% for all Black students ("The persistent racial gap," 2009).

A gap in the rentention and graduation rates between Black male and female students has also continued. During the same period indicated above, the graduation rate for Black female students was 49.9%; the rate for Black male students was 38.6% ("The persistent racial gap," 2009). As a result, college and university offices of student affairs are beginning to switch their efforts from increasing the rate of access and admissions to increasing the rate of persistence, retention, and graduation for minority students (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Standard models of college student persistence, and especially minority student persistence, provided the theoretical framework for this research. Some have observed that students' experiences of college, both in the academic and the social domain, have a direct effect on commitment to the institution and persistence to graduation (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Integration and Departure has become the standard theory used to explain student persistence decisions. For Tinto, the process of social and academic integratation necessary for student persistence requires students to break away from past associations and

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traditions. However, others have argued that Tinto's model described a transition within a culture rather than between cultures, and that attempting to apply the model cross-culturally was potentially harmful to ethnic minority students (Tierney, 1992). It has also been observed that perceptions and experiences of racial prejudice and discrimination are factors interfering with a student's social and academic integration into the campus environment (Bean, 1990).

More recently, researchers using a qualitative design have claimed that the standard student persistence theories did not consider the impact of minority cultures (Guiffrida, 2006; Thomas, et al., 2007). Traditional views of student persistence are based on Western assumptions and are not reflective of bicultural or multicultural education. While some students come from a blended culture, first-generation students are more than likely to maintain the cultural distinctives of their home communities (Guiffrida, 2004). Research focused on first-generation students has discovered that these students come into college with no background knowledge of the unique culture of American higher education (Lundberg, et al., 2007). First-generation students are more likely to commute to campus and to have lower educational aspirations. Helping their families financially is their primary reasons for being in college. For students from ethnic minorities, this sense of alienation is exacerbated by experiences of ethnic/racial prejudice. First-generation minority students have to cross more cultural boundaries to succeed in a middle-class White cultural context (Guiffrida, 2003; Guiffrida, 2005a; Guiffrida, 2005b).

The role of supportive relationships has been shown to be a strong predictor of persistence for first-generation minority students (Strayhorn, 2008). The role of mentoring relationships between Black students and faculty, including White faculty, has also been explored (Barker, 2007; Zachery, 2000).

First-generation college students are often from low-income families with no background

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in higher education, requiring additional support if students are to persist. Black students come from a unique cultural background; to support them in college requires unique cross-cultural sensitivity and competence. Black male students are not as successful as their female counterparts in attaining a college degree, yet very little research has been done to discover the reason for this difference.

The purpose of this research was to begin exploring the experiences and perceptions of first-generation Black male students in college. Although it was not anticipated in the beginning, the role of an active Christian faith emerged as a primary theme in the ability of these students to overcome obstacles and persist to graduation. Insights gained have the potential to guide student support and counseling services with strategies designed to increase graduations rates for Black male college students.

Method and Research Design

It has been claimed that relevant and culturally competent assessments of the experiences and needs of minority students are best accomplished through qualitative methods (Cresswell, 1998). Assessing persistence programs for minority students must examine in depth the human and social challenges they face. Making such an assessment in a natural setting is essential. To be effective, research must reflect a significant level of cultural competence and a fair and equitable process (Green, 2007).

For this reason, a qualitative method using a phenomenological design was used to understand the unique challenges faced by these students in their attempt to persist to graduation. Qualitative inquiry is rooted in the philosophical assumption that there is not one objective reality; rather, there are multiple realities perceived and experienced by participants in those realities (Creswell, 2007). To gain an understanding of a participant's reality, researchers must

work to lessen the objective distance from the participant and get as close as possible in order to see what they see. A phenomenological design seeks meaning from the real-life experiences of the participants. It attempts to observe a group of participants sharing a common experience in order to discover commonalities (Creswell, 2007). Hermeneutical phenomenology includes a process of the researcher making interpretations of an observed phenomenon (van Manen, 1990).

<div align="center">Participants</div>

This study arose out of a larger research project in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Liberty University. It involved an in-depth interview of three students as part of a pilot study. All participants were my students at a small, majority-Black Christian university in the south. All participants were first-generation Black male college students.

Participant A was in his late twenties, a child of share-croppers, raised by his grandmother. He came to faith in Christ as a result of the ministry of a Christian "rapper" and found his way to a Christian university in order to systematically study the Bible. He came significantly under-prepared and with no support from his home community. However, he had a strong desire to learn and a commitment to succeed in college.

Participant B grew up in an intact family with strong support to succeed in college, especially from his mother. He went from high school graduation into the military, where he saw first-hand the need for higher education. He began taking colleges course while in the military and eventually graduated from college.

Participant C grew up in a poor, single-parent home. He was inspired by the story of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's academic successes and developed a desire to go to college and eventually earn a graduate degree. He also went into the military from high school in order to

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earn GI benefits. His deployment to Iraq resulted in major obstacles to his educational goals. However, when he left the military he enrolled in a Christian university in order to earn an undergradate theology degree; he expressed a desire eventually to enroll in a seminary.

Data Collection

I began all three interviews by explaining the focus of the inquiry. Permission was obtained to make an audio recording of the interview. Steps taken to assure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participant were discussed and an offer made to provide a copy of the audio recording and/or the written transcript.

The interviews explored four guiding questions:

1.   What were the pre-college factors, including family background factors, that contributed to college persistence decisions for these first-generation Black male students?

2.   What were the unique cultural factors that influenced the overall college success for these students?

3.   How did these students perceive their experience of college?

At the end of each interview, I made a word-for-word transcript, including observer comments. An analysis of the field notes looked for preliminary themes to emerge that might provide guidance for a more extensive study of the persistence decisions of first-generation Black male college students.

It has been argued that the best place to conduct qualitative research into Black college student persistence issues is in the south (Morris & Monroe, 2009). All the research focusing on Black student persistence has been done on Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) in a northern urban setting. For that reason, I chose to interview students in a southern site.

<center>Results</center>

All three participants acknowledged the extreme difficulties they faced in pursuing educational goals. A combination of poverty, growing up in broken homes, and a school system that did not adequately prepare them for higher education, contributed to significant obstacles to their success.

Pre-college Factors

Participant A spoke of being identified as dyslexic and placed in a special education program: "So they put me down to [lower classes] and I started to fail again – all over again. So like I say, it was never really dealt with. So I graduated, only by the grace of God, but I would honestly say I graduated because they said, 'Just get out,' kind of thing. I wasn't a bad student, I wasn't in trouble, I was really decent on the basketball court, but it was just kind of like, 'He's African-American, let him go.' So they just graduated me."

Participant C spoke of the challenges faced growing up in a single-parent home in the Black community. "A lot of problems in the African-American community can be traced to a lack of fatherhood. And so, I was learning to become a young man, and my mom really didn't know how to deal with it. Plus she was really young, having been raising children since the age of 16. And so, you got a lot of this frustration, she's got the weight of the bills, of five children coming on her. I started to struggle in high school."

Contributions to Success

While growing up in poverty, the support of significant family members was a key to the ultimate success of the participants. Participant A spoke of the example of his grandmother: "Actually, my grandma, when I was coming up—I wasn't really smart in high school or in school, period—but grandma, she really pressed the Word of God on me. She impressed on my

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mom, '[He] might know his A, Bs and Cs, but make sure he knows who Jesus is.'"

Participant B talked about the support he received from his mother: "My mother had to quit school but she got married and started having kids when she was 16 years old. She basically was just pushing us to go ahead and finish basically high school—I want you all to finish school because I didn't finish."

Participant C also spoke of the support of his mother: "my mom wanted us to go to college. She said, 'I want you guys to do things I have never done.' But at the same token, it is kind of hard to do that."

The availability of membership in the military provided important role models and opportunities to pursue educational goals. Participant B did not have a personal motivation to excel educationally until he entered the military: "I went to the military, and once I got into the military and got out I saw the advantage of having a college education. So I went ahead and pursued that for awhile, but everything didn't come to fruition until I got into my 40s."

Participant C also found military service to be a way to gain access to higher education: "It was not any question; it was like, how am I going to get there. My mom couldn't afford to pay for it and I couldn't afford to pay for it, so the military was one of the ways to do it. I wanted to serve regardless anyway, but in addition they have something called the GI Bill, which would assist in getting to where I needed to be."

College Experience

Each of the Participants spoke of the struggles they faced persisting in college. Participant A faced the need to learn a set of academic skills he had not learned in high school: "When I first came, [teachers] were talking about writing a paper, and I would write a paper thinking I knew how to write one—not knowing Turabian, not knowing APA, not knowing how

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to structure a sentence properly. I knew how to write a sentence, like a text message or an email, but not on a college level—put the commas in the right place, put the periods in the right place." Participant B spoke of the encouragement he received from fellow students: "At first, being out of school for so long, and just not being confident in myself because I had been out of school for awhile. But I got encouragement from so many students, they were always . . . I'll never forget [student name]—we wound up helping each other a lot, but he was like, 'You're not here just to fail. God didn't make a way for you to come here just for you to fail.' And I got encouragement from that."

Coming back from Iraq posed significant challenges for Participant C: "I tried to complete the work and I couldn't do it. I tried another semester, and there was just so much going on, then the passing of my father in 2006. Just coming back, being a straight shooter, for the most part academically most of it was writing for me, and I love to write. Now I will tell you, certain professors and certain of the tests, they were kind of hard."

The Emerging Theme of the Role of Faith

During the interviews the faith of each participant proved to be highly significant in the attainment of their educational goals. In some cases, the faith of family members and a desire for their children to excel was an important motivator to achieve academic success. The example of important community role models who were also people of faith provided hope for achievement. Ultimately, the personal faith and commitment to a life of following Christ of each participant empowered them to overcome obstacles and achieve what may have seemed impossible. Participant A spoke of the influence of a Christian rap song that gave him a desire to study the Bible: "And actually, to be very comical, there was a Christian rapper by the name of 'Flame.' And in one of his songs called, 'Context,' he's rapping about *eisegesis* and *exegesis* and he's

talking about what they mean. Now *exegesis* is glorifying God, but *eisegesis* you're reading into the text, making it more than what it really is. And the words he said were from Latin words, and I'm like, 'Latin?' You know, it took my mind from just listening to Christian rap at one aspect, then took my mind to looking at God. So I started researching, I asked for a Bible for Christmas, a Bible dictionary, a concordance, all these biblical things so I could actually get a better understanding of what the Bible is saying."

Participant B spoke of his desire to be a faithful student of the Bible: "What motivated me was being the best, you know the Scriptures say to study to show yourself approved. Because, to me I wasn't just coming to school for me. I knew that with the knowledge I was getting I was going to be trying to disseminate the same knowledge, trying to help someone else grow. So I was trying to get all I could and do the best I could, because, you know, I just didn't want to be mediocre."

Participant C found inspiration in the story of Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Even as a child, one of the things I wanted to do was like being a success like Dr. Martin Luther King, as far as academia, I think he had his doctoral degree by 24. When I was in the sixth grade I already had it in my mind to do that." Participant C stated that he ultimate reason for persisting in college was his desire to know God and his word: "My expectations were purely to learn a lot more about God, to enhance my relationship to him, because my end result was to teach theology myself."

Discussion

College student persistence and retention literature has focused on the unique challenges faced by first-generation students (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Terenzini, et al., 1995; Lundberg, et al., 2007; Miller, 2004). Researchers have also explored the unique challenges faced by minority students, and Black students in particular (Fischer, 2007; Taylor & Miller, 2002; Strayhorn,

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2008; Mason, 1998; Thomas, et al., 2007; Littleton, 2001; Cabrera, et al., 1999; Guiffrida, 2004). However, there is an absence of research that focuses on the persistence decisions made by first-generation Black male college students. This research project was designed to begin addressing that gap in the literature.

In-depth interviews with three first-generation Black male college students were conducted. Each of the three told the story of a difficult experience on their educational journey. Even though they were the first in their families to attend college, in many cases they had significant personal support from home. In two of the cases, service in the U.S. military played an important role in their eventual persistence in college. In all cases, a personal faith in Christ was the primary factor that empowered them to persist and succeed in college. Participant C summarized it well: "For the most part, academically I didn't really have a problem, because I love the word of God, I love the word of God. That's just me. And so academically, once you know that, just like God told Jeremiah in 29:11, 'For I know the plans I have for you'—this was engrained in me from a baby, so when you know you're called to do something, that makes the process a little easier."

An apparent shortcoming of this research is the fact that the participants are Black and the researcher is White. However, having a prior faculty-student relationship with the participants set the stage for an open and honest interview. The limitation of this study was the fact that there were only three participants located on a Christian university campus in the south. However, because the nature of this study was to explore possible emerging themes and set the stage for further research, generalizability was not an immediate concern.

This study was designed to lead to a much more thorough examination of the persistence decisions of Black male college students in the south. The emerging themes that resulted will

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become guiding themes in future research.

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