A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXPLORING FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO ACADEMIC PERSISTENCE FOR NONTRADITIONAL UNDERGRADUATE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE DEGREE-COMPLETERS FROM BIBLE COLLEGES IN THE SOUTHEAST

by

Rodney Alan Phillips

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand factors that contribute to college persistence for nontraditional undergraduate African American male four-year degree completers from select evangelical Bible colleges in the southeastern United States. An ecological and adult resiliency theoretical framework guided the research. Three research questions framed this study: (a) How do nontraditional undergraduate African American male four-year degree completers from select evangelical Bible colleges describe persistence? (b) What type of experiences do participants understand as having contributed to their persistence at Bible colleges? (c) What specific factors do participants identify as having contributed to their persistence at Bible colleges? Data collection included a demographic survey, interviews, journaling, and focus groups. Data analysis combined memoing and constant comparative analysis to facilitate a hermeneutic interpretation of the essence of the participants’ experiences. The findings indicate that spiritual formation, the Bible college experience, Christian service formation, a family support network, and a local church connection all play a vital role in the persistence behaviors of this population. This study mirrored Arbelo-Marrero’s (2013) research of nontraditional Hispanic students within Hispanic Serving Institutions.

Keywords: persistence, nontraditional students, undergraduate students, African American college students, Bible college
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Dedication

This research is dedicated to my three children, Nathan, Carlie, and Jennifer, who persisted in the full experiences of their parents’ ministry and who now share in the joy of this honor.

Most importantly, this research is dedicated to my wife, Scarlett, who has consistently modeled persistence in our marriage, family, and ministries. Loyalty is an understatement as we have grown in our marriage by journeying to places near and far while making the most of life’s challenging situations. But nothing surpasses your love, support, loyalty, and persistence for what I witnessed in this educational journey as you repeatedly reassured me, “You can do this!” Though many others said encouraging words, for which I am grateful, yours was the message I could believe. You provided everything I needed as I could not have successfully completed the process without you.
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awaits the commendation of the Lord Jesus Himself.

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setting, I treasure every moment we spend together! To all future students, until the Lord
returns, we shall explore the Scriptures, never taking ourselves too seriously, but always taking
God at His Word. To all my co-nontraditional students, I say, let us persist!
Data Analysis .................................................................................................................. 111
Trustworthiness ............................................................................................................. 115
Ethical Considerations .................................................................................................. 117
Summary ......................................................................................................................... 118

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS .......................................................................................... 119
Overview ......................................................................................................................... 119
Participants ...................................................................................................................... 120
Themes ............................................................................................................................. 134
The Magnet of Persistence: The Bible College Experience .............................................. 137
The Channel to Persistence: Spiritual Formation ............................................................ 151
The Fruit of Persistence: Christian Service Formation ................................................... 163
The Bond of Persistence: Family Support Network ......................................................... 168
The Accountability in Persistence: The Local Church Connection .............................. 173
Summary ......................................................................................................................... 178

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS .......... 179
Overview ......................................................................................................................... 179
Summary of Findings ....................................................................................................... 179
Discussion ......................................................................................................................... 183
Implications for Improving the Nontraditional African American Male Student
Experience ....................................................................................................................... 191
  Interconnect the Student and Institutional Context ..................................................... 192
  Develop Faculty Mentorships ....................................................................................... 194
  Improve the Support Services Network ...................................................................... 196
List of Tables

Table 1: FBC African American Enrollment & Graduation Figures ........................................... 104
Table 2: CCBS African American Enrollment & Graduation Figures ....................................... 104
Table 3: Profile of Participants .................................................................................................. 122
List of Figures

Figure 1: Academic Persistence Themes ............................................................................. 135
Figure 2: Academic Themes Illustrated .............................................................................. 136
Figure 3: Persistence Microcosm ......................................................................................... 185
List of Abbreviations

African American Male Initiative Learning Community (AAMI-LC)
African American Males Theory (AAMT)
Association of Biblical Higher Education (ABHE)
Cumberland College of Biblical Studies (CCBS)
Fulton Bible College (FBC)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Historically Black Colleges and University (HBCU)
Male Initiative on Leadership and Excellence (MILE)
National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)
Socioeconomic status (SES)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Chapter One provides the framework for a qualitative research study exploring the persistence experiences of nontraditional undergraduate African American\(^1\) male four-year degree completers from select Bible colleges in the southeast United States. The background of nontraditional African American higher education male attrition establishes the necessity for the research of these students, laying the groundwork for the phenomenological approach. The background leads to the problem statement which is answered by the purpose statement, indicating the significance of the study. In addition, the situation to self will be addressed along with an explanation of the delimitations and limitations which erect the broad parameters for the established research.

Background

There are many barriers to adult students reentering college after an extended absence. These include situational barriers (Chavis, 2014; Colvin, 2013) such as scheduling problems (Colvin, 2013; Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011; Mackzum, 2012; Schmidt, 2015), home responsibilities (Carrier, 2011; Colvin, 2013; Forbus et al., 2011; Henson, 2013), child care (Carrier, 2011; Chavis, 2014; Forbus, Mehta, & Newbold, 2010; Kasworm, 2012; Mackzum, 2012), and finances (Carrier, 2011; Colvin, 2013; Henson, 2013; Kasworm, 2012; Mackzum, 2012; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Stewart, 2015). This setting leaves adult students with responsibility to manage the three primary roles of family, employee, and education while attending school. The results often lead to part-time enrollment in college which places nontraditional students at an even greater risk for early exits (Dobele, Gangemi, Kopanidis, & Thomas, 2013). For

\(^{1}\) Except for direct quotes, this research consistently uses the term African American, even though the terms Black and African American are synonymous (U.S. Department of Education, 2012c, Glossary).
students 35 years of age and older at private, nonprofit, undergraduate institutions, 35% attend part time (Kena et al., 2014). Only private for-profit institutions have a higher percentage of part-time students at 39%, as the rate for public four-year institutions stands at 21% (Kena et al., 2014). If one broadens the age to 25 years old and older, part-time percentages stand at 50% for public, 66% for private nonprofit, and 78% for private for-profit institutions (Kena et al., 2014).

In addition, dispositional barriers (Chavis, 2014; Colvin, 2013) from isolationism, low self-esteem, and fear of failure, can be critical to academic success (Schmidt, 2015; Vermiller, 2014). Further obstacles include institutional barriers (Carrier, 2011; Chavis, 2014) that require lengthy entrance processes and requirements (Colvin, 2013), difficulties in knowing whom to see and where to go on campus (Colvin, 2013), and transitioning to the virtual environment (Henson, 2013; Jesnek, 2012; Schmidt, 2015; Vermiller, 2014). Required technology skills are especially strong barriers for returning college students considering the extensive delay before reentry into higher education (Ellis, 2013; Schmidt, 2015; Vermiller, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). These factors are worsened if there has been a lack of experience with virtual or the use of computer equipment in employment (Henson, 2013). Fears of inadequacy rise under these conditions and even when such fears are well-managed, a high percentage of nontraditional students will take five or more years to obtain a degree (Forbus et al., 2010).

Typically, Bible college students are required to meet Christian service requirements so that they must manage four major roles (Cooks, 2010) comprising a “life-world environment” (Maroney, 2010, p. 24). A life-world environment includes these four major roles combined with health, family, and financial emergencies. The chronic strains of continual demands, such as persistent poverty, a lasting disability, a high-conflict marriage, and a high-stressed job, all of which work against successful matriculation for nontraditional degree-seeking adult students, as
they are sufficiently ill-prepared to handle these multiple issues (Jesnek, 2012; Kasworm, 2010, 2012; Orgnero, 2013; Parks, Evans, & Getch, 2013). This makes persistence and retention all too problematic, especially since “many institutions do not provide accessible and relevant services for a student population that is older, married, and working” (Kasworm, 2012, p. 14). Bible colleges and higher education stakeholders need to know what factors contribute to persistence for degree completion in order to support nontraditional students and to enable these institutions to meet their retention goals (Chavis, 2014; Stewart, 2015).

Barriers remain in place for minorities and especially African American and Hispanic higher education students. For example, as of 2012, African American male enrollment in four-year public undergraduate institutions was 12%, and only 14% for Hispanics, while for Whites the enrollment was 63% (Kena et al., 2014). In 2012, four-year private nonprofit institutional enrollment for African Americans was 13%, and 10% for Hispanics, while for Whites it was 68% (Kena et al., 2014). This is true even though 81% of all students at private nonprofit schools receive institutional grants, 34% receive federal grants, 27% receive state and local grants, and 63% access student loans (Kena et al., 2014). The average amount of student aid awarded to first-time, full-time undergraduate students at four-year private nonprofit institutions in 2012 was $15,428 in institutional grants, $4,751 in federal grants, and $7,610 in student loans (Kena et al., 2014). An important observation for these statistics is that nontraditional students are typically part time and do not receive the full scholarship amounts.

African American male graduation rates also continue to lag behind other ethnicities. The African American (male and female) four-year completion rate from private nonprofit undergraduate institutions is 29.7%, yet for Hispanics the rate is 46.7%, while the rate jumps to 56.4% for Whites (U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2014a, Table 326.10). African
American males graduating within four years after enrolling in nonprofit institutions stands at 23%, yet for Hispanics the rate is 42.3%, while for Whites the rate is 51.4% (U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2014a, Table 326.10). For African American males, 35% graduate from nonprofit institutions within five years, yet for Hispanics the rate is 55.1%, while for Whites the rate jumps to 63.2% (U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2014a, Table 326.10). A similar contrast stands for White males whose six-year private nonprofit completion rate is 65.6%, yet for Hispanics the rate is 58.7%, while for African American males the rate is 39.2% (U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2014a, Table 326.10). The African American female completion rate after six years from private nonprofit institutions is 48.5% (U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2014a, Table 326.10).

Graduating from higher education has become extremely challenging for some African American students, as “the pipeline to America’s prisons (from schools) is one littered with Black and Latino youth left behind” (Leonard, 2012, p. 2). In 2002, more African American males were in American prisons than attending college (Bracey, 2014). A decade later, the trend has shifted with more African American males attending college than those in prison, yet graduation rates have minimally increased for them (Patton, 2012). From 1993-2013, the percentage of 25-29 year olds who graduated from four-year institutions increased from 26% to 40% for Whites, while for African Americans it only increased from 13% to 20% (Kena et al., 2014). Within higher education, competition stiffens, inequality widens, and many colleges now operate with fewer resources from tightened budgets so that multi-dimensional challenges remain for African American students (Wilson, 2011). Higher education stakeholders need to know what factors contribute to academic persistence, and this knowledge is gained from African American men who have actually been successful (Harper, 2012; Wyatt, 2014).
A recent study of faith-based institutions explored the retention and completion practices from the perspective of the college (Stewart, 2015). However, an identified gap indicated a need for exploring the retention and college completion practices from the perspective of the nontraditional student (Fincher, 2010; Stewart, 2015). Exploring retention practices from the perspective of the nontraditional student is critical because most private, faith-based institutions lack retention programs and initiatives and do not target nontraditional students for retention purposes (Noel-Levitz, 2013). Additionally, faith-based institutions do not typically offer developmental courses for nontraditional students outside of tutorial services. For academic support services, consistent computer support services are absent or insufficient, creating additional risk factors (Morales, 2014). Considering that nontraditional students often lack the higher education required computer skills (Jesnek, 2012), addressing these inconsistencies within faith-based institutions potentially prove helpful since it has been concluded that academic support services are critical to retention (Stewart, 2015).

As important as institutional retention initiatives are, it is even more important to know individual student retention initiatives. After 30 years in which four surveys were conducted with nearly 2,000 participating students, the ACT’s *What Works in Student Retention* (Habley, McClanahan, Valiga, & Burkum, 2010) results indicated “institutional characteristics are far less responsible for attrition than are student characteristics …[suggesting] institutions are not major contributors to student attrition” (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012, p. 223). Quality institutional retention goals and plans cannot be dismissed, minimized, nor remain underdeveloped. However, these results point to a need for understanding academic retention and persistence from the perspective of the students because there remains little change in retention and degree completion rates. This is evidenced by the calculations stated by Habley et
al., (2012) that “nearly one-third of all first-year students do not return for a second year, … and approximately 40% of all students who enter higher education in a given fall will not earn a degree anywhere at any time” (p. 16).

Higher education faith-based students, and specifically African American students, may benefit from an understanding of the specific factors contributing to persistence so they can matriculate to degree completion. This study sought to contribute to the existing body of literature by exploring the persistence experiences of nontraditional undergraduate African American male four-year degree completers from Bible colleges in the Southeastern U.S. Hence, information gained in this study is designed to assist other African American students struggling to complete their undergraduate degrees.

**Situation to Self**

I am a professor of Bible, theology and intercultural studies at a small evangelical, Christian Bible College. I graduated from a Bible college and seminary, followed by 25 years of pastoral ministry and continued close associations with higher education through my children’s attendance in Christian colleges. My own personal experience as a student within a Bible college and seminary were altogether positive, graduating from Bible College *cum laude*, and with an above-average GPA in seminary. But this was not the typical experience for me in education. Prior to college, all 12 years of my education saw me as a very poor, unmotivated student, with well-below-average grades. The only area with consistently high scores was conduct as I was a timid, nonthreatening, and well-behaved student. Other than that, I was always on the brink of grade failure. Major changes occurred, however, when I enrolled in Bible College, and they continued through seminary. What made the difference? Part of the answer certainly pertains to my own spiritual growth progress and most definitely, the benefits of
attending a college where you are loved and welcomed. All that still does not answer the academic inabilities in light of the poor preparation for higher education after 12 years of minimal learning. Higher education presented no fewer challenges, yet I was motivated, inspired, with well-above-average grades. What made the difference?

Reentry into a Doctor of Education program at age 52 presented specific reentry challenges, yet motivation and grades remained strong as in Bible College and seminary. In explaining the differences between near failure and what I considered super-success in higher education, I have come to realize that I have personally witnessed and experienced the value of faith-based spiritual and academic support systems in higher education. These support systems have successfully enabled matriculation through graduation. Spiritual support services from which I have benefited include family, local church, pastoral care, counseling, and fellowship. Academic support services from which I have benefited include advising, tutoring, peer support, online writing centers, tuition gifts, and engaged faculty. The motivation then is to clarify persistence success for nontraditional undergraduate African American males so that the solutions are shared for many more to succeed. The motivation is strongly driven by a desire to see my fellow African American brethren, and many others, reach their God-given potential and excel in the academia context. I mirror Paul’s desire to “present every man complete in Christ” (Colossians 1:28, NASB). To these ends, this study is guided by Scripture as the ultimate authority in all matters. With the Bible as the authority, reflexivity accompanied by personal vignettes will be openly displayed as to reduce matters of personal bias to a minimum.

The epistemological paradigm that guided this study is a constructivist, pragmatic, biblical worldview. In a practical sense, constructivism is the belief that the “mind is active in the construction of knowledge” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 38). Extending this further is the social
aspect which includes constructing knowledge by means of interaction toward recognizing, producing, and reproducing understanding. While constructivism is axiological, the perspective is to gain understanding from how individuals construct, or come to beliefs, and perceive their world. It is to comprehend the subjective beliefs of participants. A constructivist approach determines to provide trustworthiness in research. What people say, how they describe experiences and conclusions to their beliefs, all form the heart of qualitative research (Patton, 2002). However, it is imperative to realize that humans do not construct ultimate truth, but rather, discover truth. Patton (2002) stated, “Data from and about humans inevitably represent some degree of perspective rather than absolute truth” (p. 569). The findings from research may not be absolute truth, but constructivism’s purpose is to gain understanding from the participants’ perspectives.

Pragmatism also guided this research. It is not to be understood as the unethical practice of the ends justifying the means or relativism. Rather, pragmatism refers to gaining knowledge, organizing experiences, and creating a bridge from theory to practice (Schwandt, 2007). The desired result is a what-works product. Pragmatism is not demanded at the expense of credibility but actually encourages “methodological appropriateness as the primary criterion for judging methodological quality, recognizing that different methods are appropriate for different situations” (Patton, 2002, p. 72). Pragmatism’s “point is to do what makes sense, report fully on what was done, why it was done, and what the implications are for the findings” (Patton, 2002, p. 72). In addition, a bit of verse provides the wisdom of pragmatism: “As gold which he cannot spend will make no man rich, so knowledge which he cannot apply will make no man wise” (Patton, 2002, p. 566).
Problem Statement

The problem addressed by this study is the low academic attainment of nontraditional undergraduate African American male students, and specifically their nominal retention and completion rates, in an evangelical Bible College context (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Patton, 2012). African American college students have a significantly lower graduation rate than their Caucasian counterparts, with a 19% and 26.8% attainment of bachelor degrees respectively (Arana, Castaneda-Sound, Blanchard & Aguilar, 2011; Aud et al., 2011; Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009). African American men comprised less than 6% of the entire U.S. undergraduate population in 2010 which was the same as it was in 1976 (Aud et al., 2011; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011; Strayhorn, 2010). African American men also fall short of their female counterparts who earned twice as many baccalaureate degrees with 66% versus 34%, respectively (Harper, 2012; Patton, 2012). Not only are there low degree completion rates, there is also the high attrition factor with two-thirds not graduating within six years. With a low bachelor degree attainment and high rates of attrition, it is imperative to accurately understand what specific factors contribute to college degree persistence, so that this group may more effectively fulfill the biblical mandates for the local church and world-wide imperatives.

African American male studies have wisely explored retention factors, such as family (Harper, 2012; Palmer et al, 2011; Williamson, 2010), community learning centers (Flowers, Scott, Riley, & Palmer, 2015), faculty mentors (Harper, 2012), tutorial services (Ticknor, Shaw, & Howard, 2014), which include the STEM field (Flowers, 2011; Fries-Britt, Burt, & Franklin, 2012; Karanja & Austin, 2014; Noble, 2011; Williamson, 2010). African American male high school seniors bound for college have been studied (Scott, Taylor, & Palmer, 2013). Other studies have focused on successful African American male achievers at predominantly White
institutions (PWIs) (Bridges, 2010; Harper, 2006, 2009; Herndon, 2003; Johnson, 2013; Kim, 2013; Moore, Madison-Colmore, Smith, 2003; Museus, 2011), historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Bracey, 2014; Harper, 2012; Kim, 2013; Palmer et al., 2011), and community colleges (Dabney, 2012, Horton, 2015), pointing to peer networks, family members, mentors, and spirituality as persistence factors. Additional studies have combined both African Americans and Hispanic students in research (Roscoe, 2015; Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Klingsmith, 2014; Strayhorn, 2010), and furthered by the research of African American females in higher education (Chavis, 2014).

Nontraditional persistence research has been conducted within varying contexts. Nontraditional Hispanic students at Hispanic Serving Institutions have been explored (Arbelo-Marrero, 2013). A study of nontraditional African American female community college students recommended retention efforts to include academic advising, faculty mentorships, and support services (Chavis, 2014). Another study of nontraditional students explored persistence factors and events in a university setting, indicating motivational factors of self-motivation, role models, increased career options, and a goal of financial independence (Schmidt, 2015). Nontraditional university students older than 50 years of age were investigated to determine their adaptation success (Vermiller, 2014). The results of that study indicated nontraditional students benefited from a multigenerational classroom but were overwhelmed by the substantial technology changes and felt disillusioned by the incivility of younger students toward professors (Vermiller, 2014).

Then too, studies have been conducted within the confines of faith-based higher education institutions. Couch (2011), for example, studied student athletes’ persistence patterns in a faith-based institution. De Souza (2012) and Andrade (2008) researched international
students in faith-based institutions. While these studies were conducted on nontraditional students in higher education secular and private settings, there remains little or no research that specifically focuses on African American nontraditional students within Bible colleges (Burks & Barrett, 2009; Patten & Rice, 2009). This is critical because spirituality is a major factor for African American male resilience (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Wood & Hilton, 2012). Though spirituality is emphasized within faith-based institutions, most Bible colleges lack retention programs and initiatives and do not specifically support academic success for nontraditional students (Noel-Levitz, 2013; Stewart, 2015). Additionally, Bible colleges do not typically offer academic developmental services for nontraditional students outside of informal tutorial practices. Therefore, research is necessary for nontraditional undergraduate African American degree completers of Bible colleges in order to hear their voices concerning positive persistence and retention experiences.

As noted above, faith-based higher education institutions have been researched concerning student athletes and international students. However, studies within the specific context of evangelical Bible colleges are rare. Spiritual formation within Bible colleges has been researched quantitatively (Cooley, 2011, 2012). College presidents of Lutheran colleges have been qualitatively researched (Tunheim & McLean, 2014). Christian service at Association of Biblical Higher Education institutions has been explored quantitatively (Barnett, 2010). American Indians and Alaska natives in a Bible college highlighted the importance of family and spirituality (Saggio & Rendon, 2004). Within the field of retention, Pentecostal Bible colleges were studied and indicated the positive effect of institutional culture on strengthening students’ commitment to their denominational college (Bland, 2013). Bible colleges have been the subject of minimal research, and this study begins to address that gap.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand factors that contribute to college persistence for nontraditional undergraduate African American male four-year degree completers from select evangelical Bible colleges in the southeastern United States (Harper, 2012; Palmer & Wood, 2012; Scanduval-Lucero, 2014; Stewart, 2015; Wood & Hilton, 2012). At this stage in the research a Bible college is defined as having three distinctives: 1) A core of biblical/theological subjects; 2) Christian service experiences, and 3) Training for ministry (McKinney, 1997). More specifically, concerning the core biblical/theological subjects, the Association of Biblical Higher Education (ABHE) requires a Bible/theology component equivalent to 30 semester hours (ABHE, 2012).

Additionally, persistence is defined here as the student who has remained enrolled through graduation in a degree program, though with the nontraditional student, there may be brief periods of stoppage followed by reentry leading to a degree (Tripodi, 2010). Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory supported by the Adult Resilience Theory (Richardson, 2002; Van Breda, 2001) served as the theoretical framework guiding this study. This theoretical framework explains the best way for students to advance is through internal protective factors (e.g., spiritual, intrinsic motivation) supported by reciprocal relationships of affinity (e.g., family, culture, peers, community, educational community).

Significance of the Study

Theoretical Significance

Instructive insights are needed from African American men who experienced academic persistence. Kim and Hargrove (2013) state that “while the discussion and research on Black male undergraduate resilience success is increasing, there is still a paucity of research examining
Black male degree attainment” (p. 308). According to Scanduval-Lucero (2014), “There is still an abundance of research that looks at diverse college students from a deficit perspective, and a dearth of research that examines the same students from an asset perspective” (p. 58). This study addressed the paucity of African American male degree attainment from an asset perspective. By their example of active engagement through graduation, select African American men had the opportunity to share their persistence experiences while not under the shadow of alarming statistics of doom and gloom (Harper, 2012). Instead of adding to an exhaustive body of literature as to why African American men do not persist in higher education, instructive insights were sought by inverting the questions normally asked of underperformers. Despite numerous barriers, the fact remains that a percentage of students does beat the odds and even exceeds expectations (Morales, 2014). Investigation of engaged students who maximized their college experiences and who overcame the odds was the goal of this study in order to significantly contribute to the field of academic persistence within the confines of qualitative research. As van Manen (2014) explains, “Writing phenomenology, in this sense, is not done primarily for philosophers, but for professional practitioners and others who are interested in approaching their professional tasks, personal activities, and everyday experiences in a phenomenological style” (p. 23).

From this practitioner, phenomenological approach, the significance of this study can be addressed theoretically. There is a lack of research about African American males who successfully completed their Bible college degrees within Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and the educational Adult Resiliency Theory (Morales, 2000; Richardson, 2002; Van Breda, 2001) framework. The numerous ecological systems frequently interacting is a source that heavily contributes to resilience within a faith-based context. Hence, this study
contributes to the knowledge base by an investigation of African American male degree attainment experiences in Bible colleges from the perspective of those who successfully graduated.

**Empirical Significance**

A focus on African American males is significant because there are certain differences between ethnicities. Research has revealed empirical evidence that academic preparation was the most significant predictor of achievement in college for Latino males (Strayhorn, 2010). However, what proved to be the strongest predictor in college achievement for African American males was socioeconomic status (Strayhorn, 2010). Furthermore, indicators promoting spirituality are distinguished according to ethnicities. For example, overall satisfaction is the direct predictor of spirituality in undergraduate settings for Whites, while sense of belonging is the leading indicator for African American students (Paredes-Collins, 2014; Rine, 2014). Gaining persistence predictors for college achievement which are exclusively connected to African Americans can ostensibly provide more precise early warning indicators for the educational sector (Habley et al., 2012; Wood, 2011).

Not only is there a scarcity of research examining African American male degree attainment, there is also a “paucity of published articles relating to retention in religiously affiliated institutions of higher learning … [and more specifically] the research regarding religious minorities” (Patten & Rice, 2009, p. 45). Jett (2010) lamented the lack of studies correlating spirituality to academic performance and especially among diverse institutions which includes Bible colleges. After completing a seven-year study on college students’ spiritual status, Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) stated higher education “has increasingly come to neglect its students’ ‘inner’ development” (p. 2). Among the more than 5,000 studies in the past
four decades, “very little systematic study has been done on students’ spiritual development” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 1). Likewise, Rockenbach and Mayhew (2014) affirm “we know very little about how college students’ worldviews shape their perceptions of and experiences with spiritual dynamics of campus climate” (p. 43). As institutions of higher learning, Bible colleges do not neglect the spirituality of their students but actually emphasize its growth and expression. Spirituality, then, is an inherent characteristic of Bible colleges.

As others begin to explore this subject, initial results indicated higher education students’ satisfaction is related to one’s religion, with Protestant students registering the highest levels of satisfaction (Bowman & Smedley, 2013). These same authors pointedly call for more thorough and rigorous research as it was established years ago that to continue to ignore religion is a direct insult to higher education students since an extensive study revealed “nearly half (48%) say it is ‘essential’ or ‘very important’ that college encourage their personal expression of spirituality” (Astin et al., 2005, p. 6). In connection with spirituality’s importance, this inquiry sought to uncover unique aspects of academic persistence attributable to religiously-affiliated baccalaureate colleges which have been ignored in this field of study (Burks & Barrett, 2009; Pascarella, 2006; Wood & Palmer, 2012), as phenomenology “aims to grasp and express these originating meanings; as well, it aims to open itself to new originating beginnings that form inceptualities of phenomenological inquiry” (van Manen, 2014, p. 43).

There have been many attempts to close the historically existing secondary educational achievement gap between ethnicities, and yet, it remains wide to this day (Morales, 2014). Between 1990 and 2013, the gap in the attainment rate at the bachelor’s level between Whites and Blacks widened from 13% to 20% (Kena et al., 2014). According to Schott Foundation for Public Education’s (2012) 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males, only 52% of
African American male ninth graders graduate from high school four years later (Rosser-Mims, Palmer, & Harroff, 2014). To address this achievement gap, a meta-analysis conducted by Jeynes (2010) indicated that the two most important factors impacting the education gap are personal religion and an intact family (Fountaine & Carter, 2012). Religious faith reduces the achievement gap by more than 50% and having an intact family can eliminate it entirely. The explanation for this is that religion characteristically compels an internal focus, teaches a strong work ethic, and encourages a disciplined lifestyle, wherein, teens are less likely to become involved in drugs, alcohol, and deviant sexual behavior.

Though Jeynes’s (2010) research pertained to secondary education, the precedence has been set for postsecondary levels. Religion or spirituality in the context of attending a Bible college is the focus of this study, and these results revealing the primary role of faith and family hold out hope for African Americans (Dabney, 2012; Hucks, 2011). In a sense, to understand persistence, or the lack thereof, it is imperative that educators “go beyond the educational sphere … to broaden their approach to the achievement gap” (Jeynes, 2010, p. 275). A Bible college setting provides opportunity to broaden the approach and address the element of religion. Arguably, to ignore religion and outside factors, such as the home and family, is to guarantee a gap remains. Educators, parents, community leaders, and researchers need to esteem more seriously the improvement that religious faith provides.

**Practical Significance**

While the literature provides an emerging scope of research on persistence for African American male undergraduate students, nontraditional students have not been thoroughly explored as a population in relation to persistence, especially in the context of Bible college institutions (Jett, 2010; Scanduval-Lucero et al., 2014; Stewart, 2015). Understanding the
persistence experiences for this subpopulation of undergraduate nontraditional African American males in the context of Bible colleges is an area that contributes to the research. Concomitantly, the importance of comprehending the factors that promote persistence is of great value to educational communities across the United States struggling to help nontraditional students stay on course during their undergraduate studies, and especially Bible colleges who frequently lack strategic retention strategies. Assumptions cannot automatically be transferred from secular to religious settings.

Many private schools actively recruit students due to the need to provide income for the college, but recruiting must be accompanied by retention to sustain the income (Habley et al., 2012). An imperative has been placed upon institutions to find ways to target the needs of African Americans (and other minorities) and to develop strategies to retain them by avoiding unnecessary spending (Roscoe, 2015). Without this information, attrition rates may continue to rise for minorities. The results of this study garner recommendations for the educational sector in providing targeted services and developing programs that meet specific needs for this group and successfully assist them in persisting toward completion of their studies (Flowers et al., 2015). By applying these persistence principles, “colleges and universities can attempt to enhance and replicate the attributes and conditions that successful [minority] students have identified as critical to their success” (Morales, 2014, p. 93).

Administrators are looking to understand the college experience for underrepresented students and to evaluate current support systems’ adequacy to meet their needs (Chavis, 2014; Roscoe, 2015). Given what the literature says about the significance of faculty impact on college persistence, particular attention to understanding their role contributes to academic development for today’s African American male students (Astin et al., 2011; Bowman & Small, 2013;
Faculty can be sensitized to more readily equip themselves for a critical role with these students in keeping them on track for graduation (Colvin, 2013). Faculty may gain knowledge for curriculum development in their andragogical practices, as research shows that first-year students who are exposed to organized and clear instruction significantly increase the probability of returning for a second year (Boulanger, 2009). With such a primary role in persistence, faculty need to know precisely their role in creating a satisfied, motivated nontraditional student. Likewise, it is critical for academic advisors to fully understand the myriad of deterrent factors that adult students face and how to best activate strategies of persistence to tailor the degree progress to the individual needs, beginning with recommending an opening transitional course (Orgnerro, 2013).

This insufficient research pertaining to African American male graduation success and resilience benefits from examinations of the educational experiences at varying institutions, including specific geographic locations (Jett, 2010; Palmer et al., 2011). Research pertaining to specific geographic locations was met in the current research by focusing on the vast African American population of the southeast. Georgia is a key geographical location since it has the fourth largest African American population. North Carolina is another key location since it has the sixth largest African American population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). This research was focused in Georgia and North Carolina.

Most importantly, however, the completion of this research proves beneficial to African American male students of faith. Because of the focus on spirituality in a Bible college context, the significant element of faith in persistence elevates its primary role. African American male students benefit from seeing the primary role faith has in persistence. Greater tolerance of faith-based beliefs within educational fields enables a certain freedom for these students to draw from
this source of strength without ridicule (Magolda, 2013). If spirituality positively affects students, then its influence should be embraced, encouraged, and appreciated (Milacci, Lawson, Firmin, & Anderson, 2005). To the extent research can clarify faith’s role, the more likely African American students are to succeed. Administrations and faculty within faith-based institutions benefit directly from this study. However, the focus is for the greatest benefits to richly support the African American male higher education student of faith, as it is primarily his interests that are being served through this research.

Having completed a quantitative study on nontraditional students, Tripodi (2010) charged the next logical step is to perform a “qualitative study with students from one institution or a few institutions in the same region which have a diverse student body in terms of delayed entry” (p. 215). The potential is for a three-prong beneficial process in helping the student, faculty and staff, and the institution. Nationally, it is predicted that college enrollment for nontraditional students will continue to increase at a higher rate than enrollment of traditional-age students (Rosser-Mims et al., 2014) as “fewer than half of all students who earn bachelor’s degrees do so within five years of high school graduation” (Habley et al., p. 16). It is projected that enrollment of students 35 and over will increase 16% by 2020, compared to 9% for those between 18 and 24 years old (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). Furthermore, it is projected that African American student enrollment will increase 25% by 2020 (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). Even now “there is no such thing as a traditional college student. The exception has become the rule” (Habley et al., 2012, p. 46). Wisdom directs input from a field of nontraditional students whose significant enrollment numbers promise to be increasing for future years in higher education.
Research Questions

Given that the purpose of this study is to explore experiences related to academic persistence, the following questions guided this study (Arbelo-Marrero, 2013):

1. How do nontraditional undergraduate African American male four-year degree completers from select evangelical Bible colleges describe persistence? An inductive inquiry approach dissuades researcher bias and encourages the clear voice of the participants to emerge (Arbelo-Marrero, 2013).

2. What type of experiences do participants understand as having contributed to their persistence at Bible College? Encouraging disclosure of general experiences which contributed to persistence clarifies targeted goals for other students and institutions (Arbelo-Marrero, 2013; Harper, 2012).

3. What specific factors do participants identify as having contributed to their persistence at Bible College? Through the research questions, a narrowing effect may now provide the details of identifying specific persistence factors (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2015).

Research Plan

A qualitative study was conducted using hermeneutical phenomenology to interpret the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). As van Manen (2014) asserts, “Doing phenomenology means to start with lived experience, with how something appears or gives itself to us” (p. 32). A lived experience (from the German word for experience, Erlebnis) literally means living through something and as a methodology aims to understand how people actually experience their phenomenon. By focusing upon nontraditional undergraduate African American male four-year degree completers from select Bible colleges, I
explored this subgroup phenomenologically so that their lived experiences and meanings surfaced concerning their particular academic persistence experiences.

A hermeneutical approach also seeks to understand and to interpret “with special attention to context” (Patton, 2002, p. 114) enabling this phenomenon to be “that which shows itself in itself” (van Manen, 2014, p. 27). Gaining understanding of African American male persistence in Bible colleges is not the end goal but rather to then hermeneutically interpret their lived experiences. Phenomenology “becomes hermeneutical when its method is taken to be essentially interpretive and primarily oriented to the explication of texts (rather than directly oriented to lived experience)” (van Manen, 2014, p. 132). Hermeneutics is defined as “the validation of the meaning embedded in a text […] and a participant’s] intended meaning of a text is a fixed, determinate entity or object that can be depicted or portrayed accurately” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 36).

Because the goal is to understand the participants lived experiences, importing preconceived ideas based on the bias of the interpreter must be avoided. Interpretation that emerges through the participants’ dialogue and conversation is to be pursued, yet always bracketing any preconceived understandings. Therefore, the study must be situated in the cultural context of African American nontraditional undergraduate male students within Bible colleges to be credibly interpreted. Specifically, the intent was to develop a rich, thick, deep understanding of the participants and their experiences and construct meaning from the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014).

The participants were 10 nontraditional African American male four-year degree completers from two southeastern Bible colleges, each with a 50% minimum of African American student enrollment. Purposeful and snowball sampling concentrated on African
American males who graduated within a six-year timeframe and were selected because they are “information rich and illuminative” (Patton, 2002, p. 40). Data collection included a demographic survey, in-depth interviews, e-journaling, and focus groups to achieve maximum variation.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

A research project must be “well-defined and well-focused … otherwise one is quickly lost in the sheer expanse and depth of one’s question” (van Manen, 1990, p. 167). Keeping the research well-defined and well-focused guides the delimitations and limitations. The delimitations for this study included a focus on nontraditional African American, higher education students in Bible colleges in the southeastern United States. The traditional path to college degree is enrolling in college immediately after high school and attending full time until graduation. However, this has become the exception rather than the rule. The ongoing trend is that as many as three-fourths of undergraduates do not fit the traditional student definition (Habley et al., 2012; Kasworm, 2010, 2012; Tripodi, 2010). Since a clear majority does not fit the traditional student definition, an understanding must be gained for the nontraditional student.

The nontraditional undergraduate student is defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (U.S. Department of Education, 2012c) as having risk factors, such as: 1) A GED recipient or Certificate of Completion; 2) Delayed enrollment after high school; 3) Attends part-time for at least part of the academic year; 4) Works full-time employment at some time during enrollment; 5) Responsible for dependents; 6) Considered financially independent for financial aid purposes; and 7) A single parent. Minimally, nontraditional has only one of these characteristics. Moderately, nontraditional has two or three of these characteristics. Highly
nontraditional has four or more these characteristics. This study specifically focused on moderate to high nontraditional undergraduate students, as defined by the NCES.

More specifically, this study focused on African American higher education students. The NCES (U.S. Department of Education, 2012a) defines African American as Black and non-Hispanic. This is a person who has an origin in any of the black racial groups of Africa and not of Hispanic origin. This study specifically focused on nontraditional African American students as defined by the NCES.

Some Bible colleges have historical roots in targeting specific ethnicities, including an African American focus, and meet the definition of Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs) or predominantly Black institutions (Cooks, 2010). A historically Black college is defined by the NCES (U.S. Department of Education, 2012b) as any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans, and accredited by a nationally recognized agency. For the purposes of this study, the definition of a historically Black college followed the NCES definition and only modified by including a college that may not have begun before 1964 but does include a specific focus on cross-cultural enrollment as a part of the college’s mission so that they clearly qualify as predominantly Black institutions. The study was further delimited by graduates from Bible college institutions distinguished by core biblical/theological subjects, Christian service experiences, and training for ministry (McKinney, 1997).

Defining academic persistence is fraught with complexity. Full-time students may slow down to part time, yet continue to persist. Transfer students may leave one (or more) institution, yet persist at another. Students may experience a brief (or longer) stop-out in which matriculation is interrupted for a length of time (Habley et al., 2012). Persistence, for this study,
refers to the enrolled student (full or part time) who has remained enrolled through graduation in a degree program, which may include any stop-outs due to unforeseen circumstances. Tripodi (2010) defined persistence as the “study of individual students and their staying at an institution of higher education until they attain a degree, satisfy their personal goals, or leave higher education entirely” (p. 28).

Research is beginning to expand definitions of student success in light of the nontraditional patterns of attendance (Maroney, 2010). It is recognized that many students matriculate entirely as part-time students while meeting obligations of the workplace or family. The demands peak so that there are repeated stop-outs and reentry. Such students are pursuing goals that include adjusting to situations out of their control. Retention and student success, then, are not simply measured on the institution’s student enrollment numbers of new and returning students. Because this study focused on the nontraditional students, persistence is defined as including part-time students who may experience more than one stop-out and reentry (Habley et al., 2012). Though retention has been viewed as the responsibility of the college, and persistence the responsibility of the student, historically, persistence has been linked to retention as interchangeable terms (Tinto, 1993). Difficult as it may be to find a general consensus for defining persistence, defining persistence as student motivation toward degree completion is within the literature context.

Delimitations are boundaries that I set for this study that limit its scope and applicability, and are based on matters relating to the study, setting, and selection of participants. In addition, there are limitations to this study which arise from the research method and design (Patton, 2002). As discussed in Chapter 5, this study was limited by gender, the unique ethnicity, faith-based worldview, and regional aspects.
Definitions

1. **Academic Success** - Students’ grade point averages and successful completion of classes toward their degree goals (Wood & Hilton, 2012, p. 44).

2. **At-risk** – Those students attending higher education as the first generation and/or minority and could be from a lower socioeconomic background (Hill & Woodward, 2013).

3. **Bible College** – A Christian, evangelical higher education institution that requires a Bible/theology core component equivalent to 30 semester hours (ABHE, 2012), Christian service experiences, and training for ministry (McKinney, 1997).

4. **Black or African American** – A person having origins in any black racial groups of Africa (U.S. Department of Education, 2012c, *Glossary*). This research primarily uses the term African American though it and the term Black are synonymous.

5. **Christian Service Formation** – Ministerial preparation to include the development of personal and public ecclesiastical capacities for pastoral leadership (Lowe & Lowe, 2010).

6. **Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)** - The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, defines an HBCU as: "...any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation" (U.S. Department of Education, 2012c, *Glossary*). Federal regulations (20 USC 1061 (2)) allow for certain exceptions to the founding date.
7. **Nontraditional Student** - The National Council for Educational Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2012a) has consistently applied nontraditional characteristics in numerous quantitative studies on nontraditional students. These seven traits are grouped into three sets of criteria (Mackzum, 2012):

a. Enrollment patterns - Delays enrollment: Student does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school. Attends part-time: Student is less than full-time for at least part of the academic year.

b. Financial and family status - Is financially independent: Student is considered financially independent for purposes of determining financial aid (twenty-four years or older, married, a veteran, responsible for dependents other than a spouse). Works full-time: Student works thirty-five hours or more per week. Has dependents: Student has dependents other than a spouse. Is a single parent: Student is not married or is separated with dependents.

c. High school graduation status - Does not have a high school diploma: Student completed high school with a GED or other completion certificate or did not finish high school.

Minimally nontraditional has only one of these characteristics. Moderately nontraditional has two or three of these characteristics. Highly nontraditional has four or more these characteristics. This study specifically focuses on moderate to highly nontraditional undergraduate students as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics.
8. **Nontraditionality** - The degree of nontraditional characteristics that students possess that include age, employment status, marital status, the presence of children, full or part-time status in college, and financial independence (Henson, 2013, p. 12).

9. **Persistence** - Persistence, for this study, refers to the enrolled student (full or part time) who has remained enrolled through graduation in a degree program, which may include any stop-outs due to unforeseen circumstances (Habley et al., 2012). Tripodi (2010) defined persistence as the “study of individual students and their staying at an institution of higher education until they attain a degree, satisfy their personal goals, or leave higher education entirely” (p. 28). The focus of persistence is motivation toward degree completion. Though retention and persistence are often used as interchangeable terms, this study will view retention as the responsibility of the college, and persistence the responsibility of the student (Tinto, 1993).

10. **Religion** - Religion refers to a shared belief system typified by principles, customs, practices, and rites in adherence to God or multiple deities (Wood & Hinton, 2012).


12. **Religious involvement** - A set of values and beliefs practiced by a group of people encompassing spirituality and a personal relationship with the group of believers in a state of spiritual well-being (De Souza, 2012).

13. **Resiliency** – The ability of students to succeed academically, despite difficult and challenging life circumstances and risk factors that could prevent them from succeeding (Kim & Hargrove, 2013).
14. *Retention, Progression, and Graduation* (RPG) - The practical definition of retention, progression, and graduation (RPG) as the steady continuation of enrollment of full-time, first-time, degree-seeking students who enrolled in a given fall term and who remain enrolled for the second fall (retention), third fall (progression), and fourth fall (progression) and then graduate (graduation) (Hill & Boes, 2013).

15. *Self-efficacy* – “Self-efficacy refers to an individual’s judgments of personal capability; it reflects a person’s belief about whether he or she can succeed in a particular situation” (Henson, 2013, p. 9).

16. *Spiritual formation* – Opportunities through which students may grow in personal qualities essential for the practice of ministry, namely, emotional maturity, personal faith, moral integrity, and public witness (Lowe & Lowe, 2010).

17. *Spiritual Well-being* – The feeling of peaceful, happy, hopeful, connected and accepting self while finding meaning and purpose in life (De Souza, 2012).

18. *Spirituality/faith* - Viewed through the lens of evangelical Christianity, spirituality is equated with the heart set on God the Father’s kingdom as the essential center of the spiritual life and always understood with reference to the transcendent, holy God. Spirituality in this study should be considered similar to the word faith with its inherent meanings related to a person’s foundational core beliefs (Milacci, 2006; Milacci et al., 2005).

**Summary**

This study focused on understanding the persistence experiences associated with nontraditional undergraduate African American male students in the context of selected predominantly Black Bible colleges. This was accomplished through the use of a hermeneutical
phenomenology methodology that explored the lived experiences of 10 participants in order to provide further insight to the educational community that serves this population. By means of a constructivist, pragmatic, biblical worldview paradigm, truth was gathered by hearing the voice of those who succeed so that an increasing number of others may join them.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two provides a context for the present research of nontraditional undergraduate African American male graduates demonstrating the importance of researching an established gap in previous studies. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory supported by The Adult Resiliency Theory served as the theoretical framework for this study. This theoretical framework explains that the best way for students to persist is through reciprocal relationships of affinity (family, culture, peers, educational community) which strengthen internal protective factors (spirituality, intrinsic motivation). The related literature review demonstrates the importance of the study, highlights the nontraditional undergraduate African American male characteristics, what is necessary for success, the obstacles to overcome, and the vital role of spirituality. The chapter ends with a summary of main points.

Theoretical Framework

This study was based on axiological assumptions in light of the inherent values and biases of the researcher. The biases include the known challenges to nontraditional adults and to the values of specialized strategies. Values also include the importance of individuals assisting other individuals to fulfill God-given directives which extends the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework for this study is based on two theories: The Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the educational Adult Resilience Theory (Richardson, 2002).

The Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory provides a framework for this study as the proposed interconnections impact learners’ development. This systems theory postulates that human development is influenced by four holistic environmental systems: (a)
microsystems are the direct social systems of interaction with institutions, educators, culture community, family, and peers; (b) the mesosystems are interrelationships that occur between a person’s microsystems for on and off campus support which includes faculty-student interactions, student-advisor relationships, and student-to-student interconnections; (c) exosystems are the external environmental settings indirectly affecting development, such as the student’s education experiences influencing the student’s home and ministry experiences; and (d) macrosystems are overarching cultural aspects in which an individual lives, such as the socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and subcultures contexts (pp. 514-515).

An Ecological Systems Theory determines the healthiest environment for student development is one with many interconnections between the student’s microsystems. Connections across various systems enhance development, and the more these systems interconnect, the more likely a student is to succeed. These social interconnections in a developing person’s ecosystems play a major role in affecting the direction and rate of growth because “development never takes place in a vacuum; it is always embodied and expressed through behavior in a particular environmental context” (Lowe & Lowe, 2010, p. 27).

Reciprocity is strongly demonstrated in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory to describe the interaction between the developing student and others in his social context that comprises an ecosystem. Reciprocity is similar to a ping-pong game in which there is mutual feedback that incrementally encourages more complex interaction of the learning process. Reciprocity occurs between the microsystems and macrosystems affecting the personal ecosystem. It is the progressive, mutual accommodation, affected by relations “within and between immediate settings and larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which the settings are embedded” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 514). This is comparatively similar to the biblical
concept of *koinonia* and the “one another” reciprocal commands of the New Testament (1 John 1:7). The more these systems are linked and interact, the more they provide a support system for the learner and have the potential to positively impact academic persistence.

The Ecological Systems Theory has been directly applied to African American males and serves as foundational to the African American Males Theory (AAMT) (Bush & Bush, 2013). Within the AAMT, the microsystem is divided into an inner microsystem and the outer microsystem. The inner microsystem is designed to capture the specifics of the African American male personality, beliefs, and perceptions while the outer provides for an analysis of the impact from family, home, neighborhood, church, and school environments (Watts, 1993). Further, the mesosystem is expanded to include an additional division called subsystem. The subsystem allows for a direct link of analysis for the impact of the supernatural and the spiritual indicating their importance to the African American ethnicity (Bush & Bush, 2013). An ecological theoretical framework that emphasizes the spiritual aspects of the African American male student provided the framework for this study.

**The Adult Resilience Theory**

The Adult Resilience Theory explains the best way for students to advance is through reciprocal relationships of affinity which strengthen internal protective factors (Morales, 2000, 2010, 2014; Richardson, 2002; van Breda, 2001). Morales (2000) identified five steps in the educational resilience cycle: (a) the student identifies or recognizes major risk factors, (b) the student implements protective factors to offset risk factors, (c) protective factors work in concert to propel the student toward high academic achievement, (d) the student recognizes the value of protective factors and continues to refine and implement them, (e) consistent and continuous refinement and implementation of protective factors sustain academic achievement as new
challenges present themselves (p. 11). The first two steps highlight the importance of a student’s self-awareness of risk factors so that protective factors are developed. The third step asserts the importance of various factors working harmoniously and simultaneously to strengthen academic resilience. The final two steps address the student’s insights in recognizing and refining identified protective factors (Morales, 2000).

In making this more applicable to African American males, Guiffrida (2006) recommends a framework that does not break away from families’ support systems but recognizes that resilience is enhanced by students embracing their families and external support systems. This type of “connection recognizes students’ subjective sense of relatedness without implying the need to break ties with one’s former community” (Guiffrida, 2006, p. 457). Schools which support African American males in their nurturing and supportive relationships on and off campus encourage resilience. Resilience is “the product of the kinship network unique among African American families of developing connections of formal kin, informal kin, and community organizations outside of the traditional, blood-relative paradigm” (Simmons, 2014, p. 173). Familial relationships are central to resiliency for African American students.

In addition to an Ecological Systems Theory, the Resilience Theory serves as foundational to the AAMT (Bush & Bush, 2013). AAMT “embraces resilience theory and vehemently opposes deficit paradigms, thinking, and practice” (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 10) and aims, instead, to approach persistence from an asset perspective. From this viewpoint, the Resilience/AAMT served this study well by addressing persistence from the perspective of African American males who have successfully experienced resilience. It was a proactive move away from negative-centered and reactive approaches but speedily toward hearing the stories of African American males who actually thrived in biblical higher education.
For African American students, combining an Ecological and Adult Resilience theoretical framework, determines the best way for students to advance is through reciprocal relationships of affinity (family, culture, peers) which strengthen internal protective factors. Internal protective factors for African American males of faith-based, Bible college institutions include spiritual growth which “fortifies the immune system of the body in addition to increasing self-efficacy and other resilient qualities” (Richardson, 2002, p. 315). The internal protective factor of spirituality serves as an intrinsic motivational center for resilience and persistence. Risk factors are analyzed and addressed based on the connectedness and interactions of the various ecological systems. Risk factors are mitigated by reciprocal relationships of affinity which feed protective factors of persistence (Morales, 2010). Protective factors are internal, external, and relational, according to extensive microsystems interactions which provide a support system for academic persistence. Protective factors work in “symbiotic concert in order to facilitate achievement of resilience” (Morales, 2010, p. 173).

Related Literature

The first section of this literature review examined ecological systems and adult resiliency as the two theories that will serve to provide a theoretical framework for the current study. The second section contains a review of related literature to provide a synthesis of the existing knowledge of undergraduate nontraditional Africa American male graduates. There is an abundance of research literature on African American male students from a deficit-based approach focusing on negative outcomes. Research on African American male students’ higher education success within the same body of literature is sparse despite the institutional efforts for retention. Thus, there is a significant gap in the literature as it relates to African American male higher education success in Bible colleges. The section that follows specifies what has been
examined, what has not been examined, and what is still developing, in order to give clarity to how this research sought to fill the gap concerning what is yet unknown. The emerging theme from the literature is addressing African American male persistence from the perspective of an asset perspective.

**Setting the Foundation for Studies of African American Men in Higher Education**

The aim of this study was to explore persistence experiences of nontraditional undergraduate African American males. The body of literature here presented shows the need to diversify by gender and ethnicity. Also recognized by the literature is the need to study this population within private institutions. Diverse student data is also to be regarded geographically. These areas provide a foundation for a study of African American men in higher education.

**Ethnicity and gender.** Even though large numbers of African American students are consistently enrolled at predominantly Black institutions, there is still an abundance of research that looks at diverse college students from a deficit perspective and a dearth of research that examines the same students from an asset perspective (Scanduval-Lucero, 2014). To demographically diversify by ethnicity and by gender is to aim at this dearth of research, knowing that male and female college students differ in their psychological stress which is associated with college (Palmer & Wood, 2012). Tracking the success of diverse college students enables a view of the positive outcomes that can result in enhanced institution and student models. Thus, instead of adding to the now exhaustive body of literature focusing on why Black male enrollments and degree attainment rates remain low, seeking instructive insights from successfully matriculated students who maximized their college experiences is the needed emphasis (Harper, 2012). This oversight verifies there is insufficient research pertaining to successful African American male graduate success and resilience.
Private institutions. In addition to the lack of African American male persistence explorations, there is a need for research among differing colleges, including religious institutions. Higher education enrollment for African American students is expected to increase 25% by 2020 and enrollment in private institutions is projected to increase 13% by 2020 (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). Research conducted with African American males in Bible colleges is a setting that anticipates the growth of this cohort for this higher education setting. Kim and Hargrove (2013) recommend that “future research on the postsecondary success and resilience of Black men should seek to examine the educational experiences of the population at varying institutions” (p. 308) as retention frameworks must take into account “institutional diversity” (Habley et al., p. 17). Rockenbach and Mayhew (2014) agree that “college experiences affect satisfaction in different ways for different students, necessitating methodological approaches that account for nonuniformity across student subgroups” (p. 43).

In light of the importance of spirituality and family as major factors for Black male resilience, studies are needed that include faith-based perspectives (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Paredes-Collins, 2014; Rine, 2014). Although the concept of African American spirituality has been investigated in the psychological and healthcare literature (Wood & Hilton, 2012), the postsecondary research on spirituality is long overdue and is exacerbated by the existing literature on African American male students. This is critical given the historical importance of spirituality in the African American community. As a religious and cultural ethic, African American spirituality has served as a personal and communal source of motivation, inspiration, hope, and forgiveness for developing success in relationship to social, political, and economic injustices.
Diverse college student studies are needed that are distinguished by differing academic majors, such as within the department of religion (Kim & Sax, 2011). Research of African American male secondary students within spirituality contexts can meet this gap and potentially empower academic achievements. Retention and persistence within the confines of faith-based higher education have been addressed from the perspective of the college (Stewart, 2015), but to compose the research holistically, retention and college persistence practices must be investigated from the perspective of the student (Fincher, 2010; Stewart, 2015).

**Diverse student data.** Continued research is compellingly urged to avoid homogenous depictions of African American males in postsecondary education. “Intersectionalities must be addressed with respect to student characteristics [such as] …religion…, regional differences…and control [e.g., public, private]. We argue no lens is too fine; rather, that fine levels of analysis allow for greater levels of insight” (Wood & Palmer, 2012, p. 192). These recommendations highlight the need to conduct additional research that analyzes the diverse student data using several different demographic characteristics, including gender, race, major, spirituality, and geographic regions in order to present a rich, thick description of the persistence practices of college experiences. Research that focuses on gender, nontraditional classification, ethnicity, and spirituality, purposes to highlight principles of student persistence, resulting in improvements to existing retention models within higher education.

**Obstacles to Nontraditional African American Male College Success**

The body of literature reveals what barriers and obstacles African American males encounter. By describing and explaining these barriers a clearer understanding is gained as to what must be overcome for persistence. These barriers are pertinent to nontraditional undergraduate African American male students in higher education.
A complex life-setting. Nontraditional students struggle with complex demands of balancing family (Forbus et al., 2011; Rosser-Mims et al., 2014), employment (Forbus et al., 2011; Orgnero, 2013; Rosser-Mims et al., 2014), and ministry (Rosser-Mims et al., 2014; Stewart, 2015) while pursuing higher education. The struggle manifests itself in managing consistent child care, financial obligations, learning difficulties and study skills, negotiating work and school schedules, transportation, and access to available services. Navigating higher education, life responsibilities of a marriage, family, work, and ministry, compete with the need to devote extra time to academic challenges. The average adult student reports for each new semester having to renegotiate involvement in college by seeking concessions from an employer(s), family, and other life commitments while battling time and access issues, financial aid issues, and concerns for institutional support services (Kasworm, 2012). Interestingly, career changes and increased income promote persistence, whereas job loss and lack of time contribute to a negative impact (Stewart, 2015). However, the two often work against each other. A change in career often requires additional time to learn the particulars of the new career as well as an increase in responsibilities and during this transitional period, time for academic studies suffers.

Numerous nonacademic causes for dropping out of college, thus emerge. Nonacademic reasons can include mental and physical health, marriage and family, employment, personal and emotional maladjustment, all of which can sequester the motivation to succeed (Habley et al., 2012). This is the dilemma that nontraditional students face, yet they are less prone than traditional students to report having difficulties with the academic challenges of college life (Forbus et al., 2010). Accordingly, Bible colleges inherently struggle with the dual concerns of apparent conflict between scholarship and discipleship, educational standards of professionalism
and personal matters of spiritual growth for nontraditional students (Cochran, 2012). In response, the ideal is for Bible colleges to clarify teaching Scripture for scholarship and discipleship, wherein uniting academic and pastoral concerns, so that persistence can be encouraged for nontraditional students.

**Insufficient academic preparation for college level work.** Researchers have outlined several obstacles that continue to serve as barriers impeding persistence in college for African American males. Of the numerous obstacles, academic under preparedness is the most significant retention issue for African American students (Harper, 2012). African American males are less prepared, having more obstacles than their White counterparts all of which makes African American males unsuccessful in facing the rigors of college-level academics (Fountaine & Carter, 2012; Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011). The specific obstacles for African American men are linked to systematic discrimination in the educational arena with fewer academic offerings and lower quality curricula (Wood, 2011). Additionally, African American men are negatively affected if they have experienced little or no family support, inadequate financial assistance, low teacher expectations, and cultural attitudes negatively viewing masculinity with academic success (Dabney, 2012; Fountaine & Carter, 2012).

To counter this, strategies have been developed to address some of these obstacles which include remedial academic courses, special programs, and support services. However, though adult students frequently attend classes at night and on weekends, support services are neutralized because of the common practice of higher education institutions offering their support services and advising and counseling opportunities during the daytime (Kasworm, 2012). A lack of access to these services has the potential to impede persistence (Chavis, 2014). Promising advancements encourage their continued use, but the greater successes point to a
holistic approach for promoting and sustaining persistence (Fincher, 2010). To promote and sustain persistence, more colleges need a centralized system for evaluating student performance throughout a semester through an alert system (Wood, 2011). An alert system tracks students, and when a problem is detected, appropriate faculty and staff are notified. These alerts are designed to occur early in the semester, serving to enact immediate interventions, such as meeting with tutors to prevent attrition (Wood, 2011).

**Technology barriers.** A barrier for nontraditional students is use of technology in today’s educational system (Guy & lowness-Jackson, 2010; Henson, 2013; Morales, 2014; Robinson, 2012; Schmidt, 2015; Vermiller, 2014). Baby Boomers are not technologically savvy and even Generation Xers find themselves having fallen behind once they reenter college. Almost without exception, nontraditional students struggle with using standard electronic devices and certainly stand in stark contrast to recent high school graduates. Nontraditional students remember the slower pace of note-taking with paper and pen. Now they must become accustomed to the modern and faster pace of note-taking with tablets and notebooks along with the absence of a chalk board but the presence of a SMART board. Technology can actually be a hindrance and a detriment to persistence (Jesnek, 2012).

A fast-growing community college purposely sought to deal with this barrier by establishing a student and faculty technology learning center wherein a coordinator trains faculty and students on the latest technology practices (Kennamer & Campbell, 2011). Research has also indicated a transitional, first course for returning adult learners overcomes many initial technology barriers (Orgnero, 2013). Adult learners may be slow to learn the technology tools and procedures, but often this is due to concentrating on avoiding mistakes, or assuring accuracy, and not that they are anti-technology (Broady, Chan, & Caputi, 2010; Nyoni & Mafenya, 2010).
Once nontraditional students see the need for and the benefits of technology, they proactively engage themselves as andragogical learners (Lowe, 2012; Mezirow, 1991). If given adequate time to learn and practice, self-efficacy develops in cyclical patterns (Broady et al., 2010). The benefits of technology facilitate nontraditional students by providing them with immediate and continual access to course-related information such as notes, syllabi, videos, and presentations (Osborne, 2012). These benefits can reduce the stress and create confidence for adult learners (Kasworm, 2012).

**Social barriers.** Social connectedness directly affects retention, but this is an obstacle hard to overcome because nontraditional students are on campus for classes almost exclusively (Jensen, 2011). The most basic needs of nontraditional students derive from the lack of social or cultural capital required to be successful (Mackzum, 2012; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2010). Nontraditional students perceive themselves in isolation with an awareness of an outsider status, as sometimes conveyed from the indifference demonstrated by traditional students (Parks et al., 2013). Isolation creates insecurities, vulnerabilities, distress, loneliness, and doubts of legitimacy in the enculturation process. They are in a “liminal space” (Parks et al., 2013, p. 70) held between two social positions exasperated as non-authentic for showing up without the *status quo* technology toys.

Social isolation is even more pronounced when minority students are viewed as receiving undeserved admission (Ovink & Veazey, 2011). A lack of needed social integration skills to navigate college requirements, repel nontraditional students away from peer-assistance, even in the most informal ways of in-class and in-between class interaction (Roscoe, 2015). It makes commuter students worthy of research as a unique cohort (Boulanger, 2009). The administrative perspective can view this cohort as an easy and effortless group of students going in the same
direction to help ease minority students’ sense of isolation (Ovink & Veazey, 2011). Ease of access to informal interaction encourages campus life networking which, in many instances, are formed by students with students (Parks et al., 2013).

**Financial barriers.** Financial barriers impede academic progress (Chavis, 2014; Fountaine & Carter, 2012; Habley et al., 2012; Jensen, 2011; Kasworm, 2012; Ovink & Veazey, 2011; Patton, 2012; Schmidt, 2015; Vermiller, 2014; Williamson, 2010). The current situation is no different, as two thirds of all Blacks who drop out of college do so for financial reasons (Roscoe, 2015). The situation is worsened when the Black student is a first generation student, as there is a lack of understanding of accessing and navigating the process of securing grants and loans (Rosser-Mims et al., 2014). African American low socioeconomic status (SES) has been demonstrated to be the “the most powerful predictor of achievement in college” (Strayhorn, 2010, p. 319-320) by negatively affecting persistence because the more hours a student works during the first year, the least likely he will graduate in six years (Scott, 2012). This is particularly startling considering nontraditional students often work full-time. This results in a part-time enrollment status which lessens access to federal financial aid (Kasworm, 2012).

Colleges that concentrate on allowing low SES students access to mentors, tutors, and engaged faculty address these persistence issues. Without connections to these key relationships and support services, persistence is weakened because of outside demands of employment, marriage, children, and ministry. Outside demands stretching finances can also include the additional burdens of dependent parents or even parents as fellow-students (Tripodi, 2010). Financial barriers remain an unresolved barrier for adult learners.
Academic Persistence Factors Related to Nontraditional Students

The body of literature indicates strategies of coping with barriers for academic persistence. Strategies pertain to institutional and individual perspectives, plans, and actions. A review of these persistence factors can specify research goals for additional knowledge.

A strengths-based strategy. A steady continuation of enrollment is beset with challenges for nontraditional students who are often academically underprepared (Hill & Boes, 2013). Traditional models of remediation designed for academically underprepared African American students do have a purpose, but these approaches typically do not allow students to focus on their interests until their deficits are corrected. Programs, such as summer bridge classes for students before entering college and remedial courses at the beginning of classes, should not be removed nor taught in isolation but rather in ways that allow students to see the connected relationships among the various disciplines (Barbatis, 2010). Furthermore, alternative strategies must be considered, such as a strengths-based model that integrates activities around talents and strengths, making weaknesses increasingly manageable (Fountaine & Carter, 2012). Based on positive psychological outcomes, education becomes much more learner-centered by tailoring the learning experiences to the needs of the individual student. Such models have been linked to retention and persistence as well as academic improvements (Bowers & Lopez, 2010; Cantwell, 2005; Gomez, 2009). Bible colleges must develop the ability to recognize and utilize the spiritual gifts of students while using them to the advantage of catering to the student-centered learning environment.

Support services. Noel-Levitz (2013) research indicated the most effective strategy by four-year private higher education institutions is academic support programs or services demonstrating their value for persistence and resilience. A wide variety of factors lending
support to students are revealed in the body of literature. These support service factors provide vital understanding of the critical nature of their role in persistence (Dabney, 2012).

**Academic advising.** Academic advising continues to be a strong factor for encouraging persistence, even being designated as the most important factor (Culver, 2012; Ovink & Veazey, 2011; Stewart, 2015) like a hub in the wheel of higher education (Habley et al., 2012). Academic advising involves an institutional representative (faculty or non-faculty) who builds relationships with students to assist their educational experiences in becoming increasingly engaged in institutional processes, while operating according to an individualized plan for fulfilling educational and career goals (Habley et al., 2012). A strengths-based advisor perspective instills within students the potential to learn anything the institution teaches, provided the right conditions are established (Habley et al., 2012). Strong academic advising includes an early detection plan to trigger intervention strategies, precluding a natural path toward stop-outs or dropouts (Culver, 2012; Dobele et al., 2013). When an advisor is prepared to help nontraditional students, it has proven effective in supporting persistence (Parks et al., 2013).

African American minorities enjoy stronger persistence rates when early proactive intervention is combined with face-to-face advising, which in turn, leads to tutorials and faculty follow-up sessions that develop additional informal network relationships (Zhang, Fei, Quddus, & Davis, 2014). This is the hub of the wheel in action for using a tag-team activity in referring students to the appropriate spokes of other campus-based support options. Using the hub and its spokes can create a first-year family for new students. Additionally, a new-student orientation precludes many negative issues (Habley et al., 2012, Noel-Levitz, 2013). Proactive academic advising has been shown to produce students’ overall satisfaction with the college (Habley et al., 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).
Peer mentoring and tutoring. A central factor to African American male high achievement is relationships with mentors and role models who form a solid support system (Arbelo-Marrero, 2013; Dabney, 2012; Fincher, 2010; Fountaine & Carter, 2012; Gasman & Spencer, 2012; Hill & Boes, 2013; Rosser-Mims et al., 2014). The What Works In Student Retention Survey (Habley et al., 2010) indicated tutoring to be perceived by four-year private institution students as the second most important retention initiative, surpassed only by an early warning system (Habley et al., 2012). This type of learning assistance program or activity is highly effective for both peer-tutor and tutee, as the tutor learns by preparing to tutor, and the experience enhances cognitive processing, as well as increases knowledge on the subject being taught (Habley et al., 2012). Peer tutors, therefore, need not be limited to high-ability students. Tutoring is particularly effective because tutors have a better ability to match the tutee’s learning styles that enable a student-centered approach (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2011).

The best mentor-mentee teams are those who share similarities in ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, and educational aspirations but not to the total exclusion of diversities. These relationships prevent potential distractions from interfering with academic progress. Dual mentorship of both a peer mentor and a faculty mentor should not be beyond the realm of possibility. Key mentoring models develop leadership qualities, instill accountability, focus on self-discipline, and intellectual maturity (Wood & Palmer, 2012). Fortunately, faith-based institutions routinely provide some form of tutoring assistance, such as a writing center, faculty tutoring, or referrals to outside resources (Stewart, 2015). Next to advisors, mentors play an important role, especially when they work in collaboration with the advisor and a learning community.
**Networking.** Creating positive support networks capitalize on the diversity of students’ strengths through their application and development (Fountaine & Carter, 2012). Developing networks can also “facilitate academic work, since getting to know staff or faculty personally can provide students with opportunities to receive personal advice about courses or services on campus” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 129). Caution must be exercised against programs that homogenize African American males into one sociocultural group. Placing them into one category creates stereotyping and detracts from networking toward diversity within a college campus. The networking philosophy is captured in the motto, “learn together, lead together, graduate together” (Wood & Palmer, 2012, p. 180). This type of social integration contributes to academic retention (Hill & Boes, 2013). Christian higher education students make stronger inroads to networking as they matriculate compared to secular institutional students and can be considered a virtue of academic persistence (Astin et al., 2011).

**Learning communities.** Learning communities are collections of students who are coordinated via coursework and grouped according to background factors (values, identities, academic plan) (Ovink & Veazey, 2011; Wood & Palmer, 2012). As a type of social integration, learning communities serve a dual purpose of gaining academic assets as well as a sense of belonging, resulting in students establishing their own identity as an active learner connected to the student community (Mackzum, 2012). Learning communities also provide students with access to peer mentoring, tutoring, and academic advising, all of which serve to provide an environment of academic and even emotional support (Hill & Boes, 2013; Wyatt, 2014). Within this environment, academic and social participation is expected and provides the needed supportive network to carry the participation. Learning communities feed higher retention rates, increased credit hours as well as persistent progress toward degree completion.
Nontraditional students participating in learning communities experienced GPAs that matched traditional students who did not participate in learning communities (Hill & Woodward, 2013). For example, in 2004, the University System of Georgia implemented the African American Male Initiative Learning Community (AAMI-LC) as a strategy for retaining African American males through the critical first year of college (Hill & Boes, 2015). Since implementing the AAMI-LC in 2004, the graduation rate for African American males has increased from 22% to 30%. In a similar program instituted in a mid-Atlantic state HBCU, the Male Initiative on Leadership and Excellence (MILE) enabled an increase from 2.1 to 3.1 GPA over a two-year research period (Palmer, Maramba, & Dancy, 2013).

Learning communities also serve the faith-based institutions’ retention strategies with commuter students especially benefiting (Boulager, 2009). One type of learning community model serves nontraditional students within similar academic interests. This type of learning community is led by a student success coach who maintains constant contact with the nontraditional members and supplies communications concerning courses and academic resources, while seeking to answer anticipated questions (Brooks, Jones, & Burt, 2013; Hill & Boes, 2013; Stewart, 2015). They can also provide opportunities for combining academic and social interactions. A major emphasis on retention and persistence should include creating, organizing, and developing learning community cohort groups since these have proven successful at varying college contexts (Wyatt, 2014). Learning communities are not nearly as prominent in four-year private colleges which no doubt include Bible colleges and are, therefore, an overlooked strategy (Habley et al., 2012).

Learning communities effectively increase retention and persistence (Brooks et al, 2013; Meeuwise, Severiens, & Born, 2010; Rocconi, 2011; Young, Johnson, Hawthorne, & Pugh,
The value of academic support for nontraditional students is vital. “Nothing is more important to student retention than academic support, especially during the critical first year of college when student retention is still very responsive to institutional intervention” (Tinto, 2012, p. 25). Bible colleges should develop and maintain this type of supportive environment because great teachers create a sense of community around any course by means of the correct assignments and co-curricular connections (Tripodi, 2010). Thus, every course should develop a certain level of learning community by the teacher actively involving students in the learning process. Research findings revealed a need for colleges to develop comprehensive retention plans, a retention team, and faculty participation to create retention as a shared goal (Wyatt, 2014). Learning communities provide a needed nurturing and supportive educational environment that undergirds success in college and serves a vital role for a comprehensive retention plan facilitating peer, administrative, and faculty relationships.

**Campus Connectedness for Nontraditional African American Men**

The body of literature guides the proper perspective concerning African American males’ affinity for college life. The nontraditional factors are extremely important, considering their need to maintain outside relationships with those for whom they are responsible or accountable. The body of literature guides the key components for campus integration according to nontraditional undergraduate African American male students.

**Supportive environment.** A supportive environment is critical to campus integration because “a chilly or hostile racist atmosphere on campus would result in a clear sense of minority students not fitting in or feeling alienated, and this lack of fit or alienation leads to leaving” (Bean, 2005, p. 216). African American students have been shown to be less satisfied with an institution if they perceive a hostile campus climate (Bowman & Smedley, 2013). Retention
focuses on several factors, including a welcoming environment because even benign neglect negatively affects adult learners (Brooks et al., 2013; Kennamer & Campbell, 2011). Certainly, faculty and staff must guard against natural tendencies toward viewing adult students with prejudices which stereotype them as failures in previous life and college experiences, resulting in a demeaning, disrespectful attitude (Chavis, 2014; Kasworm, 2012).

All African American students, part-time and full-time, desire and need a nurturing and supportive educational environment (Brooks et al., 2013; Hill & Boes, 2013; Morales, 2014; Ovink & Veazey, 2011; Perez, 2010; Scanduval-Lucero et al., 2014; Rine, 2014). A supportive campus climate employs culturally relevant approaches to meeting the needs of students from diverse backgrounds (Arbelo-Marrero, 2013). As stated above, learning communities can provide nurturing relationships making them an effective plan for increasing retention resulting in positive educational outcomes. However, supportive environments must move beyond formal relationships of learning communities and peer tutoring to informal but meaningful fellowships of varying levels, whereby, administration, faculty, staff, and the student body co-actively interact (Simmons, 2014). Bible colleges must create a culture that recognizes, appreciates, embraces, and nurtures the adult student.

**Increased connectedness to faculty.** A central factor to African American male high achievement is uplifting relationships with faculty (Chavis, 2014; Dabney, 2012; Fountaine & Carter, 2010; Gasman & Spencer, 2012; Habley et al., 2012; Morales, 2014; Ovink & Veazey, 2011; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014; Schmidt, 2015; Rine, 2014). Research revealed relationships with a faculty or staff member is the most important determining factor for persistence to graduation (Mackzum, 2012). Faculty members have the strongest impact on students when they are genuine and authentic with a clear commitment to students demonstrated
by a passion to invest time and energy beyond what is expected (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011). A capacity to connect genuine and authentic faculty and their students, positively correlate with various academic outcomes, including persistence (Arbelo-Marrero, 2013; Flowers et al., 2015; Palmer & Maramba, 2012; Williamson, 2010), cognitive development (Palmer & Maramba, 2012), elevated GPAs (Flowers et al., 2015), higher levels of campus and social integration (Fleming, Purnell, & Wang, 2013; Flowers et al., 2015; Williamson, 2010), conscientious responses to maintain integrity (Purnell et al., 2013), degree attainment (Fleming, Purnell, & Wang, 2013; Flowers et al., 2015; Palmer & Maramba, 2012; Roscoe, 2015; Williamson, 2010), and reducing stress (Forbus et al., 2011).

More than all other ethnicities, African American students connect, interact, and form relationships with faculty outside of the classroom (Williamson, 2010). The more meaningful contacts African American students have with faculty, inside and outside the classroom, the more likely they are to persist. Increased contact with faculty encourages a strategy of connection which is a main contributor to remaining enrolled in school (Barbatis, 2010; Roscoe, 2015). A greater connectedness to the institution through consistent faculty involvement provides greater opportunities for African American male student achievements. One reason for increasing success with African American men within HBCUs is the faculty who characteristically initiates and sustains supportive faculty-student relationships, aside from the entire HBCU functioning as a “village to help students finish their college education” (Lowe & Shipp, 2014, p. 249). The critical part is for faculty to understand that they must take the initiative to reach out to African American men because they typically are reluctant to ask for help (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Schreiner et al., 2011; Scott, 2012; Williamson, 2010).
Nontraditional students describe largely helpful treatment from professors (Kasworm, 2010; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011), but professors must be sensitive to nontraditional students feeling as second-class students when the atmosphere is one of an inclination to deferring to traditional students (Parks et al., 2013). For in-class and out-of-class contexts, supportive student-faculty relationships have the capacity to mitigate negative experiences by fostering the creation of inclusive learning communities (Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2014). Relationships make a significant difference in academic persistence as minority students are less likely to leave an institution when dynamic relationships would be sacrificed (Schreiner et al., 2011). The role of faculty as persistence agents cannot be overstated considering educators are in competition for students’ finite time and energy (Astin, 1984, p. 301).

Outside the classroom is not the only way for faculty to encourage student persistence. Building persistence within the classroom is also important. This is often challenging for higher education faculty, as most never receive training on how to teach students from varied economic and ethnic backgrounds (Bourland, 2009; Morales, 2014). Faculty can easily become discouraged when students struggle despite the faculty’s sincere efforts. Because nontraditional students’ campus involvement is greatly limited to what takes place within the classroom, the entire institutional culture is contained within these individual microcosms, the connecting classrooms, which highlights the importance of faculty classroom practices that encourage persistence (Maroney, 2010). Morales’ (2014) research is helpful in that it focused on faculty classroom patterns that foster persistence. Assisting students in discovering their personal learning style(s), and then matching those styles through differentiated instruction that becomes learner-centered has proven effective (Ackerman, 1971; Christiansen et al., 2011; Roubidoux, 2008).
Faculty serve as institutional agents of student persistence when they are consistently student-centered in their teaching methods because “students’ performance in the academic and intellectual realm is enhanced if their faculty … put a priority on students’ personal and spiritual development” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 135). Furthermore, faculty should personally encourage students to access the college’s support services or to form peer study groups that foster healthy persistence patterns (Morales, 2014). Clarifying for students their self-efficacy significance through biblical explanations feeds intrinsic motivation (2 Corinthians 9:8; Philippians 4:13). Personal, authentic revelations of the professor’s own struggles and eventual mastery can positively impact students’ self-efficacy. This philosophy of classroom teaching effectively removes artificial limits of academic accomplishments that students often place upon themselves (Dweck, 2009, 2010).

Biblical incentives motivate faculty inside and outside the classroom to impact students “beyond the books” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 75) to further persistence (1 Cor. 11:1; 2 Tim. 2:2). Higher education personnel who attend to their inner lives also bring their whole selves into the academic work and serve as role models for students who are motivated by desiring similar wholeness (Bryant & Craft, 2010). Accordingly, these individuals emphasize a “critical role played by college faculty … [as] powerful role models for students [because] the faculty’s behavior has a direct effect on students’ academic and personal development” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 133-134). Others concur that student-faculty contact in and out of classes is “the most important factor in student motivation and involvement” (Habley et al., 2012, p. 34).

**Increased connectedness to administration.** African American students respond healthily to administration members (and faculty) who go beyond professional duties to be supportive of student success (Flowers et al., 2015). Ethnically diverse administrative teams
have a direct, positive effect on retention for African American students since administration members serve as role models and even function as mentors (Fincher, Katsinas, & Bush, 2010). Administrations always desire to improve retention rates and should, therefore, endeavor to create more diversity on the administrative level. This type of commitment can advance academic success through interactions with students which actually cultivates students’ sense of self-worth, and inspire their progress through creating a sense of inherent motivation. Increased connectedness to an institution’s administration motivates students in stronger ways due to an improved self-esteem that internalizes the motivation, making it inherently stronger than the limited role of external verbal motivation.

Administration must do more to provide additional opportunities for faculty interaction by making it more systematic, as opposed to mere happenstance. Somewhere there must be a balance between assigning faculty mentors to students and hoping it will occur, but critical to African American male success is the main ingredient of establishing relationships with administrators, faculty, and peers on campus (Fries-Britt et al., 2012; Rosser-Mims et al., 2014). Support and encouragement from these connections must be intentional, guarded, and not isolated, so that students speak of these relationships in familial terms of endearment. So powerful are these connections that Harper’s (2012) research indicated all intended outcomes were exceeded when student relationships with professors and high-level administrators were cultivated. Creating an ethos to engage hearts in addition to minds is a part of that functioning village of knowing “who our students are, where they come from, and what their needs are before designing programs to help them accomplish their goals” (Habley et al., pp. 108-109).

Increased connectedness to faculty and administration needs to serve a higher purpose of creating a holistic mentoring environment. Bible colleges that consistently focus on a
collaborative approach create and sustain a mentoring environment. In such an environment faculty, staff, and administrators provide relational and participatory experiences with students. These leaders can benefit from an awareness of the difficulties and challenges, nontraditional students experience. Without this knowledge nontraditional African American students are easily marginalized, isolated, and lonely, but with this critical awareness and intentional purpose, institutional leaders demonstrate interest in students’ personal and professional development. Faith-based students indicated the holistic mentoring environment is transformational (Bolster, 2011).

**Social connectedness.** Developing and sustaining social relationships provides a healthy peer climate reinforcing students’ persistence to degree completion (Ovink & Veazey, 2011). Astin’s et al. (2011) research demonstrates “virtually every form of peer interaction positively influences satisfaction with college” (p. 132). The effectiveness is increased when social relationships cross cultural, ethnic, and gender lines, indicating the critical importance of extending the interactions (Williamson, 2010; Wood & Palmer, 2012). Bible colleges should make the most of social relationships, as they inherently sustain high levels of social interaction due to extended periods of commitments to a specific institution. Many Bible college students enroll because of long term religious affiliations and are even deepened by a family history of association with the specific institution (Burks & Barrett, 2009). This creates a larger student body with varying ethnicities, whose affinity naturally develops and sustains social relationships to positively impact persistence.
African American Male Personal Persistence Factors

Certain persistence factors are aligned specially with African Americans. The body of literature recognizes the strong connections with African American males as a context for persistence success. These factors are prescribed as strategies for this gender and ethnicity.

**Relationships with family and community.** Higher education institutions must recognize the importance of family involvement for African American undergraduates (Flowers, 2012; Mackzum, 2012; Scanduval-Lucero et al., 2014; Williamson, 2010). Persistence, especially within the African American ethnicity, is partially the product of the unique kinship network with their relational range of immediate, extended, formal and informal familial connections. Roscoe (2015) emphasized, “When a family is supportive and lets nothing interfere with the student’s success in college, family involvement is key” (p. 52). In addition, community connections outside of a blood-relative are part of the process of facilitation for external persistence factors (Simmons, 2014).

For African American males, reinforcing agents include resources outside higher education, such as positive family experiences that impact on retention and persistence (Maroney, 2010). Research has indicated compelling evidence for African American males to maintain connections with support networks outside of the university setting which contradicts Tinto’s (1993) traditional student persistent model (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Dancy & Johnson, 2012; Maroney, 2010; Palmer et al., 2011). A national study of the characteristics of 219 African American male undergraduates who earned a cumulative GPA above 3.0 indicated that 61% of them grew up with both parents in the same home (Harper, 2012; Patton, 2012). These GPA accomplishments occurred even though 50% of the fathers of the undergraduates had no college experience.
Family ties are inextricably linked to African American male college success, making it imperative that colleges be intentional to facilitate student success by triangulating services to students and their families (Dabney, 2012). Since the ties to family are typically strong for African Americans, it is recommended that academic advisors include in their strategies acceptable attempts to learn about students’ family and the role family has in their lives (Habley et al., 2012). There are few examples forthcoming from the literature of such triangulation. Since the principle has been strongly recommended, it appears higher education has been stymied by the inherent challenges of triangulating with family. However, best practices guides advisors to learn about students’ families and the role family plays in their lives (Habley et al., 2012). A step beyond this is for advisors to informally interact with students and their families at campus events, club meetings, and coffee shops (Habley et al., 2012). Furthermore, institutions encourage persistence by hosting semester events that include the family. Hosting family events reinforce the importance of family ties to the institution. Furthermore, such events provide a perspective of the rigors of the higher education setting so that families can cooperate in a more supportive way (Arbelo-Marrero, 2013).

Families play a critical role in college success through modeling the importance of an education, providing messages of encouragement, sharing knowledge about previous college experience, and helping keep a focused view on achieving a college degree (Palmer & Wood, 2012). Diverse students rely on high levels of family support so that it is imperative that these students not break away from their families’ interconnections, as persistence is enhanced by embracing this external support and their optimism is dampened without it (Barbatis, 2010; Sandoval-Lucero, 2014; Scott, 2012; Shin & Kelly, 2013).
Spirituality. Spirituality and family are major factors for African American male resilience, especially faith-based conversations and corporate prayer (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Research has indicated an aspect of seeking academic achievement success is developing spirituality which must be encouraged in order to avoid “the dehumanization of African American students” (Hackett, 2013, p. 73). Astin et al., more strongly asserts, with higher levels of spiritual well-being, students “tend to get better grades in college, report higher levels of psychological well-being, and be more satisfied with their overall college experience” (p. 53).

Bible colleges perfectly harmonize with this desire for spiritual well-being and should practice praying with and for students as needed to produce a residual retention effect (Herndon, 2002; Stewart, 2015). For religiously engaged college students, prayer and reading the Bible have the greatest effect on spirituality and improvements in GPAs (Astin et al., 2011). Faculty praying with students serves an additional purpose of leading by example, as students’ commitment regarding reading the Bible and praying can be quite low (Cooley, 2011, 2012; Rockenbach, Walker, & Luzader, 2012). Indeed, praying with African American men endears them to the educational journey, as they frequently use prayer as a coping mechanism to ease academic pressures (Riggins et al., 2008).

Intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic or internal motivation is present when students set personal goals to fulfill responsibilities that guard the priorities and dissuade interferences while matriculating through degree programs (Mackzum, 2012). A self-determined theory of motivation focuses on intrinsic aspects while acknowledging a place for extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2013). High priorities of intrinsic motivation for minority students include maintaining a personal relationship with God, spouse, family, and accompanied by a commitment to positive attitudes (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Intrinsic motivation creates learning
accomplishments for the sake of personal pleasure, enjoyment, and meeting personal goals. Nontraditional students benefit from intrinsic motivation because of the numerous external factors that are out of their control, such as supporting a family, and additional employment and ministry responsibilities (Dabney, 2012; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013; Young et al., 2011). Bible college nontraditional students often maintain high levels of intrinsic motivation, considering that their learning is placed into a checking account rather than a savings account, meaning, course content goes immediately into Sunday’s sermon, as opposed to surfacing four years later (Tripodi, 2010). Intrinsic motivation cannot be overstated and, therefore, administrations, faculty, and staff should focus on building and encouraging this purer, more powerful form of motivation in nontraditional students (Hebrews 3:13; 10:24).

**Extrinsic motivation.** Extrinsic or external motivation occurs when an individual is driven by receiving a reward(s). It is a result-oriented motivation. Resilience is something that individuals can possess as an intrinsic motivation factor. Yet, testimony of African American male students is that persistence and resilience can come from outside sources developed as a process facilitated by families, communities, and environments (Mackzum, 2012; Simmons, 2014). The prospects of pleasing and receiving approval from these primary external sources serve as persistence motivators to complete assignments on time, receive passing grades and continued matriculation. External motivation also is present when a return to college comes as the result of losing employment or a major change in employment, including a call to ministry. These types of changes and needs present alternative forms of external motivation, some of which overlaps with internal motivation. A change in vocation to ministry represents a retention factor for Bible colleges and for students because the curriculum aligns so closely with their new life goals. Bible colleges should appeal to these external factors to deepen emotional self-esteem
and self-controlled student factors. External motivation is important, but a more holistic motivation also considers spiritual and intrinsic components.

Retention Models for Nontraditional African American Men

Various retention models are presented in the literature. Some retention models are designed for applicability to higher education as a whole. Others concentrate upon certain subcultures within higher education. Though a variety is represented in this section, retention models appropriate to African American male students are herein contrasted with traditional models.

Tinto traditional student retention model. Tinto (1993) argued that students need to be socially and academically integrated into a college campus to increase retention. This point has strong support, even for nontraditional students. Tinto (1993) also elaborates on external communities which may provide either a positive or negative effect on persistence. One important external factor that may positively or negatively impact persistence for nontraditional students is family. For the Bible college student, one’s immediate family is typically in support of the enrolled student. On the other hand, when one’s extended family creates a hindrance toward academic goals, Tinto (1993) recommends that college integration would necessitate a departure from those relationships. When the extended family and community aids and supports the student, this is a protective factor at the microsystems level that supports persistence. The Tinto (1993) student retention model has application for both traditional and nontraditional students, yet because of the fragility of nontraditional Bible college minority students, care must be exercised to apply it according to that context (Mackzum, 2012; Sandoval-Lucero, 2014). Care must be exercised for any retention theory that is more applicable to the “residential college environment where social integration is of more importance to students than in a commuter
college environment where academic integration has more import with regard to retention and degree attainment” (Tripodi, 2010, p. 48).

Nontraditional students experience college differently than traditional students (Forbus et al., 2011). Nontraditional students are less involved in campus-based social activities due to a more complex lifestyle and especially if they attend a commuter institution. Nontraditional students typically work more hours in a career setting than traditional students but experience less work-related stress probably due to more disciplined time-management skills (Forbus et al., 2011). Nontraditional students work more hours, deal with more stress, yet also show higher GPA levels (Forbus et al., 2011). These multiple responsibilities afford nontraditional students little or no distancing from family for the sake of campus assimilation. For these reasons, the Tinto model has less influence for the nontraditional, commuter student.

**Nontraditional model.** Astin (1984) established a foundational criterion for retention research based on the premise that the more students are involved in the campus environment, the more likely they are to persist. Similarly, Tinto’s (1993) model of institutional departure exclusively focused on traditional students which resulted in three sources of student departures. These include academic difficulties, inability to resolve educational and occupational goals, and their failure to become or remain embedded in the academic and social life of the institution.

Retention plans were then developed around the support of academic integration both formally (academic success) and informally (relationships with faculty/staff) with a primary focus on intellectual (class room, tutors) and social integration (clubs, extra-curricular activities among subgroups). So critical is this to persistence according to this model that “the extent to which the individual shares normative attitudes and values and abides by the formal and informal structural requirements for membership in the subgroups of which the individual is a part”
(Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 52-53) determines persistence. Social integration of the formal and informal structure often comes by means of extra-curricular activities, student-led governments and other similar activities. However, in non-residency or commuter colleges, these activities are virtually nonexistent due to nontraditional students’ lack of interest in light of their age and outside responsibilities.

Because nontraditional students have no time for extra-curricular activities, these types of models fail to address the special situations of a majority of students in many higher education settings, and of most students at small-to-medium non-residency, Bible college settings. The point, however, that does apply to nontraditional students in non-residency colleges is that there still must be personal identification and integration into the college community to contribute positively to self-efficacy and to persistence.

Recognizing this bent toward traditional students, attention is given toward the nontraditional post-secondary student population as to retention strategies (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Mackzum, 2012). The focus evolved to center on evaluating background, academic variables, and environmental factors leading to recommendations for early interventions, academic advising, and recognizing factors affecting nontraditional college departure. Academic variables and environmental factors are addressed in nontraditional models where recommendations are made toward meeting and assisting the practical needs of transportation, childcare, work conflicts, family conflicts, and time management. These areas represent some of the most external threatening areas of academic persistence.

**Minority-focused model.** Other theorists have strongly urged a retention theory that refrains from breaking away from families and other natural support systems since they all serve to enhance retention for minorities (Guiffrida, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). Instead of total campus
integration, minority-focused models encourage campus connections without breaking away from families, communities, and other external support services. A lack of family support can dampen optimism and inhibit the development of traits that lead to career development while family support creates optimism (Shin & Kelly, 2013). African American students value group involvement and relatedness; thus, breaking away from family and community is tantamount to “cultural suicide” (Ovink & Veazey, 2011, p. 375). Schools should support students in their nurturing, supportive on and off campus relationships for persistence and retention gains. Students can experience assimilation and integration within a college campus, but there is no need to do this at the expense of family ties.

African American students characteristically value group involvement and relatedness which results in fulfilling their intrinsic nature of relatedness and subsequently increases persistence. Blended connectedness to home environments and college campuses must be the perspective adopted by higher education institutions to ensure persistence and college survival (Scott, 2012). Bible colleges can lead the way here with the proper biblical emphasis on family (Deuteronomy 6) so that persistence and retention are both the “characteristics of the individual student and the characteristics of the institution in combination with the interactions along the way” (Tripodi, 2010, p. 52).

**Bible Colleges**

Bible colleges historically have served a very important purpose in God’s kingdom program. Critical to this literature review is an understanding of their purpose, distinctiveness, and retention factors. The literature reveals their strengths and weaknesses for student persistence.
Historical purpose. The Bible college movement was born out of a need for training missionaries and as a way to combat higher education theological heresies (Sutherland, 2010). The purpose today focuses more on the training of Christian ministers. Bible colleges are postsecondary institutions with a focus on extensive study of the Bible as the curriculum while emphasizing personal devotion and public Christian service (Cooks, 2010; Enlow, 2015).

The Bible college movement was inspired by North America’s Third Great Awakening and became a catalyst for revival and missionary movements. The historical roots stem from Nyack Missionary Training Institute, founded by A.B. Simpson in 1882, and Moody Bible Institute which was founded by D.L. Moody in 1886 (Perez, 2010). From these early Bible institutes the Bible college movement grew and spread across the North American continent in the late 19th through early 20th centuries. Beginning with Johnson Bible College in Tennessee and Columbia Bible College in South Carolina, Bible institutes evolved into degree-granting postsecondary colleges which gained accreditation through the American Association of Bible Colleges, later becoming the Association of Biblical Higher Education (ABHE). By the 1960s, Bible colleges began to earn regional accreditation earning academic legitimacy (McKinney, 1997). The mission of Bible colleges has been stated as “equipping people (whole, spiritually mature) to carry out a process (various ministry and leadership skills, teaching the Bible) to guide the development of ministries with a purpose (spiritual/Christian formation or discipleship) with groups of people (general or specialized)” (Bussman, 2009, p. S59).

Spiritual integration. The primary characteristic of the Bible college is the Bible as the curricula. Every student majors in Bible which is the heart of distinguishing this type of Christian education and explains why students choose to attend this type of institution. Students purposely choose faith-based institutions based on the potential spiritual benefits of receiving a
Bible-centered education (Burks & Barrett, 2009; Couch, 2011). Even though the cost of these private colleges is significantly higher than public institutions, students’ perceptions indicate the spiritual benefits outweigh the cost disadvantages.

The testimonies of Bible college students express high levels of satisfaction based on the college making major contributions to spiritual growth resulting in increased levels of spirituality (Morris, Smith, & Cejda, 2003). Perhaps the simple truth expressed by those who invested seven years in researching the spiritual growth of college students says it well, considering that it is their firm belief that “spirituality is fundamental to students’ lives” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 1). The Bible establishes this very point in explaining the need to look beyond the physical and to the spiritual (Ecclesiastes 3:11; Acts 17:24-29; Romans 1:19-20; 1 Corinthians 2:12-13).

**Christian service.** A secondary but dominant characteristic of Bible colleges is practical training (Cooks, 2010; Morris et al., 2003; Sweeting, 1982). In addition to classroom Bible study, Bible colleges require students to be involved simultaneously in ministry that is designated as a Christian service (Parker & Pettegrew, 2009; Starr, 2009). Of all the variations, pastoral Christian ministry is held in high esteem since in Bible colleges, the preaching ministry holds the highest status (Bussmann, 2009). The combination of a Bible education and practical training produce a specialized life of ministry in human services for both the Church and society (Astin et al., 2011; Brandenberger & Bowman, 2013). Bible colleges support persistence in this area as the research has proven “volunteerism” (Strayhorn, 2010, p. 320) significantly benefits African American males’ spiritual growth and persistence (Gehrke, 2013; Saggio & Rendon, 2004). When Christian service is conducted among multi-ethnicities, benefits are multiplied as students reflect upon their own ethnic values and actions through learning and gaining respect for
others (Tharp, 2012). A residual benefit is a greater appreciation on campus for diversity, especially when one is exposed to others’ experiences of discrimination and inequalities.

Social interaction. The sense of community and belonging, designated as koinonia in the New Testament early Church experiences, is a strong characteristic of the Bible college student experience. In today’s practice this is known as fellowship which gives students at Bible colleges and all faith-based institutions greater levels of satisfaction and persistence (Couch, 2011). Attendance, affinity, social interaction, and harmony with the historical purpose of Bible colleges feed greater levels of student satisfaction contributing to student persistence. These factors are in keeping with all retention models (Austin, 1984; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Guiffrida, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). However, spiritual integration serves as an independent factor overshadowing all other positive persistence motivators, especially considering nontraditional students normally refrain from social immersion giving a stronger consideration to academic goals (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Morris, Beck, & Smith, 2004; Schmidt, 2015).

Ethnic-Integration. Historically, Bible colleges lay the biblical foundation for diversity, but its practice has widely varied. Some institutions include multi-ethnicity in their mission and vision statements, while others will formalize a lead staff person to help coordinate and monitor diversity progress (Perez, 2010). A multi-ethnic administration and faculty formally commits a college to diversity purposes. Diversity should also extend to the school’s trustees. Research revealed, however, faculty is the key to sustaining diversity efforts (Perez, 2010). A biblical mandate and the mission of the college direct an entire institution toward diversity. These drivers cast the vision and provide the accountability. In establishing a theology for diversity, the foundation is the Church that experienced unity even though there were multi-ethnicities (Acts
2:41-47). From the perspective of a diverse student body what is very important is a proper campus climate.

**Faculty involvement.** Human contact makes the difference (Colvin, 2013; Tuel, 2014). Adult learners are regarded as self-starters and motivated by what they need to learn. However, nontraditional adult learners need just as much support navigating the college system as traditional students. It really becomes a matter of determining the level of support. A faculty committed to providing a high level of personal support is typically strong within Bible colleges (Bowman & Small, 2013). Such faculty interaction increases the level of cognition in students and usually is an inherent trait of Bible colleges (Ewing, Foster, & Whittington, 2011; Kim & Sax, 2011; Sandoval-Lucero, 2014). This is a strong persistence trait for students of Bible colleges, as faculty and staff members maintain that highly respected clerical status. Since instructors are typically viewed in their pastoral roles, they hold the confidence of students for spiritual guidance (Saggio & Rendon, 2004). Pastoral faculty can take an active role in strengthening persistence through this type of personal interaction.

Research concluded that educators must engage in dialogue with African Americans about spirituality (Jett, 2010). Students’ peace and calmness in the midst of their complexed life settings are strengthened for persistence when “the faculty place a relatively strong emphasis on their own spirituality” (Astin et al., p. 60). It is reminiscent of Paul’s instruction directing Timothy to “pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you” (1 Timothy 4:16). This was the example of Jesus who enlisted the input and assistance of the disciples before and during the feeding of the 5,000 (Luke 9:10-17).
Faculty-student mentorship is a strong thread that collaboratively ties together the holistic Bible college visionary agenda. Mentorship can effectively increase the likelihood of fulfilling the college’s visionary agenda. Mullen’s (2012) definition of a mentor as a “readily available person to a novice or unskilled practitioner” (p. 386) is a beginning place for developing specific purposes and plans for the important persistence practice of mentorship. One vital measure to safeguard the harmonious passage of student success within the context of theological integrity is mentorship. Foundational to teaching the theological roots and interacting with students is bringing them to success by fulfilling the roles of teacher, advisor, and mentor. Inherent in fulfilling these roles is the desire for the relationship to be transformative and enduring both professionally and personally (Grauf-Grounds, Edwards, MacDonald, Quek, & Sellers, 2008). Students who identify a significant mentor while in higher education report higher ratings of career and life satisfaction and more rapid career advancement (Grauf-Grounds et al., 2008).

Within the role of mentor is the holistic view of the student in the context of his schooling, relationships, history, and life as primary. Authenticity reveals core spiritual values and the actions to maintain consistency, which ultimately will be the core mentor. Bible colleges must develop a theologically-oriented curriculum and professional development plan that integrate student-faculty mentorships as a safeguard to strengthen retention and persistence (Rine, 2014). Research has revealed the benefits of mentorships as including increased confidence and stronger organizational commitment, as well as meeting recruitment and retention goals (Mullen, 2012). It is a profound reminder that “undoubtedly the finest practice of building university community is the faculty mentoring of undergraduates and graduates. This mentoring has been, after all, the way the university was originally incepted” (Keenan, 2013, p. 178).
Finances and tuition. Finances must factor into persistence strategies as private, Bible college tuition and associated costs are significantly higher than those at a public institution. Accreditation is an important ingredient as students are then afforded access to government grants and loans, leveling the playing field somewhat. For African American students, research has indicated financial support is critical to persistence (Williamson, 2010). An inability to pay for tuition is a major cause for transfers to less expensive colleges and greatly increases the stop-out risks (Harper 2012). Harper (2012) also noted that African American men are typically underrepresented in paid student leadership roles, including resident assistant positions that come with free room and board. Bible colleges would be wise to see if this pattern is also true within their institutions. Harper and Harris (2012) have called for initiatives to permit lower-income students to attend college without the burden of working more than 20 hours per week in off-campus jobs.

Support services. Research that analyzed retention practices from the perspective of higher education faith-based institutions revealed that the most effective retention practices in their institutions are advising, learning communities, early alert intervention, academic support services, and orientation (Culver, 2012; Stewart, 2015). Recommendations from this research encourages provision be made for a written retention and college completion plan that is reviewed and updated annually. This plan should include effective retention strategies that provide an early alert indicator followed by intervention and ongoing counseling, academic advising, assessment of student needs and academic support services to meet the nontraditional needs. An additional recommendation is to establish a proactive retention committee led by a retention staff person coordinating all the efforts (Stewart, 2015).
African Americans and Spirituality

Central to African American life is spirituality. The literature indicates spirituality’s importance, considering the vital role it has in reinforcing persistence. Reviewing the subject of spirituality within an African American context adds to an understanding of what enables higher education persistence.

**Historical importance.** Spirituality is a core value of African American culture, as every aspect of African American life is influenced or shaped by spirituality and religion (Wood & Hilton, 2012). The historical importance of spirituality in the African American community has served as a personal and communal source of freedom, solace, hope, meaning, and forgiveness, particularly in relation to life’s injustices (Johnson, 1986; Watts, 1993). Spirituality is viewed as an emancipatory force for academic empowerment providing a positive correlation between spiritual beliefs, religious participation, spirituality, and student grade point averages. Spirituality also eases adjustments to college among African Americans which gives them an internal mechanism positively affecting persistence. African American students describe an ability to talk with God as instilling academic confidence. Religious, on-campus activities help with coping mechanisms (Wood & Hilton, 2012).

**Spirituality fosters persistence.** Findings from research reinforce the positive effect of spirituality on academic success (Andrade, 2008; Bush & Bush, 2013; Gehrke, 2013; Hackett, 2013; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Spirituality has been validated as an apparatus to produce positive effects on persistence for degree attainment (Jett, 2010). African Americans are directly associated with positive effects of devoutness. Gehrke (2013) described a common experience with “the role of spirituality in the lives of students of color combined with the transformative experience of college seems to be a powerful influence on spiritual development of students of
color” (p. 46). In a one-semester study, African American psychology majors who expressed higher levels of spiritual beliefs and behaviors received higher GPAs and more academic honors (Jett, 2010).

Academic success is supported by spirituality because it serves as a confidence-reinforcement, inspiring excellence in education. Spirituality provides a life purpose strengthening students’ healthy involvement in academic persistence that overcomes barriers along with an ability to avoid or reduce relational distractions not aligned with a Christian worldview (Wood & Hilton, 2012). Spirituality and strong family support are also major factors for African American male persistence (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). History is robust with African Americans’ spirituality shaping academic success.

Local church involvement. In addition to stamina gained from spirituality, minorities have indicated receiving encouragement from fellow church members. Church family can be the source of encouragement for academic persistence (Saggio & Rendon, 2004). African American men capitalize on encouraging words received from church members, taking these comments to heart with the application of educational resilience (Riggins et al., 2008). The African American Church has also historically mobilized resources with faith-based organizations to provide greater resources, expertise, and social networks for the Black student (Lowe & Shipp, 2014).

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory has direct application with the local church because it serves as a microsystem for a direct interaction with a social community. The AAMT (Bush & Bush, 2013) also connects to local church involvement because the outer microsystem includes the impact of the local church. The outer microsystem combined with the spiritual subsystem provides a strong network of persistence support (Bush & Bush, 2013).
Church attendance bolsters persistence in providing purpose, direction, and focus (Herndon, 2002).

Historically, the centrality of the African American Church to the African American community explains how strongly they have provided a venue designed to uplift the members, and especially African American men, to encourage and support their educational resilience (Wood & Hilton, 2012). Local congregations are pivotal as they allow African American students a formal venue that supports, encourages, and develops their spirituality (Herndon, 2002). Church members extend the support network, providing an extra boost of encouragement and for strengthening an internal sense of fortitude in challenging conditions. If a student has ties to a denominational church and attends that church’s denominational school, persistence is strongly reinforced (Bland, 2013).

**Intergenerationality**

Because of the prominent presence of nontraditional students in higher education, an intergenerational setting has been established. Intergenerational classrooms have a place in positively effecting persistence. Definitions, attributes, and benefits are explained in educational settings.

**Defined.** With a proliferation of nontraditional students attending higher education institutions, the current setting almost without exception contains a wide variation of ages in any given class. Teaching and learning alike can be challenging when diverse generations of students are contained within one classroom as the range can include recent high school graduates, baby boomers, retirees, and veterans. This has created an intergenerational context in which some students encounter other students the age of their parents while others encounter students the age of their children or even grandchildren (Robinson, 2012).
This setting has been sufficiently trending long enough for research to note the formality of the intergenerational subject. Intergenerational education is a “lifelong, relational, reciprocal and participatory process of learning based on communications and actions designed to address problems and challenges” (Mannion, 2012, p. 396). Intergenerational religious education is two or more different age groups of people in a religious community, learning, growing, and living in faith through common experiences, parallel learning, and interactive sharing (Allen, 2012). Rather than age segregation there is age integration engaged in mutual activities comprising a broad spectrum of spiritual experiences for the expressed purpose of the interpersonal experiences being spiritual growth and development (George, Whitehouse & Whitehouse, 2011). Interpersonal interactions across generational boundaries are encouraged in which a sense of mutuality and equality is understood between participants (Allen, 2012).

**Reciprocity in intergenerationality.** Peer-to-peer tutoring has been employed historically with positive results. Peer tutoring meta-analysis findings suggest it to be an effective intervention, regardless of age, educational level, or disabilities as individuals with various types of emotional and behavior disorders had even greater benefits (Bowman-Perrott, Davis, Vannest, & Williams, 2013). Certainly this has application for nontraditional students. Additional research has shown results of intergenerational studies to benefit both the tutors and tutees in a variety of settings. Research was conducted in which undergraduate students mentored senior citizens on basic Internet skills for eight weeks for two hours each (Shedletsky, 2012). Results indicated reduction in computer anxiety and increased computer efficacy. Another prominent theme to emerge was the joy the mentors experienced when the mentored expressed satisfaction in using newly learned computer skills, giving an insightful view of the
value of providing an education to others. Attitudes and relationships positively resulted from
the experience.

Robinson (2012) conducted a mixed methods study to examine perceptions of faculty and
intergenerational students toward teaching and learning. The specific focus was on reentry and
traditional students describing their interactions with each other in an intergenerational
classroom. Results revealed faculty, traditional, and nontraditional students all indicated
preference for learning in a mixed-age classroom. One reason for this included the motivation
reentry students provided for traditional students because the study revealed reentry students
were more strongly motivated than traditional students. Another result indicated reentry
students, who are characteristically lacking in computer use, learned technological skills from the
younger students. Reentry students shared their experiences and traditional students shared
computer skills. Bourland (2009) indicated similar results concerning faculty perceptions that
nontraditional students improved the intellectual environment and provided more mature
discussions. The presence, perspectives, and experiences of the intergenerational combination
improved the learning environment (Habley et al., 2012; Vermiller, 2014).

**Intergenerationality and the digital divide.** Intergenerationality addresses the digital
divide between traditional and nontraditional students. Research found older participants
displayed more caution, actively choosing to perform more slowly and preferring to take longer
for the expressed purpose to ensure fewer mistakes in completing computer tasks (Broady et al.,
2010). Older students are willing to be more involved with technology, provided they are made
aware of the benefits such technology would offer them. This informs the intergenerational
college because “with proper encouragement, clear explanations of the personal benefits, and an
appropriate time schedule, older people certainly have the potential to become equally effective in using technology” (Broady et al., 2010, p. 483).

Nyoni & Mafeny’s research (2010) revealed that adult students experience frustration in adapting to new technology, particularly if it has nothing to do with what they want to learn. Additionally, it has been shown that a mentoring program alleviates some of the anxieties (Shedletsky, 2012). Even education itself comes to be viewed as meaningful and enjoyable when the younger mentor the older. The digital divide is overcome not just by accessing computers but by building relationships between generations (Nycyk & Redsell, 2011). Both tutors and tutees are unified in an engagement of a positive activity, usually with immediate and gratifying results. Such advantages should not be underestimated, as these can motivate teachers to focus on content delivery, knowing students have the secondary support system of peer-to-peer reverse tutoring.

**Biblical foundations.** The generations are to see themselves, not as separate teams but as players on a single team which applies not only to mixed-ages but also ethnicities (Harkness, 2012). The Church, Bible colleges, and all believers should model this with a subsequent benefit for all degree-seeking individuals. The differences between generational students can be utilized in positive ways. Opposites can balance and complement each other. Members of various generations can cooperate and matriculate harmoniously. Intergenerationality extends the potential to impact institutions, instructors, and individual students.

**Intergenerationality is an expression of God’s personhood.** God directs each generation to declare His works to another (Psalm 145:4). God’s relational personhood requires the valuing of all the diversity of humanity, including differences of digital immigrants and
Intergenerationality is the essence of the Church. Biblical themes indicate believers are more alike than they are different (Romans 8:14-17; 12:4-6). Even with the differences between generations, the similarities still exist concerning strengths, weaknesses, goals, and ambitions. This base of unity allows for common concerns to be identified and expressed, which people in all generational groups resolve together (Harkness, 2012). This is the healthy function of the body of Christ, including Bible colleges.

Intergenerationality processes are integral to Christian formation. Jesus ministered to children (Matthew 18:1-6). Paul shared his concern for all generations. He instructed Timothy to care for both older and younger men and women (1 Timothy 5:1-3), taught children and/or grandchildren of widows to care for their parents and grandparents (1 Timothy 5:4), and explained the role of older women in the training of younger (Titus 2:3-5). Examples of intergenerational mentoring include Moses and Joshua, Samuel and Eli, Elijah and Elisha, Naomi and Ruth, and Paul and Timothy. Integrating the generations is well within the realm of Scriptural practice.

Intergenerationality is opportunity to glorify God. Intergenerationality provides a unique opportunity to glorify God. Individuals from different generations and ethnicities are often able to acutely see points of inconsistencies more discerningly than those within the same group in order to achieve overall improvement in learning strategies. Christ-like humility guarantees that the weaknesses are addressed and not ignored. Intergenerationality affirms each person’s value in total community, regardless of abilities or inabilities. Promoting respect for individuals in all stages and ages of life is a reflection of God’s image in all humans (Roberto,
2012). As Christians strive to work together in the classroom, diversity of abilities and healthy attitudes toward improvements essentially glorify God and serve as an example to the world. The Bible commends the strengthening of learning environments for all ages and ethnicities, as cultural competence complements the generations (Deuteronomy 6:1-25; Nehemiah 8:1-18; Psalm 78).

Many positive advantages have been noted by intergenerational strategies. When intergenerational strategies are dutifully employed, students are typically intrinsically motivated from an andragogical perspective. All generations are unified in an engagement of a positive activity, usually with immediate and gratifying results. Such advantages should not be underestimated, as these can motivate instructors to focus on the opportunities God has created by bringing the generations together for such a time as this. It gives opportunities to address issues of diversity, examine discrimination and prejudice, alongside skill development for conflict resolution. Racial relations are improved intergenerationally because “social contact with people who are different from oneself can often help to forge new friendships and enhance one’s understanding of social justice issues” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 133). Wise is the institution, instructor, and all individual students who welcome intergenerativity and invest in its success.

Summary

Chapter Two provides a synthesis of the literature pertaining to the subject of undergraduate nontraditional African American male graduates. Historically, retention strategies offered by colleges have fallen short for African American students. This is critical because most private, faith-based institutions lack retention programs and initiatives and do not target nontraditional students for retention purposes. With the lack of support services and ambiguities concerning how to meet the holistic needs of undergraduate nontraditional African American
male graduates, it is imperative to explore successful persistence practices to meet this need. With multiple headings from the literature review, it must be emphasized that the combination of persistence and retention is a “shared community-building cause that allows everyone on campus to celebrate its strengths and successes in enhancing student success” (Habley et al., 2012, p. 366). Within a shared community-building environment, students who persist move “forward without quitting in the face of defeat and despite poor odds for success” (Habley et al., 2012, p. 396).
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of Chapter Three is to present the procedures, research design, and data collection and analysis strategies for the research study. This study focused on understanding the persistence factors associated with nontraditional undergraduate African American male students within selected Bible colleges designated as minority-serving institutions enrolling predominantly African American students. The design of this study is a hermeneutic phenomenological approach for understanding factors that contribute to persistence for undergraduate nontraditional African American male students who successfully graduated from an undergraduate four-year degree program at one of two predominantly African American-serving Bible colleges in the southeastern United States. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory supported by The Adult Resiliency Theory served as the theoretical framework for guiding the research which focused on understanding and capturing the essence of shared persistence experiences within the context of two faith-based institutions serving African American students. Three research questions were used in this study to assist in gaining an understanding of persistence factors. Explanations for recruiting participants from the appropriate Bible college settings, followed by procedures and the researcher’s role are explained. Data collection was through the avenues of a demographic survey, individual and focus group interviews, and journaling. Data analysis is reviewed in this chapter as well as matters of trustworthiness and credibility.

Design

Given that the purpose of this study was to explore and understand how the lived experiences of the participants influenced their persistence, a qualitative hermeneutic
phenomenological approach was determined as the best method to conduct this research (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology is the science of exploring a specific phenomenon, whereas the hermeneutical theory is the interpretation of the description of the lived experiences (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2015; Dabney, 2013; van Manen, 1990). This type of research uses descriptions of experiences to uncover meaning about the phenomenon being examined by focusing on the perceptions of individuals and their lived experiences, which take place in their natural setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The hermeneutic approach is applicable to this study because the researcher is able to welcome his own “assumptions, beliefs, and presuppositions as an integral part of the phenomenological interpretive process” (Milacci, 2003, p. 53). Because the goal of this study was to explore and understand how the lived experiences of the participants have influenced their persistence and to comprehend the underlying meaning of those experiences, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was concluded as the most appropriate method to conduct this research.

A phenomenon is the central concept experienced by all participants in the study and which is examined by the phenomenologist (Creswell, 2013). A phenomenological study is designed to describe the common lived experiences of the central phenomenon for the participants, which the researcher subsequently reduces to the central essence (meaning) of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The heart of the research was to uncover the lived experiences in order to emphasize the personal perspectives of the individual experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013). In addition, this perspective is needed to the degree of “understanding an author better than the author understands his or her own experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 8) so that the phenomenon is “perceived freshly, as for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34).

This hermeneutic phenomenological approach describes the lived experiences as well as
exercises interpretation of those lived experiences so that the “intention and meaning behind those experiences are fully understood” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 9) giving the ability to avoid misunderstanding. The main emphasis in hermeneutics is to “focus on consciousness and experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 8) to provide insight concerning the phenomenological concepts that inductively emerge from the lived experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenology is attentive to a descriptive methodology giving emphasis to how things appear allowing them to speak for themselves. But, in addition to being descriptive, it is also interpretive, as it is captured in language and reveals the meaning of the lived experiences. A goal of this research was to explore reflectively what constitutes the nature of the lived experience. To fulfill this critical goal is to bring reflectively “into nearness that which tends to be obscure, that which tends to evade the intelligibility of our natural attitude of everyday life” (van Manen, 1990, p. 32).

This research identified factors linked to successful academic persistence culminating in graduation for 10 nontraditional undergraduate African American degree completers within the context of selected Bible colleges which are predominantly Black institutions. The collected data was interpreted within the hermeneutical research process focusing on the centralized meaning the participants ascribed to their persistence experiences. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach was the logical choice for thematically analyzing experiences into collective themes of persistence in a dynamic, ongoing, and reflective exploration of the phenomenon in order to provide a rich, thick description. Therefore, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was the most compelling choice. This was extraordinarily demanding and required strong adherence to the specific phenomenon because there were many opportunities to “settle for preconceived opinions and conceptions … superficialities and falsities” (van Manen, 1990, p. 33). The research was guided by specific, purposeful research
questions.

Research Questions

Given that the purpose of this study was to explore experiences related to academic persistence, the following questions guided this study:

1. How do nontraditional undergraduate African American male four-year degree completers from select evangelical Bible colleges describe persistence?
2. What type of experiences do participants understand as having contributed to their persistence at Bible College?
3. What specific factors do participants identify as having contributed to their persistence at Bible College?

Setting

It has been recommended that future resilience research for African American males be conducted in varying institutions of both secular and religious, and non-profit and for profit settings (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). The importance of spirituality has also been determined for African American male resilience (Riggins et al., 2008). Therefore, the sites for this study were two Bible college/higher education institutions in the southeastern United States from which participants were recruited. The rationale for the setting is that both institutions are private, nonprofit Bible colleges with an established, public focus on African American students as conveyed in their official purpose statement(s) and therefore have a majority of African American students enrolled both currently and historically. Both colleges meet the criteria of having been accredited by an organization aligned with faith-based institutions (e.g., Association of Biblical Higher Education) but also recognized by the U.S. Department of Education (US Department of Education, 2014a).
One college from which participants were sought for this research is Cumberland College of Biblical Studies (pseudonym) located in North Carolina. This institution, located in the southeastern United States, has been in existence over 40 years and is a private, nonprofit Bible college whose ethnicity enrollment consists of 60% African American, 30% Caucasian, and 10% Hispanic/Asian. The gender ratio is approximately 53% male and 47% female. Nearly 95% of the student body are over the age of 25. Those who are age 45 and older represent 60% of the student enrollment. Cumberland College of Biblical Studies (CCBS) states as a part of their core values a committed focus on serving a multi-ethnic community (internal documents). Faculty, administration, and curriculum reflect a mutual commitment to Biblical integration and to multi-ethnicity. This college has a Carnegie Classification (2010) as private, not-for-profit, very small four-year, primarily nonresidential, specialized faith institution and is accredited by the Association of Biblical Higher Education. Enrollment in the fall of 2015 was 160 with 12 graduates that same year (school documents). Bachelor of Arts graduates complete 108 of 190 quarter hours in Bible, theology, and ministry-related professional studies. Each student is required to earn credits in Christian service.

Another college from which participants were recruited is Fulton Bible College (pseudonym), located in Georgia. Fulton Bible College (FBC) has been in existence for over 70 years with a consistent focus on educating African Americans with Bible education and training and meets the definition of a HBCU. This college has a Carnegie Classification (2010) as private, not-for-profit, very small four-year, primarily nonresidential, specialized faith institution and is accredited by the Association of Biblical Higher Education. The lengthy existence of FBC with a consistent focus on educating African American men proved itself as a prime Bible college from which to recruit participants. It is a college with a consistent track record of
extensive efforts in assisting African American student persistence, demonstrating a strong interest in retention studies.

Fulton Bible College has institutional goals in harmony with Bible colleges. The Christian Responsibility goal inspires students to understand that every Christian has the responsibility to participate in reaching the world for Christ. A Christian Education goal educates students in a broad and in-depth knowledge of the Bible and Theology. Christian Service equips students with professional skills for serving the church, the community and other related fields. Christian Perspective exposes students in general subject areas from a biblical perspective. Christian Character encourages the development and lifestyle of mature Christian character. Total enrollment in the 2013-2014 academic year was 171 with 27 graduates. Graduates are awarded Bachelor of Arts degrees in Biblical Studies having completed 69 of 120 semester hours in Bible, theology, and ministry-related professional studies. At Fulton Bible College, each student is also required to earn credits in Christian service.

School data from the US Dept. of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is quite limited concerning both CBC and FBC. Based on the available data, the ministry of these two Bible colleges is not exempt from the challenges of enrollment, retention, and completions. Nontraditional African American men enrolled remains consistent within both colleges. Though enrollment numbers remain healthy for African American males, four-year completers remain nominal. For example, FBC fall African American male enrollment in 2012 was 116 and in 2013 was 67, yet for the same two years only seven and six graduated respectively. Similarly, CCBS fall African American male enrollment in 2012 was 30 and in 2013 was 24, yet for the same two years the number of completers was one and zero, respectively. African American male four-year degree completers are nominal even though
enrollment remains consistent. The contrast between African American male graduates and all graduates at CBS and FBC makes the reality even more startling. Unfortunately, this is the setting for CCBS and FBC.

Participants

Important factors for participant selection were ethnicity, gender, age, being a graduate of the selected Bible colleges, and a willingness to participate. The participants were 10 nontraditional undergraduate African American male Bible college four-year degree completers who had moderate to high nontraditional characteristics while matriculating through their higher education programs of study. Nontraditional moderate to high characteristics of participants included being older than age 25 (indicating delayed entry), financially independent (unlike most traditional students who are still dependents of parents), married with dependent children, and who had at least part time employment. Having received their undergraduate degrees since 2010, participants are graduates from one of two Bible colleges that qualify as predominantly Black institutions located in the southeastern United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2012b). Creswell (2013) recommends three to ten people, with the number determined by reaching saturation concerning the specific phenomenon. Purposeful sampling techniques were used to secure participants who fit a predetermined set of criteria which categorized them as nontraditional degree completers of a Bible college (Patton, 2002). Snowball sampling was also used for “locating information-rich key informants or critical cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 237). The goal was to attain maximum variation sampling to “get variation on the concepts of interest” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 271). Once data saturation was achieved, recruiting participants ceased.

Measures were taken to secure maximum variation. By means of a demographic survey, it was ascertained that all participants met the definition of nontraditional African American
male degree completers from one of two selected Bible colleges. Within this classification, the demographic survey revealed participants from an age range of between mid-twenties to mid-fifties who graduated since 2010.

To proactively engage prospective participants, formal action was required. Thus, a gatekeeper was secured from each selected Bible College so that information concerning an opportunity to participate in this research was made known. Personal recommendations from the gatekeepers for potential participants were offered and contact was made by means of emails, text messages, and phone calls. Snowball sampling techniques was used by asking participants to recommend peers who fit the criteria for the study which provided opportunity to access additional graduates.

**Procedures**

In the section that follows, the steps necessary to conduct the study are outlined. Procedures began with finalizing the research plan and securing Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. With IRB approval (See Appendices A & B), securing a pool of graduates began by contacting a gatekeeper of each institution. With written approval, personal recommendations from the gatekeepers for potential participants were received. Personal contacts were made with prospective participants via emails, text messages, and phone calls to present an invitation to participate (See Appendix C).

Prospective participants were asked to complete a demographic survey to confirm the stipulations of undergraduate nontraditional African American male graduates, with nontraditional characteristics. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and withdrawal at any time was permitted with no negative consequences. Interested participants were instructed to complete and return the Informed Consent Form (See Appendix
D) and the Demographic Survey (See Appendix E).

Maximum variation and criterion sampling was conducted based upon the Demographic Survey. The Demographic Survey ascertained the nontraditional characteristics as noted above. Once final participants were selected, the researcher scheduled in-depth, individual interviews, followed by some continued interaction for clarifications via emails, text messages, and phone calls. Prior to the interviews, the interview questions were piloted with a representative sample population at a predominantly Black higher education institution and proved quite successful. When the interviews with the participants occurred, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed within 48 hours for accuracy. Each participant was asked to complete e-journaling exercises as follow-up to personal interviews. Once this data was collected, transcribed and reviewed, two focus groups from each represented institution provided member checking with a review of main themes. All data was locked in an office and/or in password-protected computer files.

**The Researcher's Role**

The development of this research plan was “driven by a commitment of turning to an abiding concern… to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence” (van Manen, 1990, p. 31). There is a passionate motivation to describe the phenomenon of nontraditional undergraduate African American male persistence who exercised adult resiliency to degree completion. As a researcher my intent was to study this phenomenon and to provide a sense of understanding that will support students, educators, Bible colleges, and higher education institutions in general.

In qualitative inquiry, the role of the researcher is the instrument, adding credibility with skillful rigor of personally conducting fieldwork in systematically collecting multiple forms of
data, allowing themes to emerge inductively, while striving for trustworthiness and authenticity. This required bracketing, memoing, journaling, and reflexivity in an attempt to reduce bias and error from influencing data analysis due to positive experiences of Christian higher education institutions for my entire adult life, both as a student and as a professor. Participants were graduates of the respective Bible colleges so that no ongoing relationship of authority influenced data collection. Because I have been employed by one of the Bible colleges from which participants were solicited, and because they graduated recently, I have a previous relationship with them as an instructor and mentor. Though no current relationship of authority exists, I do continue in an informal relationship of mentor-mentee with respect continuing to be granted by the former students. In the role of researcher, I encouraged complete objectivity by extoling their accomplishments and its source(s). My personal memory of these graduates, whether positive or negative, was bracketed so that the focus was rightly placed on hearing their voices concerning academic persistence in Bible College.

My experiences in education, as both a student and instructor, have demonstrated the need for proven persistence strategies. I turned 18 the day I arrived for Bible college, having just spent 12 years as an extremely poor student, but within four years I graduated with an A average. During that time, I experienced factors supporting persistence, such as remedial courses, peer tutoring, formal tutoring, informal community groups, and teachers who proactively sought intervention in my life for ongoing matriculation. Some of these relationships continue to this day. After Bible college and marriage, I entered seminary a year later. I graduated from seminary with a Masters of Theology degree four years later, a time span rather rare even for those days. Within that torrid pace, my wife birthed two children, and I worked two to four jobs continually, as well as ongoing ministry participation. Persistence was my experience through
the same repeated patterns as experienced in Bible college. However, are these effective persistence factors today? My assumption was that they are effective today and are even more critically needed, as was confirmed in this research.

After graduating from seminary, we experienced over 25 years of pastoral ministry until the Lord opened a door for me to teach in a Bible college. This precipitated a need for a terminal degree to potentially assume an administrative position within this Bible college. Therefore, at age 52, I began a Doctor of Education program and have experienced high grades in all classes for the course work. This is all the more amazing since this blended program is very rigorous, and my undergraduate work was not in the field of education. The obstacles have been addressed by a proactive participation in the writing center and what has been called reverse tutoring where members of younger generations offer significant computer and electronic teaching in an intergenerational context (Harkness, 2012; Murphy, 2012). Ultimately, my continued matriculation is a tribute to the instructors and the university support staff. These persistence factors are consistently effective for African American male higher education students of today, and serve as best practices. Many, though, are hesitant to ask for help and those who do succeed are hesitant to tell their story for fear of negative peer reprisals. My conviction is that those African American male graduates from Bible colleges must be compelled to tell their unique stories to pave the road to graduation success and to make it more passable for others.

It may be questioned why I, as a Caucasian, conducted such a study focused on African Americans. One main reason is that I teach in a Bible college which targets multi-ethnicities. Historically, my college enrolls a majority percentage of African American students which currently and consistently reaches 60%. Perhaps my love for these choice servants of Christ is
best explained by the perspective of the Master Teacher. Jesus had absolutely no forms of prejudices and invested in assisting multiple ethnicities. Jesus ignored the ethnic tensions between Jews and Samaritans and others who were culturally considered outcasts (Matthew 9:10; Luke 7:36-37, 19:7; John 4:9). In addition to talking extensively with the Samaritan woman, Jesus made a Samaritan the model citizen in one of His stories (Luke 10:30-37). He healed the daughter of a Syrophoenician woman and the servant of a Roman centurion (Mark 7:24-30; Luke 7:1-10). He received Greeks and spoke to them of eternal life (John 12:20-28). Investments in muti-ethnicities is Christlike, and Christ is the pattern I am ultimately followed in pursuing this research.

Upon this rationale, I adopted an asset perspective. African American males are desperately needed in the Lord’s work today and that typically requires proper Bible training through a degree-completion process. Yet only 13% of African American males will enroll in private nonprofit higher education institutions. Of those 13%, only 25% will graduate in four years, 35% in five years, and only 39% complete a bachelor’s degree in six years. Of the IPEDs available data, either college in this study only rarely reaches that level (See Tables 1 & 2). In light of the nominal completion rates for African American brethren, Bible college ministries have much to gain from providing the proper support strategies. An asset perspective drove this study in search of solutions from those closest to the experiences of those who continue to struggle, but also to receive input from those who did beat the odds and who exceeded expectations by graduating. However, the recurring theme of minimal graduates and extremely low graduation rates, demanded a careful examination of a holistic asset perspective.
Table 1

_Fulton Bible College African American Male Enrollment & Graduation Figures_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>ENROLLMENT</th>
<th>BACHELOR’S DEGREES</th>
<th>SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School data obtained from the US Dept. of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

Table 2

_Cumberland College of Biblical Studies African American Male Enrollment & Graduation Figures_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>ENROLLMENT</th>
<th>BACHELOR’S DEGREES</th>
<th>SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School data obtained from the US Dept. of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

**Data Collection**

As mentioned above, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was secured from Liberty University in order to proceed with the recruitment of participants and the data collection process. Participants were four-year degree completers of selected Bible colleges secured by contacting a gatekeeper of each institution. Data collection was conducted by means of a demographic survey, in-depth interview, journaling, and focus groups. Qualitative data collection comes by multiple forms or “triangulation of sources” (Patton, 2002, p. 556) in order to secure a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The
steps for data collection included a demographic survey, individual and focus group interviews, and e-journaling.

**Demographic Survey**

Data collection included a demographic survey designed to ensure participants met the study’s criteria and qualified to complete the study (see Appendix E). All prospective participants completed this survey to confirm the nontraditional undergraduate African American male degree-completer criteria, which was followed by the one-on-one in-depth interviews. A demographic survey was developed from the literature and modified according to the required standards for determining maximum variation (Arbelo-Marrero, 2013). This demographic survey established participant ethnicity and background information, qualified nontraditional status, and confirmed that the participant did graduate from one of two selected Bible colleges. The survey provided guidance toward the intended criteria of nontraditional undergraduate African American degree completers from a Bible college providing for a range of ages (Creswell, 2013).

**Interviews**

“Typically in the phenomenological investigation the long interview is the method through which data collected on the topic and question” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). The phenomenological interviews were guided by the research questions and are the most important aspect of research for lived experiences. An appointment for an in-depth interview was designated, audio recorded and professionally transcribed with 48 hours. In keeping with qualitative research, pseudonyms were used for all participants and institutions to honor confidentiality. A contact summary sheet for each participant was created to track interactions and submissions of items and to note any issues for follow-up and clarification.
Guided by the central phenomenon of academic persistence and exploratory research questions, the interview was constructed around questions in order to elicit the personal perspectives of the lived experiences of undergraduate nontraditional African American male four-year degree completers. The purpose of the interviews was to gather and explore “narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding” (van Manen, 1990, p. 68) of the phenomenon. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the interview serves the very specific purpose of a means for “developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon” (van Manen, 1990, p. 66). The interview questions were designed to pinpoint areas with regard to participant experience with academic persistence. These guided questions (See Appendix F) were open-ended to encourage open and free expression of the phenomenon.

The questions are as follows:

1. Tell me about yourself and your job/work.
2. Tell me about your typical day outside of work, such as spouse/family and ministry.
3. How would you describe your experiences as a college student?
4. Describe your experiences related to your continuing in college.
5. How have your experiences helped you to continue in/complete your undergraduate studies?
6. How do you believe these experiences have affected your ability to continue on your educational journey?
7. What specific factors do you believe have contributed to your motivation to persist?
8. Are there aspects of being a nontraditional student that present barriers in your efforts to persist?
9. What are some of the issues you face in managing your multiple roles as a nontradiotional student?

10. What are specific things that a college could do to improve the nontraditional student educational experience?

11. How would you describe your academic experiences as related to studying within an African American, faith-based institution?

12. Can you provide a specific example of how your experiences studying at an African American, faith-based institution has influenced your persistence?

13. In what manner has the experience of studying at an African American, faith-based institution helped or hindered your persistence?

14. Do you have any mentoring relationships with faculty or staff members at the faith-based institution which have influenced your persistence? If so, can you provide some examples?

15. How did your culture and life off campus influence your ability to persist, if these had any influence at all on your persistence?

16. What, if anything, would you add to the subject?

17. Should I have other questions, may I contact you again?

These questions were designed to gain the perspectives of the participants concerning their persistence beliefs and activities so that the phenomenon may be reduced to core convictions. Questions one and two were designed to provide a relaxed setting for the interview. Questions three and four were designed to formulate a precise definition of persistence. Questions five through seven were exploratory and reflective to establish certain persistent principles. Questions eight through 10 focused on the nontraditional aspects. Questions 11 to 15
were designed to prompt participants to describe their experience within an African American serving institution including pertinent relationships. The last two questions encouraged a complete interview process having come full circle.

The interview questions were piloted with individual interviews demonstrating these questions were efficient to hear the voices of the actual participants. Once the actual research was conducted with the official participants, prior to the interview I established rapport, or caught up on past information (Creswell, 2013). Each participant signed a consent form and was assured that all of the information they provided would be treated in a confidential manner. Overall, the interviews lasted from 55 to 75 minutes and were all conducted at both Bible colleges respectively and proved to be non-threatening, comfortable environments (van Manen, 2014). Once the individual interviews were complete, the transcripts were professionally transcribed within 48 hours. The transcriptions were submitted individually to each participant to provide an opportunity to verify and ensure the accuracy of the transcription and data.

Electronic Journaling

Triangulation measures included the participation of journaling. Using diverse sources and collecting field text and experiences is important and includes the use of journals, letters, and stories (Hayman, Jackson, & Wikes, 2012). The purpose of a journal is to provide “reflective accounts of human experiences that are of phenomenological value” (van Manen, 1990, p. 73). Reflection prompted memories to be more accurate and to recall experiences otherwise long forgotten. Conducting this journaling exercise helped participants reflect on significant aspects of the academic past. As they continued reflecting on their learning experiences post-interviews, they discovered aspects of academic attainment not previously observed.
The main purpose of journaling is to document and reflect on experiences. Since it has the capacity to provide detailed information, journaling is a recommended means of data collection (Hayman et al., 2012). Regular emails provided clear instructions and guidance to encourage participation and in order to prompt their reflective abilities. Because it is important to coach participants, guided questions encouraged reflective comments and included the following (Hayman et al., 2012; Kennison, 2012; Lepianka, 2014): (a) Who and/or what was the most important factor encouraging persistence? (b) Describe a situation that illustrates an important juncture in your persistence; (c) What would you do differently to encourage persistence? (d) Add anything that defines you as a persistent student (e.g. art, pictures, music, poems).

It is important to provide a limit for the journaling period to promote participation (Hayman et al., 2012). Instructions made it clear that participants were encouraged to engage in journaling for a two-month period. Journaling instructions were given at the individual interviews so that they continued through the focus group interviews. Journaling tends to be inconsistent, so regular follow-up emails prompted participation, enhanced motivation, and helped trigger comments to keep the content on track (Hayman et al., 2012).

Participants were assured confidentiality was to be maintained. When the interview questions were piloted and e-journaling encouraged, it became readily apparent that these nontraditional students did not appreciate the levels of navigation required for the use of an online e-journal service. Instead, the participants recommended the use of simple emails. Based on the recommendation of the pilot group, this practice was followed with the participants and the response was very positive. For each email e-journal received, I saved to a password protected file and then printed, deleted the email, and paper copies were kept in a locked file.
The emailed journal entries were read through repeatedly, and submitted to member checks for thematic groupings that emerged from these textural resources.

**Focus Groups**

All participants were invited to attend structured focus group meetings that were held at each of the two Bible colleges. Focus group interviews were comprised of homogeneous group members, which, in this case, were African American male Bible college degree-completers who participated in the individual interviews (Patton, 2002). The focus groups used a moderator approach to exchange perspectives, experiences, or opinions, on the particular topic, which, in this case, was academic persistence (Patton, 2002). The focus groups’ design was to enhance data quality as participants provide clarification and confirmation on the points that merged from the individual interviews (Patton, 2002).

The focus group meeting was comprised of approximately one hour each for a total of two (one focus group meeting per Bible college affiliation for a total of two meetings), and were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed within 48 hours. Unlike the individual interviews, “focus group participants get to hear each other’s responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say” (Patton, 2002, p. 368). Through group discussions, additional insights previously ignored or overlooked in the interviews, surfaced as well as the stated themes being clarified and confirmed. To ensure the desired outcomes, focus groups were provided a list of emerging themes gained from data analysis of the interviews. The focus group meetings were guided by related questions to guard against off-subject discussions. The focus groups provided opportunity to interact with multiple participants at the same time for exploring complex, multi-layered concepts from the perspectives of the participants. Five participants attended the Fulton Bible College focus group...
and six attended the Cumberland College of Biblical Studies focus group session. Each focus group proved to be a very joyous occasion, as the participants reflected upon past experiences, both positive and challenging.

The focus group questions (See Appendix G) were as follows (Arbelo-Marrero, 2013):

1. Are these categories and themes representative of your persistence experiences?
2. How do these categories come together to explain your persistence?
3. In what ways, if any, do these categories influence each other?
4. Do some categories come before others (are they hierarchical) or are they equal?
5. Are some categories more important than others?
6. Is anything missing?

The questions served to add to the trustworthiness of the data collected, further investigated experiences shared, and determined how the experiences potentially influenced and overlapped, and provided clarification.

**Data Analysis**

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the overall purpose of data analysis is to discover key information that will reveal the essence of the lived experiences of the participants (Patton, 2002; van Manen, 2014). Phenomenological data analysis involves the researcher bringing participant experiences into the study, followed by the recording of significant statements and meaning units, and finally, the developing of descriptions to arrive at the essence of experiences (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In this analysis, I sought to totally immerse myself into the data details by repeated readings of the entire descriptions in order to list statements relevant to the topic (Moustakas, 1994). Once the whole description was completed, clusters of meaning move themes into meaning units, combining all overlapping and repetitive statements (Creswell,
The analysis took place throughout the data collection process as a natural and interactive process in order to understand the content as well as to contemplate the ideas, words, and imagery, reflecting upon the meanings behind them (van Manen, 1997). When this was complete, I coded the transcriptions and documents in order to begin identifying topical categories while continuing to reflect upon the ever-developing themes.

Gaining understanding of African American male persistence in Bible colleges was accompanied by a hermeneutical interpretation of their lived experiences. Hermeneutic data analysis involves the combination of three approaches. A “wholistic [sic] approach” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93) sought to capture the main significance of persistence. The “selective or highlighting approach” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93) attempted to highlight statements or phrases that seem particularly essential to the persistence phenomenon. A “detailed or line-by-line approach” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93) sought to know what a sentence or sentence cluster reveals about the persistence experience. In this data analysis, I sought to discover the hidden dynamics of the interrelationships resulting in principal meanings of the essence of academic persistence for nontraditional undergraduate African American male degree-completers from Bible colleges.

Theme analysis through repetition of the above three data analysis approaches helped to recover frequently mentioned elements of persistence (van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology “describes how one interprets the ‘texts’ of life” (van Manen, 1990, p. 4). The emerging text-themes, or “experiential structures” (van Manen, 1990, p. 79), were then used to hermeneutically interpret those persistence themes. Thus, data analysis involved various levels of coding, comparison analysis, repeated readings, and continual reflections, in seeking to understand emerging themes. Moustakas (1994) described this as “the art of reading a text so that the intention and meaning behind appearances are fully understood” (p. 9). This led to data
synthesis of the “structure of meaning” (van Manen, 1990, p. 78) organized into themes to closely replicate participant experiences and descriptions of persistence.

**Initial and Descriptive Coding**

Initial coding began the coding process accompanied by thorough reviews. Raw data was repeatedly reviewed through initial coding by means of a line-by-line approach. Phrases such as “growing spiritually,” “caring Bible college context,” “course material fed student ministries,” “strong family support,” and “mentor follow-up” are examples of the initial codes that were identified and written out on the margin of the page. Additional coding from repeated reviews enabled cluster themes to emerge inductively. This important process enabled a thorough search for documenting codes and noting their frequency. Inductive analysis sought for “immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships begins by exploring, then confirming; guided by analytical principles rather than rules; [and] ends with creative synthesis” (Patton, 2002, p. 41).

**Pattern Coding**

A second cycle of coding reviewed the narratives and transcriptions for patterns and themes. The first level of coding was comprised of “naïve descriptions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13) and a second cycle enabled descriptions of the “structures of the experience based on reflective analysis and interpretation of the research participant’s account or story” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13) to formalize. This enabled an interpretation of themes by which conclusions were drawn for persistence practices. This required all participants’ answers to be categorized according to the corresponding questions to look at all answers within the same question. These were labeled and reviewed for accuracy with repeated reviews. The clusters of themes formulated the codes for an ongoing data-reduction process, so the essence of the phenomenon
sought to be accurately uncovered and depicted (Creswell, 2013). An inductive approach proved critical to credible qualitative research so that descriptions of experience are depicted “in the context of a particular situation” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 14) or “in situ, that is, within the context” (Creswell, 2013, p. 184).

**Constant Comparative Analysis**

Constant comparative analysis is conducted to categorize and code experiences to gain a composite description serving as a basis for completing the formalization of themes and their interpretation. Constant comparative analysis was conducted by all participant answers categorized according to the corresponding questions to look at all answers within the same question. Though making a point concerning a grounded theory approach, Patton’s (2002) guidance is appropriate for the phenomenological process of constant comparative analysis so that “one moves from lower-level concepts to higher-level theorizing” (Patton, 2002, p. 491).

Thus, the data was grouped by tentative emerging themes and re-examined so that they were transferred to a separate file for thematic formalization of the themes. An example of clustering a pattern in the data looked like this: “faculty involvement,” “access to administration,” “family togetherness,” and “nontraditional affinity.” This cluster could formulate a code such as “Bible college experience,” and then could be reviewed again for further development. This analytic and organizational process assisted in the ongoing data-reduction process, which developed a space for the phenomenon to be accurately uncovered and depicted (van Manen, 1997).

**Focus Groups**

Two focus groups were held at the respective Bible colleges. Participants negotiated the themes presented to them in advance so they could prepare for the meeting. Through their discussion, clarification was gained concerning how the experiences influenced and overlapped
with one another, whether there were relationships between themes, and how these relationships contributed to persistence. The focus groups were audio-recorded and lasted approximately 75 minutes in light of considerable of reminiscing and laughter that took place in the process. Clarification was provided by the focus groups concerning a foundational theme of spirituality, confirmation concerning all of the formal themes presented, and an inquiry if anything was missing. The transcribed data was linked to the thematic themes and used for validation of the meanings and their interpretation.

**Contact Summary Sheet**

Each participant’s data was organized in a contact summary form (See Appendix H) to provide a tracking mechanism to ensure clarity and for the sake of memory recall. Questions arose that needed this type of a historical tracking sheet. Numerous follow-up contacts were made with participants concerning clarification and elaboration.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a validating process for credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability within the research study. Addressing each of these areas promotes and creates trustworthiness. In this study, multiple methods were used to collect the data, including a demographic survey, in-depth interviews, focus group meetings, and e-journaling. The collected data was rigorously analyzed using various levels and phases of coding. The transcribed narratives from interviews, journal submissions, and focus group feedback were all subject to member checks of transcriptions and interpretations to ensure accuracy of the themes, accompanied by researcher bracketing, peer review, and an audit trail (See Appendix J).
Credibility

Credibility is parallel with internal validity to address the personal dependability of the researcher (Schwandt, 2007). Credibility of the researcher begins with an understanding of one’s personal perspective as the instrument in qualitative research because “the perspective that the researcher brings to a qualitative inquiry is part of the context for the findings” (Patton, 2002, p. 64). Being so intricately connected with the Bible college experience required ongoing reflexivity of self-awareness and ownership of my perspective. Therefore, with this study I bracketed myself through memoing and journaling (See Appendix J) from the ongoing examination of “what I know and how I know it” (Patton, 2002, p. 64). On the one hand, I practiced a critical self-awareness of personal assumptions, but on the other hand, I realized that perfect objectivity was not possible, so there is no ultimate claim to absolute neutrality or objectivity. Indeed, this research was “grounded in my experiences, readings, interpretations, and conversations” (Milacci, 2003, p. 70).

Dependability

Dependability is parallel to reliability, which according to Schwandt (2007) requires three facets. Is the research process logical, traceable, and documented? It is, therefore, my responsibility to establish dependability by member checking. Member checks increase the validity of the study (Moustakas, 1994). Participants were given a copy of the transcriptions from their interviews to review for accuracy from their perspectives. Focus group meetings also served this purpose.

Transferability

Transferability is parallel to external validity in which the potential exists for transferability beyond the study at hand. To achieve transferability, peer review was conducted
with this study. My dissertation committee peer reviewed the research thoroughly to ensure the quality and validity of the interpretations. Consistent documentation was sought and practiced throughout the process to allow replication (Creswell, 2013).

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is parallel to objectivity and is “concerned with establishing the fact that the data and interpretations of an inquiry were not merely figments of the inquirer’s imagination” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 299). Confirmability and objectivity was established by the integrity of data collection and analysis, and informing the findings. Furthermore, purposeful bracketing or an epoche practice was utilized (Creswell, 2013). Using personal journaling as a means to reduce bias and preconceived notions ensured my role as a researcher.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were given the highest priority. Pseudonyms were used for participants. Their approval was received and all data collection did not begin until IRB approval. All files were password protected and kept in different databases and locations. All files related to interviews and content were filed under password protection and remain confidential. As a researcher, I am committed to informing the literature in an honest and truthful manner. Method alone cannot guarantee credibility, as that burden rests squarely on my shoulders as the researcher. I agree with Patton (2002) that qualitative “analysts have an obligation to monitor and report their own analytical procedures and processes as fully and truthfully as possible” (p. 434) and to maintain the credibility of the researcher by “intellectual rigor, professional integrity, and methodological competence” (p. 570). Honesty and fairness, therefore, comprise the core of this study.
Summary

This hermeneutic phenomenological study investigated the factors that contribute to persistence for nontraditional African American male students who successfully matriculated through an undergraduate four-year degree program at two predominantly Black Bible colleges in the southeastern United States. Research questions have been presented, setting and participant selection methods identified, and procedures outlined. Furthermore, data collection has been detailed with descriptions of the demographic survey, interviews, focus groups, and e-journaling. Data analysis procedures have been reviewed, establishing trustworthiness and credibility as well as addressing ethical considerations. These critical measures are designed to allow emerging themes to express the essence of the phenomenon as an inductive procedure.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand factors that contribute to college persistence for nontraditional undergraduate African American male four-year degree completers from select evangelical Bible colleges in the southeastern United States. Three research questions guided this study. First, how do participants describe persistence? Second, what type of experiences do participants understand as having contributed to their persistence at Bible college? Third, what specific factors do participants identify as having contributed to their persistence at Bible college?

A hermeneutical phenomenological design was utilized to explore this phenomenon in order to capture the lived experiences of the 10 participants in the study. Hermeneutical phenomenology is characterized by the interpretation of experiences that lead to understanding “with special attention to context” (Patton, 2002, p. 114) enabling this phenomenon to be “that which shows itself in itself” (van Manen, 2014, p. 27). Phenomenology “becomes hermeneutical when its method is taken to be essentially interpretive and primarily oriented to the explication of texts (rather than directly oriented to lived experience)” (van Manen, 2014, p. 132). This methodology allowed academic persistence to be viewed through the lived experiences of participants and led to insights that are revealed through the interpretive analysis of interview transcriptions and reflective narratives. Participant experiences, impressions, words, phrases, and ideas in relation to the motivations and influencers in each participant’s academic persistence were analyzed and are presented here.

In this chapter, the findings of the research are presented within the context of the three guiding research questions. A description is also given of the themes that emerged through participant experiences and the meaning assigned to those lived experiences in light of the
phenomenon in question. Reading, re-reading, coding, analyzing, and thematically organizing these experiences invoked emerging themes to help understand academic persistence factors.

**Participants**

Nontraditional undergraduate African American male graduates were recruited for the study through purposeful and snowball sampling methods. Gatekeepers were secured from both colleges who proved most valuable throughout the process of securing graduates that met the criteria. Through the data collection process, 10 were determined as the best to provide a rich description based on the prescribed criteria. Of the 10 participants, six are from CCBS, and four from FBC. Each participant qualified based on the criteria that had been established for the study which identified them as nontraditional undergraduate African American male four-year degree completers from one of two predominantly Black-serving Bible colleges in the southeastern United States.

**Individual Portrait**

The participants were each given a pseudonym and were identified as Aaron, Caleb, Daniel, Ethan, Gabriel, Isaiah, Joseph, Matthew, Nathan, and Zion (See Table 3). When first enrolled in Bible college, their ages ranged from 27-51. At graduation their ages ranged from 32-57. The years of attendance from first enrolled to graduation ranged from four to 18 years. All 10 graduates agreed to have their one-on-one in-depth interview and the focus group interviews audio recorded and understood the research protocol involved in the study.

Aaron completed his Bible college baccalaureate degree at the age of 57. He said it was his wife, now married for 35 years, who was instrumental in directing him to pursue enrollment in a Bible college sensing it was “the time.” However, Aaron’s dream of a Bible college education as preparation for a pastoral ministry was severely tested, first, because of his lack of
computer skills, and second, when he suffered a heart attack. Yet, even with these trying and traumatizing events, with the encouragement of his wife and four grown children and the assistance of the college administration, as well as some additional support, Aaron progressed. This proved to endear Aaron to the staff as they cooperated with his special needs. When Aaron’s health improved to the point that he was able to carry the load of a normal student, he came to love his whole college experience. He also became more involved in ministry by accepting a pastorate position half way through college. This position further impressed the need to persist in his studies because of an educated church membership. Desiring to avoid disappointing his family, Aaron persevered, successfully completing his degree program, matriculating from 2011-2016.

Caleb completed his Bible college baccalaureate degree in eleven years at the age of 56. He attended college part time and worked full time. Even though Caleb had completed a degree program shortly after high school, it had been 25 years since experiencing formal higher education. Caleb’s career in a government agency had matured to the point where he worked in an office with set hours so that he could take evening classes, affording him consistent matriculation. At the beginning of his enrollment, Caleb was also an associate minister in a large church. One aspect of his responsibilities was to function as president of a ministry alliance with approximately 30 ministers under his care. Furthermore, his two children were still active in high school and remaining involved in their activities was quite demanding. He soon moved to a pastorate of a smaller congregation. Even though quite challenging, this position actually gave him relief to concentrate all his ministry efforts in one small group. With his wife’s strong affirming support as well as her computer knowledge, Caleb successfully completed his degree program matriculating from 2005-2016.
Table 3

Profile of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years Enrolled</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Nontraditional Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>2011-2016</td>
<td>53-57</td>
<td>Married, Dependents, Delayed entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>2005-2016</td>
<td>51-56</td>
<td>Married, Dependents, Delayed entry, Employed full time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>1996-2014</td>
<td>33-51</td>
<td>Married, Dependents, Delayed entry, Employed full time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>2008-2015</td>
<td>41-48</td>
<td>Married, Dependents, Delayed entry, Employed full time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>2012-2015</td>
<td>32-35</td>
<td>Married, Dependents, Delayed entry, Employed full time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah</td>
<td>2005-2012</td>
<td>41-48</td>
<td>Married, Dependents, Reentry into college, Employed full time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>2010-2016</td>
<td>27-32</td>
<td>Married, Dependents, Delayed entry, Employed full time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>2003-2014</td>
<td>34-43</td>
<td>Married, Dependents, Delayed entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>2011-2016</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>Married, Dependents, Delayed entry, Employed full time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zion</td>
<td>2010-2016</td>
<td>29-34</td>
<td>Married, Dependents, Delayed entry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Daniel began Bible college at age 33 and completed his degree program at age 51. At the time of this interview, he and his wife had been married 28 years with two children and five grandchildren. While in school, His career was quite demanding as a project manager for a utility company. With this time-consuming position, challenges with family, and a packed schedule which included an assistant pastor position for over half the time he was a student, numerous stop-outs occurred, some even lasting several years. Even after retirement from the utility company, and accepting a pastorate of a large, growing, and thriving church more recurring fatigue forced many interruptions in his education process. However, even though some stop-outs lasted years, Daniel persisted to successfully complete his degree program matriculating from 1996-2014.

Ethan, now married for 25 years, began Bible college at age 41 and completed his degree program at age 48. He worked full time and attended college part time. His secular employment as a business manager demanded extensive hours at work. He also experienced a crisis in his immediate family from an unwed daughter’s pregnancy and subsequent birth of a grandchild. In spite of all this, he and his wife started a ministry to unwed others. Additionally, Ethan ministered as an Associate Pastor of Christian Education in a local church. Nevertheless, with much delight, Ethan was blessed to see his daughter complete a degree program at another college as well as pursue a master’s degree; his son enrolled in the same Bible college he was attending, and his wife completed her degree. And not to be outdone, Ethan successfully persisted to complete his degree program, matriculating from 2008-2015.

Gabriel, desiring a Bible college education, began his enrollment at the age of 32 and completed his degree program at 35. Gabriel worked full time and attended school full time. In the early months of enrollment, Gabriel was active in the Army National Guard. This required
participating in drill one weekend a month. After leaving the Guard, he and his wife started their own daycare business and also during his enrollment, they had another child for a total of four children. Gabriel’s wife additionally homeschooled the two older children. At the time of Gabriel’s graduation, a new church planting ministry had begun, with him serving as pastor. He persisted to successfully complete his degree program matriculating from 2012-2015.

Isaiah began Bible college at age 41 and completed his degree program at age 48. He attended college part time and worked full time for the U.S. Army. Working in the Army while being a student had its challenges which included being restricted to night classes. Also, repeated “in the field” soldier training for a few weeks at a time forced either cancellation of classes or professors to modify deadlines. During his college enrollment two of his four children were still in the home and his wife, who was attending the same college, graduated with her Bible college degree. Isaiah’s ordination was accomplished within the first two years of being a student; a heavy involvement in ministry continued until a new church planting ministry began. However, a college crisis forced Isaiah to learn the hard lessons concerning (accidental) plagiarism. Nevertheless, Isaiah persisted to successfully complete his degree program matriculating from 2005-2012.

Joseph began Bible college at age 27 and completed his degree program at age 32. He attended college part time and worked full time as a contractor with the U.S. Army. Not only did Joseph get married while enrolled, he and his wife had their first child as well. Besides the duties of full-time employment and the birth of his first child, he was heavily involved in ministry as an assistant elder, requiring ministry 2-3 evenings or days a week at his local church. He soon was elevated to the ministerial staff which increased his responsibilities of training and teaching, as well as taking additional local church classes in preparation for
ordination. Yet, Joseph persisted to successfully complete his degree program matriculating from 2010-2016.

Permanently disabled from the U.S. Army after serving repeated deployments, Matthew was able to attend Bible college full time. He began his college experience at age 33 and completed his degree program at age 43. Matthew and his wife have four children with two still in the home during his enrollment. He also pastored almost the entire time he was enrolled as a student. However, one stop-out lasted almost seven years due to health complications. Upon returning, Matthew endured severe criticisms from family members for attending Bible college, but he successfully persisted to complete his degree program matriculating from 2003-2014.

Nathan began Bible college at age 40 and completed his degree program at age 45. Nathan attended college part time and worked full time in the U.S. Army. Due to military restraints, evening classes were the rule until the last year of studies in which a more flexible work schedule enabled some select day classes. A stop-out came with a deployment lasting just under a year and other interruptions intermittently. During almost the entire time Nathan was a student, he also served in ministry as an unofficial assistant pastor of a local church. He and his wife have three daughters, one of whom was still in the home while enrolled at the Bible college. Nathan persisted successfully to complete his degree program matriculating from 2011-2016.

Zion began Bible college at age 29 and completed his degree program at age 34. He and his wife had four children all in the home during the time of enrollment. Permanently disabled from the U.S. Army after serving repeated deployments and not having a secular job, he was able to attend Bible college full time. While enrolled, he began a new church planting ministry as pastor. However, some challenges were more disheartening than others like a college crisis
when Zion had to learn the hard way concerning (accidental) plagiarism and cultural criticisms for attending Bible college. Though cultural beliefs initially discouraged Zion from seeking a Bible college degree, he persevered and successfully completed his degree program, matriculating from 2010-2016.

**Composite Analysis**

In addition to the individual descriptions, much can be learned by a composite analysis. Participants repeatedly defined and described persistence as they communicated their Bible college experiences which answered research question one. As definitions emerged, descriptions of persistence came to be amplified within the broad mental, cultural, and spiritual categories. Each category provided opportunity to define and to describe persistence.

Mentally, persistence was described as a comprehension of a justified slower pace of matriculation that bears the fruit of soaking in the freshness and depth of each course content and experience. Daniel justified a slower pace as a means of persistence to “experience the joy and richness of going through each class and … learning far more than you could have if you tried to take two or three classes. I took my time and I made it.” Daniel further elaborated on mental persistence bearing in mind future dividends by admitting “there are going to be times when you feel like quitting, but don’t quit. Yes, it may take a while based on what you’re doing, but just don’t quit. It will be beneficial to you and your ministry.” Ethan’s mental determination focused on a goal “to get a biblical degree. My goal was to graduate, so I had to finish. I stayed focused on what I was doing. Just keep moving & don’t give up.” Mentally, persistence is the perspective of viewing every class as important and recognizing it will contribute to what is needed presently and especially for what will be needed in future, vocational ministries.
Culturally, persistence was described by means of a tunnel-vision goal to graduate in spite of demeaning attitudes conveyed against gaining a formal, spiritual education. Matthew, after venting about the negative cultural feedback even from family, declared his attitude was to “recognize the Word of God carries more authority and that was my answer, just keep studying and learning the Bible.” Early in his degreed program, Zion immediately recognized such an attitude had become a critical “issue, because the more I started learning here [in Bible college] it added to my teaching, and then they [African American church leaders] told me I don't need to be doing this. But I just kept going because I wanted to be able to understand Scripture.” Nathan acknowledged “all of us African-American men, probably got different types of pushback.” But he used that as a rationale for persistence, boldly declaring, “That would drive me.”

Through this cultural aspect of defining persistence, participants expressed a strong determination that was analogous to a stubborn pride, as though they were out to prove themselves capable of completing a degree program. The inner microsystem of the AAMT includes personality while the outer microsystem provides for an analysis of cultural environments and is conveyed as an “innate desire for self-determination” (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 10), indicating African American men are resistant and resilient. The participants’ innate, stubborn desire for self-determination, in response to the cultural naysayers who dissuade against higher education including Bible colleges, expresses an ethnic identity as a part of an in-group affiliation which “valued academic achievement” (Reyes, 2013, p. 36). Though Bush and Bush (2013) have documented a segment of the African American culture that disagrees, the AAMT is not opposed to higher education, defining it as the process to make people capable of reaching their potential. Likewise, there is a recognition that this African American male higher education
opposition has a transformative effect so that the pride and stubborn aspects are changed into strong drives for success. The AAMT also provides space for the spiritual phenomena so that the stubborn drive to survive in higher education can be transformed into a firm and humble commitment which maximizes the Bible college experience (Bush & Bush, 2013). This transformative effect was conveyed in the spiritual definitions of persistence as explained in the next paragraph.

Spiritually, the longer time was spent in a Bible college program, defining persistence was understood as a process of transformation to include a recognition of being in a godly environment. With this spiritual aspect of persistence, the educational process was allowed to have its intended humbling effect which maximized all that was received. Gabriel connected persistence to spirituality by means of a desire to “go higher [spiritually]. The more I got out of this school, the more I wanted to go to the next level [of spiritual maturity]. I wanted to learn the biblical content in each class.” Nathan expressed a transforming effect in persistence as a “dependence on the Lord and a humble approach. You really have to … humble yourself as God’s Word says. Then … you’re going to be pulled in and the next thing you know you’re running in this thing.” Isaiah knew spiritually he had to be “equipped because people’s lives are at stake, souls are lost. As I continued in school I am held at a whole different level of accountability by the Lord. I was driven to continue and to finish with a degree.” Persistence was connected to spiritual accountability and growth to benefit the student presently and in the future, as well as both personally and professionally.

Though there was consistent spiritual growth, most participants acknowledged intermittent expressions of wanting to quit their educational program. During those times when
participants were most tempted to drop out, perhaps Daniel, who took 18 years to graduate, stated it best as persistence continued to be defined and described:

I had many points during my college tenure that I wanted to drop out. Most of mine had to deal with fatigue due to work overload, family, and ministry. There were times I had to work overtime hours that challenged my ability to study. Day-to-day family care and concerns challenged my commitment to never neglect my family for academic or ministry pursuits. Also, the weight and magnitude of ministry took its toll on me. Nevertheless, through encouragement, periods of rest, prayer, and an unyielding spirit [never] to give up, [these all] propelled me to stay the course. Staying on track during my educational journey was a joy to me, even if it meant just finishing two classes a year.

Why did I keep going back over 18 years? For the glory of God. My purpose on earth is to preach and teach His Gospel. To do that, I need to be effective. In order to truly ascribe glory to God, I needed to keep going back.

Though 18 years is not the normal experience even for nontraditional students, the description of an unyielding spirit captures the essence of defining persistence in the context of many aspects of life being out of a person’s control.

While recognizing the barriers, obstacles, and challenges their nontraditional status presented while being in school, participants expressed a growing awareness that some of these were excuses to be dismissed. As Matthew boldly stated:

I had to get over the hurdle of excuses (I can’t do it, I’m too old, this is too much) and allow the professors to challenge you because that helps you to become a better student. You just keep at it.
This degree of spiritual fitness brought about an honest appraisal that many challenges are common to all students, and are not unique only to nontraditional students. The challenges of being in college had to be regarded as for a season of time. A developed spiritual discipline can also prevent a dropout, as Joseph conveyed: “I would not allow it to ever enter my mind to quit.”

Beyond definitions of persistence, participants also described motivational experiences answering research question two, commonly declaring that relationships transcend all persistence factors. Critical to every attitude, experience, and persistence factor was a relational link. Relationships incrementally endeared and bonded the participants to the administration, faculty and staff so that a drive to finish grew stronger than initial and ongoing barriers. Relationships were emphasized in distinct fashion tying all experiences together. Daniel was grateful for that “one-on-one personal engagement [that] made a big difference during my matriculation. That personal touch making us feel like we're part of family. They [administration and faculty] encouraged me and the students, and we encouraged one another.” Zion agreed, “It’s the relationship, I mean, from top to the bottom. It’s the relationships you live for that you had in college.” Nathan was quite passionate as he expressed the relational aspects:

Relationships were the most important experience. My wife’s relationship stimulated emotional stability. My pastor furthered our relationship by providing accountability which kept me spiritually grounded. The faculty were so proactively involved in relationships in a professional manner that it kept me academically sharp. The interaction I had with the professors was great, and it continued. Interacting with the student body was great. It's a relationship…. The relationships would drive me.

Another motivating experience was a sense of belonging which overcame initial fears and apprehensions. A sense of belonging was felt immediately with a welcoming environment and
grew into a campus connectedness which served as protective factors. Reyes’s (2013) research indicated “the way students feel about their own ethnic group and the way they believe that particular group is perceived and valued by others makes a difference in the students’ level of motivation and academic adjustment” (p. 47). Zion’s initial impression drove the stakes deep: “My experience here at the college was amazing, because you enter in with being such a skeptic … So when I got here, what made this college so amazing [is] … they make you feel so welcome.” Isaiah was also very personal in his convictions, stating, “coming into school, after being [out of college] so many years, was so difficult. But it was a great environment. When you come in, the receptionist would always greet you and call you by name.” Joseph affirmed that “I enjoyed being around the people here. It’s a good atmosphere to be at, to learn and to interact with people.” All of the fears associated with the prospect of re-entering college were put to rest with the serendipitous experience opposite of what was expected. Matthew was quite emotional as he expressed his feelings with this regard:

When I came back [after a seven-year absence], [the Bible college president] still remembered my name. I was gone seven years, and, when I walked in the door, I said, ‘Do you remember me?’ ‘Matthew, yeah, I remember you.’ Seven years passed, and he remembered…. And that was it. I said, ‘Yeah, I'm coming back to school.’ And he said, ‘Well, we look forward to having you.’ That was very impressive and welcoming. That's when I first came through the door, being remembered by name…. For these reasons, this [Bible college] is my home.

Expressed as a desire to disprove the naysayers, participants conveyed an innate determination to rise above opposition, even when it came from within their own culture. This drive to thrive had a transformative effect, creating a teachable spirit through the educational
process. Nathan elaborated on the drive to prove naysayers wrong and spoke for the participants as a whole when describing the African American historical perspective on higher education:

For the African American churches, I know the history too. For me, what helped is before [attending Bible college] I already knew; I knew because I like to look at the cause of why things happen. I knew why the resistance [to higher education] was in the Black church, because there was a time, and we’re not talking about a long time ago either, we're talking maybe just 80 years ago, there was a time [higher education for African Americans] wasn't allowed. A lot of barriers families built, they built them out of love, to protect, because of the need to avoid the hurt of trying to go do something that you couldn't do…. I know in my family, historical family, it was built that, ‘You can’t go to that college’ eventually turned into, ‘You don't need to go to that college,’ just to protect the kids. It just translates so the kids would never get the aspirations to go get set up for hurt. A lot of it you still see now. As with sin, Satan will have two sides thinking it's each other, but it's actually one cause. That's kind of, I'd say, the genesis of why most [African Americans] pushback to attending Bible college and you still have some now: ‘You don't need that stuff.’

So the history of saying you can’t go or you can’t succeed [in higher education] would drive me to say, ‘Hey, I want to be naïve enough to believe that just me, can set the tone at least for one other person.’ A lot of ministers that are Black, that I have, that are friends, they don't really agree with a structured education. I won't say it's only Black, because there are a few Whites, but it's much higher [among African Americans]. Again, I'm sympathetic because I know they're regurgitating what grandfather said, and what mom, what dad said, they're dealing with the scars. ‘Well, you don't need that
mess.’ It's not that you don't need it, it's just that, ‘I couldn't go, and that hurt.’

Sometimes we don't translate to the kids, we translate the hurt, but it's weird; it comes in the form of protection. ‘Well, don't go,’ because they don't want the kids to be hurt the way they were hurt.

That would drive me though. My pastor went to Bible college. I want to be clear, I didn't want to think I was better, but I also didn't want to shy away from it either…. But you're talking maybe, 80 years away from, being restrained from attending where you couldn't go, and to have a Black pastor to go to a Bible college was considered in a derogatory sense, ‘Well, that's where the White people went. Why would you go there?’…. I think probably all of us African-American men, probably got different types of pushback.

This drive to prove the naysayers was rooted in a spirituality that produced an “ethic of excellence” (Wood & Hilton, 2012, p. 39) and an “inspiration for excellence” (Wood & Hilton, 2012, p. 43) regarded as from God to strive toward graduation. It is common among African American males that spirituality helped them through all barriers in defiance of naysayers (Wood & Hilton, 2012).

At the same time a drive to maintain the approval of advocators like a spouse, children, parents, faculty, pastors, and others, produced a drive to please. Therefore, the student would do anything to avoid disappointing them and to maintain their approval. Matthew spoke of this in the context of faculty: So I don't think I ever missed an assignment or if late it had to be something wrong with a computer … because I never wanted to disappoint you guys [faculty] … and that helped me to be driven. Joseph described this drive to avoid disappointing loved ones in the context of a wife: “My wife was … really happy for me to be in Bible college …. She kept
encouraging me to stay on my goal … and I always wanted to please her, so I just kept working as hard as I could.” Nathan spoke of this in the context of his pastor:

My pastor tracked along everything that I was doing …. He tries to keep me intertwined with things. His wisdom and his confidence in me, has driven me a lot. Once you get a relationship, for me, it makes me feel obligated … so I'm going to … [persist], so it helped a lot.

Research questions one and two provided definitions and descriptions of persistence as well as general, motivating persistence experiences. Determined to succeed, participants experienced a sense of belonging, a drive to disprove naysayers and to maintain the approval of advocates all in the context of transcending, reciprocal relationships. This data provided general academic persistence attitudes and motivational influences which developed an environment conducive for the emerging themes in answer to research question three.

**Themes**

In the analyses of the data persistence factors were formalized into five themes that became apparent throughout the narratives and transcriptions (See Figure 1). Phrases, ideas, and reflective thoughts on the topic of academic persistence became evident through coding and the constant comparison process (van Manen, 1997). The five themes are stated below:

1. The Magnet of Persistence: The Bible College Experience
2. The Channel of Persistence: Spiritual Formation
3. The Fruit of Persistence: Christian Service Formation
4. The Bond of Persistence: A Family Support Network
5. The Accountability for Persistence: A Local Church Connection
There is a progressive flow of the themes in research question three which can be illustrated according to the growth of a tree (See Figure 2). Spiritual formation, as a channel, stimulates and sustains academic persistence empowerment, much like the roots of a tree (Wood & Hilton, 2012) or an ecosystem of spiritual development (Lowe & Lowe, 2010). As these men walked, sat, talked, and spent significant time among godly faculty, spiritual formation grew substantially. This is reminiscent of Psalm 1:1-2.

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked…. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers.

African American spirituality, and especially for males, has been designated as an internal (roots) channel to various “activities, resources, and ideology” (Wood & Hilton, 2012, p. 31) that feed persistence. Spirituality, then, is the channel that stimulates and sustains the developmental processes among the other themes.
Like the trunk of a tree enabling participants to “grow and flourish” (Lowe & Lowe, 2010, p. 89), the Bible college experience is the magnet for persistence. As the participants grew and flourished in their matriculation, spiritual growth enabled stability and stature and attracted the students to the Bible college experience like a magnet. The direct outcome of the Bible college experience is the fruit of persistence which is Christian service formation. The Christian service formation encouraged persistence as participants recognized their personal ministries directly benefited from their educational progress. Two final themes guard and guide persistence like stakes tied to a tree in a nested environment: The bond of persistence is a family support network and the accountability in persistence is the local church connection. These five themes establish the explanation for persistence among nontraditional undergraduate African American males (See Appendix K).

Figure 2

*Academic Themes Illustrated*
The Magnet of Persistence: The Bible College Experience

By far the strongest connection to persistence was the Bible college experience. Participants expressed various factors of the Bible college experience highlighted by professors who built personal relationships, led by example, invested in participants outside the classroom, shared pastoral experience, and challenged participants to pursue excellence. The Bible college experience also provided family togetherness, climaxed in nontraditional affinity, as directed by a proactive administrative staff.

Personable Faculty

The relationship between faculty and the participants proved critical to persistence. Students were receptive to course content, but the effect was multiplied when delivered by someone who truly cared and was sincerely and professionally personal. Beyond all participants’ expectations was a faculty who extended the caring relationship in and outside the classroom.

Proactive in personal relationships. Professors personally, but professionally, developed relationships with the participants. Spirituality was encouraged through the sharing of life experiences in and out of the classroom. True to life issues were expressed realistically from a wealth of experience and Bible knowledge both in victories and challenges. Relationships with professors constantly fed students’ commitment for being in class and craving more face time. Terms that were used to describe the proactive relational aspect included “the most effective thing” and “the biggest piece” which “made the difference.” Faculty who were always available was a “major factor” for the participants. Matthew used the phrase “the most effective thing”:

The most effective thing was the relationships with [professors] who really care. That was the biggest thing. I felt like since they knew me personally, they could challenge me
more effectively. They would tell me I could do better and show me how, taking the time to detail specifics for how to improve. They would always challenge me on what was wrong, and I would improve next time. But they were also always encouraging me … because they cared…. That really helped me, not just to be here, but that helped me to really apply myself.

Daniel said “the biggest piece” for overcoming repeated challenges was a personal relationship with professors in which he received one-on-one encouragement.

The biggest piece of all the factors is personal relationship with a professor and the professor willing to give you time if you need it, pouring into you because they know what it’s like to go to school as well as having to work and other things like ministry.

Life is not consistent. Issues and struggles of life come up, and that’s when that personal relationship with your professor is so important. You need that opportunity to spend quality time with the professor and they understood all these things which is so helpful.

…. Again, I guess for me it’s always that personal touch.

Faculty who held in common a high priority of relationships, maximized the impact. Rather than just one or two who cared, when the vast majority of faculty intentionally related personally and professionally to students, persistence soared.

Ethan: Each [professor] I had was really concerned about your well-being as a student, and as an individual. If you struggle or have any situations they were always there to talk with you, and guide you with any situation that you have had in life, or in class. That made the difference…. Every professor here has the heart to see these students exceed and succeed at everything they do. Professors just need to intentionally be relational with the students.
Gabriel: I think having that relationship with the teachers where you can constantly go and talk to them or they’re always available where you can speak to them, I think that played a major role. And I wanted to know my professors because I think you learn more by watching and learning from their experiences. The professors were a major factor for me completing my college education.

Relationships with faculty did not require a great quantity of time, but purposeful investment in the quality of time paid rich dividends for the participants. Nathan affirmed “it would be the quality of time [with professors]. Instead of just a greeting of the day, it was little conversations…that and some key professors that really developed their relationship, and were constant in their encouragement.” Likewise, Zion noted “the connection and relationships professors personally developed with the students was major. Professors are very caring…[which] just made me always look forward to getting to class.”

**Willingness to connect with students outside the college context.** The impact of professors was not limited to the classroom, or even to the college campus. Many went beyond the call of duty to minister to students, especially when a crisis arose. The crises the participants personally experienced included a heart attack, a newborn baby in the emergency room, and, among others, an extremely sensitive family crisis. Through these extreme times, faculty actually showed up in person, spent additional time in counseling, and provided guidance for school issues. This is ministry beyond the classroom and the participants say it will always be remembered with gratefulness. Ethan recognized professors continued to function in a pastoral ministry toward their students:

I have had some wonderful professors. Every one of them. Professor [name] was very instrumental when [a family crisis arose]. He was like a counselor to me and encouraged
me. This was outside of the classroom where he was just dealing with a life situation. He provided prayer. He provided just a friendship. He provided just guidance to keep going. It was really good. He was the one who was directly involved. We were just devastated [from the crisis], and I dropped out for a semester. But as a result of talking and sharing, and counseling, the reason I came back is because professor [name] invested that in us. At a college like this, you have that professor who is really concerned about your well-being as a student, and as an individual, most importantly your relationship with the Lord, but also with your work. If you struggle or have any situations, they have always been there to talk with you, and guide you with any situations that you had in life. That has made the difference. That is what [my college] offered to me going through because it was challenging.

Gabriel: There was always just that comradery of everybody coming together. Because I also had a professor and his wife visit us when our newborn baby had to be taken to the emergency room. That’s what I’m talking about, the togetherness. It’s not, ‘Well, I’m just a teacher.’ It’s more than that. It’s ‘I want to be an example. I want to be a Christian example and show my students that this is the way Christianity works.’ When we started our business and in college at the same time, I know my teachers were praying for me about it because I talked to them about it every day. Everybody always has time and if they don’t have time right that minute, they’ll make time for you. I will always have a heart for my college.

From a family crisis to a personal health crisis, faculty who stepped outside their normal school role to take time to personally minister to students positively contributed to persistence. Aaron was one who received the personal involvement of faculty when a personal health crisis arose.
My college is unique because they were understanding of what each individual is going through.... When I had my heart attack, I was out two weeks. FBC is a great place to be because professors [name] and [name] helped me on a personal level. They came and ministered to me. The school helped me financially and spiritually, encouraged me to come back, gave me a lot of grace, and I completed all missed work and finished the semester.

Matthew said, “There was never a time when a professor would be unavailable to me. Everyone was always available. I could call them on their cell phone, or email, and I had no problem with anybody not getting back to me.”

**Pastoral experience benefits ministry students.** Faculty members with previous pastoral experience added to their effectiveness with nontraditional undergraduate African American men. Persistence was reinforced as the teachers covered their subjects by applying and illustrating biblical points to ministry, while relating personal challenges and victories. This enabled these teachers to serve as role models in providing guidance and solutions to situations these participants did or would face in their own ministries. Students would purposefully bring ministerial questions based on issues they were trying to resolve and gain the insights the professors could share, who, having been through those same or similar experiences previously, were open and vulnerable to share what did and did not work. It also caused the professors to be intensely interested in the subjects they were teaching. This relationship caused the students to avoid missing any class and drove them to re-register each semester. Caleb was grateful for the specific pastoral issues to be addressed:

All of the professors are open and talk about pastoral issues… like, when you're new [as a staff person] at a church, what you should be preaching starting out there, and how to find
out what the congregation is in need of once you get there. The professors just seem to have a higher level of expertise in ministry that's able to guide you, provide input. A lot of the professors have been pastors before, which is a plus…. That's of great value right there because they put another dimension on the education here. That is what I received here. I mean, that's priceless.

Gabriel: I know one of my teachers, … I would just pick his brain about ministry, ‘Well, how do you do it?” And the teacher would say, ‘Well, I do this and a lot of this.”’ You try to incorporate some of those things, not exactly how they do it because everybody's different, but learning from them how they did it and then doing it the best way that it works for you… I think that was a big component for me, that togetherness, seeing the examples of godly men performing and perfecting their craft and that made me want to walk in their shoes, and get … where they are. That helped me, as well.

For a professor to be vulnerable about past challenges and mistakes spoke volumes to these participants. That level of honesty removed the perceived halo of perfection these participants conceivably attributed to them. It produced a bond with the faculty so that the student knew he was not alone in his challenges in how to handle ministry issues. Matthew appreciated the human side of a professor being made known in the context of ministry:

One professor in particular would share negative experiences from when he pastored. I was like, ‘Okay, he's human.’ … For instance, one of the stories he told about him pastoring how someone was always challenging his every decision. And I could never see anybody getting in conflict with him, because he's a great guy! Going through his pastoral struggles and different things of that nature he would share, it made me think ‘Okay, this guy's just not here for college, but he's really concerned about building us up
and getting us mature,’ … I always felt that way. So his attitude and his [ministerial] stories and different things of that nature kept me coming back. And another professor was transparent about situations that were not so good, even about his own family members and struggles with teenage daughter. All of that plays a part, and you learn.

The combination of taking the time to know a student enabled a professor to provide specific ministerial advice. For Nathan, this multiplied the impact:

For [a specific professor], I would ask questions about being a preacher, or questions about something I had seen and I wanted to know, would it work? He didn't give a quick answer. He would point me to a Scripture, and give me an experience, a personal experience, [and] give me some clear guidance and it was typically based on me. Sometimes we can give guidance, but it may not fit that person. He knew me pretty well in that realm, so that's what made it good with [that professor].

In Isaiah’s estimation, the greatest part was when a professor’s ministry experience matched and answered his current needs:

I was getting ready to plant a church and I went and asked him [a professor] for some guidance. That's another thing: When we needed guidance we could come to the professors and sit down and talk with them. One professor I knew had planted a church and I sat down with him, and I was asking him about challenges in my church planting ministry. He gave me advice that was just right on what I was going into. His experience and knowledge fed right into it because that's exactly what we were doing. All of the faculty were at one time, pastoring somewhere, so they understood all the many things that you would go through. The greatest part was, that the faculty understood. They had the experience in the areas that we were going through. They understood that, so they
knew how to work with us because they had the experience. If they didn't, they had someone that already had been there, and they would get advice from them.

**Affinity with and an understanding of the nontraditional student.** College professors connected strongly with students when they could share their own nontraditional experiences. Or, if they had knowledge of the specific nontraditional characteristics, it … encouraged persistence from an asset perspective, taking the role of the faculty to a higher level of impact. Professors were noted to share their own personal nontraditional educational experiences while they are teaching and make application to the students’ current struggles as well as one-on-one outside the classroom. This was a major encouragement according to Daniel:

Having professors that understood me as a nontraditional student was a major encouragement. They can share their life experiences which helped me. They constantly encouraged us. They shared with me some of the challenges that they had, even sharing, ‘look, they’re going to be times when you feel like quitting, don’t quit.’ They would share the times when they had challenges of trying to balance school, family, ministry, and those things. Just hearing them talk about, ‘yes it was tough for us, yes it was challenging for us, but we made it. We made it.’ From their undergrad experience to graduate experiences, it's them sharing that information.

Isaiah attributed affinity in this area as a specific reason for persistence: “Because professors made it through college with a heavy load, that encouraged me as I was going through a similar load. They understood that, so they knew how to work with us.” Gabriel felt since his professors made it, so could he: “It kept me going because I knew they understood and once stood where I stood.”
A proactive faculty sowed in the participants’ lives, reaping a harvest of graduates. This
degree of faculty involvement made the Bible college experience the most significant aspect of
persistence and functioned like a magnet where these participants could not stay away.

**Proactive Administration**

A proactive administration was also a contributing factor toward persistence. Participants
drew much from the support services structure implemented by the administration, and a faculty
groomed concerning the purpose of a Bible college education with a concentration toward
preparing preachers. Participants also commented on the value of an administration that was
accessible and relational as opposed to being aloof and uninvolved.

Very simple aspects of college life were mentioned. These included encouragement
toward spiritual formation, a complete syllabus, and beginning every class with prayer. These
simplistic elements were of a critical nature for these nontraditional participants. Aaron was one
who said the syllabus was critical, stating with conviction, “I looked at my syllabus every day so
I don’t get behind. My wife would often joke I read the syllabus like it is my Bible.” Daniel
echoed, “I would also say to provide a complete syllabus because when you are disciplined you
know what to do and what’s coming up. That syllabus is critical to your success in class.”

Learning and practicing the required Turabian writing style was most challenging. Caleb
rebounded from Turabian mistakes once the administration provided a specific plan of attack for
both Turabian and test preparation.

Initially, for a while, I was having difficulties with Turabian [writing style]. But they had
an introductory class. We were given the format, and once I got in the habit, then
everything clicked. Something else especially difficult was taking tests. Then I was
coached in how to prepare for them. A professor taught us to read, recite, and write.
Teaching us these study skills definitely worked and I would practice that religiously in getting ready for tests. I can also use that [read, recite, write] in the preaching format.

Opening each class in prayer was viewed by participants as a ministry to them as well as welcoming God’s ministry to them during the class time. Daniel exalted prayer’s role in the classroom:

> An administration and staff should never get away from prayer. I think that’s important. Don’t just go right into whatever you’re teaching without that time of prayer. That’s a ministry to the students in some regard. It gives students an opportunity to voice a struggle and to have prayer about it. It communicates a personal touch, that the school really cares and that I’m not just a number.

Relational desires were never far from participants’ thoughts. They relished a president, a dean, and other administration members who were personal and who took the time to speak to them. Ethan viewed this as an absolutely essential, nonnegotiable role:

> One thing I would say is absolutely necessary today is to intentionally be more relational with the students. Not from an authoritative stand point, but from a getting to know you stand point. I think most of them [administration] do that, but that would be something that I would really encourage them to do. Outside of just our curriculum, get to know these students more. We have a small body of students, which would allow that to take place. Provide luncheons to meet with students and require an open door policy for office times.

Gabriel believes a relational administration is essential to an institution’s success:

> Beyond the faculty, being able to talk to the president, the dean, and also their assistants brings the togetherness in the school. I think I could go to anyone in that school, and if
you needed five minutes of their time, they wouldn’t tell you to make an appointment. I think that’s a big component of the school’s success, that togetherness, that people being able to talk with one another. I think the caring aspect of the college is a big help and that is what kept me focused…. That’s the type of school it is. It does a great job of preparing students for ministry simply because of the way the school is set up [relationally].

Matthew was shocked that he had direct access to the college president’s office, and then elaborated on other strong points supporting persistence:

I’ve told some of the students here, where in the world can you go and just knock on the [college] president’s door and just walk in and sit down and you talk and he stops what he's doing and explain different things to you? When we [with the president] would have personal discussions about my personal life, before I leave, he always prayed for me. And in class, no matter what, we always had prayer. That was key. That meant a lot because that's uplifting when you can be concerned about the whole class, and [in some classes] we’ve never missed a time [of prayer] at the beginning. Prayer in class recognizes this is an opportunity for God to work in the class. Then I also liked the way teachers would provide corrections and feedbacks on assignments. I appreciated that level of support instead of ‘now just go do it.’ And even when a professor would teach things against my [religious] tradition, they were never adamant or personally angry, but just patiently explain the Word.

Even when mistakes were made, these nontraditional participants were relieved to be given a second chance, especially when the administration was careful to explain the issues involved, coach them along, allow them to continue in their studies. Participants were ashamed
and embarrassed, but because of the way administration handled the situations, they were also relieved to be the recipients of such grace, and made the most of a second chance. Like Isaiah, for example, who had a problem with unintentional plagiarism:

There was another example of the administration working with us nontraditional students. The dean and the president have an open-door policy, and I was talking to them regularly which really helped when a problem arose. When I first started, I didn't understand the plagiarism, how it worked, and I got flagged because of plagiarism, but I didn't understand. So I came in and we sat down with the president, and the dean, and the instructor and dealt with that situation… I had to get knowledgeable of plagiarism and how it worked. They worked with me. But what helped me handle that and to keep going was the fact there had already been a relationship established. A second chance went a long way for me. Based on other students struggling in this area led the administration to incorporate the expectations within the class, so that helped. Then they started an introductory class that clearly explained all these things. You get the basics and then keep growing and learning.

Zion: I failed the first semester of [a class] because I completely copied my whole paper off the Internet. Even though I [failed the class] he [the dean] gave me another chance…. He just told me if it happens again, he would have to put me on probation and things like that. So I came back and I did what I needed to do. I am grateful for a second chance.

**Appreciation for Nontraditional Comradery**

Students expressed the power of numbers from having other like-minded students who fit the nontraditional characteristics. An ability to get answers from one another helped to develop a
tiered layer of reassurance and built confidence. With this added safety net, persistence was fed
daily as these students became strongly bonded in support, love, and fellowship:

Caleb: Well, it's always good to have somebody that's been through some of the same
road that you have been through.... All of us older students had to get back into the school
mode. We were all kind of in the same boat. It encouraged you to let you know that
you're not the only one scrambling to get back in the groove of things. You gain a certain
level of confidence through that too. The most difficult thing for me were the tests.
Yeah, I don't like tests. Study groups were the answer for me. We would meet on
campus or at night I would pick up the phone and call. Most of us [nontraditional
students] struggled with tests, and everyone was willing to interact as we made sure we
were correct in our information. Peer-to-peer and student-to-student helped me with my
biggest challenges.

Daniel: This was an encouragement because, again they were in the same posture I was
in, going through the same things. We could share with one another what it's like to try
to juggle those, well for me four different things going on at one time. Being an
encouragement to one another and say… ‘we’re making progress, let’s work hard and
let’s learn.’

Nathan: The majority of students were like me, and it helped a lot to have somebody who
was doing the same things that you were doing in class and as fellow peers, giving
personal words of encouragements and study helps. The camaraderie was something I
liked a lot. Interaction was great too. It was an added blessing because you weren't
anticipating this at the beginning and it was something positive for me.
An appreciation for nontraditional camaraderie was a daily factor in persistence as participants were assured every semester would include a fair representation of nontraditional students. Zion described nontraditional comradery as a “blessing having students in similar situations because it allows me to feel more comfortable here. Every semester had the potential to quickly develop new friends.”

**Appreciation for Intergenerationality**

Not only was there an appreciation for non-traditional camaraderie, but also viewed positively was the intergenerational setting. Nontraditional students took pride in the younger students gravitating toward them for advice, study helps, and to look up to them with respect. Aaron explained how the younger students would “levitate toward me. We would fellowship along the way, and I would do a little counselling. It challenged me to come out of my comfort zone and that encouraged me as I was learning more of my own capabilities.” Gabriel appreciated the range of ages and how the interaction served everyone’s betterment:

I remember when I first started, and I was taking ‘How to study the Bible’ with Dr. (Professor’s name) and the group he placed us in were a mix of ages. And we would meet at the [public] library to review the techniques and the notes he was teaching…. We reserved the conference room, and we would sit down, everybody pull everything out, and we just figured it out. Everybody always made themselves readily available to help. Young and old; it didn’t matter.

Not everything about intergenerationality was positive, however, as nontraditional students took notice of their estimation of younger students’ lack of respect for the teacher in the classroom. Caleb expressed disapproval of younger students’ disrespect:
Now with this younger crew, I told them to come to class on time. And when you get to class, shut your mouth, be respectful, and listen to what the instructor is saying. Because sometimes they come in and they're not respectful…. They need to understand you don't treat an authority figure like that…. Showing proper respect. It sounds old fashioned, but that's the way I am.

In summary, the Bible college experiences formed a magnet-effect for persistence in light of its attributes. In addition to participants’ appreciation for nontraditional comradery and intergenerationality, a personal faculty contributed to persistence through personal relationships and the use of pastoral experience to benefit ministry students. A proactive administration provided and developed support services to likewise reinforce persistence.

**The Channel to Persistence: Spiritual Formation**

The focus group interviews identified spiritual formation as foundational to persistence in the sense of a channel for all other themes. The participants indicated spirituality is essential since they were being trained for vocational ministry that simultaneously required the development of spiritual maturity as leaders. The elevated importance of spirituality by the participants indicated spiritual formation is foundational because, unless certain personal characteristics were shaped, then an early exit was expected. For example, humility and meekness provided a teachable spirit to receive teaching, even when it differed from the student’s own personal beliefs. Whereas, if one remained proud and arrogant, with an “I know better” attitude, then the prevailing outcome will be the opposite of persisting. Additional personal characteristics of discipline, patience, and maintaining priorities led to spiritual formation. Aaron clearly made the connection of spiritual formation as the channel to collegiate success. The rationale is to “emphasize a student’s spiritual growth because if you help that
student’s spiritual life, then they’re going to stay focused on their coursework.” As Zion persisted he observed “it really started transforming the way I think spiritually.”

**Spiritual Formation Centered on a Teachable Attitude and a Disciplined Life**

With the development of spiritual formation an inherent motivation grew into a teachable spirit, creating a willingness to receive and a hunger to gain more information. The development of spiritual formation is a channel for both an attitude and discipline toward persistence. Participants communicated the posture of a teachable attitude in various ways. A proper mindset favorable toward persistence is a meek, teachable spirit, maintained even when personal beliefs differed from what was taught in class. Persistence was actually being generated as additional teaching answered former beliefs in an inductive, loving manner.

Aaron learned from his own personal experience that persistence was demonstrated with a proper attitude inviting spiritual formation:

I learned to be open-minded. Those preconceptions that I came here with, I had to let them go because you come here thinking you know something and you really don’t know the real world. You just have surface knowledge. I learned to just allow my heart to grow and mature. Some would run off half-cocked, but they don’t know [the Bible]. You’ve got to study. When it comes to preaching, people think you can just jump in the pulpit and pastor. There’s more to it than that. The disciples were with Jesus three and a half years being under His tutelage. They would learn as he tutored, taught, and trained them. That is what I was doing.

Others joined the chorus of noting the positive benefits that came from a teachable spirit. Joseph “was always excited and willing to learn…. Each instructor helped me learn more. Especially
the different doctrines of the Bible. [Additional subjects like] learning how to exegete the
Word.... It helped me desire to study more.”

Matthew: I never felt like not going to school. My excitement was always ‘what am I
going to learn today? What’s something new I am going to find out today?’…. It would
provoke thought as professors would explain Scriptures …. That propels you to go home
and look at it and be like, ‘Wow, I didn't see that there!’ So being exposed to different
professors, different teachings, new knowledge definitely aided my spiritual growth. It
was just being exposed to different things outside of my box. There was a time early on
when a professor was explaining things different than my tradition. But the thing about it
was that he was so patient and so I just sat there and took it all in and carefully
considered what he meant. That’s what I mean by being provoked. To consider
something new, but to be open to evaluating it…. That’s part of maturity. I caught
myself early on in that process because I was sitting there steaming. I’m thinking this is
why they [cultural naysayers] told me not to come to this school. But you just persist and
keep coming back for more knowledge. The most important thing is not to be combative.

Gabriel: I would work all day, but then I’d jump in the truck and head over to school [for
class], just excited about coming to learn, and then coming home and sharing it with my
wife and going out to other places and sharing it with people. It was just exciting. That
kept me coming back. Cause I knew, five students, or more, who thought they were too
smart for all this and just quit. It’s all about continuing to grow and that’s what I asked
the Lord every school year that I continue to grow, and that I continue [post-graduation]
to grow spiritually. A humble heart is the key.
Ethan: Years ago I had a full scholarship to [a Christian liberal arts college] and one day, frustrated with a math class, I just up and quit. I moved back home and the very next day I knew I had made a mistake. The worse mistake of my life. Then, all these many years later, I was afforded another opportunity and I knew in my heart I would not make the same mistake. I regret the choice that I made. I had to do things different this time. I had a different attitude.

A teachable spirit was summed up by Isaiah who declared “the most important thing that was driving me was learning from the professors about who God is and His plan for my life. I was willing to receive everything professors fed me.” Likewise, Nathan mirrored the spiritual fruit in acknowledging “you are there to get information to build spiritual maturity, so you have to humble yourself.”

A teachable attitude was accompanied by a disciplined life as a significant part of spiritual formation. Participants communicated the aspects of a disciplined life in a variety of ways. It included discipline according to proper priorities, maintaining strict time management, and a general recognition of the necessary sacrifices. Matthew introduced the subject affirming “the school has helped me to be more disciplined, to really, really take time to hear the points and then to study.” But he was not alone in reflecting upon discipline’s importance for persistence.

Daniel: It's so important that you maintain your fellowship with the Lord. That's going to help you tremendously. You need to make sure you spend that time in prayer with the Lord. Spend time studying just in your own devotion, and not just studying for school, not just studying for ministry. That's important. The struggle was there for me, finishing school, still keeping the Lord first, still taking care of my family, because I needed to
definitely do those three…. Without question, time management is so important, and trying to make all those things happen over a semester is definitely challenging when you are constantly having to ensure that you get your work done as well as these other things that you are juggling. Discipline is essential.

Gabriel concluded, “I tried to be as organized as I can, keep things as structured as I can to keep due dates and meet deadlines” as did Caleb, noting the “key ingredient [to completing assignments] is always time. In order to find time, you must have time management. In fact, many times you have more than one thing you need to do. You don’t have a choice there but to prioritize.”

**Spiritual Formation Focused on God’s Call to Prepare for Service**

Spiritual formation is a channel for persistence because the academic process was perceived as part of God’s call to vocational service. It became fundamentally important to acknowledge that God’s call to preach was also God’s call to prepare so that gaining a Bible college education was contained within a call to ministry and essential to fulfilling that call. Experiencing the training by going through college was viewed as spiritual training both personally and professionally.

The mentality that college is a part of the calling to ministry was professed by Daniel. Confidently, he believed “not only does God call us to the ministry, but He calls us to prepare. School should be considered part of your ministry.” Coming to college viewed as equal to a call to the ministry was a firmly held belief by other participants. To fulfill the call to ministry, students believed they then must persist in fulfilling a college degree in preparation.

Joseph: I knew for the rest of my life I wanted to be in ministry. I found a school that just lined right up in helping you fulfill that goal. That really was a major driving force.
Recognizing that God's call on your life to be involved in ministry also meant I had to get the training.

Isaiah: The main factor that kept me coming, the Lord had told me to come to school. I was obedient, and then, once I arrived here and continued to seek guidance from the Lord, things became a lot easier. All of us were here because God sent us and we were to learn the Word of God. It wasn’t just a matter of sitting in the classroom. We were here because God sent us here so that we can go out and disciple, and to teach and preach His Word.

Aaron: It’s a calling…. When it comes down to God, people think you can just jump in the pulpit and be pastor. It’s more than that. I got rooted and grounded in the truth in college to I was prepared for the pulpit and pastoring.

Gabriel: [College] became a platform to do what God has called me to do with the school functioning as a boot camp, so to speak, of learning and then taking it out and having somewhere to go and apply it to because application is key…. I think when you are able to go out and do what you’ve learned and continually do it on a consistent basis, then it just adds a whole other element to where God is trying to take you spiritually.

**Spiritual Formation Grew by Witnessing God’s Interventions**

Spiritual formation is a channel to persistence as the overwhelming challenges to gaining a Bible college education were determined impossible except for God’s interventions. Often, these interventions were seen as God working behind the scenes to bring about whatever was necessary for academic persistence. Testimonies of God’s behind the scenes workings included secular employment cooperation, leniency offered by superiors in ministerial staff positions, and relieving time management constraints.
God’s working to alter the conventional thinking of a boss was observed by participants as a major work of God on their behalf.

Daniel: Even though the job [secular employment] I was doing was not related to the degree I was pursuing … they said, ‘Daniel, you need to continue to go to school. It's so important that you finish your degree.’ My managers encouraged me to go to school. It's evident when you can see the hand of God working through those in my corporate leadership. It provided a strong support system for me.

Nathan: A great turn of events; within my job it's very few Christians. My boss and I were on a team together years ago. He was a little bit older than me. Fast forward the clock 15 years later, now he's my boss at the place that I worked at when I decided to ask if I could attend day classes [in college]. Only God could have done something like this. When I proposed an alternative work schedule so I could attend day classes that was the person I proposed it to. Immediately, he was like, ‘Oh, you're going to Bible college?’ I was like, yeah. I don't know what was going on in his mind, but I could tell he was kind of like, okay. Traditional train of thought would have been, well this doesn't align with what you do here at work, so why would you want to go, but he didn't ask any of that. I have to mention him [the immediate boss], because without him saying yes, and selling it to the higher boss, then I wouldn't have ever been able to start the day classes. Only God could do something unheard of like this.

Caleb: In particular, when I was still working with the [secular employment] I got fortunate in that I didn't have to be out kicking in doors like I did at first. I got assigned an inside type job where I was managing a particular area [of his secular employment]. That kept me from being out all times of the night. So the Lord took care of that
schedule. Once you start to do it, then the Lord makes a way for you and then he allots you the time to do it. It’s a faith matter. But the Lord fixed it in such a way where I could manage all of that and college. The Lord made a way. It was difficult. It was stressful but He made a way for me to do it.

Isaiah: I trusted the Lord and prayed a lot and asked the Lord for guidance to assist me making it through multiple tasks that I had. God gave me an understanding Commander in the Army. He [the Commander] allowed me to go to school and take day classes and said if he needed anything, he would call me. So that helped a lot. Then, with my pastor. I was working with the church full time, but the pastor understood when I had classes and assignments. He would always make sure of my schedule before assigning me to preach. He was considerate of not putting too heavy a load on me. So he would work with me in that area. I thanked the Lord for that because it could have been different.

**Spiritual Formation Depended on the Holy Spirit’s Enablement**

Spiritual formation is a channel to persistence in light of the experiences of depending upon the Holy Spirit’s divine enablement. The Holy Spirit was attributed to enabling discipline, maintaining priorities, and manifesting fruit, such as humility and a teachable spirit.

It was the Holy Spirit who prompted Isaiah to attend class and who prevented him from using an excuse of being too tired to attend.

The Holy Spirit is working all the time. A lot of nights I didn't want to get up and drive from [home to the college], driving that 30-minute drive, but soon as I began to waver [the] Holy Spirit just pushes me and I would go. The Holy Spirit never told me to quit, but always to keep on pushing. There is that level of dependency and the inner working to say keep studying.
Matthew explained the Holy Spirit provided the motivation for enrollment as well as providing a settled sense of peace and security.

A major factor that encouraged me to attend and finish Bible college was the Holy Spirit pressing upon my heart that I needed someone to teach me more than I knew and that could help me in preaching and sharing the Gospel the right way. Once I got here (enrolled in Bible college), I knew this is where I needed to be. In a previous [secular] college I felt out of place because of the lack of relationship with professors and no sign of patience or compassion. You would figure, when you get a new student just come into college, even for an older student, that they would be more patient and understanding.

But when I came to [Bible college], the Holy Spirit just gave me a real sense of security. Caleb attributed his persistence to the inner working of the Holy Spirit who was “working all the time and I [now] recognize a level of dependency and that internally, the Holy Spirit [was] saying keep studying, keep on pushing.”

**Spiritual Formation Welcomed Cultural Diversity**

Spiritual formation is a channel to academic persistence for mutual appreciation and respect within cultural diversities. Though African American students are the majority in both colleges, students expressed appreciation of learning from teachers and being with fellow students from all ethnicities. There was freedom from the normal cultural pressures and worldviews which afforded all students a brief reprieve from negative experiences and beliefs. Gabriel was forthright concerning cultural diversity.

I did have two African American teachers that were phenomenal. So energetic, so full of life. They were able to relate not just to the Black students, but relate to everybody. But I think some of my best experiences and people that have helped me at the college were
not my African American teachers. It was the Caucasian teachers. I think that’s a big component of the school. You get people in there that everybody can relate to on some type of level because the one thing that we all have in common is that we're believers…. I just wanted to glean from everybody. I just didn't want to glean from the Black teachers or the Black students. I wanted to get a wealth of knowledge. I think the school does a good job coming together and working together. We do have to work at it because most of us do go to a predominantly same race type of church. But when we get to school, we have to come out of that zone where we can learn how to incorporate other people into our spiritual well-being and so I think the school does a good job of doing that…. In school, there was not a White section, a Black section, Hispanic, or Asian, we were all together…. The school taught me a lot about diversity and how we can benefit from each other and the world can see this is what the Body of Christ looks like.

Nathan was pleasantly surprised to learn of a healthy African American representation. But this was not his focal point once enrolled.

I was honestly shocked when I came and looked at the demographic of the school. I didn't expect to see so many African Americans here. I'd say the student body is heavily African American, the majority of it, but I wouldn't say there was some type of special connection. I'm Black, so it's almost going to be normal if I [look for] somebody else Black. But in a situation like this [Bible college context], it's not that type of link. If I was in what I assume is like, maybe a Duke or Harvard environment, I think there probably would be, because there's so few. But here, it’s a little different, and it was a healthy atmosphere.
Daniel was grateful for an administration who sets the tone for acceptance among cultural diversity:

This school was organized to help the ministers and also African-Americans who were in ministry to prepare or equip from its founder and his wife, who were great missionaries. They were willing to sacrifice and come into an urban community and help African-Americans though they were Caucasians. We know that history, and the Lord blessed us through them, and so [this Bible college] has grown because of it. The administration has a broad vision, and understands that all people belong to God, the offspring of God, and that even a more specific sense, that God's people that are born again that belong to the Lord come from all different ethnicities, all different races. That's scriptural.

Appreciation for cultural diversity was especially emphasized in a distinct way by Caleb and Ethan. Caleb: “I liked the diversity in the classroom too. We had different races, different ages and that helped.” Ethan: “Having African American professors provided additional affinity, but I had several White professors as well. They all poured into my life.”

**Spiritual Formation Matured through Direct, in-depth Study of the Bible**

Spiritual formation is a channel to persistence as the Bible is the unique subject. Studying the Bible fulfilled one of the main goals of the participants which became transformational and motivational for persistence. To elaborate on Joseph’s goal “to get as much knowledge of the Bible as I can,” Isaiah expressed his delight:

… learning from the Bible in class made me want to come to class, more and more. I was driven to continue to go to school, to finish the program, because now I have a deeper understanding of the Word [of God] and I am going to be held to a whole different level of accountability by the Lord. That kept me here also.
Gabriel was ecstatic to keep coming to class to learn more of the Bible though tired at the end of the work day.

For me it was just the sheer amount of knowledge that was being afforded to me. I just can remember being in church [prior to Bible college] and wanting more, and then feeling the Lord leading me to come to school, and then to get here and to be fed the way that I was fed was just phenomenal. Like I said, the things that I've learned here, I've been able to literally apply them. It was just amazing. I would … head over here to school [for a class], and just excited about coming and to learn more, and then coming home and sharing it with my wife and going out to other places and sharing it with people. It was just exciting. That just kept me coming back.

Nathan: I realized immediately almost, within the first year of being taught the Word was, ‘Man, all those years that I taught Bible study so elementary, and in many ways incorrectly.’ I kind of almost got depressed to a point, and just thinking, ‘Man, all the stuff I missed, and all the stuff I overlooked.’ That kind of built a thirst and this is important.

Zion: So when I started coming here and able to hear what Scripture says, I was like, ‘Wow. How far off am I?’ That’s what kept me going. It was such a gap from what I knew in the Bible from what I was being taught.

Nothing compared to growth in biblical knowledge for Aaron. “The greatest experience here at [the Bible college] to me was the depth that I grew in the Word. The depth because now I can sit and talk to anyone about the Word.” Each class produced additional Bible knowledge provided a rich level of satisfaction to feed persistence.
In summary, spiritual formation serves as a channel of persistence in light of its attributes. In addition to participants’ Spirit-produced fruit of discipline and teachable attitudes, spiritual formation focused on God’s call to prepare for service, grew by witnessing God’s interventions and in study of the Bible, each in dependence on the Spirit’s enablement. Spiritual formation also welcomed cultural diversity to likewise reinforce persistence.

**The Fruit of Persistence: Christian Service Formation**

One of the main goals for Bible college enrollment is preparation for ministry. It was the experience of the participants to express appreciation for the numerous aspects of preparation for ministry being fulfilled with each semester and even with each course. Not only were the college experiences preparation for a future ministry, it fed the students’ current ministries which served as one of the strongest persistence factors. The third persistence theme to emerge is Christian service formation.

**Relevant Course Material Directly Feeds Christian Service Ministries**

Course material provided biblical content that was communicated in such a way that participants found it readily usable for upcoming sermons and Bible studies in their ministries. In other words, course materials were not put on the back burner for eventual use, but were ready-made for immediate ministerial responsibilities. Like Aaron said, “It was an excellent thing to use the course materials for church sermons.” Likewise, Gabriel said, “… that’s another key factor that really kept me there because I mean the things I learned here [at Bible college], I’ve been able to literally apply them to my ministry. It’s just amazing.” It was Joseph who connected persistence with course materials feeding his ministry of teaching classes in church and at nursing homes noting “these ministries helped me to stay in school, because I needed to learn more to help me in them.” Others elaborated quite extensively.
Caleb: Everything that I learned in the classroom I utilize in ministry. Not just some, I mean every single bit of it. Every single bit of it I've utilized in a practical way in the church, in the street, in the prison, everywhere I am ministering. For example, one professor provided lessons on the roles of the husband and the wife … using Ephesians five. I use that in premarital counseling and post-marital counseling. So what you learn in the classroom is most definitely helpful as a preacher. That's part of why you're going to school. A lot of times it gets stressful because you're preparing to write a sermon, which is time consuming, or, you're preparing to teach a lesson, which is time consuming when you've got other stuff to do. Then you can take some of that what you learned in class and that's part of your sermon study too. You're studying in class or working on an assignment and the Holy Spirit says to use that for your sermon. That happened all the time.

Ethan: Every semester my classes were relevant to what was going on in life. I was able to really take my knowledge and training and really applied it in our ministry. Applied it in life. Applied in teaching, because when we [he and his wife] teach a Bible study class …, my training here really enhanced teaching those classes. It was a blessing. Every course that I took was so relevant in the timing of life that we were in. It was just phenomenal. All of those classes began to be so relevant in my life.

Isaiah: It was because I've been in class and the Lord has given me sermons for the week, right there doing the study. He gave me a sermon, the one that the professor is teaching or the lesson that we're on. It was like the Lord said, ‘This is your sermon,’ and the Holy Spirit puts it together. So he provides for us while we were in class, because I tell you, like I said, I was preaching on Sunday and I was coming to classes and then dealing with
the family and all the other things that we had that we were dealing with in life. Then right here in class the Lord is getting the sermon prepared.

Daniel: I learned many tools as I was going through school that helped me in teaching as well as preaching. It helped me to better live out the Word of God and to see it in a different perspective than what I probably would have if I only had my studies and the scriptures themselves, without any help [of the Bible college]. Having the interaction with the professors and the students as well as taking a look at the resources needed, i.e., methods of teaching …, and how you can better equip yourself with different types, different styles of teaching based on your audience, and learning those things was so important for me, and it really enhanced my ministry.

Zion purposely enrolled in classes that would provide for upcoming sermon series because “it was always a motivation.” Relevant course material directly fed Christian service ministries.

**Course Materials Elevated Ministry Competency**

Relevant course materials not only directly fed ministry competency, but they also elevated it. Course materials formalized exegetical techniques. As the participants grew in their ministry skills, so grew persistence. A Bible college fosters persistence when it fulfills its mission to train individuals for ministry. Aaron recognized a need for elevating ministry competency by stating ministry is “a calling, but you have to be professional at it.” Once Zion was heavily involved in ministry, his awareness for help was magnified, which he received by persisting in his studies:

So every class was geared towards me becoming this great pastor and this great teacher because I don't want people to be uninformed. My perception as a student changed when I started planting a church and being a pastor versus being a leader in the church. So now
I have to learn how to craft my messages and develop them and counsel people. So it became a motivation. I took the classes I had to take, but at the same time I took the classes [electives] that also are going to improve me as a pastor. Certain classes helped me improve that makes you really give yourself a gut check…. But [course content he taught as a pastor] helped my people so much.

Joseph was elevated to a ministry position as the pastor recognized an increased level of ministry competency, which was later affirmed by denominational leadership. Having the approval of his superiors produced a motivational desire to persist. Other participants agreed.

My pastor assigned me to teach Sunday School because he saw I was in college learning and growing. It was a challenge to teach in front of adults that are older than me by 20 to 30 years. It was a challenge because some people get a bad attitude when there's a younger person teaching. That's another reason I wanted to learn more. The different courses I took helped me look at the Scripture in a different way, to go deeper, in depth, and to rightly divide the Word of truth. Being part of the ministerial staff in the [Name of Denomination] church, we have quarterly conferences where we report both on paper and in person. We read the report in front of the elder, the pastor, and again where the presiding elder, my pastor, and the other ministers, and also the lay people that comes to the quarterly conferences they would read the report. He'll ask are you pursuing any further studies, and I'll say yes I'm attending [Name of college] for my bachelors in Biblical Studies. He asked what type of ministry are you involved in, and I'll list the ministries that I'm involved with. Usually they are very positive about this because they desire other ministers to go to [same college]. The leadership of my church speaks
positive words about my progress. I think that’s why my pastor assigned me to teach Sunday school because he saw what I was learning, growing, and doing.

Isaiah: The material that I was learning here [at college], really, really encouraged me to study more so that I could be more effective in the Sunday School teaching, and also when I began to preach. When I started preaching, all of the education that I had learned here, I started applying proper hermeneutics and all these things, to give the people the understanding of what we were teaching and to make it practical.

Daniel: This undergrad education has helped me in so many other ways. It opened up new avenues of thinking, and so it helps me to do other things. It helps me even more so administratively. I have strong administrative skills but when I look back on it, the Lord was preparing me for leadership even though my natural temperament is an introvert…. But when I get into those roles, I had to be an extrovert and I had to communicate more. Those things plus college helped me as I went along.

Gabriel: ...the things that I was learning, I was able to teach it and preach it and give it back to the people in a way that they can understand. The Lord just kept putting me in places where I could use the things that He had given me. That’s how I began to refine and fine tune the things I learned at the school. This provided motivation.

In summary, Christian service formation serves as the fruit of persistence in light of its attributes. Fruit from persistence was evidenced as relevant course material directly fed Christian service ministries. Additionally, course materials elevated ministry competency as Christian service formation likewise reinforced persistence.
The Bond of Persistence: Family Support Network

A fourth theme to emerge from the data analysis is a strong passion toward not wanting to disappoint those closest to the participants. This included a wife, children, parents, and grandparents, with a strong desire to start or carry on the spiritual legacy of the family. This drive to establish or carry on a family legacy and eager to avoid disappointing others provided confident reassurance toward success. This family legacy support network reinforced the positive Bible college experiences.

Wife and Children

Participants’ wives and children were strong supporters and cheerleaders. Ethan had no doubt, “My wife was absolutely supportive of me being in school here. She would just say, ‘Keep moving. Don't give up.’” Daniel’s unparalleled support of a wife was “without question, … the most influential person to help me, to encourage me when I just wanted to quit sometimes. My wife had the greatest impact on constantly propelling me to go forward.” Gabriel had the assurance of the greatest support from a wife who was “just always in my corner inspiring me.” Isaiah and his wife were in the same Bible college at the same time and drew from mutual encouragement.

My wife played a very integral role, a very important role in coming to school because the Lord had instructed both of us to go to school. She would encourage me. We would be in the same class. We would sit down and study the classwork together, and she would encourage me. She might get a little higher grade than mine, and she would say, ‘Study a little more, and you will be all right.’

Joseph could share what he learned with his wife which helped in her ministerial role:
My wife was very understanding of my multiple roles and how I had to go to school. She would ask me what I learned in school and I would share with her which she used for her classes [she taught at church]. She kept encouraging me to stay on my goal [to get a biblical degree], and helping me so I could get things done and helping me get to school on time. She was very supportive to allow me to do school work last thing at night.

Nathan: My wife loved the school for the spirituality I gained. My wife was very, very supportive. I'll tell you what, she was the management around the house. It takes a lot of homework. You got a lot of writing in the evening, and reading. My wife cleared out a space. She just made it easier logistically, around the house. When I got home at night, her first question would be, do you have anything [school work] to do this evening? She was very supportive in that area…. There were times I was at home complaining to my wife about the work load and how it was getting expensive, and the Lord would provide. My wife said it out loud, ‘See, you always were worried about it, and the Lord always provides.’ She was always my first line of encouragement, just giving me some encouraging words when I needed it most.

Sometimes a wife could be very blunt to keep the participant on track.

Zion: My wife would be all serious in talking to me, ‘You can do this. Boy, get to that night class. Don’t be staying home and don’t try to slip out of class early.’ But she saw how my passion changed and how it literally changed the way I preach, made her so excited and say, ‘Wow, look what this has done for you.’ That was my motivation.

Another source creating a bond to persistence were participants who desired to set an example for children.
Caleb: Being a role model and example for them [children] definitely made me feel good because I noticed how it impacted them. When I was down in the basement studying, they’d come and just sit on the sofa…. They learned by visual example about what it takes. It's a great role model for them as they understood what Dad was going through.

Ethan: I would always encourage my children to go to school while they are young when you don't have all the distractions. I encouraged them to do their very best in school. I would tell them that every morning, because I would take them to school and I was hoping my experience going too late in life would help to make that point.

Six of the participants were enrolled in college at the same time as their college-age children. A cooperative competition encouraged persistence:

Aaron: I told my daughter to not let me graduate before her. She started going to summer school because she didn’t want daddy graduated college before she did. So she went to summer school each summer just to beat me out, which she did. She would also help critique my papers. The fact that I was going to college was a positive experience upon my family.

Isaiah: My wife and my family, they were very supportive of coming to school, and especially my kids, they'd look at me and say, ‘Daddy, you are old to be going to school.’ That encouraged me, so they became competitive in school to keep up with dad. I would get good grades, and I would take it back and show it to them and encourage them, and they encouraged me. They saw my wife and me both leaving and going to school at night. Then, on top of that, they would encourage their daddy: ‘You can get an A the next time if you try a little harder.’ They saw that mom and dad were going to school, so
that pushed them to work harder in their school work also. My family all worked together, and was patient, and everybody was very supportive.

There was also a desire to set a standard and to leave a legacy.

Daniel: I'm the first preacher of our family. I asked the Lord to at least call one preacher every generation [family member] until He comes back. Of course, [his son’s name], who thought he wasn't going to be a preacher, told everybody, ‘I'm a PK [preacher’s kid], the last thing I want to be is a preacher.’ Guess what, the Lord took his time, and I didn't coerce him [his son] at all. I didn't try to lead him that direction at all. I wanted him to respond to the Lord, just as I did. No one coerced me at all. And when my son made his decision he said, ‘I never thought I would be a preacher, but the Lord called me, I can't get away from it.’ Now I’m waiting on one of my grandchildren. One of them. But my son is a preacher. That’s why I kept going through college.

Family had a positive effect on persistence. There was a strong desire to avoid disappointing loved ones and to maintain their approval. This thought always lingered in Gabriel’s mind.

Gabriel: And my children, they would be in their beds waiting up for me to get home [from a night class] and it became a ritual that I would tell each one something I learned in class and then to pray with them…. So that will make you pay attention [in class]!

Extended Family

Other members of the family support network bonded participants to persistence as moms and dads and others provided encouragement. It was no surprise, as Isaiah acknowledges, how proud each participant was when a mom witnessed the progress and/or graduation. “My mother got to witness me going back to school and she got to witness me graduating and it meant a lot to me to know she was pleased with what I was doing.” Daniel echoed these thoughts, “My mom
was so elated that I was continuing my education here as a minister and going to [Bible college]. She definitely was cognizant of all that was going on, and was a great encouragement.” Others joined in the chorus to also include dads and grandparents.

Caleb: My dad passed away in [19]96 and then my mom just passed. My mom was aware I graduated with a degree from Bible college. She was glad because she raised me and knew how crazy I used to be so she was glad to see me do this. She was glad to see me getting close to the Lord. She really wanted me to do well. A great supporter always telling me I’m doing a good job, and proud of me. When I finished a class she would ask what grade did I make and I typically could tell her I made an A. That made me feel good because when I was in high school I didn’t make any A’s.

Gabriel: My mom and dad were so proud of me. I just never saw my dad be this proud of me. He told his pastor about my ministerial studies and so his pastor had me preach at their church. It was really exciting and those are the things that kept me motivated.

Joseph: My parents attend the same church as us and they are proud I’m a minister. They’re proud I [went] to school, and they were there when I did my trial sermon several years ago. My parents just [only] finished high school. My two sisters and me are the only ones with [college] degrees. I knew this made my parents proud. When they would tell me how proud they are, I was so motivated.

For Ethan, to continue in a lineage of pastors was a proud persistence factor.

My mom died when I was eight and my dad died after I was already a student here. But he was really encouraged, and more than ever he really encouraged me, because we come from a lineage of pastors. My grandfather, my two uncles, my great-grandfather all were pastors. My great-great-grandfather was one of the founding fathers of [a religious
college]. It was just a joy to continue in that legacy. It was a joy to have that legacy moving forward, and looking back and understanding, this is our family heritage I am extending.

In summary, a family support network serves as the bond of persistence in light of its attributes. A wife and children, along with extended family members reinforced persistence and provided strong supporters and cheerleaders. Additionally, participants desired to set the example and to leave a legacy so that a family support network likewise reinforced persistence.

**The Accountability in Persistence: The Local Church Connection**

A strong direct connection with a local church formed a fifth direct link to academic persistence for the participants. This link largely instituted an accountability chain to reinforce persistence in training for the ministry. The relationship was commonly made by means of a pastor-mentor for the participant who often directed the participant toward the respective Bible college, and kept the dialogue going with regular follow-up as to the progress. Another aspect of the local church connection is the participants own Christian service ministry. The participant frequently was moved into a leadership position, or even became a pastor while still a student. This local church connection provided accountability toward persistence as the church observed growth in the student-pastor and positively commented on the improvements. Thus, Christian service as a student actually fed persistence and overcame the student ministry hindrances to persistence which included the necessary time constraints.

**Pastor-Mentor Accountability Connection**

A pastor under which the participant was originally attending and serving, served as a role model and directed the participant toward further ministry training at the respective Bible
college. The pastor-mentor then provided accountability toward continued progress and academic persistence.

Caleb: The president [of the Bible college] and my pastor were real good friends. They would talk about how good it is to get a good biblical foundation. I wanted to experience that on a more formal level. My pastor spoke very highly of him [the Bible college president] and I decided to enroll. Then once I came here I got hooked from the Bible knowledge I was gaining. My pastor encouraged me all the time I was a student. He would keep track of how I was doing and always ask how things were going. And I would relay the information concerning the progress I was making and he definitely kept tabs on me which I always liked.

Isaiah: One of the most important factors encouraging my persistence in college to me was my pastor. He came to [the same Bible college]. As a matter of fact, he referred me to come here. So I came, and he would always come in and ask me, ‘How are you doing?’ He would come and check on me and make sure that I was doing my work. He said, ‘Now, if you're doing good, I'm going to know about it. I know the dean down there, and I know the president.’ He also said, ‘Now, if you're not doing good, they are going to let me know.’ He would come in, every now and again, talk to the dean and the president, to see how we're doing in school. He would encourage us.

Nathan: My pastor went here [same Bible college] in the 70's. From the time that I met my pastor in 1999 … he brought up in conversation, about his experience here. I didn't have any formal training, but I could recognize that something wasn't consistent, so with my pastor going here, once I found the time, I started. That was one of the driving forces, is that he liked it [the Bible college]. That helped out a lot, with my pastor being behind
me. So from then it was kind of a mentor-mentee relationship. I would take my young minister complaints and he would listen. Most of the time, he wouldn't say anything, he would just listen. Basically, he would hear the vent, and then he would just give me some encouragement. The relationship grew over the last 18 years, to just where we're real close today. He would always inquire about my studies. He's phenomenal at moving me up in accordance with where I am with my spiritual walk so he tracked along everything that I was doing. He tries to keep me intertwined with things which has driven me a lot.

Gabriel: The church I was attending had a great, humble pastor. That’s where I got the most practice learning how to hone my craft because he would literally let me preach almost every Sunday. I found myself pouring over class notes so that I could give the very best sermons possible. My pastor used to call me all the time, ‘Hey, can you look over my sermon notes and make sure that I have the points clear and enough Scriptures for each one?’ It just made me want to excel and to do more and to learn and to grow.

Zion: I saw how an education changed my mentor’s preaching and teaching. So I was like, ‘Okay, I need to get into school.’ And he helped me so much. My mentor guided me toward Bible college and I was so motivated to follow in his steps.

Some participants had the joy and privilege to carry on the ministry of the pastor-mentor, and in some cases, continue a legacy. Proud to carry the mantle meant the participant would persist.

Daniel: My pastor graduated from [the respective Bible college] and was the Academic Dean at that time. My pastor, my ‘father in the ministry,’ said, ‘Daniel, go back to school.’ I spent 16 years under him as an assistant [pastor] and he actually handed the
ministry off to me. That relationship absolutely carried the day in terms of that mentality to finish.

Aaron: My pastor would always tell me that I needed to go to [the specific Bible college] because he graduated from [same college]. Before he got sick, he was trying to get me into [same college]. Time he transitioned [to heaven], I finally started [at same college]. The only thing that I regret that I didn’t come while he was living. He was right on target with a whole lot of stuff that he was teaching me. I feel like I am carrying on his legacy.

When a pastor-mentor demonstrated confidence in the participants, it resulted in a high motivation for persistence. Nathan was motivated when “one day my pastor said to me, ‘Hey, when you graduate, I’d really like for you to restart ours’ [Church-sponsored Bible institute]. His wisdom and his confidence in me has driven me a lot.”

**Christian Service Encouragement**

Christian service demands time which is a precious commodity for the nontraditional student. Yet, instead of Christian service being a deterrent to persistence, it actually provided motivation and inspiration for the participant as members and attendees of the participant’s ministries observed and positively commented on the ministry improvements.

Aaron: There are many of them [church members] who many times said to me, ‘I can see your growth since you’ve been at [Bible college].’ They saw my growth and that was and is always personally encouraging. That would definitely factor into me saying, ‘I’m going to get more [training at Bible college].’

Caleb: I was called to pastor a church while I was still a student at [the Bible college]. About half the time I was a student here I was pastoring. I think they [the members] appreciated the fact that I was getting more training as a pastor. They liked the fact their
pastor was improving himself to be a better teacher and preacher for them. Many times they would tell me and it made me feel good and was definitely motivational. They knew I was going to school to make sure everything I was giving them was true and no fluff.

Daniel: They [church members] could see and experience that my [pastoral] ministry, teaching, preaching was so much more impactful because of my [Bible] college training, and so it helped my church, and they said, ‘Look, I think highly of you that you're able to keep the Lord first, your family, your work, and also do ministry. Keep going. Look, you're going to make it. This too will pass,’ and all these things. Those were special words.

Isaiah: The greatest thing that kept me persistent as a student, is that I was being well-equipped as a servant-leader. The church family … encouraged me because they said, ‘Hey, the teaching that you are getting down at [the Bible college], it shows because now you are beginning to preach more practical so we can understand it’ and they meant as opposed to what they saw before I started attending [the Bible college]. When the pastor saw the change, he said, ‘Now you are eating meat. You are eating steaks now.’ Also the people see the change to my daily life. They said, ‘There is something different about you,’ or, they said, ‘We see a change, a positive change.’ But this was very positive for me because as I applied the Word to my everyday life, it made me a better person, and it began to make me a better student.

Joseph: My pastor assigned me to teach an adult Sunday School because he knew I was attending [Bible college], and because he saw what I was learning, and growing, and doing... And that’s another reason I wanted to learn more. But the people would express appreciation, saying they liked the teaching, or that I taught well…. They spoke
positively about me and I know it’s because of the different courses I’ve taken [in Bible college] helped me to go deeper and my [Sunday School] class noticed.

In summary, the local church connection serves as accountability for persistence in light of its attributes. A pastor-mentor connection produced an accountability, accompanied by the mentee’s desire to please the mentor. Additionally, church members’ positive observations and comments toward participants spiritual and ministerial growth were greatly affirming as a local church connection likewise reinforced persistence.

Summary

In this chapter a summary description is provided concerning the participants. Then, the findings of the research are presented within the context of the three guiding research questions. Research question one revealed definitions of persistence mentally, culturally, and spiritually. Research question two revealed general academic persistence experiences that relationships transcend all persistence factors, a sense of belonging provided a protective factor, and ethnic identity drove participants to disprove the naysayers wrong and to maintain the approval of advocates. Research question three revealed five specific persistence themes: Spiritual formation, the Bible college experience, Christian service formation, a family support network, and a local church connection.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

This final chapter begins with a summary of the findings of the research. Also provided is a discussion of the findings, with a focus on the interpretations and their implications in light of the literature, presented in the context of the theoretical framework. Next, conclusions drawn from this study are detailed. Finally, limitations are presented as are recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand factors that contribute to academic persistence for nontraditional undergraduate African American male four-year degree completers from select evangelical Bible colleges in the southeastern United States. The hermeneutic phenomenological research design allowed participants to explain their persistence experiences by voice and written reflection which were then analyzed for categorical units; themes that emerged were negotiated among the participants. Ten participants from two Bible colleges were recruited through purposeful and snowball sampling techniques to discuss their academic persistence experiences and inform the research on the factors that affect persistence for this particular population of students.

Data collection included a demographic survey, a one-on-one interview, a focus group interview, and reflective e-journaling. Participants shared experiences which they attributed as having motivated them to persist in their academic degree programs to graduation. Data analysis included layers of coding and the constant comparison technique that reduced the data to thematic units which were reviewed and interpreted to determine categories of factors positively enabling academic persistence. Quotes from each participant were used to contribute to the
descriptions of each theme derived from the data which explained persistence factors. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and The Adult Resilience Theory (Richardson, 2002) provided a framework for this research. Given that the purpose of this study was to explore experiences related to academic persistence, three research questions guided this study. First, how do participants describe persistence? Second, what type of experiences do participants understand as having contributed to their persistence at Bible college? Third, what specific factors do participants identify as having contributed to their persistence at Bible college?

Research question one revealed the participants’ descriptions of persistence being generally defined as focusing on the purpose of a Bible college degree, exercising patience within the context of arranging schedules according to proper priorities, practicing strict discipline as a disciple of Christ, while perceiving the challenges of education as God’s call to preparation equal to His call to ministry. Mentally, persistence was described as a slower pace of matriculation justified by an added advantage of enabling a comprehension of the rich depth of each course’s content and experiences. It is the perspective of viewing every class as important and recognizing that it will contribute to what is needed presently and especially for what will be needed in future, pastoral ministries. Culturally, there was a time higher education for African Americans was not allowed. Even when collegiate doors were opened, barriers were built by the families out of love, to protect the would-be students with the intent of sparing them from the hurt of being ostracized in college. Amongst the participants of this research, this negative cultural factor inspired an attitude of persistence described as a tunnel-vision goal to graduate, produced by a prideful attitude to prove success to all naysayers, and to avoid disappointing loved ones. Spiritually, the longer time was spent in a Bible college program, defining
persistence was understood as a process of transformation to include a recognition of being in a godly environment, and with this spiritual aspect of persistence, the educational process was allowed to have its intended humbling effect which maximized all that was received.

Research question two revealed motivational influences that served as inherent aspects of academic persistence. These influences produced an environment out of which the themes emerged in answer to research question three. The persistence experiences from research question two included a recognition that relationships transcend all persistence experiences. A sense of belonging that served as a protective factor was highlighted as an inspiring motivation. Furthermore, African American ethnic identity perspectives provided persistence in order to prove the naysayers wrong and to maintain approval of advocators. Research question three elicited specific factors for academic persistence translated into five themes which were identified as the Bible college experience, spiritual formation, Christian service formation, family support network, and a local church connection.

The Bible college experience represents the comprehensive theme for academic persistence. All of the themes intersect with this experience. Included in this persistence theme is a personable faculty, proactive administration, and an affinity with nontraditional student enrollment, accompanied by an appreciation for intergenerationality. By these, participants were connected with peers, faculty role models and mentors, and holistic resources that went far beyond anything participants could have accessed on their own. A proactive administration setting policy and practices concerning personal relationships, promoting spirituality, and support services was viewed positively by the participants. The Bible college experience kept participants coming back class after class, course after course, and year after year to graduation.
Spiritual formation includes the desires and aspirations that nontraditional undergraduate African American males are seeking in a Bible college experience and is a channel or conduit for all other persistence factors as recognized in this study. Spiritual formation occurred as participants directly studied the Bible, experienced empowerments by the Holy Spirit, and witnessed God’s personal workings on their behalf. Spiritual formation developed a teachable spirit characterized by humility and a drive to gain godly maturity. Godly maturity was demonstrated, not only in the Bible college experience but also in the various ministries in which participants served.

Participants involved in leadership positions of ministry prior to entering college was the common experience. Realizing the need for further training, they surrendered to seeking a degree in biblical studies. As the participants grew in their role as Bible college students, their ministries became more fruitful. Therefore, the fruit of the Bible college experience is Christian service formation and, the third theme to emerge in this study. The very purpose for the Bible college experience was fulfilled as student-led ministries matured. Relevant course material directly fed Christian service ministries and elevated ministry competency by providing the means for ongoing spiritual development, instilling formalized exegetical techniques, outward demonstration of communicative spiritual gifts and skills, and an ability to defend a well-rounded biblical worldview.

The academic persistence track was accompanied by two guiding factors that bonded participants to specific networks which, in turn, maintained a focus on continuing and preventing early exits. One guiding factor was the family support network of encouragers, who had full confidence in the participants’ college success and, the fourth theme. Similarly, another guiding factor, and the fifth theme, was the local church connection in which pastor-mentors served as
accountability partners and encouragers, accompanied by church members who appreciated the participants’ growth in ministry.

**Discussion**

The themes identified as influencing persistence are 1) the Bible college experience, 2) spiritual formation, 3) Christian service formation, 4) family support network, and 5) a local church connection. These point toward an interaction which takes place at the basic microsystem level influenced by the motivational experiences of inter-personal relationships. This microcosm provides the network of persistence support for nontraditional males in Bible colleges.

Participants indicated interpersonal relationships are critical as an inherent motivation transcending all persistence experiences and factors, agreeing with past research indicating interpersonal relationships produce greater levels of satisfaction (Couch, 2011). A supportive environment identified by participants as important, likewise has been researched and determined critical to campus integration for persistence (Brooks et al., 2013; Kennamer & Campbell, 2011; Newman, Wood & Harris, 2015; Strayhorn, 2015; Villareal & Garcia, 2016). Spiritual transformational experiences as an inherent persistence experience agrees with past research to indicate it overshadows all other positive persistence (Morris, et al., 2004; Schmidt, 2015). The ethnic identity perspectives of proving the naysayers wrong and avoiding the disappointment of loved ones produced an internal drive to succeed. This agrees with previous research wherein self-determination focuses on intrinsic aspects forming a strong motivation for resilience (Bush & Bush, 2013; Deci & Ryan, 2013). Maintaining a personal relationship with God, spouse, family, and accompanied by a commitment to positive attitudes likewise agrees with previous research (Deci & Ryan, 1985).
Each of the themes identified from data analysis form a part of the microsystem through which the individual is continually engaged. According to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System’s Theory, the microsystem is the smallest network of relationships, family, peers, and community. Bronfenbrenner (1977) explained:

A microsystem is the complex of relations between the developing person and environment in an immediate setting containing that person (e.g., home, school, workplace, etc.). A setting is defined as a place with particular physical features in which the participants engage in particular activities in particular roles (e.g., daughter, parent, teacher, employee, etc.) for particular periods of time. The factors of place, time, physical features, activity, participant, and role constitute the elements of a setting (p. 514).

The Ecological Systems Theory postulates that the microsystem is the most basic and direct social systems unit of interaction with institutions, educators, culture community, family, and peers. In this research, microsystems were found to have a positive impact on the persistence attitudes and the behaviors of the participants (See Figure 3). The persistence factors identified in this study were all experienced at the most basic level of relationships, engagement, and environment. In the Ecological System’s theoretical framework, the immediate settings interconnected to provide a source of super support network and motivation to the individual student at the micro level in diverse ways.
Spiritual formation provides a connection of fellowship with God by means of the Holy Spirit to reassure the student as he begins the difficult challenges of Bible college matriculation. The reassuring presence of God provides a personal heart-support security needed when one is tackling something new with many unanswered questions. Anticipating a start of a new degree program with God’s encouragement provides the impetus to persist. Once spiritual growth was apparent, the student made an immediate connection with the school because it was rightly understood as the source of the growth.
The literature has demonstrated African American males (and African Americans in general) have strong ties to spirituality and serves as a strong motivational source for participants to persist in their academic degree programs (Paredes-Collins, 2014; Riggins et al., 2008; Rine, 2014). Spirituality as a channel or conduit agrees with previous research that noted Bible colleges’ spiritual integration serves as an important source for all other persistence motivators (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Gehrke, 2013; Jett, 2010; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Morris et al., 2004; Schmidt, 2015). It has become a firm belief that “spirituality is fundamental to students’ lives” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 1). The AAMT gives a direct link of analysis for the impact of the spiritual indicating their importance to the African American ethnicity (Bush & Bush, 2013). An ecological theoretical framework that emphasizes the spiritual aspects of the African American male student provides an important aspect of an academic persistence microsystem.

The Bible college experience forms the hub, the intersection of all persistence factors, and can be described as the heart and soul of all that transpired through the process leading toward graduation. Participants experienced serendipity upon enrolling as they realized a healthy representation of other African American students. However, it was surprising to note that the Bible college experience was not tied directly to the presence of other African American students or faculty. Rather, regardless of ethnicities, there was opportunity to connect with others on campus establishing inter-connections, relationships, and to identify with those who are also nontraditional students involved in and preparing for vocational ministry. Nontraditional students training for vocational ministry provided strong, reciprocal connections.

The Bible college experience in this study also demonstrated the positive factors of providing opportunities for participants to have easy access to the administration and faculty. Such access provided the participants with role models and mentors. A proactive administration
promoting persistence agrees with the past research which indicated African American students respond healthily to administration members who go beyond professional duties to be supportive of student success and who take a personal interest in providing a support network of assistance (Flowers et al., 2015, Riggins et al., 2008).

African American males attributed relationships with faculty as extremely strong form of supporting persistence, agreeing with past literature (Mackzum, 2012) and are more prone to forming such relationships outside the classroom (Barbatis, 2010; Roscoe, 2015; Williamson, 2010). As role models, faculty can impart wisdom concerning their own nontraditional experiences and especially their pastoral experiences to guide students in school and for preparation for vocational ministry. Without these relationships, participants might not access information securing their persistence or additional understanding of ministry. Another surprising finding in connection with the Bible college experience is the minimal role of an advisor. Some of the participants started in the respective college before advisors had been established. Once advisors were instituted participants noted there was little interaction beyond the assistance in selecting classes. This is indeed an amazing oversight by the colleges when academic advising has been designated as a most important persistence factor (Culver, 2012; Ovink & Veazey, 2011; Stewart, 2015).

The fruit of the Bible college persistence is Christian service formation. Once participants understood course content fed directly into their individual ministries, and once they experienced a maturing of their ministry competencies, the motivations to succeed in school was strengthened. It also meant greater attentiveness in class, and a proactive role with peers and faculty. Participants who served in pastoral roles provide a direct connection to a local church fostering persistence. This agrees with previous research indicating Christian service bolsters
persistence in providing purpose, direction, and focus (Herndon, 2002). Yet another surprising element of this study is the fact that Christian service was not a deterrent to persistence, even though it takes a great deal of time and energy. Instead of serving as a deterrent, Christian service actually became a strong persistence factor as the biblical content and training directly fed the participants’ ministries.

The family network and local church accountability themes reinforced persistence. The family network established a firm commitment that the participant could and would be successful. Elevating a sense of responsibility and a guard against discouragement, receiving support from family evidenced throughout the data as a source of motivation for the nontraditional undergraduate African American male student. This agrees with previous research indicating persistence is the product of strong familial connections (Maroney, 2010; Roscoe, 2015; Simmons, 2014).

A network with a pastor-mentor provided accountability and instituted another microcosm layer of support for persistence. This accountability-relationship guided, guarded, and encouraged these participants. Church members reinforced the ministry development which motivated the participants in persistence. The Ecological Systems Theory has direct application with the local church because it serves as a microsystem for a direct interaction with a social community. The AAMT (Bush & Bush, 2013) also connects to local church involvement because the outer microsystem includes the impact of a spiritual congregation to provide a strong network of persistence support (Bush & Bush, 2013). Church involvement bolsters persistence in providing purpose, direction, and focus (Herndon, 2002; Bland, 2013).

The AAMT adds to the Ecological Systems Theory in amplifying the need for social and familial relationships of African American males. This need was met in that relationships
transcended all persistence factors. What was especially helpful were the reciprocal relationships of affinity with peer-to-peer nontraditional students, faculty and administration of the school, as well as family and local church networks. Every aspect of the Bible college experience reinforced and fulfilled the relational desires and needs of African American males. The AAMT also amplifies the need for a strong spiritual connection for positive results. A sense of belonging overcame initial fears to form an endearment of the participant to the college.

The Adult Resilience Theory explains the best way for students to advance is through reciprocal relationships of affinity, strengthening internal protective factors (Morales, 2000, 2010, 2014; Richardson, 2002; van Breda, 2001). Nontraditional undergraduate African American male participants indicated they knew or became aware of risk factors soon after beginning in Bible college. This is the first and initial step of The Adult Resiliency Theory. Risk Factors included little or no college experience, and much time devoted to family, employment, and ministry. Further, there was clear awareness of inefficient abilities in English grammar and spelling. Many were also well behind in computer and electronic skills and the Turabian writing style which is fairly standard in Bible colleges. The sooner students were aware of these deficiencies, protective factors could be implemented to offset them, the second step within The Adult Resilience Theory.

Protective factors included a sense of belonging to meet initial fears of returning or starting in higher education. A sense of belonging also met any cultural apprehensions as participants spoke of unconditional acceptance of all ethnicities. Another protective factor included accessing group and individual helps for learning adequate computer skills, courses and tutoring for the Turabian writing style, refreshers in reading and writing skills, and English grammar. Likewise, there were peer to peer study groups and communications in which key
information is shared and in particular, learning to closely follow each course syllabus.

Implementing these protective factors to offset risk factors is the second step in this theory. In steps three and four of the Adult Resilience Theory, participants continued to value, refine, and develop time spent with peers, faculty, family, and church-related mentors. As confidence is incrementally increased, protective factors are never abandoned but are strictly practiced, which is the fifth step of this theory.

The findings of this research support past theorists and studies which link persistence to institutional efforts in aiding student integration with Bible college social and academic environments (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993). Examples of social and academic integration include faculty and administration involvement, formal and informal interactive opportunities, all of which are all critical. Nevertheless, students’ integration into the institution should not be at the expense of critical family and local church connections. Maintaining these types of connections also support theorists who strongly urged these relationships be maintained and encouraged (Guiffrida, 2006; Mackzum, 2012; Scandoval-Lucero, 2014; Strayhorn, 2010).

The Ecological Systems and the Adult Resilience theoretical framework determines the best way for students to advance is through reciprocal relationships of affinity (family, culture, peers) which strengthen internal protective factors. Spiritual protective factors are internal, external, and relational according to extensive microsystems’ interactions which provide a support system for academic persistence. The cultural context of African American male protective factors thrive because they occur within the context of key relationships among peers (of all ethnicities), models and mentors, and family networks. These key relationships offset an intimidating situation of a new higher education experience.
Implications for Improving the Nontraditional African American Male Student Experience

The importance for recognizing persistence factors for nontraditional students is critical. Nationally, it is predicted that college enrollment for nontraditional students will continue to increase at a higher rate than enrollment of traditional-age students (Rosser-Mims et al., 2014) as “fewer than half of all students who earn bachelor’s degrees do so within five years of high school graduation” (Habley, et al., p. 16). It is projected that enrollment of students 35 and over will increase 16% by 2020, compared to 9% for those between 18 and 24 years old (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). It is likewise imperative to recognize persistence factors for African Americans as it is projected that African American student enrollment will increase 25% by 2020 (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). Even now “there is no such thing as a traditional college student. The exception has become the rule” (Habley et al., 2012, p. 46).

Institutions such as Bible colleges and other higher education bodies need to understand these factors as budgets for recruitment and retention tighten. Therefore, they need to know the most effective institutional policies and practices that promote academic retention and persistence. It is crucial for Bible colleges serving African Americans to understand specific retention and persistence factors are linked to student attitudes, relationships, and their backgrounds. All academic factors interlink with support systems from within and from outside the educational institution to ultimately impact African American male persistence (Kena et al., 2014). Serving the nontraditional student requires an understanding beyond the traditional college student. Target services that are available to students who are pressed for time and attention are an integral part of an academic system that appropriately meets the needs of nontraditional students.
Interconnect the Student and Institutional Context

Bible colleges must understand the nontraditional undergraduate African American male student. This study demonstrated that the family and local church connections are critical to persistence. Using these connecting points serves to strengthen what these students expressed are two stabilizing, guiding factors.

Triangulate with family. The importance of family with nontraditional undergraduate African American male students has been well established and is in agreement with this study (Dabney, 2012; Roscoe, 2015). The family factor must be considered as to how retention and persistence formulas are used. The family context is likened to a stake tied to a young tree in order to keep it growing straight and strong. Family context connects the student to the Bible college experience so as to keep the student growing strong in the educational setting of a Bible college. The key, then, is for administrations to attempt to link the family to the institution giving them a perspective of the rigors of the higher education setting which invites them to cooperate in more supportive ways.

Within academic advising, or in a new student orientation, students should be guided concerning the importance of their family support network as it serves to foster academic success. Additionally, information can be communicated to assist a student with a family written agreement plan regarding expectations, goals, and timelines for spouses and children. Providing input for improving communication regarding the additional responsibilities of a higher education degreed program can be a preventative measure. Wise is an administration to encourage persistence by hosting semester events that include the family. Hosting family events reinforces the importance of family ties to the institution creating a welcoming environment in which a family can be reassured of an open-ended invitation to spend time on campus. This
encourages integration into the college experience, and sharing in the struggles and victories of their college student(s).

**Triangulate with the local church.** This study has demonstrated the critical role a student’s home church plays in the college experience. It was made abundantly clear that the pastor serves as a mentor-accountability figure who maintains continuous contact throughout matriculation. This mentor-mentee relationship, previously established, and built strong over the course of months and sometimes years prior to college, has reached a peak where the mentor carries a great deal of authority with the mentee. This relationship provides a source of encouragement, direction, local church resources (an encouraging church body, and perhaps finances), and accountability as there is always a desire on the part of the mentee to please the spiritual mentor.

Not only is the pastor-mentor important, but the church family can be the source of encouragement for academic persistence. African American men capitalized on encouraging words received from church members, taking these comments to heart. Church members extend the support network, providing an extra boost of encouragement and for strengthening an internal sense of fortitude in challenging conditions. This accountability-mentor relationship continues even when the student assumes pastoral positions while still enrolled in higher education.

It is imperative, therefore, for Bible colleges to bridge the gap between the college, the student, and his home church. Admissions can obtain the local church information upon entrance into the college. Immediate contact by means of phone calls and emails can initiate a relationship with the college. Personal invitations can be offered for all school activities. Also, because of the findings within this research, it is crucial for Bible Colleges to organize representatives that are sent out to African-American Churches promoting a healthy, inviting
academic program in which to communicate African-Americans are welcomed and nurtured. The representatives can include one or more students, a professor or an administration member, to accompany the mentee to his local church and provide an appropriate sermon in which the mentor and church family get a glimpse of the mentee’s growth in his formal delivery.

**Develop Faculty Mentorships**

Participants in this study indicated the positive impact faculty have on their academic persistence. Having a connection with a faculty member was viewed with honor as the student was the recipient of the care being extended, a trusted confidant, and one who would personally become vested in his success. Bible colleges should engender a system of support for students among their faculty and staff and build it into the context of daily roles.

**Hire faculty with pastoral experience.** This study indicated how important and appreciative the students were to receive so much advice, teaching, and examples for pastoral ministry as it came directly from the faculty’s own personal history of ministry. Faculty members with previous pastoral experience added to their effectiveness with nontraditional undergraduate African American men. With the goal of Bible colleges training students for vocational ministry, a significant aspect of that training can be a teacher covering his subjects with the ability to apply biblical points to ministry. This includes illustrations, relating personal challenges and victories, and providing guidance and solutions to situations these students will be facing in ministry. For those students already in ministry, questions and issues can be freely offered to gain the insights the professors share, who, having been through those same experiences, are open and vulnerable to share what works or what does not. A faculty perspective toward ministry is a significant advantage. Administrations must hire faculty with pastoral experience.
**Connect faculty with student discipleship groups.** The New Testament model for ministry training is a discipleship model (1 Corinthians 11:1; 2 Timothy 2:2). Discipleship should occur both formally and informally. Personable faculty members welcome informal opportunities to disciple apart from formal teaching in the classroom. However, discipleship should be elevated to a formal level so that no student is overlooked, and especially since the literature has indicated African American men usually do not take the initiative to begin such a practice.

Small groups placed under a mentoring relationship with a professor (e.g. discipleship labs) can be a way for professors to get to know students and their needs, and to disciple them throughout their program. The residual effect is for discipleship not be limited to the academic context only, but expanded to include close relationships with faculty and other students. This, in turn, provides camaraderie, support and encouragement, forging deep, life-long friendships. It is reminiscent of brothers serving, shepherding, and sharpening one another in reciprocal relationships of affinity (Proverbs 27:17).

Discipleship groups, or labs, can occur in student-body-sponsored monthly lunches with professors and fellow students, school-wide fall and spring picnics that include both large and small group activities. Other discipleship lab activities can be a weekly early morning prayer time and an occasional invitation for both the student and their wives to participate. In addition to the classroom, uninterrupted regular access to a professor(s) one-on-one or in a small group is strongly desired by African American male students. These gatherings, at least on a monthly basis, are built on developing one’s personal relationship with God and His Word and bonded with a common philosophy of ministry. Such labs establish a relationship with a professor from
the beginning of a program in which times many questions can be answered and fears overcome. Placed in a small group also gives students an immediate circle of acquaintances.

The life-on-life discipleship model is biblical, effective, and welcomed by African American male students. Faculty may need formalized training to understand the philosophy, objectives, proper procedures, and possibly monetary encouragement from what is often perceived as going beyond the call of duty. As was reflected in the participants’ comments, it usually does not take a large quantity of time, but the goal is to provide consistent quality experiences.

**Improve the Support Services Network**

Noel-Levitz (2013) research indicated the most effective strategy by four-year private higher education institutions is academic support programs or services demonstrating their value for persistence and resilience. However, few Bible colleges use retention programs and initiatives to support academic success for nontraditional students (Noel-Levitz, 2013; Stewart, 2015). Additionally, few Bible colleges offer academic developmental services for nontraditional students outside of informal tutorial practices. With a lack of resources due to tight budgets, there are some economically effective aspects of support services that should be carefully implemented.

**Establish and use a retention director and a retention committee.** Establish a retention committee led by a retention staff person coordinating all the efforts to maintain support services critical to student persistence. Provision can be made for a written retention and college completion plan that is reviewed and updated annually. This plan should include effective retention strategies that provide an early alert indicator followed by intervention and
ongoing counseling, academic advising, assessment of student needs and academic support services to meet the nontraditional needs.

**Expand the role of advisors.** Participants indicated a minimal role of advisors. Some became students in their respective Bible college before advisors were instituted. Once advisors were in place, participants spoke of their role as being little more than helping select the proper classes for the subsequent semester. This is important, but advisors can do much more to promote academic persistence.

Most small colleges use a decentralized advising model with faculty advisors located in their respective academic departments (Culver, 2012). Feasibility of a decentralized model is strengthened when faculty are recognized and rewarded for advising. An additional benefit for the college is that this model is also cost effective as faculty are already in place and their expertise can be directly used for advising students. Implementing an early and on-going alert system helps students persist and progress. An early alert system can help identify at-risk students, zero in on de-motivational factors students have or develop, and monitor progress or the lack thereof, in order to institute interventions immediately. Even though it is recognized that persistence and retention is the responsibility of the entire campus, it does not mean improvements will automatically produce desirable results. Therefore, campuses must organize their efforts to improve outcomes by appointing a strategic success leader (e.g. Retention Director and staff) to collaboratively lead the process.

**Use intergenerational tutorial advantages.** Most participants of this study indicated they came to college as nontraditional students woefully underprepared in computer skills, spelling and grammar deficiencies. Strategies must be employed to address these common issues. But once again, tight budgets require strategic, economic procedures. An effective and
an economical strategy for assisting the underprepared nontraditional students is to use the younger students in tutoring them. Reverse tutoring (Brown, 1993; Kuehne & Melville, 2014; Shisler, Osguthorpe, & Eiserman, 1987; Top & Osguthorpe, 1987) can eliminate anxieties nontraditional students experience knowing they need to use various software and computer applications. In the process of teaching computer skills, spelling and grammar, the digital divide is not only overcome, but great satisfaction is also gained through building relationships between the generations, elevating levels of academic satisfaction, results, and ever expanding the network of relationships as a broader support system. Both tutors and tutees are unified in an engagement of a positive activity, usually with immediate and gratifying results. Such advantages should not be underestimated, as these can complement advisors as a secondary support system of peer-to-peer reverse tutoring.

For African American males, persistence is strengthened with face-to-face advising, tutors, and faculty discipleship labs that develop a network of relationships. This is the hub of the wheel in action for using a tag-team activity in referring students to the appropriate spokes of other campus-based support options. Using the hub and its spokes can create a first-year family for new students to meet those first-year critical needs.

**Sustain a Proactive Administration**

A proactive administration is one which listens to the voices of the students, and especially the at-risk aspects of student life. Instead of remaining aloof, participants appreciated every contact with members of administration. Gaining a listening ear had profoundly positive effects for students. Students also welcomed opportunities to receive advice, information, and interaction with members of administration. There is great potential for a proactive administration to improve persistence for enrolled students specific to African American males.
A welcoming atmosphere. Initial reentry fears were eliminated when the students witnessed a loving, caring, and welcoming spirit from administrators, faculty, and staff. Creating a sense of belonging was of critical importance to these African American men. In light of the historical significance of African American forefathers being ostracized in college, a welcoming atmosphere can be an immediate response to help remove a restraining effect. Being well received opened the door for spiritual formation resulting in a wholesome satisfaction.

Administrations can provide greeters for all main doors at the beginning of each semester. Greeters can be informed concerning questions reentry students normally have as they begin a new term. Likewise, administrators, faculty, and staff can adopt a willingness to develop relationships to reinforce the loving welcome. Additionally, careful planning should ensure that a fair representation of ethnicities be represented as greeters and that such arrangements are also made for the evening classes. The atmosphere for evening classes should mirror as much as possible the day classes. This would include all support services available for both day and evening.

Reliable course offerings. Administrations should ensure that courses are offered and available as promised. Courses must be offered in a way that will allow most students to follow the necessary sequence of prerequisites. Many Bible colleges, out of necessity, offer rotating course schedules, so they must be made available in such a way that timely completion can occur.

Nurture diversity efforts. Participants consistently expressed the diverse ethnicities in the classroom as a positive persistence factor. There were accolades for learning from diverse ethnicities among professors and among fellow students. It was expressed as an opportunity to learn a well-rounded worldview. There was a total disregard for the ethnicity of the professor as
long as the content and delivery were meeting the desires and needs of students for spiritual
growth and in training for vocational ministry. It is also viewed as an opportunity for a healthy
witness to the world for mutual respect.

The implication here is for a college to tap into the desires for diversity on campus.
Diversity begins with a theological perspective concerning equal importance among all
ethnicities and even to adopt a biblical mandate attitude (Galatians 3:28). Efforts to proactively
sustain diversity are guided by a mission, vision, and/or value statement(s) committed to a
biblical position of diversity. Commitment to that mission statement brings accountability and a
long term mentality. A proactive effort to develop and sustain diversity can include a number of
quality social interactions among students, faculty, and staff. Students can experience diversity
in ministry as an administration opens doors for cross-cultural student ministries both
domestically and internationally. Efforts toward diversity must be monitored for progress.

Invest in student ministries. Student ministries require time, energy, and would
seemingly be at the expense of school work as sacrifices have to be made. However, contrary to
being a deterrent, student ministries were actually a positive persistence factor because they
provided a motivating factor to return to class after class and semester after semester in order to
receive spiritual training and biblical content necessary for their respective ministries.
Administrations can proactively invest in student ministries by coaching faculty to include
course content that directly feeds student ministries as participants hungered for information that
would directly feed their ministries.

A greater emphasis can be placed on students involved in more diverse ministries. But it
is not likely to occur unless administrations set the example themselves by being involved in
diverse ministries. Increased offerings in cross-cultural ministry courses, including international
opportunities should be encouraged. Then, there must be organized diverse student ministry opportunities, and a faculty ministry leader appointed to spearhead the process. Placing students within an internship lasting a month, a summer, or a semester, in which credits are earned, only serves to reinforce the connection between ministry and persistence. Along these lines the development of a senior internship could serve as a capstone project. This would be a prime opportunity to connect a senior student with a veteran pastor. An added incentive is to offer course credits for internships.

**Spiritual formation is foundational for all directives/measurements.** Since participants highlighted the supreme importance of spiritual formation, it must find a prominent place in mission and vision statements and connect all aspects of college life to its fulfillment. Administrations should continue to find innovative and creative ways to create a climate on campus where students grow spiritually.

**Limitations**

This research was exploratory and allowed participants to write about and to discuss experiences which contribute rich, thick data to understand the nature of nontraditional undergraduate African American male four-year degree completers from Bible colleges in the southeastern U.S. Despite the value of the study, there were limitations that should be discussed.

The geographical region selected to investigate this phenomenon was the southeastern U.S., and specifically the two states of North Carolina and Georgia wherein only two cities were used in actuality. This study was limited geographically whereas other regional areas would also be helpful to the literature. Another limitation of this study was that there were only two Bible colleges used from which to recruit participants. Both Bible colleges used in this study have a
rich enrollment history of African American males. Yet, there are numerous other Bible colleges who are very similar and worthy of study.

Additionally, this research was limited by the number of selected participants, which were 10, and all 10 from the two preselected institutions. More participants could have potentially expanded the study providing more insight on persistence. Also, considering my past relationship with six of the participants may have presented a limitation. All participants greatly welcomed the opportunity to share their experiences. However, though no continued relationship of authority existed, students normally continue to project respect toward former teachers. Thus, a previous relationship of authority may have tempered some comments. Further, the study was potentially limited if the African American participants experienced any uneasiness in being interviewed by a Caucasian researcher. Perhaps comments were slightly restrained in order not to give any appearance of needless offense concerning ethnic identities. Finally, the scope of this study was narrowed in the fact that it does not explore retention and college completion practices from the perspective of Bible colleges. The effectiveness of retention and college completion practices from the perspective of the Bible college administration could broaden the scope of the study and provide more insight on the effectiveness of the retention practices.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

One recommendation is for an African American male to replicate this study. Participants in this study reflected very positively on the role of diversity, appreciating everything that was learned and received regardless of the ethnicity of the one teaching. While these responses were heartfelt and honest, perhaps the participants were somewhat reticent to open up concerning the added value, positive aspects, desirable traits of a heavy African
American presence on campus. Perhaps they were shy about sharing due to the fact a Caucasian was collecting the data. Ministry to African American males in Bible colleges may be improved with additional insights being drawn out from participants. An African American doctoral student conducting this research might garner such results.

Another recommendation is for this study to be replicated with other Bible colleges. It is a situation of abundance rather than a drought as there are many Bible colleges from which to choose. A recommendation is to select Bible colleges within a 50 or 100-mile radius. Bible colleges have limited resources and cannot produce specific types of information from graduates maintaining a continual need for continued research. Exploring the field of persistence within Bible colleges has barely touched the surface. Persistence in Bible colleges, then, is worthy of further investigation.

An additional area of interest is to select smaller cohorts of nontraditional or post-traditional students (Soares, 2013). A nontraditional student can be anywhere from 25 to 80 years of age. That is a large spread which could be subdivided by placing a limit on age for a smaller cohort of participants. For example, select an age range of 25-35, 35-45, or 45-55 years of age. Based on age, there may be differences of how nontraditional students persist.

A final recommendation is to target military Bible college students. Six of the 10 participants in this study were Bible college students and members of the military. Since this was not the purpose of this study, the military connection was not strongly explored. Military students are situated in differing circumstances, and often are hindered by medical issues, but also may not be hindered in the area of finances. This cohort is worthy of study as military students create a special set of issues, that if studied, could provide value to guiding persistence policies and plans.
Summary

The five themes of academic persistence from this study are the Bible college experience, spiritual formation, Christian service formation, family support network, and a local church connection. The Bible college experience represents the comprehensive theme for academic persistence from which all of the themes intersect. This persistence theme includes a personable faculty, proactive administration, an affinity with nontraditional student enrollment, and accompanied by an appreciation for intergenerationality. Furthermore, the Bible college experience connected participants with peers, faculty role models and mentors, and holistic resources that went far beyond anything participants could have accessed on their own. A proactive administration setting policy and practices concerning personal relationships, promoting spirituality, and support services was viewed positively by the participants. Spiritual formation includes the desires and aspirations that nontraditional undergraduate African American males are seeking in a Bible college experience and is a channel for feeding various avenues for sustaining persistence.

It was a common experience for participants to already be involved in leadership positions of ministry prior to entering college. While in these leadership positions of ministry, students immediately realized they desperately needed further training. Goals in harmony with the Bible college mission brought about recognition and a surrender to seeking a degree in biblical studies. As the participants grew in their role as Bible college students, their ministries became more fruitful. Therefore, the fruit of the Bible college experience is Christian service formation and is the third theme to emerge in this study. The very purpose for the Bible college degree program was fulfilled as student-led ministries matured. Relevant course material directly fed Christian service ministries and course materials elevated ministry competency by
providing the means for ongoing spiritual development, instilling formalized exegetical
techniques, outward demonstration of communicative spiritual gifts and skills, and an ability to
defend a well-rounded biblical worldview.

The academic persistence track was accompanied by two guiding factors that bonded
participants to specific networks which in turn maintained a persistence focus and prevented
early exits. One guiding factor was the family support network of encouragers, who had full
confidence in the participants’ college success, and is the fourth theme. Similarly, another
guiding factor, and the fifth theme, is the local church connection in which pastor-mentors served
as accountability partners and encouragers, accompanied by church members who appreciated
the participants’ growth in ministry. Vitally important to nontraditional undergraduate African
American males in Bible colleges is ministry competency. Christian service is a strong
persistence factor as the biblical content and training directly feed the students’ ministries.

The importance of elevating ministry competency connects with the richest applicable
actions for reinforcing persistence. It must be acknowledged that African American Bible
college students crave face-time with faculty. The relationship between faculty and the
participants is critical to persistence. Students were receptive to course content, but even more,
the effect was multiplied when delivered by personable faculty who were proactive relationally.
Time with faculty in and out of the classroom provide opportunity to share life and ministry
experiences which multiply the impact for persistence.

Additionally, a dual impact reinforcing persistence exponentially is faculty with pastoral
experience so that in both formal classroom content and informal conversations student
ministries are fed. Participants spoke in the most passionate ways when the subject was
pastorally rich faculty teaching content and sharing experiences that directly and positively fuel
student ministries. The ability to take Monday-Friday’s course content directly to the pulpit on Sunday became the weekly goal for every class. Course material provided biblical content that was communicated in such a way that participants found it readily usable for upcoming sermons and Bible studies in their ministries. As the participants grew in their ministry skills, so grew persistence. Face-time with faculty to feed student ministries is crucial. These two aspects more than all other factors build the pinnacle of inherent persistence.

Perhaps a personal perspective fittingly focuses the conclusion. As I teach the book of Genesis, covering several chapters a week (so that all 50 chapters may be covered), I know the explanations and illustrations will be sermons preached in a dozen pulpits the following Wednesdays and Sundays. When my course content is presented within a homiletical format, exegetically explained and illustrated, students can easily transform the biblical teaching into sermons for their own immediate messages. The material is often implemented within days or weeks of my delivery. I do not teach to the test. I teach to the pulpit. Students return to each class hungry for Sunday’s sermon content which they will preach with conviction. It is to follow Jesus’ instructions to feed, shepherd, and lead the lambs (John 21:15-17).
References


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December 29, 2015

Rodney Phillips  
IRB Approval 2379.122915: A Phenomenological Study Exploring Factors That Contribute to Academic Persistence for Nontraditional Undergraduate African American Male Degree-Completers from Bible Colleges in the Southeast

Dear Rodney,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971
APPENDIX B

CITI Transcript

COLLABORATIVE INSTITUTIONAL TRAINING INITIATIVE (CITI PROGRAM)
COURSEWORK TRANSCRIPT REPORT**

** NOTE: Scores on this Transcript Report reflect the most current quiz completions, including quizzes on optional (supplemental) elements of the course. See list below for details. See separate Requirements Report for the reported scores at the time all requirements for the course were met.

- Name: Rodney Phillips (ID: 4906597)
- Email: rphilips07@liberty.edu
- Institution Affiliation: Liberty University (ID: 2446)
- Institution Unit: Education
- Curriculum Group: School of Education
- Course Learner Group: Same as Curriculum Group
- Stage: Stage 1 - Basic Course

- Report ID: 16506475
- Report Date: 08/29/2015
- Current Score**: 91

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<th>MOST RECENT</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
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<td>Students in Research (ID: 1321)</td>
<td>08/29/15</td>
<td>7/10 (70%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>History and Ethical Principles - SBE (ID: 490)</td>
<td>08/29/15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belmont Report and CITI Course Introduction (ID: 1127)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessing Risk - SBE (ID: 503)</td>
<td>08/29/15</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed Consent - SBE (ID: 504)</td>
<td>08/29/15</td>
<td>5/5 (100%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Privacy and Confidentiality - SBE (ID: 505)</td>
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<td>5/5 (100%)</td>
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<td>Cultural Competence in Research (ID: 16188)</td>
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<td>5/5 (100%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

For this Report to be valid, the learner identified above must have had a valid affiliation with the CITI Program subscribing institution identified above or have been a paid Independent Learner.

CITI Program
Email: psisupport@miami.edu
Phone: 305-243-7970
Web: https://www.citiprogram.org
APPENDIX C

Invitation to Participant in a Research Study

Date:

Dear Prospective Participant:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for an Ed.D. degree. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences that influence nontraditional undergraduate African American male students to persist in their studies so that Bible colleges can cultivate policies and programs that are conducive to this population of students. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are an African American male graduate of [college name], were older than 25 years of age while enrolled, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to complete a brief demographic survey, attend two interviews (one-on-one and focus group interview), and complete an electronic journal. It should take approximately one month for you to complete the procedures listed. I will keep all participants’ identities confidential.

To participate, please respond with an email to rphillips67@liberty.edu to receive a consent form and a demographic survey. An interview will be scheduled shortly thereafter. A consent form will be emailed to you and will be reviewed together and signed by you before the first interview. If you choose to participate, and complete the survey, two interviews, and journal, you will receive a $50 gift card.

Sincerely,

Rodney Phillips
Ed.D. Candidate
Liberty University
APPENDIX D

Informed Consent for Participants

The Institutional Review Board at Liberty University has approved the document for use from 12/19/15 to 12/28/16

CONSENT FORM

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXPLORING FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO ACADEMIC PERSISTENCE FOR NONTRADITIONAL UNDERGRADUATE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE DEGREE-COMPLETERS FROM BIBLE COLLEGES IN THE SOUTHEAST

Rodney Phillips
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of African American male persistence success in Bible college. You were selected as a possible participant because of your successful completion of a baccalaureate degree from the preferred Bible college. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Rodney Phillips, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences that influence nontraditional undergraduate African American male students to persist in their studies so that Bible colleges can cultivate policies and programs that are conducive to this population of students.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things: Participate in a one-hour interview and a one-hour focus group, fill out one 60-second demographic survey, and electronically journal your thoughts and experiences on persistence over the course of one month. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and your privacy will be protected through the use of a pseudonym.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The risks involved in this study are no more than you would encounter in everyday life. Individuals who participate in this study should not expect to receive any direct benefits.

Compensation:

You will receive a payment of a $50 gift card when you complete all of the phases of the research mentioned above.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. Pseudonyms will be used to keep the participants’ identities confidential. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. The use of a focus group does not guarantee that other members of the group will maintain their confidentiality.
Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your alma mater. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study:

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Rodney Phillips. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at phillips67@liberty.edu and you may also contact the research’s faculty advisor, Dr. Fred Milacci, at fmlacci@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1791 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(Note: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature: ____________________________ Date: _____________

Signature of Investigator: ____________________________ Date: _____________
APPENDIX E

Demographic Survey Questions

What is your name? ______________________________

What was your age when you started at the college from which you graduated? ________

What was your age when you finished at the college from which you graduated? ________

What is your gender? Male ___ Female ___

Are you African American? Yes ___ No ___

From which college did you graduate? ___________________________________________

This college is located in which city and state? _____________________________________

In what year did you graduate? _________________________________________________

During your time in college you were a nontraditional student based upon which of the following factors? (Please circle those that apply to you)

a) You were married

b) You had one or more dependents (children)

c) You were financially independent (responsible for your own bills)

d) You did not begin or complete college immediately after high school

e) You attended college on a part-time basis

f) You were employed full time (30 or more weekly hours)

If you were employed full time, what did you do for a living?

____________________________________________

Would you be available to take part in an interview, a focus group interview and discussion, and complete a journaling exercise as part of this study over the course of two months?

Yes ___ No ___
APPENDIX F

Individual Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself and your job/work.
2. Tell me about your typical day outside of work such as spouse/family and ministry.
3. How would you describe your experiences as a college student?
4. Describe your experiences related to your continuing in college.
5. How have your experiences helped you to continue in/complete your undergraduate studies?
6. How do you believe these experiences have affected your ability to continue on your educational journey?
7. What specific factors do you believe have contributed to your motivation to persist?
8. Are there aspects of being a nontraditional student that present barriers in your efforts to persist?
9. What are some of the issues you face in managing your multiple roles as a nontraditional student?
10. What are specific things that a college could do to improve the nontraditional student educational experience?
11. How would you describe your academic experiences as related to studying within an African American, faith-based institution?
12. Can you provide a specific example of how your experiences studying at an African American, faith-based institution has influenced your persistence?
13. In what manner has the experience of studying at an African American, faith-based institution helped or hindered your persistence?
14. Do you have any mentoring relationships with faculty or staff members at the faith-based institution which have influenced your persistence? If so, can you provide some examples?
15. How does your culture and life off campus influence your ability to persist, if these have any influence at all on your persistence?
16. What, if anything, would you add to the subject?
17. Should I have other questions, may I contact you again?
APPENDIX G

Focus Group Questions

1. Are these categories and themes representative of your persistence experiences?

2. How do these categories come together to explain your persistence?

3. In what ways, if any, do these categories influence each other?

4. Do some categories come before others (are they hierarchical) or are they equal?

5. Are some categories more important than others?

6. Is anything missing?
## APPENDIX H

*Contact Summary Form Excerpt*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSEUDONYM</th>
<th>EMAIL</th>
<th>Phone #</th>
<th>BEST MEANS TO CONTACT</th>
<th>BEST TIME TO CONTACT</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td><a href="mailto:xxxx@xxxx.com">xxxx@xxxx.com</a></td>
<td>000-000-0000</td>
<td>Text messages</td>
<td>Early AM or at noon break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td><a href="mailto:xxxx@xxxx.com">xxxx@xxxx.com</a></td>
<td>000-000-0000</td>
<td>Text messages</td>
<td>Early AM or late PM</td>
</tr>
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## APPENDIX I

*Audit Trail Excerpt*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 4, 2015</td>
<td>Three individual pilot interviews</td>
<td>Approximately 50 minutes each</td>
<td>Three Bible College seniors anticipating graduation</td>
<td>All facets agreeable: Demographic Survey, Individual interview questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 20, 2015</td>
<td>Personal conversations as inquiry for the absence of electronic journal submissions</td>
<td>Approximately 15 minutes each</td>
<td>Same three pilot participants</td>
<td>All 3 pilot participants said e-journaling account set up for their journal submissions was too cumbersome. They felt strongly that prospective participants would feel the same. They recommend a simplified process to electronic journaling (e.g. simple emails). They also urged a simple prompt to get their reflections started.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 21</td>
<td>All three pilot participants submitted email journal entries</td>
<td>Approximately 2 paragraphs each</td>
<td>All 3 pilot participants</td>
<td>Noted the emails simplified the process that participants were far more eager to submit their journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 9, 2015</td>
<td>Submitted gatekeeper request letters</td>
<td>Two letters typed and emailed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 10, 2015</td>
<td>Gatekeeper approval letter BC1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 27, 2015</td>
<td>Gatekeeper approval letter BC2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Proceed with IRB application submission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 29, 2015</td>
<td>IRB approval</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Begin inviting prospective participants BC1 with 3 confirmations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 2, 2016</td>
<td>Individual interviews</td>
<td>Approximately 1 hour each</td>
<td>3 BC1 participants</td>
<td>Interviews recorded, backed up, sent to professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Reflection/Feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 4, 2016</td>
<td>Member check</td>
<td>Three - five days</td>
<td>3 BC1 participants Approved as is</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 12, 2016</td>
<td>Invitations to prospective participants BC2</td>
<td>Emails</td>
<td>8 participants contacted based on gatekeeper recommendations 6 responded affirmatively. Began to set up dates for individual interviews.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb. 5-6, 2016</td>
<td>Individual interviews</td>
<td>Approximately 1 hour each</td>
<td>5 BC2 participants Interviews recorded, backed up, sent to professional transcription company, sent to professional transcription company, and received transcription within 24 hours.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb. 15, 2016</td>
<td>Member check</td>
<td>Five - ten days</td>
<td>5 BC2 participants Approved with only minor editing for certain proper name spelling corrections</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Reflection/Feedback</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 1 BC1</td>
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<td>65 minutes</td>
<td>Interview recorded, backed up, professionally transcribed within 24 hours</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>March 12</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>1.5 hours</td>
<td>Negotiated Themes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 2 BC1</td>
<td>Jan 2, 2016</td>
<td>One on One Interview</td>
<td>60 minutes</td>
<td>Interview recorded, backed up, professionally transcribed within 24 hours</td>
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<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>1.5 hours</td>
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APPENDIX J

Memoing and Journaling Excerpt for Bracketing

January 13, 2016: I had a participant recently state that soon after beginning in college he started out slow, but it wasn’t long before he was “pulled in,” which had an immediate persistence effect. From my experience, being pulled in means there was an overwhelming sense of love and acceptance, with immediate understanding of the personal benefits from being in Bible college. However, I cannot presume this is exactly what the participant meant. I need to follow-up with this point in order to try and gain the specifics. Also, if similar terminology is used on additional data collection, I need to definitely probe this further.

January 31, 2016: Participants are clearly indicating they appreciate the diversity on campus among fellow students, faculty, and staff. I have no doubt they are being completely honest. But in the back of my mind I wonder if they are somewhat hesitant concerning the added value of having fellow African Americans in their educational experiences. I am thinking maybe it would be beneficial for an African American to conduct this or a similar study to draw out additional information.

February 13, 2016: A participant told me it was one of my classes in which they had the biggest challenge of all his classes. In taking this class, they continually disagreed over how the material was being presented. I think I handled it well during the interview, remembering in my studies that I needed to stick with the subject matter and encourage complete honesty. Now that the interview is over, I need to continue to process this information correctly. I also want to make sure the participant is fully assured it has not altered my attitude toward him or our relationship whatsoever. I am very grateful he was willing to participate as a volunteer, and to remember, I am still growing as a teacher.
APPENDIX K

List of Main Themes and Sub-Themes

The Magnet of Persistence: The Bible College Experience
Personable faculty
  Proactive in personal relationships
  Willingness to connect with students outside the college context
  Pastoral experience benefits ministry students
  Affinity with and an understanding of the nontraditional student
Proactive administration
Appreciation for nontraditional comradery
Appreciation for intergenerationality

The Channel of Persistence: Spiritual Formation
  Spiritual formation centered on a teachable attitude and a disciplined life
  Spiritual formation focused on God’s call to prepare for service
  Spiritual formation grew by witnessing God’s interventions
  Spiritual formation depended on the Holy Spirit’s enablement
  Spiritual formation welcomed cultural diversity
  Spiritual formation developed through direct, in-depth study of the Bible

The Fruit of Persistence: Christian Service Formation
  Relevant course material directly feeds Christian service ministries
  Course materials elevated ministry competency

The Bond of Persistence: A family Support Network
  Wife and children
  Extended family

The Accountability in Persistence: The Local Church Connection
  Pastor-Mentor accountability connection
  Christian service encouragement
APPENDIX L

Permission to Use Demographic Survey, Interview and Focus Group Questions

Dear Rodney,

You have full permission to use my interview questions, demographic survey, and focus group questions in publication of your dissertation. Congratulations on your study, well done and well earned. In the words of Julius Caesar you can now say:

Veni, Vidi, Vici - I came, I saw, I conquered!

Best Regards,

Floralba Arbelo Marrero, Ed.D.