

EXPLORING ACADEMIC GOAL COMMITMENT AND GRIT IN COLLEGE EDUCATION:  
A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE GRADUATES

by

Anthony Earl Reid

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how African American male graduates experience and understand academic goal commitment and grit regarding college education in a small Southeastern regional North Carolina district. Duckworth's grit theory was the framework used to explore the learning problems students encounter based on the premise that everyone can use the constructs of passion, perseverance, sustained interest, and sustained effort toward achieving long-term goals. Data from 10 African American male graduates came from a questionnaire; one-on-one, open-ended interviews; and focus groups. The approach used for data analysis was reactive awareness toward bringing a range of meanings to life's experiences or phenomena. Epoché, or bracketing, was used to block biases toward the essence of the graduates' experiences with the phenomenon. Three Themes emerged from the data that include the belief Education Is Key, First-Generation College Graduates and Academic Support, all constructs of which the graduates within SERDC utilized toward their passion to persevere and achieve academic goal commitment and college success.

*Keywords:* Academic challenges, African American male graduates, grit theory of learning, transcendental phenomenology

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### **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Teresa, sons and grandson, Anthony Jr., Aaron Terrell, and Anthony III; my mother-in-law, Nancy; and my mom, Joyce. Teresa, thanks so much for enduring this Doctoral journey with me, you are truly the wind beneath my wings. AJ, Aaron, and Anthony III: you guys are the reason I work tirelessly toward being a Godly example, and I pray my living continues to motivate and inspire your efforts. Mother Nancy, you have embraced me as your own by being so loving and gracious, and for this I am forever grateful. Mom, your spirit lives on within me, and I am reminded each day as I strive to make you proud. Thanks for being that loving beacon, and may your spirit, continue living within me. Until we meet again, RIP.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Educational Support Initiatives (ESI)

Historically Black college and university (HBCU)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (OCEAN)

Positive Development Model (PDM)

Predominantly White institution (PWI)

Science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM)

Southeastern Regional District County (SERDC)

The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (JBHE)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

This transcendental phenomenological study was an exploration of how African American male graduates experience and understand academic goal commitment and grit regarding college education in a small Southeastern regional North Carolina district. Academic goal commitment and grit is an individual's talent or abilities to achieve difficult goals and remain focused over sustained periods of time, despite challenges (Duckworth et al., 2007). African American male students' college education has received increased attention, and their retention and graduation rates have remained low compared to other college students (Atuahene, 2021; Brooms, 2021). A literature review provided pertinent information regarding the achievement of African American male graduates who persevered and completed their college degrees, despite the challenges they experienced (Dixson & Gentzis, 2021; Duckworth, 2016; Henderson et al., 2020); however, there is minimal research on academic goal commitment and grit for successful African American college male graduates.

Chapter One begins with an overview of the study and the importance of academic goal commitment and grit for African American males. There is background information on the historical, social, and theoretical context. The chapter includes the problem and purpose statements and the significance of the study, with theoretical, empirical, and practical information highlighting potential benefits of the study. The final section presents the research questions and definitions that align with the supporting literature followed by a summary.

### **Background**

Over the last decade, there has been an increasing interest in factors identifying individuals who excel and become more successful compared to students of equal intelligence,

particularly in the field of education (Christopoulou et al., 2018; Duckworth et al., 2007). Like other students, African American males have educational desires that are essential to their college aspirations and goals to persevere (Henderson et al., 2020). Their academic success can affirm and validate their identities toward positive socialization. However, African American male students' significant failures and attrition indicate the need to investigate their academic successes (Atuahene, 2021). The graduation rates of African American women and men in the same cohort were 59.3% and 39.3%, respectively, compared to White women and men, at 70.6% and 60.3%, respectively. African American males lag White and Asian males by 13.6% points in 4-year college graduation rates. Atuahene (2021) found African American students inadequately prepared for higher education due to low levels of precollege work.

Leaving college before graduation adversely impacts future employment, earnings, health, and overall well-being (Ford & Triplett, 2019). College graduates are three times more successful in gaining employment than high school dropouts (U.S. Department of Labor, 2018). Brooms (2021) posited the multifaceted support of family, peers, and institutional resources are important for African American male student's academic success. Henderson et al. (2020) suggested educators, practitioners, and researchers interact with African American males to encourage and promote their engagement and participation in the education system.

Academic goal commitment is vital for African American males to persevere and use grit constructs to achieve college success (Han, 2021). In addition to grit, other helpful features include excitement, motivation, effort, and optimism (Miller & Kass, 2019). An individual's achievement capabilities are a significant predictor of success incorporating grit and self-efficacy. The two important facets of grit, perseverance of effort and consistency of interest, are apparent when individuals strive to achieve their long term-goals while demonstrating passion to



confront adversity and hardship (Christopoulou et al., 2018). A review of the experiences of African American male college graduates and their perspectives on academic goal commitment and grit in college education follows, providing background for this study.

### **Historical Context**

With *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional and a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. Individuals engaged in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s argued for overcoming difficulties of systemic racism and class discrimination and expanding educational opportunities for children outside of race, such those with special needs. Despite the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, African Americans, specifically males, still lag other ethnic groups in college education achievement (Atuahene, 2021). Over the last several decades public, schools have accepted children despite their class status, creating competition between more-selective charter schools, other schools of choice, and initiatives affecting racial diversity (Ramsey, 2019). Compounding issues of racial diversity, systemic racism, and class discrimination, many people believe racism is no longer a problem in the United States (O'Neal et al., 2016).

The declining significance of race and discrimination does not negate African Americans' experiences (O'Neal et al., 2016). Most African Americans experiences higher levels of stress than their peers from factors related to racial discrimination. To understand these problems, university departments and school districts must become involved and informed about the African American males' historical experiences and viewpoints, from slavery to the present. The perception of African American males as deemed flawed still exists in a society inherently incompatible and tenuous (Brown & Thomas, 2020). Despite historical events and challenges,

African American males can persevere and overcome statistical odds to achieve their academic goals (Irvine, 2019).

### **Social Context**

Most African American college students encounter unique challenges to achieving academic success (Roksa & Whitley, 2017). African American males have trouble in college education and do not receive sufficient encouragement to achieve in school (Arenson, 2003). The challenges affect students' college enrollment and completion or graduation rate (Tolliver & Miller, 2018). The academic hindrances African American males experience are also more pronounced and challenging than for same-race females (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education [JBHE], 2020).

There are numerous academic, personal, and social factors related to African American male students' barriers to academic success. Some of these factors include poverty, lack of academic readiness, poor school experiences, teacher quality, and peer influences (Hilton et al., 2017; Robinson, 2014). Cose (2002) described these challenges as “stratification and structural inequalities which contribute to the social and economic challenges of African American males” (p. 109). Social stratification factors are a form of creating generalizations, often grouping specific students in the same category (Robinson, 2014). Stratification and structural inequalities also impact African American male students' ability to adjust to the college environment, which leads to underperformance in the classroom—the first indication of academic failure (Parsons, 2022; Powell, 2018). Naylor et al. (2015) explained that “at the core of these issues [is] institutional racism” (p. 525).

Brown and Thomas (2020) suggested that very few African American males enter college classrooms with the fundamental knowledge preparing them to take entry-level courses and be

competitive in college. Gasman et al. (2017) posited that most African American male students' home life is impacted, which has a significant effect on society. Despite these issues, "There are examples of real-world programs and activities to enhance academic success in the college environment for African American men" (Cuyjet, 2006, p. 149). Although African American males can succeed, scholarly literature has not addressed this topic adequately (Goings & Bianco, 2016). This research may prove beneficial for all students and educational leaders.

### **Theoretical Context**

The theoretical context for this study was grit theory (Duckworth, 2016). Grit has two underlying constructs: passion and perseverance toward one's commitment to sustain effort and interest to achieve long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). Researchers have used and adapted Duckworth's theory to study the validity of individuals' desires to fulfill their goal commitment, despite obstacles or challenges (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Duckworth and Quinn (2009) collected data from individuals from all facets, including two classes of West Point cadets (2008 and 2010), 2005 Scripps National Spelling Bee contestants, and Ivy League undergraduates. Duckworth et al. (2007) also conducted a test to examine the academic performance capabilities of college students, finding that grit for learning is as important as grades and IQ in high academic achievement and success. According to Weisskirch (2018), "In a college setting, grit may contribute to an individual's self-awareness of their potential for academic success" (p. 21). Grit enables students to construct passion and perseverance to achieve their academic goal commitments. Bazelaïs et al. (2016) suggested that achievement is not based solely on cognitive ability, as personality traits are also important. Among West Point cadets, grit strongly predicted an individual's completion of highly intensive training programs and graduation status (Duckworth et al., 2019).

Other researchers provided additional lenses to Duckworth's work. Direito et al. (2021) researched the benefits of grit for student in engineering education. Oxford and Khajavy (2021) explored grit specific to linguistics, studying general grit components and second language. Meyer and Meyer (2017) examined grit among female soccer players by measuring applications of their learning and performance capabilities. Hochanadel and Finamore (2015) examined how grit impacts high school and college students by assessing their personality characteristics, self-regulation, engagement, and achievement.

Higher education presents a significant opportunity for students of all ethnic groups and races to learn and achieve a college degree. Barbouta et al. (2020) found the constructs and mindset of grit have a positive impact on academic growth. Grit affects students' learning success and achievement in U.S. colleges and universities. Grit theory was applicable to this study because it provides insight and avenues for all students to overcome obstacles and challenges in college education. Grit theory served as a lens to explore students' success and how they overcame academic failures. This study could provide constructs for educational leaders to assist students, particularly African American males, in overcoming the perceived inequalities impacting their educational desires as they strive for college success.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is although a college education is important to achieving the American Dream, only 16% of African American males who enter college graduate (Atuahene, 2021). There is a dearth of research on African American males' experiences with academic goal commitment—grit and its role in college success. A lack of educational support impacts African American male students' academic achievement in the school system (Britt-Spells et al., 2018). Actual or perceived discrimination affects students socially, psychosocially, and behaviorally,

leading them to lose focus in the K–12 classroom (Britt-Spells et al., 2018; Leath et al., 2019) and compounding the challenges to college entry and success.

Most African American males in out-of-home placements enter the K–12 classroom psychologically wounded, needing differentiation to mitigate the impacts of their daily realities and challenges (Miller Dyce, 2015). The advantaged class attempts to divert attention from these realities and challenges, which Link and García (2021) identified as health inequality diversions. African American parents teach their children to understand their position in society, which helps them navigate issues such as health inequality diversions and negative stereotypes within the school context. Understanding how African American male college graduates persevere and develop grit to overcome these challenges could assist higher education institutions in identifying the factors and experiences enabling graduates to achieve their academic goal commitment and earn their college degrees.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how African American male graduates experience and understand academic goal commitment and grit regarding college education in a small Southeastern regional North Carolina district. Academic goal commitment–grit in college education is defined as examining the connection between graduate students’ focus and how they achieve their college degrees despite the challenges (Henderson et al., 2020).

### **Significance of the Study**

This transcendental phenomenological research study provides the lived experiences of how African American male college graduates used academic goal commitment–grit relationship to overcome challenges and persevere to achieve college success; thus, it has theoretical,

empirical, and practical significance. The theoretical significance shows how the grit theory aligns with this research. The empirical significance shows how African American males could overcome educational challenges and persevere to achieve academic success as graduates. The practical significance addressed the involvement of the large population of African American male students having problems overcoming challenges to achieve academic success.

Qualitative research was essential to gather viable and reliable information from academically successful African American male participants within a small Southeastern North Carolina district. This study was a means to understand this situation, and to find ways to provide educational support for African American male students in their efforts and determination toward pursuing academic achievement and contributing to their community and society.

### **Theoretical Significance**

Duckworth (2016) proposed that an individual could use the constructs from grit to overcome mental, social, and cognitive behavior challenges. A student might be able to use the academic goal commitment–grit construct to overcome a challenging task. Grit theory is individuals' beliefs in their capabilities to use perseverance and passion toward sustained effort and interest to overcome long-term goals (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Park et al., 2020; Perkins-Gough, 2013). Henderson et al. (2020) explored how African American male students used constructs of grit theory in a public school system, finding positive results. The theoretical significance of the proposed study was extending grit theory by focusing on the potential to increase the African American male students' college success rate.

### **Empirical Significance**

Researchers have addressed human endeavor toward academic goal commitment and grit in areas including military, sports, professional, and education (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et

al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Park et al., 2020; Perkins-Gough, 2013; Tang et al., 2021). After examining various aspects of this relation, Henderson et al. (2020) indicated the need to investigate how academic goal commitment–grit relates to African American male students. African American males must navigate and persevere in the public school system where the norms, practices, and policies remain embedded in the ideal of Whiteness. Compounding the issue, African American males have the greatest potential for academic risk in college (Powell, 2018). Adverse impacts include discrimination, inability to adjust to college life, socioeconomic status, poor college preparation, choice of major, and faculty expectations of students of color compared to White students (Hilton et al., 2017). The empirical significance of this study was the understanding African American male graduates' experiences and assessments of academic goal commitment and grit in college. This study extends the literature by showing the constructs of academic goal commitment–grit feasible for most students, particularly African American males, to model to achieve college completion. The findings might also provide vital information for universities and colleges to support African American males and prevent them from falling through the cracks along their academic journey.

### **Practical Significance**

By filling gaps in the research on academic goal commitment and grit for African American male college students, this study contributes to a broader discussion of how to use these concepts to close the college success gap between African American males and their peers (Adler-Greene, 2019; Liou & Rotheram-Fuller, 2019). Other gaps come from the lack of an established definition and the need to identify existing academic goal commitment gaps between theory and practice for using effective tools and programs to improve student academic success rates and education development (Adler-Greene, 2019; Madani, 2019). Further research into

African American male college graduates' experiences and perspectives is important to understanding, developing, and implementing focused academic goal commitment and grit initiatives in college education. Akos et al. (2020), Henderson et al. (2021), Madani (2019), and Tang et al. (2019, 2020) indicated the need for future research using African American male graduates' voices to bring about effective improvement strategies. Educational leaders, teachers, policymakers, and other stakeholders are essential components in educational development to improve upon academic goal commitment and grit practices in college education for all students, specifically African American males (Adler-Greene, 2019; Albright et al., 2019; Madani, 2019; McNair et al., 2020).

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how African American male graduates experience and understand academic goal commitment and grit regarding college education in a small Southeastern regional North Carolina district. The central research question addressed African American males' academic goal commitment–grit relationships and the effects on their academic success as college graduates. The study had three sub-questions. Determining the relationship between academic goal commitment and grit will provide a way to understand how students will use these constructs to complete their objectives.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of African American male graduates who used academic goal commitment–grit in college education?

#### **Sub-Question One**

What are the experiences of African American graduates' who used perseverance to achieve college completion?



### **Sub-Question Two**

What are the experiences of African American graduates' who used sustained interest to achieve college completion?

### **Sub-Question Three**

What are the experiences of African American graduates' who used sustained effort to achieve college completion?

### **Definitions**

1. *Academic goal commitment–grit relationship* – A high commitment to academic-related goals, high grit perseverance, and moderate grit consistency will yield the highest levels of academic achievement (Tang et al., 2021).
2. *African American male* – An American male with ancestry from Africa (Bryc et al., 2010).
3. *Clear path* – A sound guide, free of distractions and obstacles, and the use of rudimental processes to achieve academic and college success (Reid, 2023).
4. *Grit* – An individual with grit is highly successful and high achieving. These individuals work hard, know deeply what they want, and have determination and direction while exemplifying passion and perseverance (Duckworth, 2016).
5. *Retention rate* – The number of students' institutions retains from admission through graduation (Haverila et al., 2020).
6. *System of doing* – a mental aspect of processing one's thoughts of being determined and focused until what seems unnatural becomes an act of normalcy (Reid, 2023).

## Summary

African American males have the lowest college retention rate compared to their peers. Although, academic goal commitment and grit relationship design is an important aspect of U.S. society, this feat could prove promising for struggling African American male college students. A review of the literature shows a research gap, and a dearth of research allowing American male students to provide their perspectives on academic achievement and success (Chedid et al., 2020; Henderson et al., 2021). There is a relationship between academic goal commitment and grit, indicating the need for information to enable students to reach their academic milestones. Although most African American males face extreme academic challenges in college, a small percentage still persevere and achieve their college degrees (Atuahene, 2021). Chapter One provided an overview and background information of the experiences of successful African American male graduates, who may have used constructs of academic goal commitment and grit, to achieve college competition.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how African American male graduates experience and understand academic goal commitment and grit regarding college education in a small Southeastern regional North Carolina district. In this chapter, I present related literature on academic goal commitment and grit relationships and how this relates to African American males in college education. The theory used to frame this inquiry was Duckworth's (2016) grit theory, as addressed in the first section of this chapter, the theoretical framework. The second section, the related literature, presents the importance of academic goal commitment–grit relationships, the characteristics of perseverance, sustained interest, sustained effort, and achieving long-term goals. The connection between these relationships in college education, students' view concerning grit, and African American males in college education also appear. There is a discussion of the literature gap regarding perspectives of African American males on their academic goal commitment and grit relationships in college education. Despite a plethora of literature on African American males' college failure rate in education, there is a dearth of research addressing their successes. This gap shows the importance of a paradigm focusing on African American graduates who succeed with potential efforts toward developing a benchmark for all African American male students to model.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework provided a foundation for understanding the academic goal commitment and grit relationships of African American males in college education. The grit theory of learning and previous literature indicated the need for awareness of African American

males' perspectives on their academic goal commitment and grit relationships. The theory and the literature present various ways to address African American male graduates' attrition rates in college education.

Grit is using one's talent or abilities to achieve difficult goals and remain focused over sustained periods (Duckworth et al., 2007). The grit theory of learning refers to areas of knowledge of why some people fail and others succeed. The predictors of grit, such as learning quickly or easily, good luck, IQ scores, and physical health, are not necessarily indicators of success. Researchers have found that success is tied to perseverance and passion for achieving long-time goals, described as grit (Duckworth et al., 2007). A development and validation grit scale is useful to measure or assess the outcome of perseverance and passion (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Measuring the constructs of high achievers through how they overcome setbacks, to conquer their challenges, and continue until they finish a task is perseverance. Passion is whether their interest changes from year to year and to what extent they become engrossed in a project, whether for a short time or quickly lose interest (Duckworth, 2016).

Steadfast and challenging goals readily influence the beliefs of intellectual ability among same-age peers or adolescents, affecting their grit and growth mindset (Park et al., 2020). This phenomenon aligns with Duckworth's (2016) grit theory regarding how individuals might construct their passion for learning and persevere to achieve their goals. Students possessing the grit phenomenon are outliers and predictors of success. Moreover, individuals who set goals and adhere to them are often successful in school and life (Perkins-Gough, 2013). There are no shortcuts to excellence; people must stay in love with their goals beyond embracing them (Duckworth, 2016).

Determinants of grit and self-control are related but separate components of success (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). According to Duckworth and Gross (2014), “Self-control is the capacity to regulate attention, emotion, and behavior in the presence of temptation and grit is the tenacious pursuit of a dominant superordinate goal despite setbacks” (p. 319). Self-control is tightly coupled with everyday success, and grit entails having a superordinate goal to pursue passion and perseverance for years or decades. Despite promising means of developing grit, perseverance and passion are essential for students in mainstream society (Kwon, 2021). The components of grit theory could prove valuable for most African American male students to achieve their academic goals.

Academic-related goal commitment and grit are vital for understanding how students develop and maintain a high level of passion for their education and beyond. Few researchers have addressed African American males’ college success rate, a gap necessitating a research paradigm focused on African American graduates who succeed. This study’s findings could provide a benchmark for all African American male students.

### **Related Literature**

The related literature presents the importance of academic goal commitment and grit relationships. There are discussions of Duckworth’s (2016) grit characteristics, essential student challenges in education and learning, and domains of student academic performance. Research on African American males includes academic achievement and support, challenges, and aspects of experiences for African American males in college education. This section presents an important principle regarding African American males’ perspectives on academic goal commitment and grit relationships.

## **The Importance of Academic Goal Commitment and Grit**

Using academic goal commitment and grit simultaneously to achieve goals is critical for students' college success. To help adolescents (students) achieve academic success, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners should address the goal commitment–grit relationship. Cultural environment, age, and physical setting are important factors in connecting students' academic goal commitment, grit, and achievement. Goal commitment and grit indicate the direction of an individual's goal setting, with the energized aspect of goal pursuit characterized as goal implementation. Goal implementation is a topic frequently explored related to grit, whereas goal setting is a subject largely unexplored. Moreover, it is vital for a student possessing grit to set a primary goal of achievement in a specific domain (Tang et al., 2021).

### ***Characteristics of Perseverance***

Perseverance is the extent an individual uses to sustain continued effort amid adversity or challenges. Overcoming challenges requires a “never give up attitude” (Xu et al., 2020, p. 8). Individuals who display Grit Scale characteristics for perseverance and passion are better able to adhere to their commitments; also, people who obtain a high score in one Grit Scale dimension will likely score high in the other. The literature review shows how the two components are interrelated yet distinct (Duckworth, 2016).

The interaction between a few African American males and the U.S. public school system provided favorable conclusions, as the students could navigate and persevere amid unfavorable norms, practices, and policies (Henderson et al., 2020). Despite encountering unfair treatment, lower expectations, and exclusion, African American males were still able to activate identities that promoted a positive sense of self. Five college students identifying as Black, African American, and Sudanese chose the passion to construct perseverance to succeed in the

public education system. The researchers investigated the characteristics essential for building identities that would reinforce pride, strength, and aspirations toward college achievement. The study's findings indicated the need to strengthen cultural ethos for African American males, moving them from being at risk for academic failure to at-promise for college. Providing spaces for African American males to lead, modeling success, and delivering messaging that honors their strengths and responsibility to their communities could be critical in their efforts toward perseverance. Furthermore, educators, practitioners, and researchers need to interact with African American males and provide the necessary opportunities to promote their engagement and participation in the public education system. Henderson et al. (2020) provided valuable information on how African American males strive toward perseverance despite challenges to achieve college success.

### *Characteristics of Sustained Interest*

Sustained interest, the first source of passion, is when an individual exemplifies a strong attentiveness toward a skill or subject, embarking on mastery. Sustained interest is a concept often misunderstood as talent. Whereas talent is the mastery of a skillset, sustained interest results from a passion for persevering over a long period. Each stage of the mastery process provides a level of optimism and empowerment. When students persevere, they develop hope (expectations), passion, and the belief they have the power to improve things (Duckworth, 2016). The constructs of sustained interest could be an essential resource and benefit for African American male students. Students who remain focused and have a good temperament can use sustained interest to achieve. Adding temperament to one's well-being will primarily influence school readiness, academic achievement, and educational attainment (Duckworth & Allred, 2012).

### *Characteristics of Sustained Effort*

Sustained effort, the second source of passion, is the continued, effortful, and deliberate practice toward mastering a skill to achieve a goal. Individuals who possess sustained effort often work or exert effort outside their comfort zone. Sustained effort or deliberate practice could require more time on task to achieve a skillset, leading to another result of passion: persevering over a long period. An individual who strives to achieve a goal typically demonstrates three key elements of mastery: practice, practice, practice. Moreover, when students exert intense and deliberate effort to goal achievement, conscious incompetence becomes unconscious competence. Students can use sustained effort as a primary motivation for effortful, deliberate practice to improve their skills. At the intersection of this phenomenon, deliberate practice is for preparation and flow is for performance. At this point, the student loses track of time, and the task often becomes effortless (Duckworth, 2016).

### *Characteristics of Achieving Long-Term Goals*

Long-term goals and follow-through require an individual to exude purposeful and continuous commitment toward achieving certain activities or goals. Follow-through and commitment are predictors of students achieving college success, holding appointed leadership positions, and obtaining notable accomplishments throughout adulthood. The two concepts are useful for understanding a student's academic history. Furthermore, an important goal was to determine if long-term goal commitment or follow-through predict whether students finish college instead of dropping out. The outcome of this construct provides a framework for the grit phenomenon. Following through on long-term goal commitments requires and builds grit (Duckworth, 2016).



## **Essential Student Challenges in Education and Learning**

All students will experience challenges related to education and learning, including stress, as they strive to overcome and achieve their academic goals and requirements (Asikainen et al., 2020). Some students persevere and reach their academic goals; others give up and never complete the goal (Duckworth, 2016). Key educational challenges students encounter are burnout, achieving the resilience to continue, and the assistance of supportive teachers, encouraging and inspiring them to persevere (Romano et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2021; Tuovinen et al., 2020). Students overcome challenges in education when their essential needs are addressed.

### ***Grit and Student Burnout***

Characteristics of student burnout are the outcomes of exhaustion, cynicism, and inadequacy (Tang et al., 2021). Exhaustion is a feeling of burden or exhaustion resulting from overtaxing work, a state of extreme physical or mental fatigue (Asikainen et al., 2020). Cynicism means a lack of interest and a pessimistic or indifferent attitude toward studying generally and in relation to others, and a lack of professional efficacy, referred to feelings of incompetence and poor achievement in studying (Asikainen et al., 2020; Salmela-Aro et al., 2009). Inadequacy is the state or quality of being inadequate, the inability to put in the required study, and the failure to overcome situations to achieve in school and life (Asikainen et al., 2020). The components of student grit—consistency and perseverance and their relation to the resilience factors impact the adverse outcomes of high burnout (Tang et al., 2021). Committed high school and college students are more effective with higher academic resilience to counteract burnout than their peers. However, there have been few studies on mitigating the effects of student burnout with grit among disadvantaged individuals.

### ***Grit, Academic Resilience, and the Student***

Resilience is essential to understanding the commitment mechanism behind the grit phenomenon. Resilience suggests the importance of assisting thousands of at-risk students to recover academically within adverse situations, events, and environments (Tang et al., 2021). Understanding the impact of how students control their educational development tasks at an early age and at school age is vital to improving the academic success rate for all students. The motivation behind grit and the resilience factor shows the connection between students' coping processes to persevere (Tang et al., 2021). Committed high school and college students are more effective with coping or higher academic resilience to persevere and counteract burnout than their peers (Romano et al., 2021). Studies of the correlation between exhaustion, cynicism, and inadequacy have shown positive and statistically strong results for understanding the essential component of student burnout. Student academic resilience, time, and effort management with a deep understanding can help reduce student burnout and its impact on their well-being (Asikainen et al., 2020), which is vital for enhancing students' overall study skills. Students committed to academic resilience typically overcome the effects of burnout, which include poor performance, low personal satisfaction, and disengaged behaviors. Consequently, researchers theorized that students with highly gratifying protection action of resilience are more effective in overcoming burnout (Romano et al., 2021).

### ***Grit and the Role of Teacher Emotional Support***

Another vital factor is the perceived perspective of teacher emotional support for students in academic engagement. The three essential components of a teacher's ability to provide emotional support—positive climate, teacher sensitivity, and high regard for the adolescent or student perspective (Romano et al., 2021)—enhance academic resilience and school engagement.

School engagement comprises vigor, dedication, and absorption, as vigor reflects motivation with high energy levels, dedication toward schoolwork, and a positive attitude toward studying. The positive development model of teacher support provides two critical factors for student success: Students' academic resilience is essential, and teachers' competencies to create and maintain a warm climate are vital (Romano et al., 2021). Positive relationships between teachers, students, and peers can produce a positive and fulfilling experience. When students perceive positive relationships with their teachers, they depend less on their resilience to protect against academic burnout (Duckworth, 2016; Romano et al., 2021).

### **Five Domains of Student Academic Performance**

Academic grit performance influences student success (Postigo et al., 2021). Student performance can be gritty, industrious, or careless. Gritty students have high performance and achievement, industrious students are moderate achievers, and careless students put forth minimal effort. There are five domains of student academic performance: personality traits, motivational factors, self-regulation learning strategies, student approaches to learning, and psychosocial contextual influences (Postigo et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2012).

#### ***Personality Traits***

Personality traits comprise five categories: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (OCEAN; Buecker et al., 2020; Montag & Elhai, 2020), which reflect the person's being. Openness is the extent to which a person has an appreciation for a variety of experiences; conscientiousness is the degree to which a person prefers planning over spontaneity; extroversion is the extent to which a person tends to prefer being sociable, outgoing and talkative; agreeableness is the tendency to be kind, sympathetic, and happy to assist others; and neuroticism is the extent to which someone is inclined to worry or be vulnerable or

temperamental (Buecker et al., 2020; Montag & Elhai, 2020). Personality traits are linked to areas of individuals which support and sustain existing attitudes and behaviors. These existing associations are guided by behavior more than the changing personality traits (Soutter et al., 2020). This allows an individual's personality traits to assist in better understanding the domains of life.

### ***Motivational Factors***

Motivational factors include intrinsic goal orientation, extrinsic goal orientation, task value, and control of learning beliefs, self-efficacy for learning and performance, and self-regulation learning strategies. Students' physical identities may impact their intentions to persevere and their career choices in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Intrinsic goal orientation toward an academic task indicates the student's participation is an end in itself rather than a means to an end. Another intrinsic factor is the degree to which students attribute their participation in a task to reasons such as challenge, curiosity, and mastery (Hasan et al., 2021; Pintrich et al., 1991). Extrinsic goal orientation concerns the degree to which students perceive themselves to be participating in a task for reasons such as grades, rewards, performance evaluations by others, and competition. Students high in extrinsic goal orientation engage in learning tasks as a means to an end; however, they relate to issues rather than participating in the task itself. Task value refers to students' perceptions of the course material in terms of interest, importance, and utility. High task value should lead to more involvement in learning. Self-efficacy for learning and performance comprises two aspects of expectancy: expectancy for success and self-efficacy. Expectancy for success refers to performance expectations and relates specifically to task performance; self-efficacy is a self-appraisal of one's ability to accomplish a task and confidence in possessing the skills needed to perform that task.

Test anxiety has shown negative relationships with expectancies and academic performance. The components of test anxiety are worry or cognitive and emotional. The worry component refers to students' negative thoughts that disrupt performance, whereas the emotional component pertains to affective and physiological arousal aspects of anxiety. The cognitive component and preoccupation with performance are the greatest sources of performance. Training in using effective learning strategies and test-taking skills should help reduce student anxiety (Hasan et al., 2021; Pintrich et al., 1991).

### ***Self-Regulation Learning Strategies***

Self-regulation learning strategies have different regulatory actions. According to the student academic performance construct, students assimilate content from different courses and complete assessment activities shared by their teachers. In this theoretical viewpoint of self-regulation, there is an expectation that the effective use of learning strategies would lead to higher academic performance (Bernardo et al., 2022; García-Hermoso et al., 2021). In the cyclical self-regulated learning process, students plan a task, monitor their performance, reflect on the outcome, and repeat the cycle. The university dropout phenomenon is common worldwide in many countries. This transpires into a quest to understand the use of self-regulation learning strategies. An added variable is student engagement which serves to show rather students have intentions to drop out or not (Bernardo et al., 2022). The self-regulation learning approach shows that that through information processing perspective, strategic learners are able to monitor and identify their own learning strategies (Kermarrec et al., 2022).

### ***Student Approaches to Learning***

The student approaches to learning component comprises five skills to reinforce their desires to achieve their academic goal commitments. The skills are thinking, communication,

social, self-management, and research (Moreira et al., 2021). Each skill allows the student to determine what will benefit them at the moment. There is also an intrinsic motivation to student learning. The strategies employed under this approach will depend on the specific task, although they are commonly comprehensive and characterized by the establishment of relations between specific content and a broader phenomenon. When a student adopts a surface approach, there is an extrinsic guided motivation to complete a task. Low investment and low effort follow role learning are characterized by this approach (Moreira et al., 2021). This approach also provides a key pedagogical strategy to enhance the quality of students' collaborative learning process (Han & Ellis, 2021).

### ***Psychosocial Contextual Influences***

Psychological contextual influences are the characteristics or facets that influence an individual psychologically and socially. This component addresses individuals in relation to their social environment and how the environment affects them physically and mentally (Hasan et al., 2021; Pintrich et al., 1991). Context and mechanisms hypothesized to be vital intervening factors in predicting children's participation. Context provides opportunities and constraints. Mechanisms drive participation outcomes (Maciver et al., 2019). The effect of social power and class can also, be identified as mechanical or contextual. Inequality creates a context which strengthens the relationship between disparities and outcomes are considered mechanical effects. Contextual effects are when inequality creates a context altering the relationship between disparities and an outcome. These social psychological processes are predicated by social class. Key elements of this phenomenon are a) status anxiety, the perception of society: social norms and mobility, and cohesion and social distance (Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2020).

### **Academic Achievement and Support Matters for African American Males**

Following George Floyd's tragic, unnecessary death from police brutality, there emerged a loud and resounding chant—"Black Lives Matter" (Cai, 2020)—to which others replied, "All Lives Matter." Both are true within the given contextual narratives. These narratives have played out in mainstream media, across the nation, and on the streets. Despite the conflicting narratives, it is clear that millions of American parents desire to overcome poverty and support their children with a better education (Cai, 2020), an endeavor also pursued by the public school system.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) presented disturbing statistics on the state of African American students' education (Cai, 2020). The Center for Public Education collected the data to assist policymakers and the public monitor the educational progress from Pre-K to college and rethink what public schools can do to assist U.S. students better. In 2018, 32% of African American students lived in poverty compared to 10% of White students. The percentage of African American students whose parents obtained a bachelor's degree or higher was 27%, compared to Asian students at 69% and White students at 53% (Cai, 2020).

The NCES showed staggering disparities in African Americans students' experiences compared to their peers (Cai, 2020). Challenges include insufficient internet access and the high percentage of African Americans attending high-poverty schools. As a result, the students might experience emotional disturbances yet not receive services for their disabilities, increasing the high school dropout rate (Atuahene, 2021; Cai, 2020). The achievement gap between White and African American students and the disproportionate ratio of African American students and teachers have not improved, contributing to low graduation and college enrollment rates (Cai, 2020). Academic achievement and support matter, particularly for African American males.

### ***The Foundation of Academic Success***

Brooms (2019b) explored African American male students from two foundations of academic success. School culture and relationships provided narratives from the students addressing and promoting a campus culture that increases a sense of belonging, educational experiences, and academic aspirations. Brooms explored how these students constructed meaning from their school experiences and their efforts to pursue academic success. Salvo et al. (2019) identified the foundations of academic success as matters of familiarity, clarity, and commitment by leaders: providing familiar teacher-directed instruction, confirming the students understand assignment instructions, and administering project assessments such as exams. Policymakers and educational leaders must commit to best practices for creating and delivering appropriate educational content that is equitable and accessible to a broad range of student learners, removing economic, academic, cultural, technological, and other challenges.

Pruitt et al. (2019) suggested another foundation of academic success for African American males is addressing contemporary issues such as unequal education technology access, school funding disparities, and economic problems that continue to plague African American communities. The study's findings could provide information to assist policymakers with educational reform and funding to improve African American males' educational attainment. Specifically, the data may inspire policymakers to allocate funding for more extensive teacher training and greater resources to improve African American males' educational attainment and academic success.

### ***African American Males' Academic Performance***

The reasons African Americans have lower grades than their White peers are not fully known (Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Salvo et al., 2019). Some African American male students resist



harmful stereotypes and labeling and achieve academic success within the school environment (Banks, 2017). There are many areas where Black men might experience discrimination (Britt-Spells et al., 2018; making it a pressing issue and mitigating the social, psychological, and behavioral problems most African American male youth experience within the educational system (Nasir et al., 2019). The impacts on academic performance and well-being create strain and suffering, which often cause students to lose focus within the classroom.

The probable academic failures and shortcomings often place African American male students in desperate positions. In almost every aspect of learning and development, they are disproportionately below the academic standards of their peers across racial and ethnic classes (Nasir et al., 2019). Perhaps this could explain why African American males do not meet academic standards or reach high school graduation, often caught up in the criminal justice system or even dying. The academic failures show the need for teachers, educational leaders, and policymakers to become an integral part of ensuring these students receive the academic mentoring and support necessary for achieving academic success within U.S. schools (Ransaw et al., 2019). The disproportionate number of African American school suspensions, specifically among males, leads to lower student achievement and a more negative attitude toward education. As a result, students lose self-motivation, engage in self-destructive or defiant behaviors, and receive more school suspensions (Boucher, 2016).

School district leaders must have local control and accountability plans to enhance students' academic performance capabilities and achievement (Greer et al., 2018). High-population school districts receive additional funding to assist high-needs students. Excluding underrepresented voices from local control and accountability committees often leads to problems with funding for African Americans, particularly males. When district leaders cannot

connect with African American parents, their male students' needs could go unmet by school funding. A lack of the assistance and support necessary to be successful at school poses hardships for African American male students, jeopardizing their academic performance.

### ***Parental and Family Support***

Parental and family support, particularly within the home environment, contributes to African American male students' success in overcoming academic challenges, including learning disabilities (Taylor et al., 2019). Negative or no family interaction could disadvantage African American male students in their pursuit of academic success. However, there remains limited research on family support with diminishing returns and providing a parental resource for the disparities of African American adolescents (Assari et al., 2020). There is a dearth of evidence addressing race and ethnicity factors and how it affects the parental resources needed to mitigate the disparities experienced by African American male adolescents. Another aspect is the cost of allowing Black students to be absent from social and psychological development. A therapist can support parents and families in developing new relational skills (Hogue et al., 2019). With professional counseling, students have a greater capacity to strengthen their confidence in human interactions, both at home with family and parents and while in school. Therapy can create an environment that allows African American males to build trust and fidelity toward their families, teachers, and peers. Quality treatments and increasing the implementation of high-fidelity family-based interventions would improve these adolescents' conduct and other mitigating challenges (Hogue et al., 2019). There is a need for family and parental monitoring, which would significantly reduce externalizing behavior in the school setting at different levels (Lopez-Tamayo et al., 2016).

### *Teacher Support*

Compassion, concern, and positive teacher support are key components for African American male students' success in school (Colaianne et al., 2020). Compassionate teachers provide a cultural environment conducive to student performance and learning capabilities. The baseline of compassion and empathy toward students indicates how teachers should perform within a professional educational setting (Amzat & Valdez, 2017; Warren, 2015). Compassion mitigates newly formed knowledge about the racist stereotypical discourse of endangered and in-crisis perceptions of African American males' experiences within the educational system (Brooms, 2021; Brown, 2017). Additionally, when teachers are compassionate and treat students with respect, the students build confidence and trust and exert the necessary effort toward learning. Racial stereotyping becomes less apparent, furthering positive teacher–student interactions (Jasper et al., 2019; Liang et al., 2020; Warren, 2015). Student–teacher interaction shows how empathy, respect, and trust produce favorable student outcomes. Factor analysis and reliability tests show teachers' agreement that empathy, respect, and trust are necessary for teachers of Black students, particularly Black males (Jasper et al., 2019; Liang et al., 2020; Warren, 2015).

A compassionate White male teacher at an Upper Midwest urban high school exemplified how developing positive interaction with students of color proved critical (Utt & Tochluk, 2020). By conceptualizing the problems and challenges numerous students of color face, particularly African American males, the teacher concluded they embodied the gaps in achievement and opportunity between White and Black students. This compassionate teacher realized students only needed solidarity in the forms of compassion and concern from their leaders. This teacher's

conceptualization confirms the importance of all leaders being positively supportive and involved in the lives of African American males and their quest toward academic achievement.

### *Schools and Community Support*

School and community environmental support and the impact on environmental constraints require investigation to understand the relationship between disadvantaged communities, neighborhoods, parental monitoring, and school behavior (Browne & Battle, 2018; Choi et al., 2018; Lopez-Tamayo et al., 2016). School, community, and neighborhood disadvantage exposure could significantly decline with parental monitoring of the students' externalizing behavior in the school setting at different levels. There is a need to better understand the relationship between African American males and their "particular neighborhood and community" (Lopez-Tamayo et al., 2016, p. 372) and school environments.

Schools and the community should collaborate more to provide resources and support systems for students, particularly African American males, who do not know how to succeed in their classes and with their homework (Grace, 2020; Greer et al., 2018). African American students shared sentiments about basic instructional practices where their teachers do not teach, and they receive assignments without support. Perceptions of teachers' instructional practice leave African American students believing they cannot succeed in many courses, particularly advanced courses. Understanding the salience of these perceptions and the importance of facilitating successful school–family–community partnerships require targeting intellectuals, scholars, and the overall society (Booth et al., 2016; Parker & Wilkins, 2018; Vereen et al., 2020). Including all stakeholders is vital to increasing educational equity. It is also paramount that teachers and school–family–community collaborations promote cultural freedoms, avoiding cultural encapsulation and insensitivity to the disparities of African American male students

(Booth et al., 2016; Parker & Wilkins, 2018; Vereen et al., 2020). Leaders should mitigate low academic score disparities between urban and suburban, small-town, and rural schools regarding African American male students' academic proficiency in science, mathematics, reading, and writing courses (Bryan et al., 2020; NCES, 2017). Partnering and developing activities to address the inequalities and challenges urban students encounter requires understanding their experiences from the voices of the students, their families, and community members (Bryan et al., 2020).

### ***Counseling and Mentoring***

Counseling and mentoring can be a supportive aspect in assisting African American males. Three African American male counselors shared their involvement with how social justice began early in childhood and involved immediate family, religious institutions, counselors, and mentors and how this reflected upon racial incidents they witnessed (Dollarhide et al., 2018). A community for African American males may prove promising through effective counseling (Heaven, 2015). In the realm of social justice and counseling, support for African American males from students of other demographics has the potential and possibility to encourage positive racial identity for these students by learning to interact with society.

### **African American Males' Academic, Cultural, and Technological Challenges**

Scholars have identified the academic, cultural, and technological obstacles to learning that African American male students must overcome to achieve academic success (Derbel, 2017; Dixson & Gentzis, 2021; Howard, 2013; Patterson, 2021). The importance and significance of the three challenges align with the underlying issues and hardships African American boys encounter as they strive to integrate within the school system. Understanding the academic, cultural, and technological challenges of education most African American males' experiences are vital to enhancing these students' educational health and viability. Researchers have explored

the challenges African American males encounter in their quest to achieve academically and the reasons these students do not achieve at the academic level as their peers. Understanding the academic, technological, and cultural perspectives of African American male postsecondary graduates is essential.

The impact of culture, race, and ethnicity on mental health contributes to cultural challenges that could impact academic performance (Hernández-Mogollon et al., 2010; Leong & Kalibatseva, 2011; Walker, 2018). This study will be an exploration of academic, cultural, and technological challenges to provide the African American male voice on how they achieved academic success, which could indicate effective methods for mitigating these disparities for African American male students. Technology has changed education delivery in the United States and worldwide, adding new problems in integrating virtual and digital worlds into teaching and learning (Dalgarno et al., 2013; Trawick et al., 2020). However, there is a disparity in African American males' involvement with online learning.

### ***Academic Challenges***

Proper preparation, support, and encouragement are necessary for all students to succeed in school (Ludicke et al., 2019). African American males typically have lower grades than their female counterparts or White peers (JBHE, 2020; Leath et al., 2019, 2020; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Salvo et al., 2019). The lack of resources and school support for African American males (Woods-Jaeger et al., 2021) places these learners at a disadvantage in academic achievement in the school environment (Leath et al., 2019). The school standards, requirements, and academic pace could be beyond disadvantaged students' abilities (Badger & Sutherland, 2004; McGee, 2021). Workload expectations can also affect academic achievement (Gregory & Lodge, 2015; Patterson, 2021), causing students to lose hope in overcoming their academic deficiencies.

Students fall behind in their studies without effort and cannot catch up, putting them at risk for the school-to-prison pipeline (Ferguson, 2020). They might find other areas of interest outside academics, with unfortunate outcomes (Mocombe, 2018).

Clayton and Teasley (2022), Lateef et al. (2022), and Lewis et al. (2010) identified a national dilemma in academic underachievement among African American male adolescents. Durkee et al. (2019) and Webb (2016) proposed the White-acting hypothesis, which indicates that African American male students do not want their peers to perceive them as behaving as White. The White-acting hypothesis is a form of misidentification in which African American males align with academic norms in not valuing education, reducing their academic performance capabilities (Durkee et al., 2019; McMillian et al., 2016). The issue of misidentification has been a challenge for over 100 years (Artiles, 2019; McMillian et al., 2016).

Harris (2018) and Patterson (2020) posited that the educational outcomes of African American males are dismal and have reached the level of an American and a Black community crisis. Secondary education academic failures prevent most African American males from pursuing higher education, leading to unemployment, gang membership, violence, incarceration, and intergenerational poverty. Psychological and social discomfort avoidance efforts interfere with African American male students' academic behavior and can result in self-sabotage and handicapping, impeding academic performance and college graduation (Dixson & Gentzis, 2021; Harris, 2018).

### ***Cultural Challenges***

As educational institutions continue their efforts toward building a shared vision, they face frequent challenges (Brooms, 2017, 2019b; Cotton et al., 2017; Howard, 2019; Reid & Petocz, 2006; Sherren et al., 2010). One challenge is encouraging African American male

students' efforts and motivation toward actively participating within the class environment (Ardichvili et al., 2003; Patterson, 2021). African American males are highly cognizant of the context in which they exist and how they see and interpret peer interactions (Brooms, 2015, 2019b). Feeling dismissed as vital participants within the classroom environment, African American male students disengage from learning by withdrawing from daily instructional activities. As a result, their capability for and effort toward learning tend to suffer.

Whittington et al. (2021) identified disparities between African American and African-born Black males. These disparities and other obstacles often place African American males at risk of achieving their educational aspirations, leading to years of oppression (Nichols et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2019). African American male students' cultural environments provide educators with a better understanding, leading to improved academic experiences (Hodge & Collins, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Warren & Coles, 2020). Employing teachers of color is another way to support African American males' experiences with the school's cultural environment (Bristol & Goings, 2019; Scott & Rodriguez, 2015). The academic achievement gap between African American males and White students has remained for over 50 years.

Despite the desire for African American males to achieve academically, they remain underrepresented in America's colleges (Holland, 2017). Key factors causing underrepresentation could include a lack of college preparation due to the absence of support on all levels (London et al., 2021). College preparation is a vital area in which educational leaders could encourage these students to achieve. Other contributors to overcoming challenges and participating in a conducive and vibrant cultural environment are parent involvement, family routine and cohesiveness, the availability of resources, and addressing discrimination (Phelps & Sperry, 2021). Parental engagement and racial socialization could be means to overcome these



cultural issues, providing children with an understanding of racial pride, racial challenges, egalitarianism (emphasis on equality and coexistence), and self-worth.

Hawkins (2018) suggested these issues in education have been prevalent for decades with little to no effort for educational reform. Moreover, African American males who experience a sense of frustration and feel they do not belong or are uncared for might unfairly target others. These students could be deemed troublemakers, often resulting in exclusions, such as suspensions and expulsions, based on schools' current educational policies. The cultural challenges from these educational experiences are an integral aspect of the inequities related to race and ethnicity, class, gender, and disability (Hawkins, 2018; Howard, 2019).

African Americans who regularly encounter prejudice could develop a healthy paranoia or cultural mistrust, a response based on experiences of racism and oppression (Howard, 2019; Trent et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2013). Factors contributing to African American male students' feelings about learning and the choice to disengage are low self-esteem, lack of confidence, lack of perceived worth, and self-expectancy (Plaut et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2007). Multicultural ideology indicates that differences among racial and ethnic groups require recognition and appreciation (Nienhusser & Oshio, 2017; Ryan et al., 2007; Trent et al., 2019). Rather than ignore group membership, people should seek to understand, accept, and even embrace ethnic differences to promote justice, resulting in better economic and social conditions for ethnic minorities and intergroup harmony (Plaut et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2007).

### ***Technological Challenges***

Virtual technology is undergoing rapid, innovative, and revolutionary change worldwide (Badger & Sutherland, 2004; McGovern et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2020). In schools, the change entails shifting the educator from a sole provider of knowledge to a collaborative partner with

staff and students to provide an exceptional educational experience. A related area of interest is African American males' disparity with online learning. Educators' challenges in using virtual worlds include a lack of technology, support, funding, and time (Bower & Jong, 2020; Dalgarno et al., 2013). Other difficulties include usability, familiarity, equity, ethics, inherent limitations and acceptance of virtual worlds, and management and planning problems. Technology has changed education delivery in the United States and worldwide, adding new problems in integrating virtual worlds into teaching and learning (Bower & Jong, 2020; Dalgarno et al., 2013).

It is paramount to bring virtual technology to African American males who lag other ethnicities, races, and genders in computers, internet capabilities, and usage (Jackson et al., 2009; Luo et al., 2021). Video game usage is a favorable aspect of IT and virtual reality for African males. Virtual reality technologies are an essential medium for the digital production of physical features of external reality (Luo et al., 2021). One way to capitalize on African American males' interest in technology is by using their video game playing and virtual capabilities as positive methods to improve their academic performance (Jackson et al., 2009; Luo et al., 2021). Researchers and technologists have begun to work intensively to make video games and virtual reality mediums more efficacious for learning, a topic the ACM has noted (Cesar et al., 2019).

Students can experience virtual reality learning through technology. They can explore biological cells, replicate classic experiments, practice Spanish with Barcelona natives, experience psychological hallucinations, and enter caves behind waterfalls (Nussli & Oh, 2015). However, there are several issues to address before virtual worlds become mainstream (Gregory et al., 2015; Luo et al., 2021). The cost of the apparatuses prevents most students from expanding their learning capabilities to find academic success. At the same time, the less fortunate struggle

to keep up with technological advances. This perception could provide pertinent information to address the disparities African American males experience.

As the intersection between technology and education continues to grow, educational leaders must reassess how they develop and implement improvements for educating students, even amid unachieved expectations and failed projects (Gregory et al., 2015). Schools can enhance graduates' employability by recognizing the benefits of flexible, more in-depth, and collaborative social learning. An example includes offering students opportunities to enrich their face-to-face learning using in-class technology (Hassall & Lewis, 2017). Nazar et al. (2019) examined technological support in engineering design for historically marginalized youth. Using a case study approach, the researchers explored how youth engaged in engineering design in collaboration with people around them. The findings focused on the when, how, and why implications of STEM.

Overcoming technological challenges enabled a young African American male student to use inventive methods and ingenuity to construct an app addressing childhood bullying (Nazar et al., 2019). The student was both an inventor and a destroyer by combating bullying through innovation. Nazar et al. (2019) deemed technology an effective way to integrate inclusion in engineering education, thus combating African American males' technological challenges. Despite Nazar et al.'s case, there remains a significant lack of African male students involved in STEM education programs (Mocombe, 2018). Furthermore, African American males see other paths to success as more appealing than traditional education, mainly STEM. From this construct, African American males are more prone to prisons, urban street life, athletics, and entertainment, contributing to this disparity (Dancy, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2011).

The dual technological disparity between Black/White and Black female/male students is a linguistic structure and social class function (Mocombe, 2018). Riegler-Crumb and King (2010) stated that gender and racial/ethnic disparities in STEM fields are troubling from a social justice perspective. The perception of disparities could further perpetuate stereotypes about who belongs in the STEM fields. African American male students might view STEM disparities as self-fulfilling prophecies and continue to believe they are victims, unwilling to overcome and achieve academically.

The academic, cultural, and technological phenomenon is prevalent throughout African American male students' educational journey. This has caused most African American students to feel they are not vital to learning within the institution's culture. Despite their feelings, they must continue striving to overcome academic, cultural, and technological challenges and achieve college success (Griffin et al., 2021).

### **Additional Challenges**

The National Education Goals Panel (1997), commissioned by President George H. W. Bush and other elected officials, established national education goals to be met by 2000, including that all children will enter school ready to learn. Phelps and Sperry (2021) noted, "Children will have access to high-quality preschool programs, every parent will be a child's first teacher, and children will receive health care, nutrition, and access to physical activities" (p. 52)

African American males face various additional challenges, including a lack of community input and resources, mental health, the resegregation of schools, and online learning. When these challenges are addressed, students can achieve academic success and become successful participants in U.S. society. Families, schools, churches, community resource centers,

civic groups, think tanks, charitable foundations, and businesses can collaborate within schools and communities to provide additional support. African American male students could find the encouragement needed to become thriving citizens from these outside entities and community resources (Chin, 2021).

### ***Mental Health***

The impact of culture, race, and ethnicity on mental health poses cultural challenges (Hernández-Mogollon et al., 2010; Leong & Kalibatseva, 2011; Shannon et al., 2022). Leong and Kalibatseva (2011) and Shannon et al. (2022) found that racial and ethnic minorities in the United States are less likely to utilize mental health services. Mental health issues, such as anxiety disorders, are understudied, underdiagnosed, and undertreated in African Americans (Shannon et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2013). Members of mainstream society must respect these racial differences to mitigate such disparities (Miller & Davis, 2021).

Addressing African American boys' challenges, schools and communities could lead to developing strategies to mitigate risk factors (Brooms, 2015, 2019a). The boys face treatment, cognitive, affective, value orientation, physical, and structural challenges (Leong & Kalibatseva, 2011; Shannon et al., 2022). Research has also shown the White stereotypes and prejudices toward ethnic minorities (Miller & Davis, 2021; Ryan et al., 2007), particularly within learning institutions. A lack of attention to these contextual factors limits individuals' understanding of student attitudes, behaviors, and performances during and outside school (Brooms, 2015, 2019a). Resolution could come from the collective involvement of academic leaders being cognizant of the problems and willing to assist in improvement.

### ***Resegregation of Schools***

An increase in resegregation, or reversed desegregation, within U.S. schools could be a challenge to African American student achievement (Hussain, 2021; Lancellot, 2016; Mickelson et al., 2021). Initial efforts toward desegregation involved exploring racial integration (Chin, 2021; Mordechay, 2021). In *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007) and *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education* (2007), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled school districts could not use race as the sole factor to desegregate K–12 public schools. Some schools adopted the Freedom of Choice plan (Ben-Porath & Johanek, 2019; Lancellot, 2016), which allowed citizens to choose the schools they wanted to attend. However, Freedom of Choice was unsuccessful, privileging White families and contributing to desegregation. The results were unfavorable for Black students, showing the financial disparities between Whites and Blacks. Despite the overpopulation of African American and minority students at a district’s desegregated schools, there were no policies or mandates toward equal student representation (Lancellot, 2016).

### ***African Americans and Latinos***

African American and Latino men overcame academic challenges with family and teacher support and creative intervention to ensure successful matriculation (Carey, 2019). Men of color, particularly African Americans and Latinos, are given their viewpoints regarding educational research, which often shapes school practices. An academic dilemma is that P–12 educational choice and quality often leave students underprepared for secondary education (Carey, 2019). There are insufficient voices from men of color to understand African American and Latino males’ progression from elementary to postsecondary education. This negativity impacts students of color in their quest to attend college (Harris, 2018).

There is a call for academic intervention and strategies to assist African American males and men of color. African American male students who have achieved academic success amid challenges desire to conduct research findings. The students' unique challenges in school contribute to the challenges and disparities in educational outcomes (Ellis et al., 2018). These factors directly reflect why these students cannot achieve success and meet the same academic standards as their peers. However, some African American males find a way to achieve academic success.

### **African American Males' College Experiences**

Regardless of race, male students demonstrate poor knowledge of mental health and higher self-stigma toward counseling (Shannon et al., 2022). Stigma comprises the negative public perceptions of receiving professional mental health services and the individual internalized worth of seeking these services. These factors provide reflective perspective microcosms of the disparities between the overall African American population and counseling utilization. Durkee et al. (2019) identified the stigma of racial identity as a fundamental aspect of human development. Racial identity is a person's identification with a racial or ethnic group and the meaning drawn from its affiliation.

Acting-White accusations and racial identity influence one another, with cultural invalidations of student identity threatening to discredit or undermine an individual's sense of belonging with a social group (Durkee et al., 2022; Durkee & Gomez, 2022). Another stigma, discrimination, is significantly and positively related to students' drive for masculinity (Osa & Kelly, 2021). Osa and Kelly (2021) found that negative psychological factors and their associations with racial identity and AWA stigmatize African American male college students' experiences.

The presence of African American male-centered programs has increased on U.S. college campuses. Druery and Brooms (2019) solicited African American male college students' personal narratives regarding the benefits they receive through program engagement. The findings showed that Black male leadership collective services (BMLCs) provided a culturally enriching environment that positively contributed to their college experience. BMLCs assisted African American males in improving their college tenures through three critical components: brotherhood, a support network, and enhancing their personal development. In voicing their perspectives, participants cited individual and collective factors that encouraged their persistence to college graduation (Druery & Brooms, 2019).

### ***Academic Support for African American Males in College Education***

Academic support for African American males is a vital concern (Britt-Spells et al., 2018). Most African American male students experience the effects of discrimination and social, psychological, and behavior challenges in the education system (Britt-Spells et al., 2018), which could cause them to disengage and lose focus in the classroom (Leath et al., 2019). Adolescence is a critical period for youth as they experience identity development based on their conscience and how they relate to, are viewed by, and are treated by others. Leath et al. (2019) explored the relationship among African American adolescents' school-based racial discrimination experiences, racial identity beliefs regarding the importance (centrality) and affective meaning they attach to being African American (public regard), and classroom academic engagement with curiosity and persistence. Research findings indicate the need for all stakeholders to provide academic support for African American males.



### ***Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Predominantly White Institutions***

African American males feel a sense of greater educational support and expectations for academic success in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) compared to predominantly White universities or institutions (PWIs; Harper, 2015a). HBCUs provide and encourage the pursuit of STEM programs (Wallace & Gagen, 2020). Educational leaders must work together to advance African Americans in STEM at all levels (Qazi & Escobar, 2019; Rankins, 2019).

Harper (2015a) examined African American males' experiences at PWIs. Out-of-class engagement with communication and confrontation skills enabled African American male students to resist stereotypes (Hawkins, 2015). There is a need for further inquiry to determine why some African American males persist and others do not. Moreover, this aspect aligns with the principle of meritocracy, which suggests that all youth have access to educational equality and success (Rogers & Brooms, 2020). Students who exemplify meritocracy achieve even when they encounter structural issues or obstacles such as poverty, racism, and educational challenges. From this perspective, students who overcome these challenges exemplify the work ethic to achieve and become academically successful.

White professors at PWIs might perceive Black students, particularly males, as inferior, thus creating an added burden for these students (Hawkins, 2018). African American males found that some White peers saw them as privileged from the affirmative action mandates. Affirmative action is a vital resource to ensure students of color receive the same opportunities as their White peers (Sultana, 2019). The affirmative action assistance Blacks receive is comparable to the perceived preferential treatment received by Whites.

### ***Performance Comparisons Between the Genders***

Perhaps the most alarming is the disparity between African American females and African American males. African American females far outnumber African American males in all facets of higher education, accounting for 63.6% of all African American degree enrollments (JBHE, 2020). This disparity suggests that far more Black women than Black men will become lawyers, doctors, and corporate leaders. Furthermore, more African American females than African American males will attend graduate schools, secure professional positions, and pursue leadership positions in U.S. society (JBHE, 2020).

### ***Online Learning Environments***

In sharing their sentiments about online learning and teaching, African American male students identified online learning as a valuable resource (Salvo et al., 2019). The virtual medium allowed students to experience online instructors' communication and grading responsiveness proportionate to their online engagement. The participants identified the advantages of online learning environments for college preparation and future careers. They reported that online instructors were responsive to electronic communication and promptly graded assignments, increasing their enjoyment of learning online.

The African American male students in Salvo et al.'s (2019) study indicated that online learning helped prepare them for college and future careers. At-risk students with reading issues also mentioned problems with verbal communication, face-to-face instruction, communication with faculty and staff by electronic media, technology issues, and insufficient technological support from educational institutions. Despite the online environment, disadvantaged students with technology challenges reported a preference for African American instructors. However,

African American males often had White female instructors in their online courses (Corey & Bower, 2005; Wallace et al., 2019).

Amid the expansion of online education in college, African American males' enrollment in online courses is decreasing (Salvo et al., 2019). The nation's future depends on how well educational institutions develop, nurture, and deploy talent and promote online course completion by African American male college students. Financial assistance, prior academic achievement, previous IT training, continuous enrollment, student selection of topics perceived as uncomplicated and less demanding or familiar due to sufficient prior knowledge, use of handheld digital devices, and a nonprejudicial learning environment were key factors in African American male college students' online course completion. Salvo et al. (2019) recommended strategies for policymakers and educational leaders to implement and promote academic achievement and degree attainment for African American male college students.

### **Academic Goal Commitment–Grit Relationships for African American Males**

There is extensive research on the education predictors of African American male students' problems but far less on the factors that can lead to positive outcomes (Harris & Kruger, 2019). This reflective perspective includes keen reasoning and desires for practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and legislators to continue their efforts to find the proper construct for resolving the educational disparities of African American males and other minority groups (Howard, 2019). Some perceive men of color as the worst students at the bottom of nearly every statistical metric of educational progress (Harper, 2015b; Howard, 2019), viewing African American males as incapable of achieving academic success within the U.S. school system. African American male college students' graduation rate of 16% (Atuahene, 2021) supports this narrative within the research literature. Despite the negative sentiments and predictors, a small

percentage of African American male college graduates persist and achieve college academic success.

Tang et al. (2021) conducted a study to explore academic goal commitment, grit, and the importance of putting the goal back into grit. The findings suggested that the relationship between academic-related goal commitment and grit was a strong indicator of academic achievement. A person-oriented approach could show how goal commitment, grit-perseverance, and grit-consistency function together and contribute to students' resilience to achieve their goals. Romano et al. (2021) found that resilient students could elevate themselves in the face of chronic failure and persevere to academic success. The researchers deemed resilience a personal capacity that enables an individual to handle setbacks, challenges, and pressures. Furthermore, these constructs are related to student well-being, motivation, and mental health challenges. The findings showed the implications of student burnout, learning environment support, and teacher–student and peer support (Romano et al., 2021).

Henderson et al. (2020) described how African American males could use the constructs from academic goal commitment and grit relationships to persevere and achieve college success. The students used the value of positive socialization in their quest for academic goal commitment while engaging the principles and characteristics of grit. Students' academic expectations are essential to their motivation to do well in education. Based on their expectations, students build the self-confidence, esteem, and competence to overcome doubt and fulfill their development. Henderson et al. also explored the students' experiences of the prevalence of intersectional identifiers linking race and gender. The participants perceived themselves as centered by not only race but their religious and leadership roles (Henderson et al., 2020).

## Summary

Duckworth's (2016) grit theory of learning provides a foundation for understanding how African American male college graduates overcame challenges by using academic goal commitment and grit relationships to achieve their college degrees. Exploring the lived experiences of this population with academic success could indicate how African American male graduates succeed academically. Duckworth asserted that students could achieve academic success by constructing perseverance and passion toward grit. Further, grit would allow them to achieve academically despite the negative perceptions and influences of others. Most research data are unfavorable toward African American male students achieving academic success (e.g., Assari et al., 2018; Banks, 2017; Brown, 2017; Gibson, 2018; Grace et al., 2018), which is an ongoing and developing research topic.

There is limited literature on how African American male students might use the conceptualized paradigms to incorporate academic goal commitment and grit relationships to achieve college success. Filling the literature gap through the lens of the grit theory of learning (Duckworth, 2016) could provide information on effective instructional methods for African American male students, enhancing their academic success rate. In conjunction with the literature, this study provides a foundation for understanding why educational leaders must embrace academic support to ensure African American male students persevere and achieve college success.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how African American male graduates experience and understand academic goal commitment and grit regarding college education in a small Southeastern regional North Carolina district. Answering the research questions will require exploring how college graduates persevered and developed grit in overcoming challenges to college success. The three qualitative data collection and analysis instruments were a questionnaire; one-on-one, open-ended interviews; and focus groups. Recruitment occurred to explore how 10 African American male participants experienced educational challenges and persevered in obtaining their college degrees. Chapter Three presents the setting, participants, researcher positionality, researcher's role, and procedures. The chapter concludes with trustworthiness and ethical considerations, followed by a summary.

### **Research Design**

This study was qualitative with a transcendental phenomenological design. The purpose of the study was to explore how African American male graduates experience and understand academic goal commitment and grit regarding college education in a small Southeastern regional North Carolina district. Qualitative methodology was appropriate to collect data on the experiences and perspectives of African American male college graduates to gain a better understanding of academic goal commitment and grit. A transcendental phenomenological design was an apt approach to describe the lived experience of African American male college graduates and find the meaning in their experiences with the phenomenon of academic goal commitment and grit (see Patton, 2015). The data came from African American male college graduates' voices describing their experiences. The themes from the study could improve

African American male students' approaches to academic goal commitment and grit, leading to college success and completion. This study helps fill the gap in research on African American male graduates' experiences implementing academic goal commitment and grit.

A quantitative approach would not provide the deep insights, in-depth meanings, and essence of the experiences of the African American male graduates essential for understanding academic goal commitment for all African American males. Whereas quantitative research is objective and grounded in mathematical tools comprised of statistics and probability, qualitative research is subjective and grounded in theories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In a qualitative study, the research questions are subjective and more open; the data emerge during the collection phase and are discovered during the analysis phase. Researchers gather quantitative data with predetermined instruments like questionnaires and experiments, and then conduct statistical analysis. Husserl championed phenomenology and the principles of openness in the constructs of philosophy and science, which was considered radical during this time (Moustakas, 1994). Van Manen (2014) described phenomenology as individuals using everyday thought and openness toward conceptualizing new ideas through a phenomenological inquiry.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how African American male graduates experience and understand academic goal commitment and grit regarding college education in a small Southeastern regional North Carolina district. The central research question addressed the academic goal commitment–grit of African American males and how it relates to their academic success as college graduates. Additionally, three sub-questions guided the study. The association between academic goal commitment and grit provided a way to understand how students will use these constructs to complete their academic objectives.

Researchers could use these constructs to understand how African American male graduates persevered and achieved their college degrees.

### **Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of African American male graduates' who used academic goal commitment–grit in college education?

### **Sub-Question One**

What are the experiences of African American graduates' who used perseverance to achieve college completion?

### **Sub-Question Two**

What are the experiences of African American graduates' who used sustained interest to achieve college completion?

### **Sub-Question Three**

What are the experiences of African American graduates' who used sustained effort to achieve college completion?

## **Setting and Participants**

The Southeastern Regional District County (SERDC; pseudonym) is centrally located near numerous colleges and universities. However, despite the significant number of colleges and universities in the area, most African American males do not pursue higher education. Examining how 10 African American male participants from this area achieved their college degrees could provide deep insight. The study's findings show effective strategies other struggling African American male students could use to increase their college enrollment and success rates. According to Braun and Clarke (2022), it is essential to consider the volume and richness of the research participants' data items. As the researcher, I used wisdom, discernment,



and proper decision-making. A researcher must determine the adequate sample size or number of participants to ensure a complete and well-executed study (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

### **Setting**

The setting for this transcendental phenomenological research study was SERDC, a small Southeastern regional district in North Carolina. The district has approximately 11,000 students and 700 teachers. This educational system encompasses 26 schools: 15 elementary, five middle, and five high schools. In addition, there are two public charter schools, one serving K–12 and the other K–8, and an alternative disciplinary school. The setting’s selection was because it is a place where African American males are experiencing challenges to their college success. All participants (referred to by pseudonyms) had progressed through this district and overcome the problems and situations explored in this study.

Out of 11,000 SERDC students, there is a combined 71.4% classified as African American, Hispanic, Native American, and other, and 28.6% classified as White or Caucasian (SERDC, 2022). Most African American male students in this area never attend college, instead experiencing mistreatment or bold disregard from the courts to the educational system. This distinctive community is centrally located in proximity to numerous universities. The county’s close relationship with the universities is symbolic of the state’s traditions and customs of education and technology. The geographic location was ideal for recruitment and study.

### **Participants**

Study participants were 10 African American male graduates born in the SERDC who attended the county’s K–12 schools and achieved postsecondary degrees within the past 5 years (2017–2022). Purposeful and snowball sampling were the approaches used to recruit participants. Qualitative participants met the predetermined criteria necessary for a study (Patton,

2015). Purposeful sampling occurs when a researcher recruits participants with similar characteristics and interests from a targeted population (Frey, 2018), enabling deep insights (Kurbanoglu et al., 2013). From this sample population, I selected African American males with college degrees based on commonalities in their experiences toward pursuing college success. Another means of recruitment was snowball sampling, with current participants referring subsequent ones until I achieved the desired sample size. Participants received pseudonyms to protect their privacy (see Mukungu, 2017). The participants responded to questions from a questionnaire; one-on-one, open-ended interviews; and focus groups.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As an African American male, I progressed through elementary and secondary school as a below-average student. Despite my low GPA, a sound musical background earned me an invitation to attend college as music major. However, I quickly discovered that academics were an integral part of postsecondary education. Unable to sustain the necessary grades, I withdraw from college with only a year until degree completion. My desire to overcome this failure led to countless hours in the public library, and my quest for academic redemption became a desire to join the Navy for education and travel. This ongoing learning and educational development inspired me to understand how African American males overcame educational challenges to achieve college success. I explored the research participants' experiences to understand how they constructed their passion to persevere academically despite all challenges and hindrances.

### **Interpretive Framework**

I believed the participants would construct meaning from their efforts and interests by reflecting on their experiences to persevere and achieve their academic goal commitments. The constructive social framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018) was the lens through which this study

occurred. A qualitative, subjective approach was appropriate to better understand the experiences and viewpoints of how African American male college graduates use the constructs of passion and perseverance to achieve their long-term academic goal commitments toward college success. Academic goal commitment and grit are constructivist paradigms used to describe and encourage an understanding of the human experience (Azzarito & Ennis, 2003), which made them appropriate to explore African American male graduates' experiences with academic goal commitment–grit in college education.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Philosophy comprises ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (based on the Greek root word *episteme*, which is people's knowledge of how they come to know reality), and axiology (the reality of worth and values; Edelheim, 2015; Pfeiffer, 2002). My determination to finish what I began came from my decision to persevere as a college graduate. This reality comes from my background as an African American male college graduate who experienced countless barriers to achieving academic success. My philosophical assumptions are integral to my previous experiences as well as the present study. I recognized and addressed these subjective and objective viewpoints, beliefs, and perspectives to ensure they did not compromise the integrity of this study. The three philosophical assumptions in this study were ontological, epistemological, and axiological.

### ***Ontological Assumption***

An ontological assumption underlies a common or typical theme and belief (Brown, 2017). I believe that African American males are being ingrained or incorporated within a culture that does not conform to their daily cultural norms or realities. Educators, perceptions, and focuses typically encompass teaching styles mandated by educational standards, which

might not be effective for African American male students to succeed academically. From this perspective, my ontological assumption was there often a learning and developmental disconnect between educators and African American male students. A key aspect of my assumption centered on education value. African American male students experiencing these realities might embrace notions that do not value the cultural norms of learning and education. Moreover, my assumption was that teachers are tasked with ensuring all students succeed and progress from instructional learning requirements mandated by the educational leaders, policymakers, and the education system. These mandates require teaching according to the daily, weekly, and monthly instructional guidelines. As a result, African American male students often underachieve, failing to meet the academic requirements and persist.

### ***Epistemological Assumption***

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge (Stehlik, 2018). This study's epistemological assumption was that individuals, specifically African American males, can overcome self-expectancy (based on how others view them), construct their perceptions, and persevere despite the challenges, situations, and circumstances they encounter. Because I can understand the African American male college graduates' lived experiences, I used the epistemological assumption to assign meaning to their commonalities. Despite the individuals' varying perspectives, the themes that emerged from their experiences showed similarities. Thus, I assumed these themes would confirm the knowledge shared by successful African American male postsecondary graduates who persevered and achieved college success. As the researcher, I kept myself separate from each individual and their experiences with the phenomenon of study (see Lincoln & Guba, 1988).

### ***Axiological Assumption***

Axiology is the study of value or worth (Gericke, 2012). As an African American male college graduate, I believe it is vital to acknowledge the importance of understanding the experiences of this population from a firsthand perspective. Following the principles of God means training and teaching students of all ethnicities. Knowing that academic goal commitment–grit benefits all students improves society for the betterment of all. In 2 Timothy 2:24, Apostle Paul says to all followers, “And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach and patient” (King James Version, 2018). As servants of Christ, individuals can reap unlimited benefits and rewards by helping all people to succeed in college education. Instructors must trust God as they encourage students, specifically African American males, to fulfill their academic goal commitments and grit endeavors.

### **Researcher’s Role**

Transcendental phenomenological research relies on the interpretative legitimacy of the researcher (Creswell, 1998). An integral part of the qualitative researcher’s role as a human instrument is personal interests, beliefs, and predispositions (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). As a human instrument and researcher, I used sound judgment and engaged in epoché by setting aside my assumptions and expectations (see Heidegger, 2000). I remained mindful and aware of familiar judgments of genuine experiences, foreseen or unforeseen, that emerged from participants’ perspectives.

As the human instrument, I used bracketing to identify and set aside my biases and preconceptions so I could explore with an open mind the common themes that emerged from the participants’ perspectives of their lived experiences. My notetaking reflected their themes, and my information aligned with their statements and explanations. Because I am also an African

American male college graduate who experienced the same challenges, I remained aware of my bias to avoid influencing the study. I maintained focus, used active and attentive listening, and avoided making personal assumptions. I had no authority, professional or otherwise, over the participants.

### **Procedures**

Researchers must outline the procedures they will follow to conduct a viable study (Moustakas, 1994). Before proceeding with the study, I applied for and obtained Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix A). Because the participants were adult African American males from the SERDC area who have achieved their college degrees, no site permission was needed. After IRB approval, I sent a request to participate (see Appendix B) to qualified individuals on the SERDC email distribution list. In addition to information about the study, the email included what participation would entail and my contact information. The potential participants must have met the inclusion criteria of African American males who have achieved college degrees and are from the SERDC area. Qualified individuals received an emailed informed consent form (see Appendix C) to ensure they understood the voluntary nature of participation, the benefits and risks of participating, and their right to leave the study at any time without repercussion. Prior to taking part in the study, the participants signed the consent form and returned it to me via email.

Next, I emailed a questionnaire to collect participant data (see Appendix D). They could participate in interviews either in-person (at a university within a 20-mile radius of their geographical location) or virtually (via Microsoft Teams; see Appendix E) or take part in a focus group (see Appendix F). I audio- and video-recorded the interviews and focus groups and assigned pseudonyms to ensure participant privacy and confidentiality.

The data came from a questionnaire; one-on-one, open-ended interviews; and focus groups. After transcribing all recordings (see Appendix H), I used a coding process to examine participants' responses and identify themes that address the research questions (See Appendix I). I synthesized the participants' perspectives, memoing and color-coding common themes to understand the essence of the participants' lived experiences.

### **Permissions**

Before conducting the research study, I obtained Liberty University IRB approval (see Appendix A). I did not need site permissions because the participants were adult graduates who have completed postsecondary degrees. The scope of this area or population was appropriate because it is an integral part of where African American males face challenges to their college success. This distinctive community is centrally located in proximity to numerous colleges and universities (SERDC, 2020). The city's close relationships with colleges and universities are symbolic of the state's traditions and customs of education and technology. I directed the interested African American male graduates to a web page, where they clicked a link to complete the questionnaire I used to determine if they met the criteria to participate.

Interested respondents received a letter (see Appendix D) and an informed consent form (see Appendix C) that indicated my goal of understanding their views and experiences to identify commonalities and themes. was entirely voluntary, and they could discontinue participating at any time during data collection. By physically or digitally signing and returning the consent form in advance or on the day of the interview, the participants gave their permission to engage in interviews or focus groups.

## **Recruitment Plan**

I began recruitment by sending emails with information about the study (see Appendix B) to African American males who had achieved their college degrees. My goal was to recruit 10 eligible African American male participants from SERDC. I also used snowball sampling to ensure the desired sample size.

Although I had provided some participants with informal educational assistance, mentoring, and coaching over the past 14 years, they were not my subordinates. Our previous relationships did not compromise the study because I had no authority over them. Willing participants returned their consent forms via email or at the interview location. With their signatures, participants agreed to the data collection methods, including a questionnaire, interview, and focus group. The questionnaire, interview, and focus group took about 60 minutes each, for a total participation time of approximately 3 hours. After data collection, the participants had a chance to check the findings' accuracy through member checking (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). All participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix C), and all identifying participant information remained confidential.

## **Data Collection Plan**

The purpose of data collection is to assemble multiple sources of evidence and information to address the study's research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data for this study came from a questionnaire; one-on-one, open-ended, face-to-face or virtual interviews; and focus groups. Collecting data from three sources allowed for triangulation on the experiences of African American males who graduated with a 4-year college or university degree.

The first stage of data collection was the questionnaire. By completing the questionnaire at a time and place convenient to them, participants could respond to the items anonymously,



without interference or time pressures; thus, they might have been more forthcoming in their answers (Krosnick, 2018). This standardized questionnaire allowed me to measure the participants' opinions and attitudes for evaluating and reviewing their answers to determine if the codes and themes potentially aligned with the future interview and focus group questions. The individual interviews and focus groups enabled me to understand the participants' lived experiences. These data provided rich and detailed meaning for coding and reporting commonalities and identifying themes (see Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022; Patton, 1999).

### **Questionnaires**

Researchers use questionnaires to collect various data (Ruel et al., 2015). Questionnaires are a means for participants to share information that helps researchers improve upon societal issues and concerns (Gassman et al., 2019). Questionnaire information was useful for capturing how 10 African American male college graduates experienced educational issues and concerns and achieved college success. The questionnaire was the first data collection instrument to set the participants at ease and make them comfortable sharing and discussing personal experiences. A generated questionnaire rates the intensity of reactions from the statements provided by the respondents (Hampson, 2014).

### ***Questionnaire Questions***

I administered a questionnaire to thoroughly explore African American males' issues and concerns of education. Researchers use questionnaires to elicit knowledge about a topic, program, or issue related to their experiences (Krosnick, 2018). The 10 African American male college graduates shared how they experienced educational issues and concerns and still achieved college success. I provided a statement assuring participants' privacy and

confidentiality. Upon completion by the participants, the questionnaires (see Appendix D) were gathered at an assigned email address.

The questionnaire data were the lived experiences of the African American male participants as shared in their responses to seven questions:

1. What were some of your experiences as an African American male persevering to achieve your academic goals in college? (CRQ)
2. Why was it important for you to achieve your academic goals? (SQ1)
3. What were the contributing experiences enabling you to persevere and continue to achieve your academic goals? (SQ1)
4. What were the contributing factors enabling your passion to achieve your academic goals? (SQ1)
5. What was the most profound challenge you experienced in college? (SQ2)
6. How did you overcome this challenge? (SQ3)
7. What influence did others have on your academic goals? (CRQ)

The themes that emerged from the questionnaires underwent analysis to determine if they aligned with the interview and focus group themes. The objective was to examine the questionnaire questions to reveal how these seven questions and responses could prove a viable, appropriate, and favorable evaluation of its contribution (see Párraga Martínez & Martín Álvarez, 2020). This qualitative study's findings show how the themes and commonalities shared by African American male graduates could serve as a model, benchmark, and academic resource for struggling African American male students. Thus, the findings could contribute toward improved academic achievement and success rates. This evidence-based information serves as a foundation for empirically supported evidence based on African American male postsecondary

graduates' choices and decisions to succeed (see Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022). Educators, educational leaders, and policymakers could use the findings in future teaching approaches and legislation. Each statement built upon African American male graduates' perspectives of student persistence, challenges, support mechanisms, and motivation. I explored the participants' responses to identify commonalities in their experiences.

### ***Questionnaire Data Analysis Plan***

The questionnaire data analysis plan is a working document (Guagliardo & Jablonski, 2016). Analyzing the participants' responses entailed coding, labeling, and organizing the data and identifying themes from the commonalities (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). I scanned the words and phrases to examine and interpret the participants' responses and identify the emerging themes. The questionnaire data provided pertinent information on African American male graduates' persistence and achievement to compare with individual interview and focus group responses. Each category of the qualitative variables or themes should show raw data from queries to be run through managed data file workflow software (Silva et al., 2016).

### **Individual Interviews**

The second source of data was individual interviews. One-on-one, face-to-face interviews are direct conversations between two people with a specific and structured purpose (Krosnick, 2018). An interview protocol maintained the intent and integrity of the semistructured individual interviews (see Priyadarshini, 2020). Researchers conduct semistructured interviews to pose challenging questions and capture the themes or commonalities among participant responses (Wright et al., 2020). The 14 interview questions elicited the lived experiences of 10 African American postsecondary graduates from a small Southeastern regional district in persevering to overcome challenges for academic success.

One-on-one, face-to-face interviews are an effective means of collecting data (Gill et al., 2008). The interviewer and the interview questions should be neutral to allow the participants to speak freely. I began the individual phenomenological interviews (see Appendix E) with brief questions to provide a trusting and welcoming environment (see Guillemin et al., 2018). The wording of the open-ended interview questions allowed the participants to relax, overcome fear, and feel at ease (see Gill et al., 2008). I recorded the interviews and transcribed them using NVivo software. Triangulating the data from the interviews, questionnaire, and focus groups provided more reliable answers to the research questions (see Lawlor et al., 2016).

### ***Individual Interview Questions***

1. Please provide a brief background to describe yourself. (CRQ)
2. What was the benefit of academic goal commitment and grit? (CRQ)
3. What aspect of your college experiences do you think was the most challenging? (SQ1)
4. What academic expectations were the most challenging during your college experience?  
(SQ1)
5. What cultural expectations were the most challenging during your college experience?  
(SQ1)
6. What technological expectations were the most challenging during your college  
experience? (SQ1)
7. How did you overcome these challenges during your college experience? (SQ2)
8. What compelled you to overcome these challenges in college? (SQ2)
9. What kind of effort did you exert to meet your college goals? (SQ3)
10. How would you assist other African American male college students with their academic  
challenges? (SQ3)

11. What else do you think would be beneficial for me to know regarding how you persevered to complete your college degree? (CRQ)

### ***Individual Interview Data Analysis***

The second source of data analyzed was individual, one-on-one, open-ended interviews. I used meticulous detail in coding the African American male participants' interview responses (see Parameswaran et al., 2021). I broke down the data into small samples, read each sample, created codes for each sample, reread the codes, and edited the codes as needed for understanding. I allowed themes to emerge from the African American male participants' shared characteristics, perceptions, and experiences.

### **Focus Groups**

A focus group is an opportunity for multiple participants to respond to questions, elaborate on their responses, and build off one another's comments (Gill et al., 2008). Focus groups gave the participants an opportunity to elaborate on the issues and concerns experienced throughout their educational journey (elementary, secondary, and postsecondary). In the focus group (see Appendix F), the 10 African American male graduates shared commonalities from their experiences. Their discussions allowed me to more effectively understand how the questionnaire and the one-on-one individual interviews developed into themes. The focus groups provided an atmosphere for the participants to interact and share perspectives of the academic challenges they experienced. The focus groups allowed all participants to recognize the similarities between their educational challenges, viewpoints, and perspectives. I encouraged each participant to interact and respond to questions during the 2-hour conversation. Sharing experiences and responses is valuable for the integrity of the research process. Integrating the

focus group data with the questionnaire and individual interview data through triangulation could provide more reliable answers to the research questions (see Lawlor et al., 2016).

### ***Focus Group Questions***

1. What do you attribute to the success of your academic goal commitment–grit as an African American male college graduate? (CRQ)
2. How do you explain to other African American males how they can use the constructs of perseverance to achieve their academic goals? (SQ1)
3. How do you explain to other African American males how they could use the constructs of sustain interest to achieve their academic goals? (SQ2)
4. How would you explain to other African American males how they could use the constructs of sustain effort to achieve their academic goals? (SQ3)
5. How did academic goal commitment–grit affect your college success? (CRQ)
6. How did academic goal commitment–grit benefit you? (CRQ)

### ***Focus Group Analysis Plan***

The third source of data analyzed was the participants' responses to the focus group questions. I evaluated the participants' influences and relationship with the research topic for coding and developing themes (see Morgan, 2018). I observed if the participants were engaged with the research topic to establish a smooth flow of discussion. Focus groups have established and widespread use across an array of science disciplines and subfields (Stewart et al., 2007). In this study, the focus groups allowed the participants to come together and provide a group perspective on their lived experiences and academic perceptions. The participants collectively shared how they overcame their academic challenges and persisted toward completing their educational endeavors, indicating similarities and commonalities.

## **Data Synthesis**

Researchers conduct qualitative phenomenological studies to explore and analyze the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). During data analysis, I synthesized participants' responses to questionnaire, individual interview, and focus group questions. I coded the data by looking for common themes across each participant's responses and the three data sources. Data analysis is a means to identify the overall themes that align with the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I used meticulous attention to detail in coding and looking for commonalities or themes from African American male participants' lived experiences (see Parameswaran et al., 2021). Data triangulation and horizontalization allowed me to identify relationships between the theory focus groups and its practice (see Stewart et al., 2007) and to transcribe the findings from coding and the themes to ensure they aligned with the study's overall research questions. Using imaginative variation and phenomenological reduction (see Appendix L) enabled me to understand how 10 African American male college graduates overcame challenges to achieve academic success.

## **Trustworthiness**

I used the elements of trustworthiness to ensure reliable and valid findings (see Amankwaa, 2016). Credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability are vital for trustworthiness in qualitative research (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Trustworthiness provides a degree of soundness toward the researcher's information and may be seen by other researchers as valuable (Carcary, 2020). The concepts are discussed in this section to provide readers with understanding, which may provide further clarity toward trustworthiness.

**Credibility**

Credibility is an essential component of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One way to achieve credibility is member checking, which involves sending the preliminary findings to the participants to ensure the researchers' interpretations align with their intended responses. The confidence used toward the truth of the study and understanding the findings within the study is the most important criterion of credibility (Polit & Beck, 2014). A study has credibility when the findings accurately describe the participants' reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation entailed using data from a questionnaire, open-ended interviews, and focus groups.

**Transferability**

A study has transferability when the findings can be transferred to another setting and applied to another context (Guba, 1981). Transferability indicates how pertinent or applicable the findings are to the context of the research study. According to Moon et al. (2016), transferability is critical to applying research findings. K–12 schools, colleges, universities, and mentoring programs could use this study's findings to help African American male students persist to graduation. SERDC university and college leaders could use the findings to develop and implement academic goal commitment–grit initiatives for all students' success.

**Dependability**

Dependability is key for reliability and data consistency (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To maintain dependability, a researcher must account for changing contexts and conditions in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Dependability provides assurance that the findings of an inquiry are consistent (Guba, 1981). A researcher takes steps to ensure the dependability of a study. First, I documented the research process to ensure others can replicate the study. My dissertation committee and the Liberty University Quality Research Director conducted an



inquiry audit, which Carcary (2020) identified as a detailed data review to analyze the research procedures. These individuals also reviewed the audit trail in assessing the findings.

### **Confirmability**

Another way to ensure transferability is maintaining an audit trail (see Appendix G) so that other researchers can replicate the study. To achieve confirmability, a researcher explains or discloses the data based on interpretation and additional scrutiny (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Two ways to ensure confirmability are bracketing to remove researcher bias and following the procedures and standards outlined (see Appendix J). I took precautions to protect the participants' privacy. The techniques I used were triangulation, reflexivity, and an audit trail. I employed triangulation by collecting data from multiple sources, ensuring that the research findings emerged from only participants' responses (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexivity is a contextual relationship between the study participants and the researcher (Dodgson, 2019). Reflexivity allowed me to explain the study in its proper context, sharing my experiences with this phenomenon. A researcher's experiences can shape a study's outcome (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Having a peer reviewer confirm the data analysis and interpretation (Patton, 2015) added to confirmability, as readers could evaluate and interpret similarities and differences between the researcher and the participants (Dodgson, 2019).

### **Ethical Considerations**

I began participant recruitment after IRB approval. All participants received informed consent forms that, when signed, served as an agreement between all parties for conducting research. Lipson (1994) identified ethical issues as informed consent procedures, deception or covert activities, confidentiality, and research benefits to the participants and society. These principles are essential for the researcher to understand and apply to stay within the boundaries

of ethical practice. Ethical codes of conduct are written procedures for conducting research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The informed consent also outlined the requirements for participation in the study. Pseudonyms were the means to protect the SERDC participants' privacy. Adhering to ethics and ethical consideration allowed African American male graduates to share their lived experiences without compromising their identities. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), researchers must protect the confidentiality and anonymity of their informants (participants). Through member checking, all participants were able to verify the research findings. The participants' information remains password-protected on my computer, and only I will retrieve the data for research purposes. I will safely retain all hard copies in a locked filing cabinet at my home office for 3 years.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how African American male graduates experience and understand academic goal commitment and grit regarding college education in a small Southeastern regional North Carolina district. The problem is that although a college education is important to achieve the American Dream, only 16% of African American males who enter college graduate (Atuahene, 2021). There is a dearth of research on African American males' experiences with academic goal commitment–grit and its role in their college success. The data collected in this study provided valuable information for addressing the challenges African American males encounter in their desire to finish college. The study process included research questions, triangulation, data collection, and data analysis, and the setting and procedures aligned with the purpose of the study. A qualitative research researcher's role and placement are vital because this relationship is beneficial to the

phenomenon. Data analysis occurred following IRB approval and data collection. I ensured trustworthiness and followed ethical considerations to provide valid and reliable findings.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how African American male graduates experience and understand academic goal commitment and grit regarding college education in SERDC. Academic goal commitment–grit in college education is defined as examining the connection between graduate students’ focus and how they achieve their college degrees despite the challenges (Henderson et al., 2020). This chapter presents the triangulated data from African American male graduate participants’ questionnaires, interviews, and focus group responses. Data collection and analysis occurred to identify emergent themes and how they aligned with the research questions.

### **Participants**

This section provides a description of each participant, including their educational background, institution, degrees earned, major, and generation status as an African American male to graduate college. Table 1 shows the institution in the SERDC, highest degree earned and major, and generation of student for each participant.

**Table 1***Graduate Participants*

Graduate participant	Institution	Highest degree earned	Content area	Generation AA male graduate
Tyleek	PWI	BS/MS	Sports Studies Sports Management	1st
Devin	PWI	Bachelors	Social Work	1st
Austin	HBCU	Bachelors	Behavior and Social Science	1st
Dwight	HBCU	Bachelors	Music Education	1st
Cecil	HBCU/PWI	BS/BS/MS	Nursing Business Administration Healthcare Admin.	1st
Simeon	PWI	Bachelors	Recreation, Sports, and Wellness	1st
Casey	HBCU/PWI	BS/MS	Music Education Theology	1st
Shane	PWI	Bachelors	Educational Studies	2nd; his brother was 1st
Donavan	HBCU	AS/BS	General Studies Accounting	1st
Thaddeus	HBCU	Bachelors	Business Administration	1st

**Tyleek**

Tyleek, a SERDC Sports Studies and Sports Management graduate, experienced moments of feeling he did not belong at his institution of higher education. This experience often made it difficult to see a clear path toward academic goal achievement. Being only one of five African American males in his initial Construction Management major made Tyleek feel at a disadvantage and wonder if college or achieving a college degree was worth the effort. His older sister, an upperclassman on campus, provided Tyleek with guidance and support. After changing his major to Sports Studies, he began to experience the drive and determination necessary to continue toward achieving his college degree.

**Devin**

Devin, a graduate in Social Work, was admitted to SERDC as a sophomore as a high school/community college transfer. Initially Devin was undecided about which degree program to pursue. After switching majors multiple times, he chose the Social Work program, which suited his loving character and fondness for mankind. However, Devin realized the course workload required him to study extended hours to fulfill academic goal and commitment to his college degree. The encouragement from his mom coupled with his younger siblings, nieces, and nephews looking up to him made him determined to give his all.

**Austin**

Austin was a SERDC Behavior and Social Science graduate. Although he experienced challenges trying to endure, he maintained the necessary grades to continue receiving scholarships toward degree fulfillment. While pursuing his college degree, Austin experienced the death of his mother, which forced him to develop survival mechanisms for learning to deal with grief and stress while using grit and striving to achieve his academic goal. He also encountered challenges of balancing work as he pursued his academic studies. Austin described these qualities as having the drive and tenacity to summon inner strength to perfect himself.

**Dwight**

Dwight, a SERDC Music Education graduate, identified his biggest challenge in college as staying on course with his academic studies. With the newfound freedom of college, Dwight found it easy to stray off course. Therefore, despite repeated temptations, he had to constantly remind himself why he was in college. He welcomed positive encouragement from like-minded students and upperclassmen. Dwight identified academic goal commitment and grit as the epitome of his character as he strove for degree completion. As he continued his academic

journey, Dwight realized he was developing a force toward his academic success much greater than himself.

### **Cecil**

Cecil, a Nursing, Business Administration, and Healthcare Administration graduate of SERDC, experienced profound challenges of balancing his responsibilities and a drive toward his goal to achieve academic success. As a young father, he had to learn how to allocate quality time to his job, college course work, and his family. He described many long nights and weekends spent completing discussions on Blackboard and preparing for and taking quizzes and tests. Cecil constantly tried to find the optimal time during the day when he was the most productive. He identified drive and motivation as two important factors used to ensure he achieved his academic goals.

### **Simeon**

Simeon, a SERDC Recreation, Sports, and Wellness graduate, experienced high and low moments in his first months as a college freshman. He described the difficulty of adapting to college life and being away from his parents. At times, Simeon confessed, he wanted to give up. The adversity he endured from peer scrutiny added another challenge for him to persist. What sparked Simeon's desire to persist was his near dismissal from college after which he was determined to achieve his academic goal and not waste his mother's investment.

### **Casey**

Casey, a Music Education graduate from SERDC, had profound experiences of wondering if he was worthy enough to achieve or succeed in college. Other areas of concern were financial stability and if he was talented enough to play music in line with the standards of his musical peers. He had to overcome the voices of high school teachers telling him he could

not achieve in college. As a young father, Casey was determined to reach his academic goals and show his child what was possible. He also knew his college degree would provide a promising future for himself and his child. Casey's overall perspective toward academics was to embrace an end goal: completing his college degree.

### **Shane**

Shane was a graduate in Educational Studies from SERDC who identified his most profound experience as adjusting to the university environment. He often found many of the school's activities, events, and programs catered to one ethnic group. Despite multiple weekly activities, few caught his interest. He found it hard to fit in without losing his identity. To overcome the feelings of exclusion at SERDC, Shane took advantage of support groups on and off campus. He understood the sacrifice his parents made for him; therefore, he was determined to persevere and achieve his academic goal of completing his college degree despite the situations and circumstances he experienced on campus.

### **Donavan**

Donavan graduated from SERDC with a degree in accounting. His most profound challenge while attending college was devoting the necessary energy to self-motivation and discipline to remain focused on his courses. Another challenge was securing the necessary finances to continue his academic studies. He stated that these challenges caused him to question his sense of belonging and made his college experience difficult. To overcome these challenges, Donavan became extremely active on campus. He got more involved with campus activities, which gave him a clearer understanding of his sense of purpose. He noted he had to really "push through" and use grit to reach his academic milestones.



## **Thaddeus**

Thaddeus was a SERDC Business Administration graduate. He reported his most challenging college experiences as having to deal with multiple assignments due at the same time while raising his daughter. He described working to help support his family and pay for summer classes to graduate on time. Thaddeus noted that, by being highly motivated and a go-getter, he was determined to “finish what [he] had started.” Thaddeus understood he could expect growth by remaining determined to achieve his college degree. He had a keen sense that education and growth are interconnected and would provide a path in striving to achieve his academic goals.

## **Results**

This section presents the findings of this research study. Three themes emerged from data analysis, including multiple sub-themes. Three data sources—questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups—enabled triangulation. Each participant had 60 minutes to complete a questionnaire. One-on-one, open-ended Zoom interviews with each participant lasted approximately 60 minutes. Three focus groups conducted via Zoom ( $n = 4$ ,  $n = 3$ , and  $n = 3$ ) also lasted about an hour.

The three means of data collection allowed the participants to share the essence of their academic experiences. The participants had an opportunity to discuss information relevant to the research questions. I identified three emerging themes and multiple sub-themes by reading the questionnaires and observing each participant’s interview and focus group. Each graduate encountered obstacles and challenges in college but was able to use the constructs of academic goal commitment and grit to achieve his college degree. The three themes were *The Belief Education Is Key*, *First-Generation College Graduates*, and *Academic Support*.

### **The Belief Education Is Key**

In the Belief Education is Key, each participant shared his sentiments about the importance of academics and how education is the key to success. The participants said they needed to press forward to achieve their academic goals despite the challenges they faced. Dwight expressed that Education Is Key; African American males must move with a purpose while remaining committed to achieving their academic goals. Donovan emphasized the importance of African American males overcoming the stigma of not being able to meet or achieve required academic standards. Austin emphasized how this leads to a successful career and a life of fulfillment.

Devin discussed the importance of having passion and a burning sensation in his heart that would not subside; therefore, his motivation was to satisfy the sensation by achieving the goal he envisioned. He knew this would broaden his perspective on life and expand his intellectual scope. On the questionnaire, Shane shared that perseverance in college was his primary motivation. Growing up, he was taught that failure was not an option. Therefore, he refused to become a failure and contribute to the negative statistics surrounding African American males. Additionally, Cecil discussed the importance of staying on fire, maintaining determination and motivation to achieve academic success, and defeating the odds of failure.

### ***Predominantly White Institutions and Historically Black Colleges and Universities***

Whether attending a PWI or an HBCU, all participants, agreed the belief Education Is Key even if it meant, they would have to experience challenges, ranging from homesickness, a lack of focus, and disorganization to perceived prejudice. Despite the situations and circumstances, each graduate used the constructs of academic goal commitment and grit to complete their goal. Through passion and perseverance, they pressed forward and completed

their college degrees. The participants who attended PWIs expressed feelings of being at a disadvantage, a lack of belonging, and a culture of prejudice. Tyleek described significant discomfort, which weakened his self-esteem and confidence. Shane discussed the troubling experience of seeing many college activities of one culture and not much of others. He expressed how being on a PWI campus was the most challenging element of his academic experience. Simeon discussed the challenges of adapting to the PWI cultural environment and expressed thoughts of giving up. Each participant was determined to stay focused, using grit to continue his quest to achieve his academic goal and a college degree.

The graduates who attended HBCUs provided a different perspective on their academic experiences. Although each graduate expressed a welcoming cultural and academic environment, he identified other areas of concern. Participants' challenges included trying to live up to the standards of their peers and educational leaders and meet the styles and traditions of their respective educational institutions. Dwight recalled being pushed by peers and upperclassmen to attend classes on time. About missing class, they would say, "Don't do that. You don't want to do that." Casey said he "was determined to ensure he made his professors proud by striving to do his best academically." Donovan discussed the importance of doing his best to live up to the history and traditions of his HBCU. All HBCU graduates expressed how exposure to their HBCUs and college environment was inspiring.

### ***Young Men of Faith***

Second, each participant agreed Education Is Key in their belief as Young Men of Faith, and they identified faith as a primary course of resolve while striving toward his educational goals. Thaddeus described how as a young man of faith, he found inspiration from patience and prayer to press forward and achieve his college degree. Devin expressed the need to pursue a

college education because it was God's will. Along with his faith, he was inspired by an inner passion for determination and legacy. As a young father, Casey faced balancing schoolwork and his place of employment while being a leader at school and his place of worship. Simeon expressed that putting trust in God and himself made him feel he could achieve whatever he put his mind to, which helped him overcome his academic challenges. All participants reported that being young men of faith gave them the drive to persist academically. Each participant knew academic goal commitment and grit would allow him to press on to achieve college success.

Dwight said that God was the inner force behind his academic success. He expressed that "prayer and faith [were] central to his music education degree," enabling him to keep a clear mind and a level head. Each graduate's faith provided a foundation for using his passion and perseverance to continue toward academic success. Seven of the 10 participants had deep family spiritual roots; four were ministers of the gospel. Each participant trusted in God and felt he could not have accomplished his degree without his faith and belief. Devin discussed how anything was possible with God and believing in oneself, saying the "capstone of the entire educational experience is belief in God."

### **First-Generation College Graduates**

Equally important, nine participants identified as being first-generation African American males to graduate from college. Shane, the only exception, graduated two years after his older brother from the same college. Thaddeus discussed the importance of graduating, saying it was essential to stay in the mindset of being focused. Simeon spoke about the challenges of adapting to college life as a first-generation college graduate. He reported the importance of keeping a positive mindset and continuing to strive toward one's academic goals; from this, all goals will be reached. Additionally, Casey expressed how being the first-generation African American

male to attend college carried a heavy burden. He constantly worried whether he was good enough or talented enough to achieve academic college success.

Also, all participants agreed that being first-generation college graduates added to the burden of finishing college. Each felt the responsibility and commitment to making their family, friends, and educational leaders proud of their academic successes. According to Tyleek, “Academic success is moving toward a bigger sense of the world.” He described an aspect of academic success as ultimately taking a deeper evaluation of himself and his academic and life goals. Simeon stated that adversity, adaptability, and having a point to prove came with being a first-generation African American male college graduate. The other graduates agreed.

### ***Expectation and Expectancy***

In addition, Expectation and Expectancy were two areas of interest noted by the first-generation college graduates. All participants perceived an expectation or expectancy from their family and loved ones to use academic commitment and grit to finish their studies. Expectation is a belief that someone will or should achieve something; expectancy is a state of thinking or hoping that something, especially something pleasant, will happen or be the case. All first-generation African American male participants believed they were expected to achieve their college degrees. Participants expressed an expectancy to begin and finish what they had started, which kept them focused and willing to exert the necessary effort to complete their academic goals.

Tyleek discussed feeling pressure from his older sister, a successful college graduate who earned her bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees. She had set the standard; therefore, a sibling and family expectation was for him to press on toward degree completion. Devin and Simeon placed a level of expectation to achieve their degrees upon themselves. Both participants

noted that their degree achievement would be a model and a path for their younger siblings. Casey and Donovan discussed facing expectations from their professors and educational leaders to achieve academically. Further, their respective HBCUs set forth academic standards.

### *Vision of Future Success*

Furthermore, all participants emphasized being forward-looking and understood their status as first-generation African American male graduates meant they had to overcome all their academic challenges. Because of the diversity he faced, Simeon had to adapt and focus on overcoming his rough situations. Donovan said he did not envision attending college until the last 2 years of high school. When his mindset changed, he wanted to start college and knew he must finish. Austin said he envisioned attaining his academic goals to achieve a successful life and career. He perceived that his academic success would lead to a life of fulfillment. Shane felt his lifetime passion for persevering had always fueled his desire to achieve his goals; he has the drive and determination to meet every goal he sets. The 10 participants agreed that their willingness to continue until degree completion empowered them with the drive to foresee future success.

Finally, the graduates from SERDC strived to use their empowerment, skill sets, and networking abilities to provide a path for other African American males. Cecil believed having the mentality to complete what one had started was important. He expressed the need for African American male students to be comfortable in their own skin and use positive affirmations, such as “I can, and I will, be successful.” Tyleek described how proper guidance with academic support enables building confidence, leading to academic and occupational success. Thaddeus discussed how academic success equates to time management and motivation and expressed the importance of using one’s resources appropriately to ensure academic success. According to

Donavan, engaging his resources enhanced his skill set, preparing him to hone his networking skills and capabilities to achieve his vision of future success. All participants agreed that this mindset increased their passion to continue persevering and was integral to their academic goals and aspirations.

### **Academic Support**

Briefly, the 10 participants discussed the importance of academic support and how vital it was to their academic success. Cecil recalled building a support team and network to accomplish his goals. The support provided a balance and reinforced his drive and determination toward academic success. Several participants discussed the importance of having family, friends, and educational leaders encouraging their efforts to persist. Devin recalled having a success coach who assisted him with academic support. He expressed how encouraging she was and how she shared her wisdom concerning his academic success. In his interview, Dwight discussed the importance of seeking others for help while pursuing goals. Thaddeus shared that, in his experience, it was crucial to ask for help: “Just put pride to the side.”

Also, each participant said that having an academic support group encouraged and motivated their desire to continue pressing toward degree completion. Shane emphasized how having a strong support group enabled him to persist after failing a chemistry exam. He said he “did not give up. [He] just continued pressing forward” and declared students should never be ashamed to get help. According to Cecil, “When African American male students receive academic support, this helps to keep them from becoming just another statistic or academic failure.” The SERDC participants could sustain academic goal commitment and grit by following the guidance of other successful students, and they used the resources available to meet and achieve their goals. All participants agreed guidance and resources were two critical

components of academic support. Donovan mentioned that his experiences in college consisted of guidance and academic support from very passionate, purposeful, and determined people on campus (e.g., deans, chairs, professors, provosts, presidents, and other staff and students) who used their resources and “chipped in to make sure [he] was motivated to finish his academic studies.”

### ***Guidance***

Furthermore, the participants discussed the need for college upperclassmen, family members, and educational leaders to encourage academic goal commitment and grit. Devin stressed the challenge of filling out his FAFSA without help or guidance; he had no one in his family to assist him. Tyleek recalled the challenge of determining which major to pursue. He received guidance from his sister, which impacted his academic achievements. According to Casey, having great mentors guiding him in college and great spiritual leaders in life “have helped him make it through.” Austin believed guidance sets a good example for all leaders to model. Tyleek stated, “The exposure to different people as role models helps to build confidence.”

Consequently, the SERDC graduates believed they would not have achieved their goals without the guidance they received from others. Each explained the importance of guidance to determine how to gird the academic goal commitment and grit to complete their studies. Cecil said his family and friends provided guidance, encouraging him always to do his best as he strived to succeed academically. Dwight stated reporting using others’ guidance about time and effort to diminish situations not in keeping with his academic goals. He expressed that significant figures in his life were vital in guiding him to fulfill his academic success. Dwight noted he wanted education and college to be his path to achieve in life.



## Resources

In conclusion, all participants emphasized the importance of using their higher education institutions' academic resources. Participants expressed the importance of seeking academic support from the educational resources provided at their colleges and universities. Each graduate used all or two of the three resources: *informational resources*, *peer tutoring*, and *academic counseling*. Table 2 shows the breakdown of the graduates' use of the academic resources.

**Table 2**

### *Academic Resources*

Graduate participant	Informational	Peer Tutoring	Academic Counseling	Amount
Tyleek	Yes	Yes	Yes	all
Devin	Yes	Yes	Yes	all
Austin	Yes	Yes	Yes	all
Dwight	Yes	Yes	Yes	all
Cecil	Yes	Yes	No	2
Simeon	Yes	Yes	Yes	all
Casey	Yes	Yes	No	2
Shane	Yes	Yes	Yes	all
Donavan	Yes	Yes	No	2
Thaddeus	Yes	Yes	No	2

Tyleek discussed how his university's informational resources were vital to his academic success. Once he realized how user-friendly the educational resource tools were, his academic experience became much easier. Austin used his learning tools, which assisted him with organizing and creating a schedule to follow. He expressed the importance of these tools and methods regarding his continued life experiences while striving to fulfill his career goals.

Furthermore, most SERDC graduates discussed their gratitude for their peers providing tutoring and academic counseling. Shane was thankful for peer tutoring to ease into his college experience and ensure he achieved academic success. He considered one of his professors a "campus mom," saying she provided him with the necessary support to achieve academic

success. Devin stated that his academic advisor provided the necessary academic counseling to ensure he met his educational milestones. He was also grateful for her encouragement regarding his minor in religious studies.

Despite the academic resources, some participants believed they were “not college material, but they girded the necessary growth mindset, along with strong peer support to sustained their efforts to fulfill their academic goals. Beside that, each participant expressed how they used sustained interest, and academic goal commitment, to overcome the challenges of academic rigor and financial struggles, to reach their academic milestones. Furthermore, each participant expresses the importance of using passion to perseverance to overcome their initial and long-term goals. As a result, upon being provided with inspiration, motivation, and encouragement, to use their academic goal setting capabilities, the participants were able to balance multiple responsibilities, to achieve academic success. Table 3 highlights the challenges and barriers, the graduates experienced and overcoming factors; they use to align with the Grit theory constructs.

### **Table 3**

*Challenges & Barriers, Overcoming Factors, & Grit Theory Alignment*

<b>Challenges and Barriers</b>	<b>Overcoming Factors</b>	<b>GRIT THEORY</b>
Some participants believed they were “Not College Material”.	With peer support, participants were able to transition to a growth mindset.	Sustained effort
Academic Rigor in a Program	To succeed, each participant ensured they were in the college major of their choice. One participant changed his major from construction management to sports studies	Sustained interest
Financial struggles	Most participants experienced through assistance, were able to overcome their financial struggles. One participant had to overcome the challenge of financial aid and had to complete the FAFSA application.	Goal Commitment
Inspiration, Motivation, and Encouragement	With encouragement from family, peers, and educational leaders the graduates were inspired and motivated to persevere.	Perseverance
Goal setting	With the drive and push from family, peers, and education leaders the graduates were able to set and establish (short and long- term) proper goal setting initiatives.	Achieving long-term goals
Balancing multiple responsibilities	To avoid distractions, and follow through on completing assignments, the graduates were able to understand their purpose, and remember their goals.	Goal Commitment

### **Outlier Data and Findings**

This section presents the outliers in the questionnaire, interview, and focus group responses. Although the participants agreed on numerous experiences, two outliers did not align with the themes and research questions. The presentation of these outliers serves as a cautionary note for educational leaders who will review these graduates’ experiences.

**Outlier Finding One**

All participants stated that Education Is Key to their overall academic success. One participant said he did not feel he could achieve educational or academic success at a higher education institution. Several participants commented on their experiences and how they also thought of quitting and doubted if college was for them. All participants agreed that education is the pathway to academic and overall success, but they had difficult experiences while pursuing their college degrees. Therefore, it is important to establish a “clear path” toward achieving a college education to confirm the perspective and mindset that Education Is Key.

**Outlier Finding Two**

One participant agreed with the importance of striving to achieve academic goal commitment and grit to achieve academic success. However, he was adamant that all college graduates attend yearly graduation ceremonies before returning home for the summer. He felt witnessing others’ degree fulfillment would spark motivation to make every effort and complete college. When there is an inner motivation and an empowering growth mindset (Elliot-Moskwa, & Dweck, 2022), to do, students become adept at achieving academic goal commitment and grit and using their passion to persevere.

**Research Question Responses**

This section presents the answers to the study’s research questions. The responses emerged from the triangulated data collected with a questionnaire, semistructured interviews, and focus groups. The responses to the study’s central research question and three subquestions address the study’s purpose.

### Central Research Question

What are the experiences of African American male graduates who used academic goal commitment–grit in college education?

The African American male SERDC college graduates overcame their academic challenges by using the constructs of academic goal commitment and grit to achieve college success. Despite all challenges, the graduates' consensuses from the focus groups were, they were determined to ensure they finished college, and their goal was to make their family, friends, and faith base family proud. Furthermore, each agreed, each challenge they experienced allowed them to gird the grit necessary to strive toward degree completion. Tyleek said that "being a first-generation African American male in [his] family provided him with a strong sense of vision in pursuing a college degree." The participants used their passion to persevere and were determined to reach their academic milestones. Devin said that "while [his] academic studies were challenging, [he] received encouragement from [his] mom to just work hard to complete [his] undergraduate degree." It was important for the graduates to know they had a reliable support system as they strived toward their academic goals.

The SERDC community depicts a sense of failure for African American males, often causing most students to doubt their abilities to persist or achieve college success. Cecil discussed building a support team and network to accomplish his academic goals and how they encouraged him to do his best, helping him to improve his performance and maintain it throughout his college journey. Shane said he received academic support from passionate, purposeful, and determined people. Also, in the focus group discussions, many graduates initially felt doubt, uncertainty, and indecision about their college experiences, yet the support of family, church family, friends, and educational leaders enabled them to achieve their degrees. Even after

degree completion, many of Tyleek.'s high school teachers and college professors continue to have a tremendous impact and influence on his life.

Education Is Key applies to the African American male college graduates' experiences. Tyleek expressed how his professors, family, and friends provided a perfect balance, enabling him to grow as a person and scholar. Austin described his experiences at the college's educational study sessions with peers as motivating, allowing him to do his best. Although many participants experienced academic challenges, they were able to use their efforts, determination, and willpower to obtain their degrees. Simeon believed that positive reinforcements from his family, friends, and fraternity brothers inspired him to accomplish his goals. Using academic goal commitment and grit, the SERDC college graduates were determined to show how they could meet their academic challenges. Donovan said that although the people were supportive in the educational environment, they still held him and his peers to high academic standards.

### **Sub-Question One**

What are the experiences of African American graduates who used perseverance to achieve college completion?

The SERDC graduates had to use academic commitment to achieve educational success. They employed the constructs of perseverance to reach their long-term goals. Additionally, in the focus discussions, many expressed the desire to become first-generation graduates in their families, and some wanted to prove their worth and validity as African American male college graduates. Simeon discussed having to persevere and overcome the stigma that he could not achieve in college. Casey wanted to prove wrong some of his high school teachers who did not believe he was a worthy candidate to achieve college success. All SERDC graduates expressed

determination to persevere and move forward by being focused. Cecil felt there should be a plan to persevere in a higher education institution and life.

Participants identified their determination to persevere through college. Shane discussed not letting college get the best of him and never quitting. He was determined not to waste his parent's finances with academic or college failure. Participants stressed the importance of believing in their abilities to persevere and finish their goals. Donovan noted he always wanted to become the person he was looking for in himself. He expressed the advantages of indulging, understanding others, remaining grounded, being around others with like minds, and becoming high performers. Thaddeus described perseverance as being in an overdrive mindset while staying focused and giving it his all. All participants agreed, adding that family was a significant reason and motivation to persevere. Thaddeus said every student must be willing to do work to persevere in the college environment.

### **Sub-Question Two**

What are the experiences of African American graduates' who used sustained interest to achieve college completion?

Participants from SERDC identified goal initiative as a reason for sustained interest. According to the participants, setting and staying with goals is essential to success. Cecil said, "It doesn't matter if it takes 1, 2, 5, or 10 years. It is important to keep striving and just keep going." The graduates expressed the importance of keeping their passion for finishing their college degree. Tyleek stated, "It is important to find something you are passionate about, and this will keep the desire to persevere until the goal has been reached." Thaddeus said he stayed strong, prayed, and used positive affirmations to sustain his interest and ensure degree completion. He expressed how he continues speaking to and encouraging himself and that he had to make his

family proud. Donovan urged others “to shoot for the moon, and if the moon is not reached, then at least you are among the stars.”

All participants within the focus groups agreed, from SERDC stressed the need to develop a system of doing to ensure sustained interest toward academic goal completion. Casey said, “All men are patterned to do the same thing over and over until it becomes a way of doing. [This] makes us goal-oriented to continue striving to achieve the goal at all costs.” Each participant expressed using sustained interest to remain focused and understand the end goal. Simeon suggested individuals keep sustained interest front of their mind and remain focused by remembering why they are attending college. The participants identified sustained interest in their determination to stay focused and never quit. Austin defined sustained interest as moving and taking one day at a time. He expressed how important it was to keep pushing through and know others at home were looking up to him.

### **Sub-Question Three**

What are the experiences of African American graduates’ who used sustained effort to achieve college completion?

The SERDC graduates used various reasons to explain how they used sustained effort to meet their academic goals. Many graduates expressed having a high work ethic and being high achievers as the force behind their drive toward sustained effort. Participants identified that having a plan, being willing to collaborate, and being around like-minded people helped motivate them to continue striving to meet their goals. Dwight recommended that students surround themselves with others who will push them to do their best. He expressed how this support would help students remain focused and willing to work to achieve their goals. Austin



stated it was important to communicate with others to make sure they were not distracted and losing focus.

All SERDC participants identified sustained effort as the determination to push through when they felt like giving up. Furthermore, in the focus group discussions, each participant discussed the importance of having the mindset that no matter the challenge, they would keep striving until they reached their goal. To overcome thoughts about giving up, Austin urged establishing patterns by setting schedules and developing plans until the sustained effort effectively achieves academic success. Simeon expressed that sustained effort is to keep things going, knowing things will improve. He recommended aiming high and studying more because “hard work beats talent.”

### **Summary**

This chapter presented a descriptive summary of the study participants and insight into the roles of African American male college graduates. The 10 participants’ narratives included their backgrounds and educational experiences while attending SERDC’s colleges and universities. Three themes emerged from the data collected through questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and document analysis: Education Is Key, First-Generation African American Male College Graduates, and Academic Support. The chapter included an analysis of the central research question and the subquestions to better understand the findings, including participants’ emphasis on how they used the constructs of academic goal commitment and grit to achieve college success.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

This study's findings showed how African American male SERDC college graduates experienced academic goal commitment and grit. Data collection occurred with a questionnaire, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups. Data analysis followed Creswell's (2009) six steps. Chapter Five presents a discussion and interpretation of the research findings, implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how African American male graduates experience and understand academic goal commitment and grit regarding college education in SERDC. Through the lived experiences of the SERDC graduate participants, I gathered an understanding and perspective of how African American males overcome challenges to achieve academic success. Despite a plethora of research on the challenges African American males encounter and their college success rate, there is a dearth of information on how they may persist and achieve college success. Previous research on academic goal commitment and grit for all students in education proves promising (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth & Allred, 2012). Despite this information, most African American males encounter academic challenges (Dixson & Gentzis, 2021; Duckworth, 2016; Henderson et al., 2020). Therefore, it was important to examine how successful African American male college graduates from SERDC achieved college success.

The findings of this transcendental phenomenological study add to the literature discussed in Chapter Two regarding how African American male college students use the constructs of academic goal commitment and grit to achieve college success. The participants

were able to use passion and perseverance to achieve their long-term goals and college degrees. This chapter includes my interpretation of the findings, implications for policy and practice, methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

This section offers a summary of the emergent themes and sub-themes discussed in Chapter Four. The three themes were Education Is Key, First-Generation African American male College Graduates, and Academic Support. The interpretation of the findings aligns with the research questions. This study showed how SERDC African American male college graduates were committed to their academic goals and used passion and perseverance to overcome their academic challenges to achieve college success.

### ***Summary of Thematic Findings***

Ten African American male college graduates from SERDC with varying college degree pursuits provided their experiences of how they achieved college success from their perspective. The triangulated data came from a questionnaire, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups. Three themes emerged from data analysis: Education Is Key, First-Generation College Graduates, and Academic Support.

**Inspiration, Motivation, and Encouragement.** My first interpretation is that when students receive the positive influences of inspiration, motivation, and encouragement from their family, faith-based family, friends, and educational leaders, they have the determination to stay focused and achieve their academic goals (Diotaiuti et al., 2022; Henderson et al., 2021). The participants believe that these positive influences enabled them as graduates to gird the necessary confidence to press forward in their efforts persevere. Because of this, the study aligned with

how the participants shared their experiences as African American male college graduates while striving toward academic goal commitment and grit to achieve college success. As a result, the theoretical framework of Duckworth's (2016) grit theory aligned with the findings and supported the participants' commitment to their academic goals. In line with grit theory, the participants used the constructs of passion and perseverance to achieve their long-term educational milestones. Moreover, all participants discussed their determination to achieve their goals despite the obstacles. The participants stated when they felt down, they relied on the encouragement of family members, students, and peers and this was vital towards keeping them on course, and this reinforced their belief that Education Is Key as they used their efforts to achieved academic success.

Next, the participants also discussed how these positive experiences inspired them as First-Generation College Graduates, and this endowed them with the necessary grit to keep pressing forward. Simeon mentioned how advantageous it was for him to take his academic endeavors seriously because many African American males in SERDC and throughout America have never attended college. Simeon believed numerous African American males did attend college but never finished. He did not take his college experience lightly and understood that, as an African American male college graduate, he was one of the "few of many" who had successfully achieved his college degree. He also believed his positive outlook, attitude, and passion to persevere stemmed from these positive influences.

Moreover, the success of the African American male college graduates required a mindset of willful determination, which helped them build the necessary grit to stay committed to achieving their academic goals. Because the SERDC graduates had to overcome others' low

expectations and challenges while attending college, they had to gird the necessary drive and determination to sustain interest and effort to succeed. In addition, the graduates recalled some upperclassmen being extremely knowledgeable, confident, and always willing to share how to deal with their academic challenges. This supports the research of how when upperclassmen, peers, and leaders show their support for others, specifically men of color they are more successful (Brooms, Franklin, Clark, & Smith, 2021).

According to Worley, Meter, Ramirez Hall, & Medina, (2023), peer support is vital towards the promotion of adaptive academic and mental outcomes. Furthermore, this literature is in keeping with how the graduates were determined to achieve the college degrees. Moreover, these influences are important implications as to how all struggling students, specifically African American males' students may achieve. This literature also, aligns with how the participants were able to use their mindset towards their passion to persevere. By this, each participant also discussed how important the role upperclassmen played with assisting and providing them with the necessary, academic support, and how this enabled them to continue their academic journey towards college and academic success. Worley et al (2023) posited viable insight into how social relationships are linked with academic motivation, as being instrumental o how students are able to overcome anxiety overtime. Moreover, having peer to peer support within the context of a college setting may have proved valuable towards how the development (graduates) of student's self-perceptions in relation to competence (Worley et al., 2023).

What's more, the study participants believed that competence regarding education was also, key for them as first-generation African American male college graduates, and the academic support they received was vital to their college success. Equally important, research have shown, when these students receive support with their academic studies, this have the

tendency to holistically, enhance their schooling experiences (Brooms et al., 2021). As such, when supporting the “whole student” (academic, emotional, social and spiritual), the benefits are rewarding when considering the challenges this population of students experience. Where as, academic support through tutoring/advising, emotional support when the students experiences feeling of disarray arouse and/or encounter personal barriers, social support encompass peers, family and faculty/staff, and spiritual support are through the students’ role related to their faith. In addition, to the whole student construct, while in college, the participants also benefitted from setting goals and balancing responsibilities.

**Goal-Setting.** My second interpretation is how the graduates of SERDC showed a desire for goal-setting in their questionnaire, interview, and focus group responses. Each participant clearly described the importance of developing a plan and strategy and persevering to achieve their goals. The participants identified prayer, time management skills, and discipline as key aspects of the goal-setting process. Beside that, this supports the research study that when students have clear and credible intentions, this enhances their motivation and this aligns with tenants of self efficacy, sense of belonging and perceived value of the curriculum (Tinto, 2017). Consequently, three graduates stressed the importance of not succumbing to outside distractions, which would have caused them to lose focus and hinder their academic pursuits. The participants also believed that being organizing and creating schedules enhanced and reinforced their determination to achieve their commitments toward their academic goals.

Furthermore, the participants discussed how adapting and adjusting to their plans and schedules helped to create a cultural environment conducive to their academic successes. They realized the structured study schedules gave them comfort, which put them at ease. The graduates realized that adapting and adjusting also helped them build their confidence and

motivation to persist. The graduates felt empowered to develop viable study habits from this confidence and motivation, which led to their accomplishments. Many participants made bold assessments regarding the benefits of their goal-setting, was the ultimate result of “receiving [their] college diplomats.”

Next, the participants discussed questioning if they had made the right choice upon beginning their college experience. But, after sustaining viable goal-setting plans and strategies and staying focused, they fulfilled all their academic goals and college requirements. This supports the research that, when challenges persist, the student must develop the necessary grit with passion to persevere, to reach their academic goals (Christopoulou et al., 2018; Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth, 2016). One graduate stated, “It was important for me to set patterns and schedules for making a plan and to keep my goal-setting efforts going.” Multiple participants attributed using their goal-setting capabilities to achieve college success to their motivation and inner strength to succeed (Tinto, 2017). Moreover, inner strength and motivation are among the five domains of student academic performance (Hasan et al., 2021; Pintrich et al., 1991). All the participants had a positive view of the importance of setting and achieving goals, which impacted how they balanced their responsibilities. Also, through these efforts and student motivation, there are hopes this may reduce education disadvantage, for this population (Brooms et al., 2021; Tinto, 2017).

**Balancing Responsibilities.** My third interpretation is how each participant discussed the importance of balancing responsibilities between work and school. A few participants (non-traditional graduates) described the additional responsibility of caring for children. Moreover these non-traditional graduates addressed how they were challenged to figure out how to balance their workload, and the responsibility of raising children, all while pursuing their college

degrees. Each non-traditional participant described how this endowed them with added motivation to achieve their academic goal. Moreover, their mindset was to ensure their offspring's understood the importance of education and fulfilling their academic responsibilities. This study supports the literature, whereby, even with challenges, individuals must still gird the passion to persevere and stay committed toward achieving their goal (Diotaiuti et al., 2022; Henderson et al., 2021).

One graduate expressed how prioritizing daily responsibilities and activities are vital to establish an effective schedule. Despite the daily challenges, he found it advantageous to ensure each event or person gets the proper balance and amount of attention, which helps in meeting and achieving academic goals. Another participant stressed that balanced responsibilities are the building blocks to achieving academic success and that planning to balance responsibilities was a path to academic maturity.

All participants discussed that maturity was essential to keep their passion, persevere, and defeat the odds by sustaining their interests in fulfilling their academic responsibilities. One participant described this maturity as life-changing and character-building. All participants discussed the narrative of counteracting the negative stigma placed on most African American males regarding academic success. The graduate's mindset was to show he had the resolve necessary to achieve academically, and the catalyst to these achievements was embracing his responsibility to balance his daily activities to achieve his college goal. Although all 10 participants strove to balance their responsibilities, they realized this milestone was vital to their high achievement and success.

Students striving to balance their responsibilities have effective and viable lives and careers. Given the promising report of how the research participants achieved their college



degrees, this study's findings could serve as a benchmark for other African American males struggling academically in secondary and postsecondary education. One participant urged exposing struggling (peer to peer) students to successful ones (Brooms 2021, Henderson et al., 2020). He also expressed the need for successful African American graduates to share their knowledge with these students. He stated, "By doing things such as this, the lie might be destroyed, which champions the stigma and narrative that the greatest majority of African American males can't be educated."

### **Implications for Policy or Practice**

This section presents the study's implications for policy and practice. The policy implication applies to SERDC and schools in surrounding areas, which may be vital toward securing the necessary funding for future African American male college students' success. The implications for practice are suggestions for SERDC higher education leaders, policymakers, and educators to improve and increase the academic success rate of African American male college students.

### ***Implications for Policy***

Significant research addresses the hardships, obstacles, and challenges African American male college students encounter in their efforts to achieve college success (Atuahene, 2021; Brooms, 2021). Even when these students enter college, most never finish, yielding a low college completion success rate (Atuahene, 2021). This study's findings reflected the participants' perspectives of how they could persevere and achieve college success despite the low college success rate of most African American male students. Although the collected data indicate limited academic resources for African American male students in SERDC, there are promising opportunities to establish educational programs that may prove vital for these students. If the

district's educational leaders can secure the necessary information and funding to establish educational programs and support initiatives, they may be able to help African American male students improve their overall college and academic success rates.

There are implications for policy addressing the academic retention and graduation rates for underprivileged college students across the United States. The limited programs for assisting the district's disadvantaged students represent an opportunity to increase this population's graduation success rate. Other colleges and universities with limited academic and social support for these students may consider using educational programs and support initiatives to improve their school's recruitment, retention, and academic success rates. Allocating additional funding to programs for disadvantaged students may require policymakers to adjust their funding stipulations; however, the benefits could increase the academic success of SERDC college students and potentially America as a whole.

For example, for America as a whole I suggest implications for policy as related to McGill's (2016) "whole student", which is equated to his advocating for the developmental aspect of academic advising (p. 50). In this, approach the student is challenged to develop along various cognitive, social, and affective domains of learning (Johnson, Strayhorn, & Travers, 2023; McGill, 2016). As a result, the advisor foster a relationship with the student, and this relationship coincide with teaching (teacher) and learning (student), which are crucial to the occurrence of the students' academics and the concerns of life (Duller, Creamer, & Creamer, 1997; Johnson, Strayhorn, & Travers, 2023). Alternatively, this approach is empirically considered more effective than the prescriptive approach of academic advising. Whereby, prescriptive academic advising is considered an advisor-managed outcome. Whereas, this approach between the advisor and students is outcome- oriented (Alexitch, 2002; Johnson,

Strayhorn, & Travers, 2023). What's more, there are foundations and supportive programs offering assistance to all college students, including men of color, (which may prove promising for African American males) in attempts to enhance the college graduation rate for all students, but are vital for men of color.

In conclusion, I suggest that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Lumina Foundation are two foundations which may provide assistance to college students, specifically African American males to increase these student college academic experiences. Whereby, each year there are college student success summits (College Opportunity Summit, supported by the white house and the Black Male Summit supported by the University of Akron). Furthermore, this supports the study by showing there is an increase push for African American male students, college academic success. In addition, these types of summits brings together a large population of higher education stakeholders, in efforts determine the need for evidence based policies and practices which will work for all students (But, specifically addressing the needs of African American males) by improving their academic outcomes (Johnson, Strayhorn, & Travers, 2023).

### ***Implications for Practice***

The participants in this study held strong beliefs about their academic goal commitments and grit. This finding confirms how potential educational support initiatives, positive development model programs, and other academic support initiatives throughout SERDC may prove effective for motivating all underprivileged students in higher education. The SERDC college graduates' passion to persevere was vital to their accomplishments and could benefit the future success and effectiveness of these types of educational programs. Participants in this study stressed how advantageous their determination to achieve their academic goals was toward completing college and their overall college experience. The graduates' experiences may also

provide information for educational leaders to create academic, cultural, and technological, support initiatives to assist all students, specifically African American male students, in accomplishing their academic goals, Moreover, since technology is changing the way education is delivered in the United States of America and worldwide, this has created new problems for integrating virtual and digital worlds into teaching and learning capabilities for students (Dalgarno et al., 2013; Trawick et al., 2020; (Duller, Creamer, & Creamer, 1997; Johnson, Strayhorn, & Travers, 2023). Despite this research, this study supports the need for the importance of providing the necessary technological advancement for all students, and may provide keen benefits for African American male college students.

Additionally, overcoming the technological disparities and the passion to persevere provides commitment to long-term goals (Duckworth, 2016), including college students striving to achieve academic success. Underprivileged and disadvantaged students, such as many African American male college students, need the necessary assistance to succeed in higher education. Addressing this situation will create a college culture that may diminish the perceived stigma experienced by most of these students, which often hinders their desire to attend college and succeed. Although many colleges and universities have educational programs addressing this population of students, most underprivileged, disadvantaged, and underrepresented individuals are not graduating college at the same rate as their peers. Educational leaders, policymakers, and educators within SERDC could help create educational support initiatives that actively assist, encourage, and promote these students' matriculation in higher education and ensure their academic success.

Consequently, I suggest that this population of students will benefit from the resources and assistance of developmental academic advising (Johnson, Strayhorn, & Travers, 2023;

McGill, 2016). In addition, the contrast between developmental advising and prescriptive advising, is developmental advising enables the advisor an opportunity to become an integral (directly assisting the students) part of the student's day to day academic goals. But, prescriptive advising is when the advisor, provides instruction, but is not directly involved with the student's day to day goal (Alexitch, 2002; Johnson, Strayhorn, & Travers, 2023).

Furthermore, this research has shown that the teacher – student relationship fosters an effective way to enhance the overall potential of academic achievement for college students (Duller, Creamer, & Creamer, 1997; Johnson, Strayhorn, & Travers, 2023). As a result, this provides an opportunity for educational leaders and policymakers to acquire the necessary assistance from foundations, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation and the Lumina foundation, and others, to support programs such as developmental academic advising specifically for this population of students (African American males). As a result, evidence based policies and practices such as these will ensure the college needs of the overall academic outcomes for all students, specifically African American males are achieved (Johnson, Strayhorn, & Travers, 2023). Finally, this research study, supports this literature, showing how the African American males perspectives align with how the principles of grit and how they were able to succeed in college.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Duckworth's (2016) grit theory provided the theoretical framework to explore SERDC graduates' experiences in overcoming their academic challenges in higher education. Grit theory suggests that students can overcome challenges when they use their passion to persevere and exert sustained interest and effort to reach their long-term goals. One significant finding of this study was the theme of a willingness to finish, which directly correlates with Duckworth's theory

that students can use their inner passion and perseverance to reach their long-term goals. This study's participants expressed being willing and determined to succeed in their college pursuits, despite the academic challenges. They believed that using grit to adapt to the challenge in persisting allowed them to press forward to fulfill their academic goals.

Further analysis of the data showed how the graduates used the constructs of grit in various ways to persevere and overcome academic challenges. The participants expressed determination to use their faith to persist and their inner strength to achieve their academic goals. According to Duckworth (2016), when individuals have a strong belief in their capabilities and a passion to persevere to achieve their long-term goals, they typically do so despite the challenges. Although the graduates experienced various challenges in their efforts to achieve college success, they kept the belief and mindset of completing their goals (Burton, 2020; Dweck & Yeager, 2019). Despite thoughts about giving up because of the challenges, the participants were willing to sustain their interest and effort to persist. By being steadfast and willing to overcome these challenges, the graduates could succeed at the same rate as their same-age peers.

In continuing what they had begun, the graduates showed how academic goal commitment and passion to persevere are the keys to college success. Duckworth's (2016) grit theory supports the graduates' commitment to achieving their academic goals by not giving up. The participants showed they could use the constructs of grit to achieve similar academic success as their peers. Degree completion had given most graduates the confidence and mindset to pursue more challenging feats, such as earning their master's degrees (Elliot-Moskwa and Dweck, 2022; Yeager & Dweck, 2020). By pushing through and using the constructs of grit, the graduates could become even grittier (exerting more and more effort) toward their academic goal pursuits.

Moreover, underprivileged and disadvantaged students, such as the African American male graduates in this study, are likely to achieve college success when they are willing to persevere and use their passion to succeed (Christopoulou et al., 2018; Duckworth, 2016; Henderson et al., 2020). The study showed that graduates who remained committed to their college pursuits despite the obstacles and challenges were able to finish and earn their degrees. An integral aspect of grit theory is using one's capabilities to complete a task no matter how tough it is or how long it may take; the goal is to follow through "until the end." This transcendental phenomenological study extends Duckworth's (2016) grit theory and supports the literature (Christopoulou et al., 2018; Henderson et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2020), by showing how African American male college graduates used their commitment toward academic goal achievement and grit to succeed.

### **Empirical Implications**

These findings are useful for educational leaders, policymakers, administrators, and educators who are integral to higher education and may assist underprivileged and disadvantaged students, especially African American male students, in SERDC and throughout the United States. This study also provides an in-depth perspective of empirical implications of how individuals succeed despite their shortcomings and can gird the necessary grit to achieve. The study reveals key aspects of how the graduates were willing and motivated to prove they were capable of academic success like their peers. These types of motivation factors are important for students when they are willing to persevere. According to Kwon (2021), the willingness to persevere and exert grit is essential for students in mainstream society. These types of students are more likely to exert willingness when they use their passion to preserve, and they are encouraged by adequate support toward their grit characteristics, essential student challenges in

education and learning, and the domains of student academic performance capabilities (Duckworth, 2016).

This study's findings are integral in helping to show how using perseverance and the "never-give-attitude" (Xu et al., 2020, p. 8) enabled the participants in SERDC to persist. Research has shown that a student's grit processing resides in a primary goal of achievement within a specific domain (Tang et al., 2021). From this domain and the evidence of their experiences, the graduates discussed being disciplined and focused on their efforts to achieve their academic milestones. By being organized and managing their academic schedules and standards, the graduates were determined and motivated to succeed. These efforts have proven that when students are willing to push through, adapt, and adjust to their situations and circumstances, they can gird the resilience to overcome most challenges (Romano et al., 2021). The participants' experiences support the premise that as they persevered, they developed a level of mastery, which led to their willingness to continue until they reached their academic goal.

The literature shows how individuals can achieve their goals through their passion to persevere and their temperament, both influenced by school readiness, academic achievement, and educational attainment (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth & Allred, 2012). The findings from this study suggest that the graduates were capable and built confidence through their determination and willingness to work toward their college success. Empirical research has shown how individuals can overcome challenges to achieve long-term goals through academic goal commitment and grit (Duckworth, 2016; Henderson et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021; Duckworth & Allred, 2012). Despite, the limited research literature addressing how struggling African American male college students overcome academic failure, the participants' research study proves promising. To overcome the gap in the literature, African American male



students may be provided with assistance, by using the constructs of developmental academic advising. For instance, the advisor is empowered to assist the college student with the necessary assistance to ensure they succeed academically within college.

Data analysis showed the participants had strong convictions regarding their experiences as first-generation graduates desiring to complete their college endeavors. The graduates agreed their overall goal of degree completion reflected a level of pride and provided them with the confidence of having what it takes to succeed in their chosen profession and in life. Additionally, the graduates agreed that having support, inspiration, motivation, and encouragement from their classmates, peers, other stakeholders, and all involved with their success was vital. The study's findings add to the literature on academic goal commitment and grit and help to reinforce the need for all students, specifically African American males, to push through and achieve their goals.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this qualitative research study, was in the area of the small population of SERDC participants, who only attended either a PWI or HBCU. Although each participant provided their perspectives regarding their experiences at their particular university, it would have been of great advantage to gather information from students who have experienced both colleges. Because this information may have provided “deeper insights” contrasting the disparities between students academic experiences from both colleges. Alternatively, the limitations of this study also included the small sample size. Seven of the 17 qualified individuals identified for this study did not participate: Three opted out after completing the questionnaire and four did not return the questionnaire. Of the three who returned their questionnaires, one had the potential to provide vital information because he had attended a PWI

and two HBCUs to achieve his college degree. His questionnaire provided pertinent information regarding his perspective on his experiences at each university. Gathering a perspective from African American male graduates who attended both PWIs and HBCUs could provide a deeper understanding to address the challenges they faced to achieve college success. Such a study could be useful for policymakers and educational leaders to assist these students more effectively in their educational pursuits.

The sample provided important information on the participants' perspectives of their experiences and how they achieved college success. The limited, scope of potential participants' who have experienced both PWI's and HBCUs, and the limited participation from the seven students who met the criteria but did not engage in interviews or focus groups limited the overall perspective of the African American male college graduates in this district. The missed interview and focus group participation of the African American male college graduate who attended a PWI and HBCUs weakened the opportunity for the research study's overall perspective in connection with the population of college graduates.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations of this study revolve around the sparse population of these types of graduates from SERDC, which encouraged my desire to use a transcendental phenomenological study vice using the Hermeneutical study. While only conducting research on African American males who have completed college, it would have been interesting to examine other African American male students who have attended college but never finished. Additionally, my plans to only use African American male college graduates from SERDC centered on Duckworth's (2016) theoretical framework. For example, academic goal commitment and grit, means one's

passion to persevere and achieve long-term goals. Whereas, this research design, coincided with my reasoning, for conducting a qualitative research study.

As result, my reasoning concurred with the Duckworth's theory, of examining the small percentage of graduates who used the mindset to construct sustain interest and sustain effort with passion to persevere, and did not drop out of college. My choice of research theory, to pursue further in support of Duckworth's theory (2016), is the principle and construct of Carol Dweck's (2019) Mindset theory. This research theory coincide with academic goal commitment and grit, relative to how an individual's positive mindset to embrace their fears, failures and challenges to achieve in school, business, parenting, relationships are necessary to succeed in life (Dweck, 2019).

Whereby, each graduate girded this mindset and persisted in their drive and determination to achieve academic and college success. Equally important, most underprivileged, underrepresented, and disadvantaged students, specifically African American males have desires to complete college, but the plethora of challenges they encounter hinders their success. As such, this small population of participants, (exemplified Dweck's (2019) mindset) provided a way to narrow the scope, to evaluate their success. After examining these graduates' experiences and perspectives, I believe it would have been difficult to correlate the African American male graduates with other African American males who did not graduate from college.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

In reference to recommendations for future research, I believe more research is needed to address African American male students' challenges in college completion. Despite significant research on the obstacles and challenges they face in achieving a college education (Cai, 2020;

Henderson et al., 2020), there is limited evidence of how they could overcome these challenges to achieve academic success. Moreover, my research study fits with Duckworth's (2016) theory, and has provided a potential path way for struggling African American male college students. What's more, one recommendation is for stakeholders, researchers, policymakers, administrators, educators, and other educational leaders to conduct more in-depth research to address this issue. For example, it is of importance for these stakeholders to glean the constructs of academic goal commitment and grit for African American males, to empower them with using the constructs of developmental academic advising, and also help to provide them with the necessary assistance. Although, this endeavor may initially require the collective efforts of the students, parents, policy makers, investors, and educational leaders, I believe the benefits from this endeavor may prove to be valuable. Additionally, further research should focus on the initial start of these students quest from birth, K-12, and in their efforts to pursue college. Furthermore, qualitative research in this area of interest may highlight other arears of concern which may provide deeper insights into why African American males college students face academic challenges.

During the research study I learned that if all stakeholders support these students, U.S. society's health and viability will improve. Further research regarding how this population of students' deals with their challenges is also advantageous toward advancing the successes of American colleges, universities, and society. Research has shown this underprivileged, underrepresented and disadvantaged population of students within SERDC and beyond can achieve college success at the same rate as their peers (Henderson et al., 2020). Given the necessary help to prepare for college like their peers, these students will have prospects of a promising future. This supports, my reasoning for recommending qualitative research in the area

of examining these students from birth, and until the time they attempt to pursue college. Finally, to incorporate developmental academic advising with the academic process of this population will be of great importance.

First, when challenged to persevere and use their passions to overcome academic challenges and achieve long-term goals, underprivileged students experience higher confidence and well-being (Duckworth, 2016; Henderson et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021; Duckworth & Allred, 2012). Second, they begin to realize that through their commitments to their academic goals, and by exerting grit to sustain their interest and efforts, they can endure and overcome their educational and academic challenges (Duckworth, 2016; Henderson et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021; Duckworth & Allred, 2012). Lastly, research has shown, when these students are provided with the same level of support, as their peers, they exude the confidence to achieve academic and college success at the same level. As result, this prompts recommendations for future research. In retrospect, this study's data and findings could assist all stakeholders to increase the college success rate of this population.

Additionally, there is a wealth of literature on African American male college students' limited academic success rate, (e.g., Atuahene, 2021; Brooms, 2021). Besides, after observing the demographics of this African American male population, I decided to review the situation further to understand why this population falls at the bottom of most educational and academic statistical metrics. The findings show that these students are willing and able to succeed in higher education but may need the encouragement and extra assistance necessary to achieve academic success.

In conclusion, to incorporate my research study with the other literature, I believe the success of African American male college students, and all students will be able to achieve

college success. It is paramount for all education leaders to join with academic sound students, parents and educators in assisting these students with desires to help them wing increasing their college success rate. The findings in this study can be replicated in other districts, by reviewing the data collection findings provided within this study. Finally, I will recommend trying to conduct research with African American male graduates who have experienced both PWI's and HBCU's. As a result, I believe this perspective will provide a more accurate assessment of these students overall college experience.

### **Conclusion**

This transcendental phenomenological study provided information regarding how African American male college graduates in SERDC used passion and perseverance to achieve college success. The triangulated data came from a questionnaire, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups. The participants were 10 graduates from the SERDC district who had obtained college degrees. In line with the constructs of Duckworth's (2016) grit theory, they used academic goal commitment to sustain interest and efforts to overcome long-term academic challenges. I explored the graduates' use of these constructs to show how they reached the same educational and academic milestones as non-African American peers. The findings could provide methods for stakeholders to assist other underprivileged, underrepresented, and disadvantaged students, specifically struggling African American males, to achieve academic success at the college level. The willingness to exert grit to overcome challenges is essential for all college students and provides a path for African American males' success.

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## Appendix A

### IRB Approval

Study Details	Submissions
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Approved

**IRB-FY22-23-608**

Exploring Academic Goal Commitment and Grit in College Education: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of African American Male Graduates

PDF

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<b>Approval Date:</b>	<b>Expiration Date:</b>	<b>Organization:</b> Active	<b>Submissions:</b>
03-16-2023	N/A	Graduate Education	N/A
			<b>Sponsors:</b>
			N/A
<b>Admin Check-In Date:</b>	<b>Closed Date:</b>	<b>Current Policy:</b>	
03-16-2024	N/A	Post-2018 Rule	

(i)

Key Contacts	Attachments		
Team Member	Role	Number	Email
Anthony Reid	Principal Investigator		[REDACTED]
Anthony Reid	Primary Contact		[REDACTED]
Jerry Woodbridge	Co-Principal Investigator		[REDACTED]

**Appendix B**  
**Recruitment Letter**

Dear Administrator:

As a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to explore how African American male graduates experience and understand academic goal commitment and grit regarding college education in a small Southeastern regional North Carolina district. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study. Participants must be 18 years of age or older and African American male graduates from Southeastern regional district county (SERDC) who have achieved their college degrees from 2016 to 2022. Willing participants will complete a questionnaire, a recorded, one-on-one interview, and a focus group. After I collect the three forms of data, I will ask the participants to check the accuracy of the findings by reviewing their interview and focus group transcripts and providing additional data as needed. The total time for participation is about three hours.

Although I will request participants' names and other forms of identification, I will keep this information confidential. I will email a consent form to all interested individuals to read, sign (type their names), and date and return to me. The consent form contains additional information related to the research study.

Sincerely,

Anthony Earl Reid  
Doctoral Candidate at Liberty University

## Appendix C

### Consent Form

**Title of the Project:** Exploring Academic Goal Commitment and Grit in College Education: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of African American Male Graduates

**Principal Investigator:** Anthony Earl Reid, doctoral candidate, Liberty University

#### Invitation to be part of a research study

You are invited to participate in a research study to show how African American male college graduates persevere and overcome challenges to achieve their academic goals. Your participation has the potential to provide a benchmark for African American male students to persevere and overcome educational challenges and achieve their college degrees. You were chosen for this study because you are 18 years or older and an African American male who graduated from Southeastern regional district county (SERDC) and have achieved your college degree from 2016 to 2022. This research study is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this study is to explore how African American male graduates experience and understand academic goal commitment and grit regarding college education in a small Southeastern regional North Carolina district. A questionnaire; one-on-one, open-ended interviews; and focus groups will be the means of data collection. The research will highlight how African American male college graduates stayed focused and overcame barriers to academic, cultural, and technological success.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in an emailed questionnaire. The estimated time for completion is 60 minutes.
2. Participate in a one-on-one, open-ended, audio- and video-recorded interview through Zoom. The estimated time for completion is 60 minutes.
3. Participate in an audio- and video-recorded focus group through Zoom. The estimated time of completion is 60 minutes.
4. Participants will also be asked to review their interview and focus group transcripts.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society are include increasing African American male students' educational and academic achievement, which translates into meaningful participation in their community and society.

### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. Some questions might cause you to reflect upon negative educational experiences.

### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. If published, the participant's identification and information will be protected. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym. The interview will be conducted in private where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked filing cabinet. The data may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hard copies shredded.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group might share the discussions with persons outside of the group.

### **How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

### **Is study participation voluntary?**

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

### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address or phone number 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.

### **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Anthony Earl Reid. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Anthony Earl Reid at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Woodbridge, at [REDACTED].

### **Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

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, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515, or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu)

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

### **Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy for the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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

The researcher has my permission to [audio-record and video-record] me as part of my participation in this study.

---

Printed Subject Name

---

Signature and Date

## **Appendix D**

### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire questions will elicit African American male participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon under study.

1. What were some of your experiences as an African American male persevering to achieve your academic goals in college? (CRQ)
2. Why was it important for you to achieve your academic goals? (SQ1)
3. What were the contributing experiences enabling you to persevere and continue to achieve your academic goals? (SQ1)
4. What were the contributing factors enabling your passion to achieve your academic goals? (SQ1)
5. What was the most profound challenge you experienced in college? (SQ2)
6. How did you overcome this challenge? (SQ3)
7. What influence did others have on your academic goals? (CRQ)

## Appendix E

### Interview Questions

1. Please provide a brief background to describe yourself. (CRQ)
2. What was the benefit of academic goal commitment and grit? (CRQ)
3. What aspect of your college experiences do you think was the most challenging? (SQ1)
4. What academic expectations were the most challenging during your college experience?  
(SQ1)
5. What cultural expectations were the most challenging during your college experience?  
(SQ1)
6. What technological expectations were the most challenging during your college  
experience? (SQ1)
7. How did you overcome these challenges during your college experience? (SQ2)
8. What compelled you to overcome these challenges in college? (SQ2)
9. What kind of effort did you exert to meet your college goals? (SQ3)
10. How would you assist other African American male college students with their academic  
challenges? (SQ3)
11. What else do you think would be beneficial for me to know regarding how you  
persevered to complete your college degree? (CRQ)



## Appendix F

### Focus Group Questions

1. What do you attribute to the success of your academic goal commitment–grit as an African American male college graduate? (CRQ)
2. How do you explain to other African American males how they can use the constructs of perseverance to achieve their academic goals? (SQ1)
3. How do you explain to other African American males how they could use the constructs of sustain interest to achieve their academic goals? (SQ2)
4. How would you explain to other African American males how they could use the constructs of sustain effort to achieve their academic goals? (SQ3)
5. How did academic goal commitment–grit affect your college success? (CRQ)
6. How did academic goal commitment–grit benefit you? (CRQ)

## Appendix G

### Audit Trail

Identification of research problem	Although college education is important to the success of the American dream, only 16% of African American males who enter college graduate (Atuahene, 2021). There is a dearth of research on African American males' experiences with academic goal commitment and grit in college.
Development of research problem	Research proposal to explore the experiences of African American male college graduates and how they persevered in college.
Literature review	Literature review conducted to synthesize existing literature around academic goal commitment–grit in college education for students, specifically African American males.
Theoretical frame(s)	Grit theory of learning and the constructs of academic goal commitment–grit are used to give voice to African American male graduates.
Methodology	A qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach will be used to explore the experiences of African American male college graduates specific to academic goal commitment and grit in college.
Interview protocol development	A questionnaire; one-on-one, open-ended interviews; and focus groups will be the researcher-developed tools for data collection.
Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval	IRB approval will be obtained and included in the appendices.
Participation selection	Snowball and purposeful criterion sampling. Participants will be college graduates who (a) identify as African American, (b) identify as male, (c) had the perseverance and passion to complete college, (d) are from the SERDC, and (e) graduated college within the last 5 years.
Data collection and storage	There will be three sources of data for triangulation: a questionnaire, interviews, and focus groups. Recordings will be transcribed and analyzed, with all data stored via a secured computer database and file cabinet.
Data sources	Recorded interviews, recorded focus groups, and a questionnaire.
Transcription	The recorded interviews and focus groups will be transcribed using NVivo transcription software.
Coding	Coding will occur using NVivo software. Codes will then be clustered into themes using horizontalization.
Trustworthiness procedures	Data triangulation, member checking, expert review, questionnaire, interviews, and focus groups.
Summaries	Summaries of participants, answers to research questions, and rich descriptions of themes.
Research findings	Relevant literature, descriptions context, methodology, research design, data collection, data analysis, questionnaire responses, recommendations for the future research, references, and appendices.

## Appendix H Transcript

ONE [REDACTED]

I had different experiences; some were good, and some were bad. It was difficult adapting to being out on my own away from my parents. Being a young freshman was a rough time because of all the adversity thrown my way. [REDACTED]

I had people looking up to me. Also, I wanted to make sure I made my mother proud, she had helped me with my tuition, so I couldn't have her wasting her money. Being where I 'm from, not too many make it out, so I had a point to prove. I had a point prove to myself and everyone who ever doubted me. [REDACTED]

Almost getting kicked out because of my academics was one of the main reasons. Also, I crossed over into [REDACTED] Fraternity incorporated and that set my expectations higher than they've ever been. I to maintain an image for myself and my fraternity. [REDACTED]

The extra support from my family. No matter how hard I struggled, they were always there to help me where I lacked. Also being one of the first to go to college, I had to be one of the first to graduate too. [REDACTED]

Discipline I to go to classes and turn in those assignments when they were due. Also trying to stay focused with so much going on around me. Girls, parties, and alcohol; were some very hard habits to break. [REDACTED]

Putting trust in myself and God. I knew I could do whatever I put my mind to. Believing in me is what really helped me overcome these challenges [REDACTED]

The older brothers who were in the frat before me. I saw the different things they accomplished, and they pushed me to another level. I wanted to be like them and known for positive things. Also, I had my mother in my corner the whole way throughout my 4.5 years of college [REDACTED]

TWO [REDACTED]

NA [REDACTED] 1

Growing up in an American home, we were taught failure is not an option. We were also aware of the negative and positive statistics surrounding African American males. My refusal to become a failure and a contribution to the negative statistics were the fuel needed to achieve every goal I set. [REDACTED] 2

I attended a PWU, in a known prejudiced county. Most of those "contributing experiences" were negative remarks from individual who didn't want me in their county. I used their words as building blocks by taking what they said and working hard, so I wouldn't become what they said. [REDACTED] 3

I had one professor, who looked like me, became a campus mom to me, and she helped ensure I set reachable and what I felt were unreachable goal. In the end, every goal set was met. The feeling of achieving these goals and the responses I received from my support community was enough for me to set and achieve more. [REDACTED] 4

Attending a PWU was the most profound challenge I experienced. On campus, I didn't feel the prejudice of the county. However, you could tell the ethnic group behind all the programs and events that were held on campus. There was something every week, but very few things to do that caught my interest. This made it hard to fit in, without losing my identity. [REDACTED] 5

Although I wouldn't suggest it now, I decided to work and make money. While attending school, I had three jobs – 2 on campus and 1 off campus. When I wasn't working, I was usually in my dorm or at church, if there was something going on. [REDACTED] 6

I was graced with an awesome support system on and off campus. They filled every gap that was open, and I truly couldn't have done it without them. [REDACTED] 7

### Three [REDACTED]

For me perseverance in college was at the helm of all my motivation.

Personally, I didn't envision myself going to college until the last two years of high school, so it was critical to me to ensure that not only started college but that I finished.

My experiences in college consisted of receiving help and support from very passionate, purposed and determined people on campus from Deans, Chairs, to Professors, Provost, and Presidents everyone chipped in to make sure you were motivated to finish. [REDACTED] 1

It was important for me and still is important for me to achieve my academic goals because of the GPA I graduated high school with. I graduated high school with a 1.7 GPA, and this is my constant reminder of the level of importance that education has in my life and how it will affect and impact the world around me.

Education is also important to me to achieve my goals because it broadens your perspective on life and expands your intellectual scope. It will enable me to become and remain an asset to my wife, family, community, city, state, and the world. [REDACTED] 2

Many times, it would be financial contributions from the federal government and other times it would be a lack of self-motivation and discipline to remain consistent with performing at a high level. [REDACTED] 3

In some moments, it may have been a sense of belonging or trying to remain focused on one thing at a time.

Due to me being extremely active on campus while in college. [REDACTED] 4

The most profound challenge for me in college was transferring from a technical college to a university.

The initial adjustment was extremely difficult and overwhelming. [REDACTED] 5

When transferring from schools the main thing to implement or adopt is a new community or organization that can support you during those times. That community will help produce a sense

of belonging and will give you confidence to thrive while getting acclimated to a new environment. [REDACTED] 6

My high school teachers and many college professors had a tremendous impact and Influence on my academic goals. And most of them still do.

Attending a HBCU had to be one of the best decisions I made towards my education. While people are supportive in those environments, they also have a standard that they make you uphold and rise to instead of lowering the bar. [REDACTED] 7

### **THREE** [REDACTED]

Some of my experiences included having to deal with multiple assignments being due around the same time, with also still having to raise my daughter, and still having to work to help support my family and pay for extra classes in the summer. Just so I would be able to graduate on time.

[REDACTED] 1

It was important to achieve my academic goals being that I am one of the first men in my family to attend a 4-year University and also graduate and receive bachelor's in management information Systems. [REDACTED] 2

I would have to say having patience and also praying. [REDACTED]

Time Management and Motivation. [REDACTED] 4

I would have to say it would be during my final semester before I graduated. So, for me to graduate and participate in the Commencement Ceremony I had to take 6 classes that totaled 18 credit hours. With that I still had to work and help take care of my daughter. [REDACTED] 5

I overcame the challenge by giving it my all, using the resources and help that was offered to me. Always having my daughter on my mind to motivate me to reach the finish line. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] 6

My family had a positive influence on my goals and always made sure I never went without.

[REDACTED]

### **One on One Interview**

[REDACTED]

Two: New information bigger sense of the world, exposure

Three: sense of belonging, and there was more female driven, small group of African American males. Lifestyle, culture pressure to act different, boxed in always being watched.....academics increase. Plus

Four: Pressure for older siblings, her achievement, to living up to her expectation, being first generation African American male.

Five: felt they you or he doesn't care about his academics' goal, no one have expectations for to achieve.

Six: Apps like Blackboard; I am old fashion MS word office, PowerPoint.

Seven: Being close to home, family and sister doing his undergraduate kept me focus, Library reach out for help.,  
Tools for help, study habits, and properly tutoring.

Eight: Sister after sister finished her MS  
Internally begin to his degree and he used a program to measure his goals.

Nine: Collaborative, networking classmates, study tools books, to learn the information.

Ten: comfortable expressing challenges find someone can trust or believe in you.

Eleven: Create a small nick community no one to push him, mentor, and tutor.

████████████████████

One: Social Worker, Wilson Department of Social Service, help the elderly and love serving people. Always wanted to help people and make an impact.

Two: to obtain my BS, an even deeper desire to pursue his master's in social work in the summer. And ultimately to get his Clinical psychology certificate. In social Work.

Three: Academics, no one who he related to or could help him with his studies 8 people in a small apartment, 3 bedrooms. He had to go outside and sit in mom's car to study, or the school library. Did not do well in studies, because of these types of distractions.

Four: Professors and family, first generation of undergraduate, my mom pushed. And my little brothers' look up to me wanted to go to school like me. Professors reach out to him to keep him on track.

Five: come from a low class, low income, and code with a learning disability, slow learning, and low expectation. Still in his head, learning low self-esteem, he learns to overcome the barriers. Naysayers, mainly himself.

Six: No computer, no laptop in family to MS office, did not have the \$50 to get subscription (me of mom had \$0)  
Financial Aid wasn't enough to cover all tuition or books or laptop.

Therefore, I had to go to the library.

Did not have car, mom worked overnight.

Seven: First generation and God, Financial Aid filled out, still did not cover tuition and books, No one to help, they never went to college. Knowledge, God Spiritual drive.

College staff invested in their students.

Grace and deadlines

Believing I can do it.

TESTIMONY fall semester before I was failing an equipment per my teacher, you don't pass you will not graduate. Advisor SW advise to change major to and lord spoke you will graduate in SW, I then talk to the professor open my pass assignments, two-week window, and I passed with a C.

Eight: God, Support and Believing in myself.

Crate a path for younger siblings, brother nieces' nephews and other from the ghetto, advising it possible.

Nine: 98%                      tired 2%

No full glass, but almost.

Ten: Others never thought about big brother, mentor to as many as I can, just be a guide Metaphor, not to step on Legos, they hurt.

Eleven: Trust God is the main component; I wouldn't get through it without God. He gives one me peace.

Even pursuing my MS, the Capstone is with God.

\*\*\*888\*\*\*\*\*

Anything's possible with God and belief in you.

One: First generation AA male Low income raised by grandparents, first in family to finish high school or college, community giving back.

Two: Commitment to finish strong, complete what I started, for more opportunities, make parents proud

Three: Believing that I can go to college could go like me.

Convince to go to factory; family didn't have the funds for college education.

Survival moneys, death of mom I took 2-3 years off to get myself together. But eventually I was able to push through.

Four: Keeping my grades

Above a 3.0, cause of stress, and to sustain my scholarships and clubs, while working two jobs.

Five HBCU to become a better male and to gather a sense of confidence.  
Before going but going to HBCU help me culturally.

Six: No laptop, could not afford one Library, had a cellphone but not a laptop.

Seven: one day at a time, pushing through, staying focus on goals Push through to overcome failure.

Eight: wanted to graduate, wanted to be successful, wanted a career path, to better serve my community, one I returned to my home and community in a better way.

Nine: Late nights, losing sleep, red bull energy drinks,  
8 o'clock class Job grinding, working hard grind people with same mindset. Likeminded people  
Those on their way out or has been there pushing you.

Ten: see what distracting them pf discouraging them find out what, the issues are and then address them (It)

Counselor HS GPA 10<sup>th</sup> of 11<sup>th</sup> grade no one in my family knew, they dropped out of HS. ██████████  
██████████ explained the GPA, which changed my outlook and finding out what their issues is and trying to do something about it.

Eleven: Finding out the individual's mindset towards a degree, seeing how they were taught how degree will aid them in life.

NOTE some go because they were forced by parents.

Some go because it something they really wanted to do.

\*\*\*\*\*

AAMale find out they background, because we put every on in a big pot, we expect the same outcome or results.

It's not that they don't want to go, grandparents raise me, not thinking about school or Spanish on and two to get into college.

My route I had to take.

BACKGROUND twice.

Find their root of the matter tree sprouting as the thinks.

When a person feels you understand them, they will be more opted to listening to directions.



[REDACTED]

Hunt 2015 ECSU 2019

One: Drive; obtain something,  
likeminded, greater than me

Two: staying focus, temptation on campus, parties, game, and events up to person to stay focus  
God Music Education at the center is God.

Four:

Five: not knowing nothing about the HBCU experiences (A&T and NCCU)  
Never seem, this learns on the fly.

Six: Laptop worn, computer lab, day 3-9 working around band practice Navigating around.  
Manage how to get things done.

Seven: Nutshell friends lean on and trust, upperclassman lead, managed of dorm.  
Keep things open established relationship.

Eight: Not coming back to same situations, Finances, God center gifts make room for you.  
Fraternity.

Nine: High work ethic 6:30 7, time management manage of my time.

Ten: make sure they have the right amount of support, from freshman and senior connection to  
proper  
I have old books, by me giving this all I can do.

\*\*\*\*\*.

Diploma, perseverance, buddy up, with others can't just do it alone. to keep you focus, family  
my mom.

Like 21 credits hour's mom called her every other day, brother's fraternity.

Of course, God

Kind mind, steady levelheaded.

[REDACTED]

One: Military Medical field, paramedic RN

Two: change life (lives)

Give backs to public niece passed I wanted to help because of these.

Three: growing up in the environment, background, technology of by home study more, for our community.

Four:

Five: balancing work life, wasn't prepared formulate a plan 8-8 7-3 12-8

Work, chill, bills etc.

A plan (life by side school)

Six: I pad, HPC, iPhone, more resources (device to all home, no desk.

Seven: Goals plan, step write maturity, takes note, stick taps, things in perspective

Eight: Determination and will, (driven) to go forward, never were a person to accept mediocre. Project you goal to reach.

Nine: having the initiative no one is going to hold your hand, you have rubrics.

Buckle down and get done brainstorming.

Ten: try to set success for now, now factor more resources scholarship, non-profits, and other means to get them ready.

Low income -----resources

Eleven:

Stay on fire in your body, determination, motivation, whatever make to top of mountain, or go back down you have defeated the odds,

Stay on the course.

Single parent raised [REDACTED]

2015 2020

Different connection, join organization.

Two: life how I want, and having a job (educator) mentor, older brother be what they want to be (God and family)

Three: Beginning new environment early classes, multiple assignments (groceries) scrap up change. Stop succumbing to outside distractions.  
Finishing and high expectations to finish strong.

Four:

Five: New people comfort, around other people

Six: Phone, iPhone  
No resource to repair phone.  
No computer  
Go to one of his friends.  
Black board, adapted.

Seven: Knowing I was there for a reason, God put everybody, in a place for a reason.  
Young brother & mother grandmother  
First not wanting to be a failure, Hard, me, I was hard on myself.  
Not to be a liability but an asset, inspire his younger sibling, no one to give advice.

Eight: surrounding, other leaving knowing I am still here, Time I wanted to pack up and go back to [REDACTED]

Be grateful, since my friends never got the opportunity.

HS never filled out application, wasn't on my mind any military, so I give college a try.  
Didn't like college at first, but I gave it some time.

Nine: determination, set schedule, nap, before going to library, early tuck in, discipline, no parties. Organize and rest.

Making the grade: if I didn't make the grade I wanted on an assignment, the next time will aim higher more help, or study more.

Few semester grades, dropped almost kicked out of school (ADP, lost close family, overcame).

Ten: Keep going don't stop effort, mistake keep striving have faith in yourself.  
Disabilities, be grateful, others with disabilities and they can't do like us.  
Build relations, reach for the stars.

Eleven: Respect older brothers, standard purpose, Kappa, keep it going for AA males.

[REDACTED]

One: Father, husband, masters, minister

Two: Pushing towards something new, another side of life

Three: Getting used to the atmosphere PW (BOX) to PB getting used to aspects.

Four: Living up to my professor expectation, history, there may, tutoring seeking help.  
Church, home, school

Five: Parents were ministers  
Expecting do stuff like sports and others

Six: I was pretty tech savvy (I was ok)  
Seven: prayer, family, friends, college, pastors

Eight:

Nine:

Prove to others.

Ten: contact same field, relations, criminal justice, music link them up together with others.

Eleven: God first, know, wife, end Goal

[REDACTED]

1: Minister My Business

2: It allowed if set goal, written thing toward, how far I've come.

3: Most challenging [REDACTED]

AAMale PWI being there to overcome, Change ourselves.

4: Academics expectations \* deadlines meeting deadlines, 3 jobs church back and forth

5: seeing so much of one culture and not the other culture.

6: Mud volleyball for a whole week.

Skiing also

Mom and Dad, mac book pro \$2000

7: Not letting it get the best of my work to get a solution, instead of quitting.

8: parents paying expectations almost \$40, 000 scholarships did not cover everything.

9: depend upon the goal, unreachable and the amount of effort prioritized Low to most.

10: Home life issues, full ride, pay out of pocket, not looking for, or no strings attached

Be there for them,

11: A good support system on campus (small but good) parents, failure

I wanted to be here.

Hard to break a negative mindset. PWI or HBCU, I never wanted to go to an HBCU.

Your outlook, each person is different, home life past present.

Peoples that don't believe in themselves.

Only two schools were [REDACTED]

It would be interesting to glean the outliers that go with evaluating the disparities between the two.

[REDACTED]

One:

Two not allow me to be defined, by my 1.7 GPA.

Or in school my 1.5 GPA

Overcome the stigma of African American males not being able to be educated.

Three: getting the mindset, of my past, dynamics of thought accusations myself if to think at a higher level, changing the environment with, where I wanted to go (conducive environment) with where I wanted to go.

Four:

HBCU your people expectation always as one bad apple everyone is grouped as such.

Mix cultural High school, to HBCU the goal I s know exactly who you are.

Six: initially getting acclimated to all where had been Microsoft office. Classrooms excel accounting formula, challenge (opportunity for grow, before a helpful tool in the long run.

Seven: HBCU for me, they made it their goal, multiples mean of help, library, and mentors, involuntary and voluntary, professor called ensure you are okay.

Side note, professor stop class to counselor a student who family member had passed away, (died), sat and waited and counseled, the people cared)

Likeminded, people that was around me. Professors, mentors, and friends.

Eight: Big family, 6 brothers and 2 sisters, wanted to be an example college businessman, "I became the person I was looking for in myself, for them if they shoot for the moon, just end up somewhere near the stars,

Nine:

Long nights, 1 to 2 o'clock in the morning organization

Business organizations

Male organizations

Accounting organizations

Indulge to understand, be grounded to and around becoming high performing students.

Automatically made my standards go to another level.

Get around people that better than you (me)

Ten: I was doing this it for a couple of years now.

Destroying the lie, that they can't be educated.

Get them around other AA men, that's well educated.

1.

2.

that have done it.

Share that they can do it

Expose them to people

Share and expose.

Eleven: Exposure, going out of the country Paris and Amsterdam

████████████████████

One: Go getter, highly motivated, determined to finish what he have started.

Two: Where I am today working, I can achieve able to expect growth from educating in college

Three: Taking multiple courses, in one semester work lord, social life and work, too many classes

Four: Reading certain APA to stay in honor society had to get up, and get to it stick to it, Never Give Up, to finish

Five: different organizations PWI & HBCU's

Show you know what you know not different HBCU to PWI

Six: None, I am tech savvy

Keep a working laptop, but you must make do.

Severn: Prayer, staying strong, I must do this determined.  
First in family I got to this, be the one that finish.

Keeping that mentality

Eight: Family

Nine: overdrive study mindset staying focus and giving it my all

Ten: sit down with them and build relationships

Make them comfortable.

Tell to get help.  
Don't be afraid.  
Consent and professors  
Get help.

Eleven:

Don't ever let anyone say something is not obtainable.

Read everything, ensure you read, read, read.  
Put in the work.

Go achieve it is not impossible it is obtainable if you put in the work, and don't seek the easy route.

## **Focus Groups**

### **Focus Group One**

One

Family, God

Mom, family, God, Professors [REDACTED]  
 God, set a good example [REDACTED]  
 Friends, Family, God, connections [REDACTED]

## **Two**

Something to focus on, keeps you straying away, delayed but not denied [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]

Focus, plan, people perish temptation is real; freedom part people said don't do that. You miss class, they will shut the door, get around people with the same mindset. [REDACTED]  
 Focus, Collins Aerospace to overcome the distractions even helps me with obtain my masters.  
 [REDACTED]

Brother [REDACTED] worked and went to school, big ups to you Brother [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]

Most men are patterned, we try to stick to their goals, almost finished with my masters, and going to pursue my PhD. Goal orientated.

Sustain my goals [REDACTED]

"Move with purpose" don't be stagnant.

Seek others, for help; you pursue your goals [REDACTED]

## **Four**

Patterns, schedule, masking a plan, deep your goals to keep that effort going [REDACTED]

Sustainability piggyback [REDACTED]

## **Five**

For me as a musician, use to push forward, used my gifts to make room, education, talk and related on different levels [REDACTED]

## **Six**

Build drive tenacity, skill to perfect yourself, your craft mental skills, inner strength t using those strategies [REDACTED]

Piggyback Undergraduate help I to see, and brought out the person I was meant to be, benefit of wanted to stay focus, better [REDACTED] (Devin)

You are you own worst enemy.

5 years of age playing, and getting better, HS, College, figure it out your purpose, purpose early on everything and prayer and Go's plan [REDACTED]

Don't be lazy...

Focus, mindset, that is right don't be lazy [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Leaders, all brothers on panel us and have a whole community following us, don't be lazy, [REDACTED] piggyback... Be good example [REDACTED]

"Education is Key" [REDACTED] This new generation (School to Work) [REDACTED]

Initiative to understand the child now, younger teachers you older teacher firm, Likeminded brothers.

## **Focus Group Two**

### **One**

Step into education being there for younger kids, started rough over time, it gets better, help them get to where they want to be. [REDACTED]

Not to be a statistic or a failure, kids look up to me, Negativity, example [REDACTED]

Resources Book, Pad, write things down, one can get things done [REDACTED]

### **Two**



Way to use the same resources to overcome anything to achieve in life. It's the little things, to mode yourself. To your advantage this can affect something big. [REDACTED]

### **Three**

Goal initiates the goal, plan, it writes it down, stay on the course, weather you fail, drop down, figure life out, 2years, 1 year, 5 year, 10 years.

You have beat the statistical odds you have made, you have run the course [REDACTED]

Agreed with CB, Goals, good support group system [REDACTED]

Agreed [REDACTED]

### **Four**

The more, the better outcome, it will all fall into place, stay on top, stay determined, it will fall into place. I will tell younger guys, even when things get hard, just keep the same strive mindset. Don't let what you are going through upset your feelings and effort of what you are trying to be in life [REDACTED]

Agreed with [REDACTED] Example **Will Smith** (and the machine, effort drive, and determine. He saw somethings others didn't see, one foot forward every day.

Hard work beats Talent [REDACTED]

-----Agreed

### **Five**

[REDACTED] equals results indicative when I failed my first chemistry exam, [REDACTED] I continued to press forward.

WOW-----We All obtained Our bachelor's degrees (ALL)

### **Six**

More opportunities more doors set me apart, higher position, experiences, and extra education, will not understand until you walk across that stage and get into the real life. How much it will benefit you in the future you be forever be about to use [REDACTED]

He's right [REDACTED] 2% of doctors.

AS, BS, **MS** added to one's title.

[REDACTED] agreed.

So you are not just another number or statistics [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] you are being watched, people of influence, Positive of Negative Perseverance, work be graduate.

CONNECTION teaching to business [REDACTED]

Building Blocks [REDACTED]

Never be ashamed to take help [REDACTED]

To Mr. Reid thanks for giving us an opportunity to be a part of this research project.

All Agreed!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

## **Focus Group Three**

### **One**

Family, focus, Relief pressure to study, different environment [REDACTED]

Not performing as well as I could have HS; I had something to prove to myself. College was a stamp of approval for me to show others I can be a high performer, and achieving student [REDACTED]

██████████) Agreed with Both Family, Being the only male to graduate college.

## Two

Finding our way, you like learning of per to learn ██████████ there is so many ways of studying.

Flash cards, YouTube, and power point

I think that one of the barriers African American males have, is to find out what way we like to learn. ██████████

Once we figure this out, it will increase our retention of information then pursuing education becomes a little bit easier, because you know specifically what you want to do because you are able to kind of digest it properly ██████████

██████████ Agreed

Resources, like internet access, I didn't know this when I was freshman at ECU, this makes course work easier or easy, also, one on one, Verse Being a classroom with 100 people of 30 people ██████████

## Three

Defined sustained interest ask ██████████

Find something you are more passionate about ██████████ Construction Management major didn't like, change to Sports Management, and wanted to learn more. ██████████

Put pride away, don't have too much Pride to the side, and don't be afraid to ask for help, it's so much help at HBCU's not sure About PWI's ██████████

Exposure is good,

National association for Black Accounts in ATL

School career firs, there was a great hunger for job opportunity student running in for opportunity rushing in... ██████████

Tip of the iceberg, now there are more ██████████

## Four

Remember why you are there for me I was just 30 minutes away from home, stay on track network, exposure to different people model others to **keep building confidence** ██████████

Seek and be around others like you while you are trying to meet your goals ██████████

██████████ AGREED

## Five

Walking across that stage ALL AGREED

Go to graduation before you go home underclassman ██████████

## Six

██████████ Name on Different applications that require BS.

██████████ Agreed

██████████ this unlocks your mind -----degree.

Money brackets heighten financial goals, \$56, 000 and \$70, 000 and \$90, 000 ██████████

(Donavan)

US FOUR proud of us ██████████

Yes, Likewise ██████████ advocated for, and aware, more of us are needed in this these environments, it exposed us and inspired us to see what we can be.

## Appendix I

### Challenges & Barriers, Overcoming Factors, & Grit Theory Alignment

Challenges and Barriers	Overcoming Factors	GRIT THEORY
Some participants believed they were “Not College Material”.	With peer support, participants were able to transition to a growth mindset.	Sustained effort
Academic Rigor in a Program	To succeed, each participant ensured they were in the college major of their choice. One participant changed his major from construction management to sports studies	Sustained interest
Financial struggles	Most participants experienced through assistance, were able to overcome their financial struggles. One participant had to overcome the challenge of financial aid and had to complete the FAFSA application.	Goal Commitment
Inspiration, Motivation, and Encouragement	With encouragement from family, peers, and educational leaders the graduates were inspired and motivated to persevere.	Perseverance
Goal setting	With the drive and push from family, peers, and education leaders the graduates were able to set and establish (short and long-term) proper goal setting initiatives.	Achieving long-term goals
Balancing multiple responsibilities	To avoid distractions, and follow through on completing assignments, the graduates were able to understand their purpose, and remember their goals.	Goal Commitment

## Appendix J Themes, Subthemes, and codes

- I. Theme 1: The Belief Education Is Key
  - a. Subtheme 1: PWIs and HBCUs
    - i. Adjusting to challenges
    - ii. Moving with purpose
    - iii. Overcoming the stigma, that they cannot succeed
    - iv. Understanding education leads to a successful life
    - v. Passion and burning sensation to fulfill one's goal
    - vi. Education will broaden one's perspective and intellectual scope
    - vii. Perseverance and motivation
    - viii. Overcoming failure to beats the odds
    - ix. Constructing a successful mindset despite the challenges
    - x. Used passion and perseverance to reach one's goals
    - xi. Staying focused despite the challenges
  - b. Subtheme 2: Young Men of Faith
    - i. Like-mindedness with patience and prayer
    - ii. Faith and the will of God
    - iii. Same Beliefs of inner passion and beliefs
    - iv. Spiritual Resolve of balancing school work with inner force and determination
- II. Theme 2: First-Generation College Graduates
  - a. Subtheme 1: Expectation and Expectancy
    - i. To be successful
    - ii. Self-esteem
    - iii. Something to prove
    - iv. Finishing what I have stated
    - v. Focus
    - vi. Determination and motivation
    - vii. Classmates and mentors
    - viii. Move with purpose
    - ix. Living up to standards
    - x. Professors and educational leaders
    - xi. Cultural Environment
  - b. Subtheme 2: Vision of Future Success
    - i. Staying focus
    - ii. Being an Example for family and others
    - iii. Setting academic standards
    - iv. Perseverance and passion
    - v. Making an impact to make a difference
- III. Theme 3: Academic Support
  - a. Subtheme 1: Guidance
    - i. College upperclassmen
    - ii. Challenge with college process
    - iii. Family assistance

- iv. Mentors and spiritual leaders' assistance
- v. Role models
- vi. Encouragement
- b. Subtheme 2: Resources**
  - i. Using higher education institutions academic resources
  - ii. Information resources
  - iii. Peer tutoring
  - iv. Academic counseling

### **Appendix K Bracketing Essay**

As an African American male elementary and secondary student, I graduated from high school as a below average student. With a sound musical background, I was able to attend college as music major. But I found out quickly that academics were an integral part of post -secondary education. Unable to sustain the necessary grades to continue this endeavor, I withdraw from college with only a year until degree completion. As a college dropout, my desires to overcome this level of failure cause me to spend countless hours in the public library. My quest for academic redemption transpired into a desire to join the Navy for education and travel. This ongoing learning and educational development have inspired me with desires to better understand the plight of how these African American males overcame educational challenges to achieve academic success.

My goals and objectives were to examine the research participants to understand how they use the constructs of academic goal commitment and grit, with passion to persevere academically despite all the challenges and hindrances they encountered. I upheld all ethical integrity throughout the course of this research study. Husserl (1970) noted researchers must put epoche or bracketing, at the core of their research. Therefore, in my role as a human instrument or researcher, I utilized the principles of bracketing and did not compromise the integrity of the participants' interviews and the data collection process. Within the chosen setting, the questionnaire, open-ended one-on-one interviews, and focused groups, questions I ensured the graduates were provided with the freedoms to share their own lived experiences. Aligning with Brook (2005), as a researcher I was committed to setting aside my personal assumptions and was determined not to compromise the integrity of the research study. This data collection research approach has the potential to assist educational leaders and policy makers with more improved methods to assist African American

males who are experiencing educational challenges and considered as underachievers or underachieving (Fitzgerald, 2016).

In this epistemological journey (Jackson, 2018) as a researcher, my desires were to understand the participants' educational perspectives and experiences from their post-secondary education. This transcendental phenomenological research design had strong philosophical underpinnings and the interviews (Moustakas, 1994), added support to the scope of my data collection process.

### Appendix L Variation Reduction

<b>Imaginative Variation-Cluster of Essences (I.e., categories)</b>	<b>Synthesis-Meaning and Essences (i.e., themes)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Adjusting to Challenges</li> <li>•Moving with Purpose</li> <li>•Overcoming the Stigma, that they cannot succeed</li> <li>•Like-mindedness with patience and prayer</li> <li>•Faith and the will of God</li> <li>•Same Beliefs of inner passion and beliefs</li> </ul>	<p><b>The Belief Education Is Key</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•PWIs and HBCUs</li> <li>•Young Man of Faith</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•To be successful</li> <li>•Self-esteem</li> <li>•Something to prove</li> <li>•Staying focus</li> <li>•Being an example for family and others</li> <li>•Setting academic standards</li> </ul>	<p><b>First-Generation African American Males</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectation and Expectancy</li> <li>•Vision of Future Success</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•College upperclassmen</li> <li>•Challenge with college process</li> <li>•Family assistance</li> <li>•Informational resources</li> <li>•Peer tutoring</li> <li>•Academic counseling</li> </ul>	<p><b>Academic Support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Guidance</li> <li>•Resources</li> </ul>