REPRESENTATION AS MOTIVATION: PERSPECTIVES OF FIRST-GENERATION AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS ON INSTRUCTORS OF SHARED IDENTITY

A Dissertation By

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Abstract:
The research explored first-generation, African American male college student interactions with African American male instructors in higher education. The purpose of studying shared identity student-instructor interaction was to identify and understand themes in the student experiences and gain insight into approaches beneficial to the student demographic. The paper used theories relative to race, gender, and sense of belonging to view and understand student experiences and factors impacting students' academic success. The study aimed to address the problem of African American male students’ isolation and academic withdrawal due to a lack of shared identity support from the classroom leader, and the related effects on persistence and completion. This paper included perspectives of students from the community college and university level.

The study findings described participant efforts in classes led by African American male instructors, the magnitude of sense of belonging from African American male instructor interaction, as well as the instructors’ efforts in motivating participants in the study to reach their goals. This paper built upon the work of previous research on race, gender, and sense of belonging in higher education. This study provided seminal information beneficial to educational policy, programs, theory, and practices used to support the study demographic.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The lack of representation as a form of inspiration for African American males can affect their academic success and limit their abilities, options, and access to lucrative professional platforms (Harris et al., 2011). Cultural support and healthy student-teacher interaction with faculty sharing students’ identities can impact persistence beyond the 1st year of college for African American male college students (Sanon-Jules, 2006). Instructors with the ability to respond culturally to students they identify with may result in empathetic and active learning moments (Rouland et al., 2014).

The California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO) shared only 5.9% of California community college (CCC) students identify as African American and over 50% identify as students of color (CCCO, 2018). African American students report a 75% public high school graduation rate, and a 41% graduation rate over a 6-year period at 4-year public institutions (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). In addition, gender-specific quantitative research revealed low enrollment rates for African American men in college compared to African American women (NCES, 2008). These data can inspire educators to investigate the factors deterring the African American male students from higher learning success. Exploring the successful or limiting effects of representation for the African American male college student could reveal helpful results (Harris et al., 2011).

Background of the Problem

This section provides the background, significance, and issues relative to representation, learning systems, and the support needs of first-generation African American male college students (Trotman & Moss-Bouldin, 2014).

African American Representation

Shared identification of African Americans in education may have been historically popular in athletic departments. However, some students who secured role models such as athletic coaches at the high school level lack similar support and academic modeling in the college classroom (Benjamin,
Benjamin (1997) indicated the causes of limited academic success among African American male students asserting, “Our educational systems have denied young Blacks access to higher education in all disciplines through inadequate guidance and lack of encouragement at critical precollege stages” (p. 93). Considering the low academic success rates of African American men in college, cultivating shared identity interaction between these students and academic instructors in addition to athletic instruction could be of great benefit.

African Americans were historically subjected to segregation, limiting their ability to access adequate education (Medley, 2012). The long-term consequence of this limitation resulted in fewer opportunities for African Americans to become college professors (Wallace & Brand, 2012). On May 17, 1954, the Brown v. Board of Education ruling challenged limitations in education in Topeka, Kansas and other locations (Tilman, 2004). Over 250 African American leaders issued statements in support of desegregation of Mississippi public schools in September of 1954, the same year of the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court ruling (Tilman, 2004). Prior to 1954, over 80,000 African Americans educators taught more than 1.5 million African American students; however, the Brown v. Board of Education ruling changed funding and teaching policies that negatively impacted job security. Funding to separate yet equal African American schools decreased while teaching qualifications in predominantly White schools increased thus disqualifying African American educators from employment (Tilman, 2004). Competing with White counterparts was a difficult task after desegregation.

Between 1945 and 1965, over 35,000 African American educators in the southern states were fired. From 1983 and 1989 the new teaching certification requirements resulted in the disqualification of over 20,000 African American public-school educators (Ethridge, 1979; Hudson & Homes, 1994; Tilman, 2004). Updated hiring qualifications required experience teaching at similar institutions and specific education certification preferences resulted in the disqualification of many African American Educators. In 2001, more than half of students receiving public education did not interact with or receive academic development from educators of their same race (Ethridge, 1979; Hudson & Homes,
This fact includes the small population of African American male educators and male students at that time.

**African American Male Representation**

Although many educators were displaced due to defunded African American schools and desegregation rulings, other schools continued to integrate African American educators by offering roles in athletic-academic leadership (Medley, 2012). The depiction of racial representation by leaders of color in education came in the form of athletic coaching contributions to male athletic programs rather than academic program involvement (Barker & Avery, 2012). African American male representation has been higher in athletic settings than academic higher learning settings. African American leaders in sports have been instrumental in motivating young men to complete classes and take on diverse career paths by incentivizing sports. This was accomplished as instructors helped African American male students apply lessons learned in sports to academic and professional settings (D’Lima et al., 2014). However, representation is also needed in classes for students who are not interested in sports as an incentive for success.

Inspiration for African American men in college often occur when they see themselves in older peers who hold titles of authority, especially when their likeness is represented in roles of classroom leadership (Harris et al., 2011). Pairing the demeanor and familiar feel of a passionate athletic coach or mentor with the characteristics of a patient and academically knowledgeable leader can support the problem of the male absence in the classroom. Applying these supportive and familiar methods to the classroom could provide a balanced approach toward increasing the success of first-generation African American males (Rabitoy et al., 2015).

**Corporate and Collegiate Representation Gaps**

Corporations consider a mix of racial representations in their marketing and design processes to create and promote a product fitting the lifestyle of the intended audience (Harrison et al., 2017). Substantial thought on cultural and racial imagery takes place to represent consumer populations (Christensen, 2011). In a study on limitations of multicultural identity in advertisement by Harrison et
al. (2017), a participant pointed out the submissive and often oversexualized nature of advertisements involving people of color. The participant asserted, “I don’t really see many ads like as far as education or somethin’ like that, where you don’t have to be seductive” (Harrison et al., 2017, p. 10). At the time of this study, the underrepresentation of the African American population in publications such as school websites, bus ads, or brochures to high schools potentially sent a message of exclusion.

Students make common connections to the campus, instructor, and their content when they are validated and represented (Milner, 2016). Students find the learning process to be forced and difficult to succeed in settings where they feel they do not belong (Newman et al., 2015). Exploring the experiences of students can offer insight to tackling the lack of sense of belonging, validation, and representation.

Outside of widely publicized examples such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Barack Obama, there are few current, popular, and positive academic representations for African American male students (Johnson, 2015). In contrast, a study by Hurtado et al. (2015) described the factors involving academic hardships of White male college students. The study indicated how the academic images of this group were maintained to provide positive information platforms perpetuating traditional images of success. According to Thompson and Hickey (2014), symbolic interactionism argued depending on the way a person is nurtured, raised, and socialized, they may interact with certain concepts in ways that differ from those who were nurtured from a different perspective and environment. These symbols include the positive representation of men in a given cultural context. This base of symbolic interactionism can be applied to the idea that individuals interact with the concept or symbol of the White or Black people group based on the information they were exposed to, programmed to accept, and nurtured to believe (Thompson & Hickey, 2014). Based on this perspective, if an African American man connects himself to images of criminal behavior, athleticism, and musical talent, his identity and magnitude of success may become limited to that exposure. Fragments of this theory connect to the experiences of the African American man in a study by Harris et al. (2011). The
symbol of a lady’s-man or consumer of flashy items was often congratulated, expected, and accepted as the norm among peers of shared identity. The authors labeled these characteristics as cool posing, which often contains values limiting student success and cause multiple distractions from academic obligation (Harris, 2011).

**Problem Statement**

This study addressed the problem of African American male students’ isolation and academic withdrawal due to a lack of shared identity support from the classroom leader, and the related effects on persistence and completion (Griggs & Dunn, 1996; Whitley, 2018). Campus programs targeting gender and race have addressed the issues of men in college; yet, provide limited perspectives of African American male instructor classroom efforts (Black, 2018; Obiakor & Gordon, 2003). The lack of African American male student-teacher contact can impact the success of the student (Trotman & Moss-Bouldin, 2014). According to Gooden (2012), a lack of African American male representation sends a covert message validating the lack of supportive recognition of student worth, efforts, and contributions and negatively affecting classroom performance and societal outcomes. Norms, activities, and mannerisms that are detrimental to the success of this population demand our concern (Harris et al., 2011). The problem this study addressed is the isolation and academic withdrawal of African American male students related to the lack of support from African American male classroom leaders (Griggs & Dunn, 1996; Whitley, 2018).

**Purpose Statement**

This study explored African American male college students’ experiences with professors of shared racial and gender identity. The purpose of the study was to explore and investigate the interactions of African American male students with faculty members of the same race and gender, to identify and understand themes in the student experiences and gain insight into student–teacher interaction methods that are beneficial to the student demographic. The crucial focus on student–teacher interaction can provide current information to a traditional teaching system serving African American male college students (Sanon-Jules, 2006). This study sought to determine the impact of
the experience of student-instructor dynamics by the matching of race and gender identity possibly causing a successful shift in future data.

**Research Questions**

The lack of motivating representation for the African American male first-generation college student drove the purpose of this study. To accomplish this purpose and gain the perspectives of this student population, three research questions served as guides in acquiring participants' lived experience in the classroom:

1. How do first-generation African American male community college students describe their experience and efforts in class with African American male instructors?
2. How do first-generation African American male community college students describe their sense of belonging in classes taught by African American male instructors?
3. How do first-generation African American male community college students describe African American male instructors’ efforts in motivating them to pass their courses, pursue educational goals, or complete their academic programs?

**Significance of the Study**

This study contributed a new layer of understanding of classroom matters relative to first-generation African American college men and factors that affect their success. African American men in higher learning settings have observed students of other racial categories gravitate to professors with similar characteristics for motivation, but they could not always do the same for themselves (Walker, 2014). Male-centered programs are in place at the college and university level to provide students with transitioning tools and shared identity role models. Understanding how supportive agents and role-modeling are continued in the classroom may result in improved success rates for African American male college students.

This research is a significant addition to educational leadership as the findings add to an intellectual conversation that few educational leaders and researchers have explored. The study findings may impact policy, procedures, and practice to produce actionable results. This research may help cultivate a learning process for African American college men stemming from the classroom and extending outward into professional settings (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014).
This study may benefit classroom practitioners by providing methods sensitive to the factors that discourage this demographic. This study provided recommendation and solutions for poor success rates that add to stereotypes, labels, and common deficit narratives (Black, 2018; Crenshaw, 2011; Harper, 2012). The study sought to provide awareness and understanding of (a) the norms hindering African American male college students’ success, and (b) the interactive social triggers that inspire these students. This study supported institutional leadership by providing authenticated findings on sense of belonging and faculty diversity. This study may benefit policy makers, administrators, faculty, and staff with a wealth of rigorous and detailed knowledge that will inform their efforts to support the success of African American male students. Key stakeholders such as professional development liaisons, board members, vice presidents of instruction, prospective instructors, parents, and taxpayers may also find the study results useful in understanding the college experiences of participants.

**Scope of the Study**

This section provides the scope of the study in demographics, sample, setting, study assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of the study. The study was conducted at two institutions in Southern California, one community college and one university, to acquire a well-rounded perspective. Participants were African American men who (a) identified as first-generation college students, (b) had completed at least one course at the community college level, and (c) had been enrolled in at least one course with a full-time or part-time African American male instructor.

**Assumptions of the Study**

Participants received a concise yet thorough reminder of background information about the problem. I assumed they would understand the purpose and significance of the study prior to answering interview questions. I also assumed this introduction would motivate the truthfulness of their forthcoming responses and recollections.

Additional assumptions of the study centered on the positive or negative student interactions with African American male instructors. Participants may interact with the same instructor in different
ways depending on factors highlighted in the theory of readiness, challenge, and support (Sanford, 1966). The theory aims for an equilibrium of challenge and support by arguing that true growth is unattainable without this balance. For example, some participants may not appreciate instructors who constantly challenge them or call on them to participate in class solely because they have something in common such as race. In contrast, when professors shift to extreme support in the effort to avoid harsh treatment, they may ignore the moments that challenge the student to grow and ultimately cause more harm than intended (Sanford, 1966). A “tough love” or athletic coach approach by the male instructor may be an over challenging style that is received negatively by the student. I was aware of the theory supporting the balance of challenge and support. I assumed a student’s perceptions about the beneficial presence of an African American male instructor. Participant experiences depended on the personalities of both parties and the instructor’s teaching style.

**Study Delimitations**

I chose to delimit my study to community college students in Southern California because it was the location of my educational practice. Completing the research in this location allowed me to make an immediate impact in my profession as an African American male instructor. The study sample included only students who self-identified as African American men on their enrollment documents. This study did not include African American female students and African American female faculty but did not purposely ignore female instructors’ efforts and accomplishments in supporting African American male students. I recognize the important efforts and sacrifices made by female instructors to further develop the African American male college student population. This critical delimitation was made to pay attention to the level of support provided by African American male instructors related to sense of belonging and shared identity relationships that can support male students who may not perform as well as their female counterparts. In addition, rather than interviewing staff or faculty, the study investigated instructor-student interactions from the memorable experiences of students. Faculty are less likely to remember detailed experiences with a particular student, considering normal student–teacher classroom ratios.
Study Limitations

Limitations of a study are usually beyond the control of the researcher and limits generalizability (Creswell, 2012). A major limitation of the study was access to in-person interviews and focus groups. The study relied on virtual interactions on a web-based platform. Another limitation of the study was the lack of access to student academic records. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, the trustworthiness of participants’ reporting on their academic status and experiences were considered as truthful statements. Although semistructured interviews enable comfortable responses that mimic natural conversation, the nature of this approach may pressure participants and cause them not to elaborate on topics that trigger negative memories (Creswell, 2014). The magnitude of detail in participants’ responses may be affected if questions make them feel uncomfortable. This factor limiting the research was monitored and avoided to maintain the quality of data. In addition, this study was limited in focusing only on the perspectives of students and not faculty, and results depended on the trustworthiness of the participant view. Finally, considering the setting location, sample selection criteria, and small sample size, the scope of the study was limited to the experience of a few individuals. As a result, the findings may be transferrable but are not generalizable to all African American male students.

Definitions of Key Terms

The following definitions apply to terms used throughout this research study:

**African American Male Students.** Students who self-identify as Black, or possess roots, ancestry, physicality, or biology of African descent will be considered African American. Students who self-identify as men will be termed male (Harper & Nichols, 2008).

**College-to-Career.** The term college-to-career refers to any successful college process guaranteeing post academic employment placement for students (Frett, 2018).

**First-Generation College Students.** Students with parents who did not complete a college level degree are termed first-generation students (Rubel, 2017).
**Full-Time College Students.** Students who are enrolled in an institution of higher learning taking more than 12 units or the minimum course load.

**Instructor Support.** For the purposes of this study, instructor support will signify the understanding and empathy instructors display in and out of the classroom on matters impacting students’ performance in and out of the classroom (Warren, 2015).

**Part-Time College Students.** Students who are enrolled in fewer than 12 units at a college are considered to be part-time.

**Representation.** In this study, representation refers to the presence of positive role models who hold positions of authority and perspectives of racial, gender, socioeconomic, familial, geographic, or generational identities (Griggs & Dunn, 1996).

**Sense of Belonging.** Sense of belonging is the feeling students have when campus settings, resources, and agents welcome their presence, input, and value in a positive and inclusive manner (Newman et al., 2015).

**Shared Identities.** When two or more individuals possess surface-level identity traits causing the assumption of shared realities mutually confirmed or not, they may be said to hold shared identities (Milner, 2016).

**Traditional Students.** Traditional students were the ideal student group in mind when early educational institution policies and processes were developed.

**Transfer Students.** Students who have completed courses at the community college level making them eligible to matriculate and continue their path at the university level are transfer students.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

The information in this chapter provided details of the educational context of African American male college student interaction with instructors. I presented the background of the problem under study and described the problem, purpose, significance, scope of the study, and definitions of key terms. Chapter 2 provides a thorough review of relevant literature intersecting with the topic, research
questions, and historical and theoretical foundations. Chapter 3 presents the study methodology, research design, and research methods, and data analysis details, measures to ensure trustworthiness, and the role of the researcher. Chapter 4 will present the study findings and data provided by participants. Chapter 5 will contain interpretations, a discussion of conclusions, and implications and recommendations for education policy and practice.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Through this research, I sought to determine whether culturally shared identification and representation play imperative roles in the success of African American, male, first-generation community college students. Underrepresentation and the lack of supportive cultural understanding are factors affecting sense of belonging and achievements in classrooms (Hurtado et al., 2015). Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley’s vision for successful achievement demands a high priority be placed on support for underrepresented groups with the goal of reducing achievement gaps by “40% within 5 years and fully closing those achievement gaps within 10 years” (CCC Black and African American Advisory Panel, 2020, p. 11).

First-generation students, low-income students, and African American, Latino, and Native American students are underrepresented in higher education (Means & Pyne, 2016). Underrepresented groups are reminded of their differences and spend more time than represented students thinking about their race in relation to the higher education setting (Hurtado et al., 2015). A quantitative study at a predominantly White institution (PWI) found 59% of African Americans very often thought about how their race and background were portrayed, while only 19.1% of White students very often thought about factors impacting their race (Hurtado et al., 2015). These findings implied 80.9% of White students in similar settings may not think much about how their race is perceived by other races. From a critical perspective, it would be interesting to know how students thought about the cultures, values, and beliefs attached to their race and how those aspects of their identities informed their decisions in college.

Researchers have been urged to consider focusing on cultural empathy, as well as interactive and equitable teaching styles of instructors representing the African American male student demographic (Common, 2014; Gary, 2015). Researchers in the field have recommended the study topic of identity between faculty and students suggesting positive behavioral and motivational outcomes for African American students (Bensimon, 2007; Chapman-Hilliard et al., 2016; Graham &
Substantial effort went into the last decade providing researchers such as Bensimon (2007) the tools to measure equity and support. At the time of this study, researchers had disproved an earlier popular statement, proclaiming “institutions of higher education do not produce annual reports on measures of equity, nor do they have equity-oriented benchmarks” (Bensimon, 2007, p. 455). Graham and Nevarez (2017) explained how equity-oriented benchmarks in education involve an empathetic approach. More educators are embracing their accountability for equity, empathy, and culturally competent programming. Assessments of the way services are provided to students, evaluations of sensitivity to ethnic relations, and transformative leadership are the cause of successful strides (Graham & Nevarez, 2017; Harris & Bensimon, 2007). Shifting focus to representation factors exploring interaction with African American college men has been a trending suggestion (Common, 2014; Gary, 2015). The information on the shared identity instructor-student interaction could offer noteworthy results for African American male students.

Historically, the typical response to the struggles of African American students displayed a lack of systematic responsibility (Davis et al., 2015). Harris and Bensimon (2007) have claimed institutions would decrease their responsibility for students experiencing evident race-based disparities and attribute the outcomes to the student. The placement of instructors in classrooms who inspire students to ask for academic assistance can be a solution to underperforming students (Bensimon, 2007). This study seeks to identify and understand equitably effective contributions to the academic success of men who identify as African American, first-generation community college students. This study will seek equitable solutions by exploring the perspectives of students who have interacted with faculty with whom they identify racially and ethnically.

This chapter introduces historical understandings, theoretical foundations, a conceptual framework, and a review of relevant literature. Topics addressed include learning needs and styles of first-generation African American college students. Supportive research on masculinity on campus, the toxic cultural barriers hindering the success of African American men, and the latest findings on
cultural competency, representation, effects of negative labeling, and student-instructor interaction are included in the review of the literature.

**Historical and Theoretical Foundations**

**Historical Foundation**

Education and information gave African Americans the confidence needed to navigate the 16th through 19th centuries (Wallace & Brand, 2012). However, in many areas, deadly consequences deterred many African Americans from educating themselves in the 1600s through 1800s (Beachum, 2010). As slaves were freed in the North, African Americans traveled from southern states with the intention of being educated despite the low-economic status and lifestyles compared to equally skilled members of other races (Span, 2010). Threats of basic human rights and the lives of free slaves occurred during a time when the dominant race segregated settings of learning and places of education (Beachum, 2010). Jim Crow laws supported the upward mobility of European Americans, and placed limitations on the African American male family leadership role (Karpinski, 2010). Buras (2009) illustrated how many southern schools built for White students were developed to socialize future leaders, while African American schools were poorly developed and systematically designed to lack the basic elements of sustainability.

**Early Stages of Progress**

Early innovative efforts in education helped to produce a working-class society while excluding the African American citizen. The Morrill Act of 1862 supported Americans with the intention to create a system of colleges and universities geared toward agriculture, science, mechanical arts, and engineering but the system was not inclusive (Bailey, 2012). The lack of support of all citizens was defined by the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 with a ruling of separate but equal treatment, and the result was drastic segregation and limitations for African Americans (Medley, 2012). Schools became separate, yet unequal in terms of quality. Segregated but prestigious schools such as the University of Maryland turned away students of color who were interested in studying law in the early 1920s. A student, named Thurgood Marshall, received a letter from the university stating
how the law school did not accept people of color. As a second choice, Marshall attended Howard University, an institute historically designated for African Americans. Marshall used the denial letter from Maryland to file a lawsuit to fight for equal access to education for African American men (Williams, 1998).

Attorneys who advocated for integration could not overrule the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, but used the ruling to create the momentum needed to demand equal and better schooling for African Americans or force integration (Heise, 2005). School officials were eventually convinced creating separate schools for African Americans with quality equal to White institutions would be too expensive (Medley, 2012). Those efforts would include creating the same exact schools twice. Integration unwillingly became the most feasible option. An attorney named Houston won a Supreme Court decision in 1938 granting admission to the University of Missouri Law School for Lloyd Gaines, an African American man who was denied based on race (Higginbotham, 1989). On May 17, 1954, the outcome of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case ruled the ending of segregation, ushering in integration (Medley, 2012). Critics have viewed the results as unsuccessful considering the displacement of over 35,000 previously employed African American educators (Tilman, 2004). African American schools received less funding causing layoff of African American Employees. However, the efforts of *Brown v. Board of Education* and other desegregation movements succeeded in providing a platform impacting the way the government and courts dealt with educational matters for minorities (Heise, 2005).

**A Turning Point in History**

The Brown ruling marked the exodus of the policies and regulations set by the segregation of Plessy and caused an influential transition in history for African American students (Carson, 2004). The point of transition happened when school officials were pressured to decide whether to spend federal or state funds to create all-African American schools or integrate to share academic resources with some African Americans. Despite the success of *Brown v. Board of Education*, “most White Americans were unwilling to risk their own racial privileges to bring about racial equality” (Carson,
It is imperative to state this study does not imply that education moves to a modern form of segregation but advocates for more educators who can help motivate and integrate students who enter an unfamiliar system that often challenge their sense of belonging.

During the battle against the legalized practice of segregation known as Jim Crow Laws, African American students continued to receive fewer academic opportunities and the aftermath of such segregation continued to impact these students (Carson, 2004). Modern academic leaders who praise traditional systems may unintentionally ignore nontraditional students (Bailey, 2012; Brookhart, 2009). The topic of inequality in education included a new focus. Terms of the past such as segregation and integration have changed, and equity and diversity are the current foci. Brookhart (2009) studied the learning style diversity of millennial students to understand their preferences. According to Brookhart (2009), the characteristics of the traditional student have changed drastically as diversity efforts became the norm. However, a system once created to support a traditional student group has stayed the same. Brookhart’s (2009) findings on this topic urge new researchers to explore efforts supporting nontraditional students including those who identify as African American men. The following review of related literature, including the subsequent research supports the integration of educators qualified to serve an underrepresented demographic.

Theoretical Foundation

The following theoretical frameworks provide a lens through which topics on race, representation, and validation for African American males can be investigated to connect relationships between norms and concepts.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework developed to support counter arguments in race relations in law (Crenshaw, 2011). CRT emerged from the aftermath of the civil rights movement, issues surrounding race-neutrality, liberal racial reform, and critical legal studies in the mid-1980s (Crenshaw, 2011). The theory offers a critical analysis of race and racism from a legal point of view.
Arguments of CRT. Quigley and Mitchell (2018) found there were negative effects on the self-esteem of students due to urban stressors. Critical race theorists have argued the discomforts and stressors stem from a system of White supremacy reserves resources and opportunities for a chosen few (Davis et al., 2015). The theory contrasts the concept of color blindness and choosing not to acknowledge race in matters that favor one group and discredits another. Becoming numb to a form of harm or avoiding race and the feelings people attach to the concept can cause more systematic harm than help. Davis et al. (2015) explained how a color-blinded system makes detecting and measuring racism very difficult. The neutralizing impact of color blindness and the false sense of equality provides a home for covert racism in systems like education (Davis et al., 2015). Notable critical race scholars such as Pollack and Zirkel (2013) provided key narratives of privilege in their research. They shared the common critiques countering the promotion of equity. The research of Pollack and Zirkel contrasts external views relative to color blindness and counter arguments of CRT arguing it is a fair to ignore race or equity measures geared toward the success of African Americans. CRT argues ignoring the impacts of race will ignore the intentional displacement of the starting line for disadvantaged people groups in the race to success. The application of CRT helped view the causes of underperforming student populations justifying the need of equity support, but others felt using this lens would ignore the needs of students who traditionally meet learning standards (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013). The “what about us” or “all lives matter” counter-perspective to CRT argues equity amendments to a system working well for the majority should not be made for the minority. Supporters of this belief views CRT as a tool to support students who are commonly overlooked and neglect those who are commonly observed (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013).

CRT and the Classroom. Various experts on CRT place racism at the core of the theory and communicate the concept as a norm deeply rooted in society’s intentions and ingrained as a permanent component in U.S. culture (Davis et al., 2015). Prior studies have applied this theory to the classroom and the general context of student services. For example, Davis et al. (2015) brought CRT into education to formulate inquiry on race, racism, and how both may impact poor outcomes for
African American men. The research suggested external programming as means to serving this population beyond the classroom. Instructors who share the same gender as certain students may be able to provide details about careers and roles that are socially, culturally, and gender specific. In the efforts of making the curriculum matter to careers, the research discussed the importance of single-gender educational interventions as a successful template model for African American males (Davis et al., 2015). The focus was considered a model of best practice for developing (a) positive racial identity academically and professionally, (b) psychological health, and (c) the factor Davis et al. (2015) coined as “critical race consciousness” (p. 76). Research intersecting CRT has suggested single-gender interventions as an equitable tool and urged future research to discover ways to support African American men in the classroom. The shared identity representation can support the student equitably by using culturally competent methods unfamiliar to other instructors.

The lens of CRT can be used to confront the stigmas, stereotypes, and expectations connected to racial prejudgments carried out in classrooms. Rather than ignoring racial concepts in the classroom setting, Quigley and Mitchell (2018) agreed supportive leadership should prioritize a “color-conscious educational leadership paradigm supported by inclusive standards” (p. 336). Racial unconsciousness perpetuates racism on a latent level, according to Gooden (2012), “A school that is mostly populated by Black and Latino Americans is expected to fail. If this is not the case, then why is there no outrage when we see so many urban schools failing?” (p. 72). The statement agrees there is no outrage from a population who wields the majority of the nation’s wealth because African American scholarly failure is expected. Critical race theorists ask what the classroom setting would look like today if an African American instructor was the decision maker (Brooks, 1994). Classroom structures with a foundation of White privilege should be examined through a CRT lens to identify the impacts on marginalized students (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT argues overt racism is not the main problem, but what should be investigated lies beneath the obvious surface and is in the values and beliefs governed by actions of those in power (Crenshaw, 2011).
Validation Theory

This section will provide the background of validation theory developed by Rendón (1994) and the presence of validation in the classroom pointing to support, faculty validation, and engagement as strong predictors of student success (Barnett, 2011). Aiding established and developing institutions in creating success systems and methods for nontraditional students led to the theory of validation. The purpose of this theory was to justify arguing marginalized students require reinforced encouragement, interaction, and involvement to foster development and confirm their abilities to succeed (Rendón, 1994).

Educational leadership author Tomlinson (2004) asserted invalidating a student can defeat their motivation to perform and learn well. In contrast, validation invites a student to bring their authentic selves to the classroom (Tomlinson, 2004). Many men of color in higher education struggle with issues including low self-esteem and imposter syndrome but valuing the unique characteristics of the student is a form of validation enabling self-esteem development (Tomlinson, 2004).

Considering the traditional void between students and powerful decision makers, the application of student validation can provide an approachable interaction and a shared power dynamic for the traditionally nonprivileged student (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Rendón, 1994). Faculty who operate from this theory can especially empower first-generation college students, African American students, and Latino students, providing students with comfort and confidence to operate more efficiently (Rendón, 1994). Contrasting with traditional characteristics of higher education settings, validation can help nontraditional students experience a sense of belonging, acknowledgement, and respect as productive students (Rendón, 1994).

Validation Theory and the Classroom. Validation is an imperative factor in the study of African American male student success (Walker, 2014). The lack of validation of African American men is a norm in the culture of higher learning and should be examined through the lenses of validation and CRT (Davis, 2018; Reed, 2018). In the context of the classroom, teachers often
validate and welcome the behavior, input, and learning methods relative to the norms of dominant White cultures (Warren, 2015).

Students who make the role of the instructor easier by meeting instructor expectations may be favored; however, Milner (2016) found influential teachers are those who can connect with the student by understanding that student success is correlated to background. This holds true for African American men. The study presented how music or other multisensory stimulants can be involved in the effective learning environment for African American students. Milner observed educators who identified as African American men successfully infusing student music preferences into the learning process and found African American “students felt validated; like they could relax a bit, while still working hard to build knowledge and learn the content that had been covered” (p. 428). Studies have found providing a validating culture can be achieved when community college instructors try to remember names and lived experiences of students (Milner, 2016). A validating culture also encourages campus life engagement and employs ways to make students feel they possess the abilities and innate tools to become successful in the course (Milner, 2016).

In addition to instructors’ intentional efforts to validate the student, researchers Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) have demonstrated simply raising and communicating expectations to students can have positive impacts on them. Rosenthal and Jacobson randomly selected students and informed them they were expected to increase their performance because of their results on a previous assessment. The student group who was aware of the expectation and believed they were competent outperformed their peers, because the group that did not receive the message of expectation did not have the instructor-generated motivation or validation to do better (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). The efforts of the successful students were validated and held to high expectations. When CRT intersects with validation theory, leaders can become sensitive to systems that covertly devalue African American males and respond immediately with actions that validate, motivate, and inspire success (Milner, 2016; Mitchell, 2018).
Review of the Scholarly Empirical Literature

The following literature includes previous and current research providing new knowledge to male representation, environmental norms, and student-instructor interaction. The section also is presented through the lens of the theoretical foundations featured in this study.

First-Generation Students of Color

College students who identify as first-generation African American men have some of the lowest college completion rates according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES; as cited in D’Lima et al., 2014). D’Lima et al. (2014) set out to focus on ethnic and gender differences in retention and graduation rates. In the beginning of the semester, the 1st year African American population required more external motivation to succeed academically (D’Lima et al., 2014). The 1st year African American students who succeeded did not demonstrate intrinsic motivation until the end of the semester (D’Lima et al., 2014). D’Lima et al. concluded instructors who provide a foundation of trust, care, and empathy can build the necessary confidence for the first-generation student population to reach academic goals. In addition, identifying factors that motivate the student can help them continue and further their education (D’Lima et al., 2014).

Educators must consider socioeconomic factors in working with first-generation college students from minority populations (Rubel, 2017). The characteristics of some low-income school environments depicts a history of violent activity, reduced-price or free meals, metal detector clearance, and heavy police activity (Rubel, 2017). Therefore, it is considered inequitable to hold these students to the same standards as high-achieving learners who hail from affluent less stressful backgrounds. Although instructors have the time and opportunity to work on their equity-directed practices through observation of their students’ neighborhoods, most instructors would not have this backing from administrators (Rubel, 2017). Therefore, instructors are caught between carrying out established policies or making special accommodations for first generation students who require more attention.
Student Motivation

Shih (2018) intended to identify the key to establishing motivation. The area of focus was teacher-student dialog, a type of communication inspired by Brazilian educator Freire (1970) and referenced in the works of Shih. Shih outlined “Implications for Teachers’ Teaching” (p. 232), which included the subpoints of practicing love, fostering humility, supporting hope-centered teaching, empowering humor, nourishing silence-based teaching, incentivizing critical thinking abilities of students, and truly believing students can achieve their wildest dreams of success. Research study focusing on race and gender related to extrinsic and intrinsic motivation agree there is a need to identify student motivators and pair them with pedagogies grounded in diversity and empathetic thoughtfulness (D'Lima et al., 2014). To meet student needs, Shih argued “one of the deepest teachings of Freire’s pedagogy is the dialectic between theory and practice, which involves the true dialogue between students and teachers” (p. 231). Shih stressed humility is a reciprocated value in the student-teacher dynamic, and thoroughly believed the factor of humility to be the center of teaching procedures and interactions.

Gender Factors and Student Success

While determining the characteristics of first-generation college students, other revelations occurred in the quantitative study by D’Lima et al. (2014). The study containing 591 participants found high-achieving students received more support, and these students tended to identify as female. Independent of race, characteristics of self-efficacy and resourcefulness were prevalent among the female participants (D’Lima et al., 2014). The study determined African American women were generally better prepared than men of the same socioeconomic status. African American men (a) reported lower success rates; (b) received fewer letters of recommendation, honorable mentions, or awards; and (c) and received fewer invitations to department meetings representing student perspectives on important matters (D’Lima et al., 2014). D’Lima et al. asserted women would achieve higher grade point averages than their counterparts, with Caucasians achieving better grade point averages than any other population of students. Caucasian American, or White students, and women
of all racial categories were generally more prepared for college. Additionally, their motivations to succeed remained intrinsic while the intrinsic motivation of men declined. The authors determined teaching style adjustments for minority men can be difficult (D’Lima et al., 2014). However, the study lacked any exploration of those difficulties and could have benefitted from including extrinsic motivators as a factor.

A study by Davis and Otto (2016) further examined the gender phenomena in higher education. Rooted in norms of masculinity, many men have associated feelings of embarrassment with asking for help, while their female counterparts take advantage of the gender norm by being receptive to assistance and showing vulnerability (Davis & Otto, 2016). In this quantitative study, the researchers set out to highlight the Black and White gender gap and show African American males encounter the most hardships. They found African American men had lower levels of peer support compared to African American women (Davis & Otto, 2016).

Understanding Gender in the Classroom

The cultural norms connected to men may cause hardships for minorities that are extremely detrimental, and the topic should be examined (Harris & Harper, 2008). Rather than ignoring a lack of communication and/or excessive absences of students, educators are urged to understand masculine norms by using practices that intrude (Wood et al., 2015). These efforts interrupt the norm of suffering in silence that is connected to masculine nature. Research by Wood et al. (2015) focused on self-worth and efficacy as integrative motivators for 1st year African American men at community colleges. Wood et al. found it was common for African American men in college to not communicate with their instructors. Rubel (2017) also found many first-generation African American male college students exercise a self-detrimental silence when facing academic uncertainty rather than employing inquisitive methods. This lack of communication supports the argument of taking the initiative with intrusive advising. It is said to be the answer to detrimental student silence caused by masculine norms (Wood et al., 2015). Wood et al. found only 36.9% of African American men spoke to faculty in their 1st year. Although the researchers shared thought-provoking data, this study could have been
strengthened by information highlighting why most men do not visit office hours or speak to their faculty.

**Gender Theory and the Classroom**

An additional theory applied to this study to view and understand the African American male student perspective is Kimmel's (2000) foundational theory on gender. It is included to view the nature of decisions made by men influenced by micro and macro societal definitions of gender masculinity norms. Kimmel’s four tenets of masculinity portrayed in Western culture include strength, courage, leadership, independence, and assertiveness (Kimmel, 1994). Kimmel’s (1994) belief that gender should be determined by the individual’s internal definition rather than a simple biological correlation provides insight to gender validation that students may receive from shared identity experiences. Kimmel (2000) argued unique cultural variations and suitable societal beliefs defined gender differences and rejected notions that determined and generalized gender on the bases of biological restrictions.

Kimmel (1994) did not believe gender could be classified by a few characteristics. Kimmel’s perspective contradicts the haunting contemporary idea that no matter the variations of race, gender, class, age or sexual orientation, the idea of being a man is historically defined as not being like a woman. Kimmel explained the contemporary concept of manhood has been ultimately defined by what a man does and how a man portrays himself, but not who a man is and how he feels inside. As this study called for exploration of the African American male experience with instructors of perceived shared gender, substantial data can connect masculinity norms to the classroom and the student-teacher dynamic. Targeting masculinity, researchers on gender theory stated, “Masculinity is what men think it is” (Kimmel & Wade, 2018, p. 237). Therefore, participants’ freedom to determine what they deem masculine in their experiences with shared identity instructors was recorded in this study.

Although Kimmel (2000) urged conscientious men to refuse theories and labels that portray them as testosterone-drunkards, Kimmel did not vilify masculinity within the topic of gender. Rather, Kimmel’s perspective communicated the existence of good masculinity where there is strength in
empathy, positivity, responsibility, and the existence of bad masculinity possessing toxicity, division, and disregard for women and children causing a weak societal foundation (Kimmel & Wade, 2018). In the “Journal of Women in Culture and Society,” Kimmel, and Wade (2018) proposed educators take approaches to men that provoke thoughts allowing them to fearlessly go against the status quo regarding gender and masculinity. This includes educational leaders and their interaction with African American male college students.

**Gender Theory and Masculinity**

Within the core of Kimmel’s (2000) gender perspective lies the belief that the fight for equality is won by dismantling dominant structures in society that prevent individuals from being their true selves. In the research by Harris (2015), substantial evidence was gathered during a study of Black male graduate students and the exploration of their genuine identity on a predominantly White student-serving campus. The self-monitoring, self-judgement, and pressures that cause students to suppress their true identity and portray the institution’s expectation of sexuality, gender, race, age, and affiliation became the fabric creating the term “gendered blazer of success” (Harris, 2015). Relative to Kimmel’s (1994) view that traditional gender norms value external portrayal over internal feelings of oneself, Harris’ (2015) study illustrated how this theoretical blazer was worn by “gay or questioning Black male college students who actively pretended to be someone they were not” (p. 85) to achieve success. There is a level of potential harm that young men can encounter due to the possible internal disagreement with society’s definition of masculinity and their own. Like the gay or questioning African American male students highlighted in Harris’ study, students in this study encountered moments forcing them to suppress who they really were to maintain a fragile level of the campus-wide respect and meet expectations of an African American male athlete. The appropriate term for this type of masking is the *letterman jacket of respect*. The coat represents the external portrayal of cool and calmness, serving as a distraction from the participant’s internal academic pressures, personal expectations, stereotypes, and challenges of an African American male college student.
Masculinity Challenges

Harris and Struve (2009) partnered to explore cultural identity and masculinity at the college level. According to their article entitled, “Gents, Jerks, and Jocks,” traditional meanings of masculinity can affect many men in college in a negative way (Harris & Struve, 2009). Harris and Struve described one study participant who struggled academically while trying to adjust to the role of nursing student. Due to the student’s academic career focus, “peers and his father harassed him regularly and questioned his sexual orientation” (Harris & Struve, 2009, p. 3). This brief qualitative narrative described how men became depressed and disengaged from school friends, and ultimately left the nursing program due to an identity struggle rooted in toxic masculinity pressures (Harris & Struve, 2009).

Their research suggested educators should be aware of the challenges encountered by first-generation students who identify as men as they attempt to make a healthy transition to unfamiliar college territory (Harris & Struve, 2009). The focus of the study was to discover ways educators can reshape classes to include lessons on masculinity with the aim of supporting positive and productive progress in areas of male gender identity development (Harris & Struve, 2009). Implications from the research included the discovery of ways educators can merge gender identity development with a given discipline.

Harris et al. (2011) continued research contributions by returning to the topic of masculinity and seeking to better support those who identify as college men. The researchers gathered qualitative data on a topic they entitled, “Cool Posing” on Campus. The voluntary study with 22 participants focused on masculinity and gender topics from the perspective of African American men at private institutions (Harris et al., 2011). The researchers were interested in evaluating the sociology of masculinity to understand the nature and nurture relationship of the phenomenon. The social constructivism perspective in the study helped the authors argue masculinity is a culture acquired through experience. It includes what we see and what we are taught by individuals who model certain behaviors (Harris et al., 2011). Aggressive behaviors such as physical responses to stress or conflict
and competitive activity are the learned behaviors contributing to masculine stereotypes (Harris et al., 2011).

The most significant finding of their research was the contrast of African American and Caucasian American male masculinity perspectives. While White men associated masculinity roles with leadership positions and multiple involvements in campus organizations, African American students connected masculinity to the pursuit of temporary sexual relationships, competitions dominated by men, and the collection and presentation of status materials (Harris et al., 2011). The findings revealed the priorities of African American men in college stemmed from their learned masculine identity and their nurtured definition of what it was to be masculine. Harris et al. (2011) demonstrated how these pressures can hinder academic success; however, further exploration of the specific norms associated with masculinity, socioeconomic status, and the value of education would have added value to the study.

**African American Men in Community Colleges**

Harris and Harper (2008) provided a significant examination of research regarding the topic of minority men at 2-year and 4-year institutions. Harris and Harper sought to understand male gender identity socialization and gender role conflict. The review highlighted the lack of information regarding gender and education issues involving faculty (Harris & Harper, 2008). In addition to gender gaps in enrollment and overall completion, the researchers identified a lack of focus given to identity development and the expression of norms among men compared to women at the community college (Harris & Harper, 2008). For example, a student engagement survey described in the study demonstrated how “Thirty-one percent of Black men were uncertain of their plans to return to college the next term” (Harris & Harper, 2008, p. 26). The authors associated the high percentage to the masculine nature of competition and the aim to avoid defeat. The author highlighted how men who fail to present power and confidence in school usually do not continue their academic journey (Harris & Harper, 2008). This research gave useful insight into matters of masculinity at 2-year colleges. Data on gender-related development challenges for men of color remain scarce, according to Harris and
Harper; however, ways men can feel powerful without dropping out of college could be investigated as well. Finally, considerable emphasis could have been placed on the reasons students in the study felt unsure about returning to college the next semester.

**Stereotypes and Labels of Men in Higher Education**

Harris and Harper (2008) explored multiple struggles of men at 2-year colleges including social identifiers and labels. In addition to African Americans, men from a lower socioeconomic status were stereotypically identified as, “The Working White Mechanic,” “The Struggling Asian Help Seeker,” “The Latino Homeboy,” and “The Closeted Black Gay Achiever” (Harris & Harper, 2008, pp. 30–32). These generalizations are labels that can help or hinder the success of the student.

Male gender norms impacted by toxic masculinity and paired with preexisting stigmas hindering student-teacher interaction can limit the academic success of those who identify as African American men first-generation college students (Marrs, 2016). The work of Woods et al. (2018) demonstrated oversimplified generalizations of African American men including being labeled poor time manager or lacking intelligence. However, educators should realize low success rates are not only a personal problem for a student, but a social issue (Scott, 2012). In neighborhoods prone to poverty, cultural norms such as valuing secure employment to acquire immediate resources may take priority over academic needs (Scott, 2012). From a critical perspective, failure to understand these immediate survival needs can fuel many stereotypes and possibly student isolation.

**Isolation as a Result of Stereotypes**

Isolation can be the result of identity issues and the lack of peer support for academic goals (D’Lima et al., 2014). When same-race instruction is not feasible, current and aspiring instructors can consider employing a CRT lens to explore how dominant society challenges impact the success of the African American men in college (Myers, 2012). Rubel (2017) also noted without proper support and targeted attention, male students are likely to retreat deeper into isolation.

For African American men in college, standing out can make one an outcast (Johnson, 2017). Johnson presented the experience of high-performing African American students at historically Black
colleges and universities (HBCUs). African American men felt singled out and not supported by their peers due to their academic achievements. Although male students in the study were nurtured by faculty and staff at HBCUs, they occasionally were pressured and would deal with negative stereotypes connected to being overachievers in their racial category (Johnson, 2017). Their research suggested a stronger support system could prevent students from employing “lone wolf” behavior as an isolation response.

**Representation as a Counter-Stereotype**

Certain factors in positive imagery can help students cope with prejudgments, stereotypes, and racism (Black, 2018). Supportive resources, campus organizations, and positive imagery are features that could be explored in the aim of countering negative stereotypes for students. For example, Black (2018), an African American faculty member and organizer of African American males’ support groups, explained how representation causes lasting effects on the observing student. Black (2018) spoke to students and learned how “positive images of the Huxtables [a Black family in a popular 1984-1992 TV series] were counter to the negative Black male stereotypes [of] the violent, ignorant, sexual predators who filled the news and affected the relationship we had with the world” (p. 11). Black was an educator and author of a periodical featuring support systems for African American men on campus and understood how his title as an African American male faculty member countered images and stereotypes. Explaining how negative labeling and misrepresentation can eclipse positive titles, Black (2018) asserted, “The experience of a Black male, as student, staff, or in my position as a faculty member, on a historically White campus is difficult because of racism” (p. 11). Considering the societal events of 2020, this statement from the author still holds true for many who identify as and are seen as African American men.

**Sense of Belonging**

Wood et al. (2015) discussed masculinity, self-efficacy, and the connection to sense of belonging. The authors suggested the need to develop programs for students that embed these factors into curriculum exercises, “to help ease their sociocultural and academic adjustment in
Building this transition may provide an atmosphere where the student feels they belong in the environment. The way individuals are developed culturally and socialized prior to college, paired with balancing multiple roles, will have effects on their ability to adapt to the demands and responsibilities of a collegiate authority system (Mwangi et al., 2017). When faculty fail to realize or address these role strains, the student may feel as if they do not belong (Wood et al., 2015).

Prior studies show beneficial outcomes for African American male students can be attributed to the interactive partnership between students and education leaders who provide a sense of belonging. In a qualitative study, Harper and Nichols (2008) conducted focus groups at three racially diverse private institutions. Thirty-nine African American males were interviewed to provide their experience specific to stereotypes, competition, and social distancing. The results were that same race engagement was normal; however, the engagement was limited to members of regular interaction in smaller subgroups. These subgroups felt a sense of competition and separation from other African American male groups who appeared to have different values, norms, and beliefs. This data counters the oversimplified presumption African American men are likely to integrate based on race alone. Harper and Nichols implied the holistic invitation of male-centered programs would be beneficial. The researchers posited:

> Collaborative programming between culture centers, student activities offices, Black fraternities, and other student organizations would likely attract students who may not feel entirely comfortable going to an event where there may not be other Black students with whom they share much in common. (Harper & Nichols, 2008, p. 13)

Centers that feature African American culture to promote sense of belonging would benefit by diversifying their spaces. Nichols (2008) shared how doing so will aid in welcoming, "students who identify and experience their Blackness in different ways" (p. 13).

**Images Confirming Belonging**

Johnson (2015) presented the way certain placement of supportive pictures and images has the potential to reimagine success and hope for male students. Johnson’s ethnography case study referred to images as paintings, posters, and visible art. The study had a firm grasp on the positioning
of relatable images and specifically, “understood school to be a place of belonging – not just a place of temporary residence” (Johnson, 2015, p. 911). In addition, the academic advances of African American male students can be supported with the placement of images, graphics, and paintings of individuals considered as “cool.” Johnson found participants in the study felt the positive images for African American males such as Obama or King were not images that inspired their generation in their at-risk state and condition (Johnson, 2015). The example of Obama seemed distant from the reality of participants. For example, when the researcher asked a student if images of Dr. King or President Obama represented him as a Black male, the participant replied, “Well, not all the way. But it could one day” (Johnson, 2015, p. 915). The response implied a degree of hope for African American young men transitioning to higher education. Researchers and educators should consider more efforts to communicate how students who look like this participant belong in college.

In an issue on the importance of shared identity, “About Campus,” a publication of College Student Educators International (ACPA) countered some of Johnson’s (2015) findings on high school students and relative images inspiring sense of belonging. Mature African American male students provided contrasting responses to the images of established African American men (Black, 2018). For example, college students shared their feelings toward people who did not admire President Obama. An African American male student at Colorado State University stated, “He was doing everything right; he was a devoted and loving husband, a father who was present in his children’s lives, and a graduate of the best universities in the country” (as cited in Black, 2018, p. 12).

Other college students connected their academic interests to Obama’s values of education (Black, 2018). Although a slight change in age can reveal a contrast in perspective, both sources asserted when students see more of themselves in leadership positions, a stronger guarantee of success is formulated (Black, 2018; Johnson, 2015). Both studies could have benefited from examining the placement of classroom educators who may mirror the background of the student population. Faculty who share their identities could potentially welcome high school students who
may not relate to images of successful men like Obama, and could bridge the gap between two social classes.

**Outcomes of Shared Identity**

Successful agents of shared identity in race, gender, and cultural support and understanding are issues affecting sense of belonging in classrooms today (Hurtado et al., 2015). Some of the most immediate faculty-content connectivity outcomes are attributed to shared identity and validity (Milner, 2016). When students find it difficult to connect in settings they do not excel in, it can affect sense of belonging (Newman et al., 2015). Students who identify with individuals can ease the connection process and prevent separation from the learning moment, creating successful outcomes (Bensimon, 2007).

Quantitative studies on classroom success rates of African American collegians with shared-identity professors describe a classroom “that promotes positive academic motivation behaviors and school performance among Black students” (Chapman-Hilliard et al., 2016, p. 48). Additional information on African American student success in classes taught by non-African American instructors described how African American students deal with finding where they fit while “simultaneously searching for ways to combat deficit narratives that may be present in the Historically White College or University setting” (Chapman-Hilliard et al., 2016, p. 56). Studies and perspectives state when students find it difficult to make connections to the lecturer, they may have difficulties making connections to the literature, thus, making the college experience difficult (Black, 2018; Walker, 2014).

**Cultural Competence**

Aiding African American first-generation college students includes recognizing how cultural norms impact gender factors, student engagement, and academic success (Woods et al., 2018). Additional research on the relationships of culture, race, and gender can further develop understanding of all three factors. In a study relevant to college culture and retention, Tinto (1993) explored some of the causes and preventions of student attrition. Tinto found total cultural
assimilation is not always necessary for graduation assurance. Rather, the most needed solution is for the student to connect with the campus culture by seeking and securing membership in at least one academic community (Tinto, 1993). Considering that students spend valuable time in the classroom, Tinto’s descriptions of a supportive community and cultivation of a supportive environment can also connect to the culture of students in the classroom.

Graham and Nevarez (2017) provided a starting point for advancing African American male success. The following platform aimed to empower African American men to take charge of their academic responsibilities included the combination of (a) social justice, (b) critical pedagogy, and (c) empowerment (Graham & Nevarez, 2017). The benefits of the transformative approach to the learning environment would help the student view themselves in the learning content to develop self-worth and self-efficacy, create a bridge between home and school so inspiration and learning is not lost in transition, and create change-agents that are prepared to challenge systemic injustice and inequalities (Graham & Nevarez, 2017). In addition to creating an environment where students empathize and respect cultural diversity, Graham and Nevarez (2017) explained how this form of transformative leadership can help educators, “identify [their] own biases and work to eliminate them in their own teachings” (p. 77).

Graham and Nevarez (2017) also highlighted a study on African American students conducted by Roderick (2003) in Chicago. Graham and Nevarez (2017) declared “male students are not necessarily lacking the skills to achieve well in school, but rather the self-identity and belief in their future relating to the school environment” (p. 75). The study highlighted the struggle of helping students realize they have the capacity to excel under rigorous academic circumstances. Graham and Nevarez suggested elements such as social justice, empowerment, and critical pedagogy can allow students to bridge home and school settings and see themselves in the learning experience. This approach was identified as “benefits of implementing a multicultural school culture” (Graham & Nevarez, 2017, p. 77).
Tuncel (2017) addressed the topics of cultural competence and student-teacher interaction with the aim of determining ways that future instructors could employ culturally responsive methods. Tuncel (2017) illustrated the need for teacher-student understanding. Taking an empathetic approach to differences in perspective while displaying patience and respect for culture was highlighted. In the article, “Improving the Cultural Responsiveness of Prospective Social Studies Teachers,” Tuncel suggested a culturally responsive classroom can solve current issues; however, searching for ways to maintain this environment may be difficult. Understanding the cultural impacts of a student’s academic performance can provide insight to educators who focus on closing learning gaps for them.

Classroom studies relative to culture have determined clear trends supporting guidelines for future studies. The researchers cited in this section found students and teachers serve as agents needed to change and maintain an atmosphere where cultural norms were exchanged. This equilibrium of understanding can create a harmonious and advantageous learning environment.

**Cultural Clash**

Cultural clash may occur when African culture, Latin culture, and mainstream cultural styles interact (Rouland et al., 2014). The cause of such clashing can be a lack of cultural understanding. The effects of cultural incompetence in the classroom can damage the learning process of the African American student (Rouland et al., 2014). Considering the racial representation of today’s learning atmosphere of African and Latin culture, a culturally inclusive classroom can include conversations about historic interactions representing both groups. For example, there is literature showing the positive outcome and integration of the African presence in Spanish culture (Lane-Poole, 1886). These conversations may motivate intellectual and mutual respect in the classroom causing cultural harmony for 1st year and 1st generation college learners (Harris & Harper, 2008). Shifting the classroom focus to creativity through cultural integration can promote a shared accountability structure between African American students and other cultures (Rouland et al., 2014).

In a study examining the connection between African American culture and classroom learning environment, 41 females and 33 males were observed (Rouland et al., 2014). The study compared
African American household norms, general societal norms, and mainstream U.S. households. African American homes of lower socioeconomic status did not cultivate a suitable study environment. Unlike campus locations that warrant quiet studying, most African American homes are very active during ideal study times, feature high levels of sensory stimulation, and a host of conversational and musical interruptions (Rouland et al., 2014). This study left out the perspective of African American students who found a way to thrive academically despite their nontraditional cultural learning atmospheres.

In regard to culture, Hall (2007) examined the incorporation of popular hip-hop music in the classroom in a mixed methods study consisting of faculty and students at an HBCU. Hall (2007) explained how educators can develop a “wizard behind the curtain” (p. 102) attitude when creating lessons attempting to include unfamiliar culture. A pretentious attempt to include student culture without researching the truly applicable norms can create more harm rather than harmonious understanding. The integration of the hip-hop music genre was included as an example in the study; however, any cultural integration will suffice if there is a thoughtful consideration of background research and understanding of the learning audience (Hall, 2007). The researcher essentially urged educators to be aware of the cultural prejudgments brought to class by instructors. Hall (2007) asserted, “I think the first thing that you have to do is be open and honest about your lack of understanding about the culture and about what you’re doing, that ‘Hey, I’m bringing this into class to serve you’” (p. 104). Instructors who incorporated this genre into their class were successful at communicating the historical and cultural relevance to the student and discipline while not compromising rigor of student development (Hall, 2007). Careful thought and meaningful research on the student population will give the instructor the confidence to prevent cultural clash.

**Classroom Struggles**

The fear of failing does not always motivate male African American students to earn an “A” letter grade (Abrams et al., 2017). A recent mixed methods study of 44 African American women from the mid-atlantic United States region with ages ranging from 18 to 91 allowed participants to give their
perspectives on topics and actions of African American men (Abrams et al., 2017). A younger female in a focus group felt men should work on their emotional communication and most women connected characteristics of manhood to being a leader and being able to take care of a family (Abrams et al., 2017). Other findings connected a sense of stubbornness to men who are strong-minded due to cultural habits attributed to the experience of repeated failure from trying hard (Abrams et al., 2017). Frustrations from failures may cause men to close themselves off and fail instead of seeking aid. Rather than trying, and risking the embarrassment from failing with effort, they save the time it takes to try while simultaneously validating the belief they are regularly and intentionally blocked from opportunities (Abrams et al., 2017). Trying to avoid embarrassment while being too strong-minded to change is a combination resulting in stagnation (Abrams et al., 2017). Another form of this mental state occurs when faculty intimidation diminishes the engagement of African American college men (Harper, 2014).

This state of belief relates to the perspectives of CRT and the stance that opportunities and systems are influenced by racial factors favoring one category over the other (Crenshaw, 2011). Other self-defeating factors stem from the prejudgments educators and leaders bring to the classroom. These expectations form stigmas and can impact student-teacher interaction, causing classroom struggles. For example, if African American male students are treated in a way that causes them to believe individuals in education will only view their contributions as products of cheating or stealing, this can discourage the student from genuinely trying hard to escape the prejudgment (Myers, 2012).

**Faculty Interaction and Validation**

A classroom leader can set a tone of acceptance (Fox, 2001). Fox interviewed students in class on topics regarding race. Data from the organized and controlled conversations about race and racism in the college classroom were selected and featured in a book and tool to help educators respond to heated topics while making all parties feel welcomed (Fox, 2001). A section focused on
the safety of the typically outnumbered African American male student. Fox (2001) encouraged to students to work with class members from different backgrounds to create an open-minded culture.

While aiming for validation and sense of belonging, Fox’s (2001) analysis of the interview data showed practitioners should exude characteristics of trustworthiness and reliability for students of color and encourage conversations about privilege. These characteristics and conversations can be accomplished by affirming human similarities in the classroom. Fox (2001) shared “All peoples of the world are a single human family—before they begin delving into the ugly realities of racism, economic power struggles, and the clash of cultural and religious values” (p. 111). The goal of validating the existence of various students and their perspectives on sensitive topics can be accomplished when the instructor is not afraid to lead those efforts (Fox, 2001). This class focus group provided perspectives that would encourage instructors of different races to actively make supportive efforts to validate all classroom differences.

Gender and Student-Faculty Interaction

Researchers Statham et al. (1991) chose a midwestern urban setting to administer surveys, conduct interviews, and perform observations with 167 faculty members and their students. The observation data acquired from this triangulation approach showed the amount of time spent on encouraging student participation. Significant differences between male and female faculty revealed female faculty made the strongest efforts to involve and promote students’ input, perspectives, and integration of personality (Statham et al., 1991). Most of the results acquired by the researchers tended to associate characteristics of care and understanding with women. Women instructors used circuitous and patient methods of teaching that were less penalizing and blunt than men (Statham et al., 1991). Although the findings were a result of detailed triangulation, the conclusions are specific to the tested population and may not be applicable to all male educators. The study provided a platform for future investigation of race, gender, and student-instructor interaction.
Male Faculty Validation and Interaction

Grasha (1996), a male faculty member known as a leader in validating and accommodating a traditionally ignored population, identified five teaching styles related to students’ styles of learning: (a) expert, (b) formal authority, (c) personal model, (d) facilitator, and (e) delegator. The common thread of value—the qualities that all the teaching delivery methods have in common—are (a) active listening, (b) reflection of feelings, (c) validation, and (d) letting students know they are members of a group (Grasha, 1996). The author illustrated mistakes often made in listening that may cause the African American male student to disengage. Certain faculty tend to internalize responses while students are speaking or interrupt the student for the sake of offering an immediate solution (Grasha, 1996). This lack of patience can send a message that a professor’s role warrants them to jump to a conclusion the student has yet to provide. Inactive listening, deflecting of feelings, and invalidation of the student perspective can perpetuate the student and faculty belief of misguided and devalued African American academic perspectives (Grasha, 1996). Reed (2018) also claimed this approach eases discomfort and can help educators focus on the emotional perspective connected to the identity of the student in addition to the content of the student message. Validating points of views by verbalizing feelings and needs benefit the African American male student (Grasha, 1996; Reed, 2018).

White Female Faculty Validation and Interaction

Warren’s (2013) study used culturally responsive teaching and empathy to examine ways to improve student-teacher interaction between White female educators and African American male college students. Warren mentioned a wealth of literature illustrating the ways culture and gender differences impact the academic setting, and how understanding the differences in framework will help instructors create a better learning setting. The utility of empathy framed the study and argued teachers with a learned understanding of historical racial and cultural experiences tend to empathize and interact more frequently with a historically underserved student population (Warren, 2013). Participants in this study were White female teachers who also fit the criteria of possessing the
empathetic characteristics found in Warren’s literature review, and past or current African American male students acquired using the snowball sampling technique. Although White male educators implement empathetic teaching methods and a historic knowledge of various ethnic norms in America, there is a masculine side within gender mentioned by Kimmel (2000) that ignores the characteristics popular within femininity. Counselors of their institutions were contacted to select students randomly to participate in three different focus groups. The discussions regarded teachers they felt negotiated the best and worst student–teacher interactions and relationships with African American men. Warren took the list of White female teachers with positive interactions and contacted them to conduct classroom observations and semistructured interviews. The results suggested, “empathy helps: a) facilitate teachers’ instructional flexibility and risk-taking; b) establish trusting student-teacher relationships; and c) support teacher’s ability to intervene proactively to ensure students meet high academic expectations” (Warren, 2013, p. 175).

**Resetting the Stage for Success**

Substantial data reflect low grade point averages and low rates in (a) enrollment, (b) engagement in leadership, and (c) degree attainment for African American college men (Harper, 2012). Studies highlighting positive working examples may provide solutions and tools for success. A qualitative study by Harper (2012) moved beyond over-used deficit methods of questioning students about what they lack and sought instead to reframe methods inspiring success (Harper, 2012). Rather than interviewing unsuccessful students, Harper focused on successful participants while considering factors such as aspirations, persistence, and support groups. Study findings demonstrated active engagement was the core influencer that resolved masculinity identity issues, increased personality judgement response in racially underrepresented professional settings, and enabled general academic success (Harper, 2012). Incorporating active engagement can reset a traditional stage where both student and faculty can perform productively.
**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study is supported by the history of African American men in education. This platform provides a solid foundation so each aspect of the study may be viewed from the perspective of CRT, validation theory, and gender theory. Dynamics involving power and race in society will intersect with factors of gender validation for men in the African American student population. The supporting theories illustrate how factors such as cultural wealth, racial and gender validation can bridge the gap between isolation and sense of belonging. The overarching framework will aid in clarifying the line between the student and the resources that provide upward mobility. Viewing the study through these concepts can aid in identification of transformational measures that can change current norms. The framework will be supported with an in-depth analysis using qualitative methods. The end result will provide insight into student needs that may increase successful academic outcomes. Figure 1 is an example of the conceptual framework that presents the concepts informing this study.

![Conceptual Framework Diagram](image)

**Figure 1. Conceptual framework diagram.**

**Chapter Summary**

The research reviewed set the stage for more work needed to investigate cultural empathy, validation, and representation as tools for the academic success of African American college men. Taking a traditional approach while ignoring obvious needs of students will continue to fail the nontraditional student population (Harris & Bensimon, 2007). Studies have demonstrated there is
much to investigate regarding representation in leadership and the struggling student. Rabitoy et al. (2015) found students who made connections with peer mentors of similar ethnicity were likely to be more successful than students who did not have encounters with individuals of the same ethnic category. The impact of similar ethnic representation in instructors could possibly affect large scale changes in success for underperforming African American men in college (Crenshaw, 2011). Efforts to replace discouragement, stigmas, and labels with patience, support, and a sense of belonging can be upheld from the perspective of validation theory (Rendón, 1994). The argument that gender is determined by the individual’s internal definition based on their experience rather than society’s biological assignment can explain the gender validation students may receive from their shared identity experience with faculty (Kimmel, 2000). The theoretical framework and review of research literature are foundational to the research process outlined in the next chapter. This examination of representation and magnitude of empathy can potentially lead to effective changes in the college success of African American men.
CHAPTER 3
METHOD OF INQUIRY

African American male college students continue to place the lowest in many academic achievement categories (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2009). Data from 1999–2009 report African American males having the lowest enrollment rates and the highest drop-out rates (NCES, 2009). These findings support the problem of low success rates of African American males and question the experience they have had in the classroom. Research has demonstrated how males enhanced their development when interactions with groups and mentors of same race and gender occurred (Gary, 2015). The low enrollment and high drop-out rates of African American men are ongoing trends (Gaither, 2015). The purpose of this study explored and investigated the interactions of African American male students with faculty members of the same race and gender. The study aimed to identify and understand themes in student experiences to gain insight into student–teacher interaction methods that were beneficial to the demographic.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is the approach to a study that employs listening skills, patience, and welcomes the response to open-ended questions to gather the experiences numbers cannot provide (Creswell, 2012). Denzin and Lincoln (2018) asserted, “a qualitative research project leads to a perpetual resistance against attempts to impose a single, umbrella-like paradigm over the entire project” (p. 18). This naturalistic style of gathering information allows the researcher to provide a trustworthy platform to receive narratives aimed to build a better understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2012).

This study explored African American male college student experiences and interactions with supportive faculty members of the same race and gender. In relation to student and faculty gender mentions in this study, I acknowledge and note the term man was used interchangeably with male by participants’ who self-identified as cisgender male. Although faculty members of the same race and gender as students may not guarantee positive or motivational outcomes, interaction was explored to
discover any value. Experiences that cause sense of belonging was explored to determine the impact on student learning. This study provided new methods supporting the isolated African American male college student (Hall, 2007). The focus on student–teacher interaction can help educators structure their methods to aid nontraditional learners such as African American college men (Sanon-Jules, 2006).

The study aim examined the shared identity motivators for African American men. Representation inspired the thought that success can be an attainable reality (Griggs & Dunn, 1996). The presence of successful role models can reduce isolation and withdrawal from the learning environment, thus, impacting retention and completion rates (Griggs & Dunn, 1996; Whitley, 2018). Aiming to create an isolation-free safe place shared identity support can increase retention rates and matriculation to universities for students of color, making the option of academic retreat less tempting (Griggs & Dunn, 1996; Whitley, 2018). To support prior claims by authors on this subject, Critical race theory (CRT), validation theory, and gender theory were used to guide the following research questions:

1. How do first-generation African American male community college students describe their experience and efforts in class with African American male instructors?

2. How do first-generation African American male community college students describe their sense of belonging in classes taught by African American male instructors?

3. How do first-generation African American male community college students describe African American male instructors’ efforts in motivating them to pass their courses, pursue educational goals, or complete their academic programs?

This chapter presents the methodology needed to gather lived experiences and provided the integration of philosophical foundations. This is followed by a description of the appropriate research design relative to the methodology implemented in this study. The description includes information regarding the setting, sample, and collection of data. This section provides procedural details, methods of data analysis, a discussion of the researcher’s role, and measures to ensure trustworthiness.
Philosophical Foundation

Characteristics of qualitative research include observations, interactions, personal experiences, case studies, introspection about lived moments, artifacts, and symbolic interpretations connected to culture and norms (Creswell, 2012). The foundation of qualitative research features a solid frame of supportive concepts, understandings, and terms. The foundation of pragmatism highlights the factors in the environment of the human experience rather than the remote assumptions given to a phenomenon (Ozmon, 2012). The elements of pragmatism support the qualitative approach as it is the “theoretical position that privileges practice and method over reflection and deliberative action” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 18). This foundation values what actually happens rather than what is planned to take place. The core of pragmatism aims to achieve desirable outcomes by prioritizing the human experience (Ozmon, 2012). Pragmatism takes an outcome that appears to be influenced solely by a macro set of systemic factors and considers the unique causes and effects of the micro-situation (Shields, 1998). This philosophy is known as “the philosophy of common sense, because actions are assessed in light of practical consequences” (Shields, 1998, p. 197). One example of applying this philosophy to education is looking beyond the guidelines designed for universal student success. Assignment expectations and rubrics in syllabi may be misunderstood on an individual level, considering cultural differences. A limitation of pragmatism is the conclusions are based on unique interactions that are difficult to generalize and apply to a large participant pool.

Strengths of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research can cover a wide contextual gathering of complex perspectives (Creswell, 2012). The aim of qualitative research is to gather unique and uncommon perspectives of a small group, possibly countering the assumptions made about a group based on generalized numeric data (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative research methods can ease tension for participants that may be caused by closed-ended questions warranting only yes-or-no replies (Creswell, 2014). Participants may want to give the researcher an accurate response and may feel limited by closed-ended questions about a
topic requiring a fully explained response. I provided a welcoming platform for explanations through qualitative research that exceeded superficial responses (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative methods tend to provide more depth and detail to the experience and construct a well-rounded understanding of the subject matter.

**Limitations of Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is limited by the inability to provide a generalized answer to a research question (Creswell, 2012). In addition to generalizability issues, a weakness in this qualitative study included the difficulties in narrowing down a specific cause to the large-scale problem of low success rates (Creswell, 2012). If participants are given a platform to explain their answers, the explanation can become so diluted and ambiguous that identifying a stance or theme may be difficult (Creswell, 2012). In addition, given the fluid nature of the researcher–participant interaction, the possibility of research bias is high and would require monitoring (Creswell, 2012). This characteristic of subjectivity can lead to issues in maintaining professionalism and trustworthiness. Finally, qualitative research cannot depend on instruments developed by other researchers and the study process can be lengthy due to the time-consuming procedures needed to answer research questions (Creswell, 2014).

**Qualitative Methodology in This Study**

The casual approach to interview conversations allowed the listener and speaker to predict and monitor the direction and trustworthy intentions of a given study (Creswell, 2014). The chances of participants being caught off guard by certain straightforward questions were minimal. The nature of an interview protocol provided dialogue allowing the participant to feel comfortable and heard. More direct survey questions could have triggered emotions, causing a psychologically damaged participant to retreat from the study, answer questions insincerely, and decrease the quality of the findings (Harrell & Bradley, 2009).

A qualitative approach is suitable for a population discussing sensitive matters (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). This study highlighted topics regarding academic efforts and interaction. I followed the recommendation of Harrell and Bradley (2009) to stay away from threatening or embarrassing
questions. I avoided simple yes-no questions and use open-ended questions to provide a relaxed setting enabling elaboration (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). This qualitative study provided rich data and in-depth explanations that numeric data could not communicate (Sandelowski, 2000).

**Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design, a strategy used to isolate and properly identify the core essence of the experiences surrounding a common phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017). A phenomenological research design will increase comprehension of African American male college student experiences in the classroom. This helped to make connections between various student experiences, perceptions, and interactions with African American male educators. Creswell and Creswell (2018) described the aim of the researcher as seeking to acquire valuable knowledge from the daily life experiences of participants and this goal was successful.

African American male educators are likely to have encountered academic experiences like those of African American male students (Walker, 2014). A phenomenological research design helped describe the essence of participants’ shared experiences. The results were brought to the attention of current educational leaders and will guide the decision of practitioners. The phenomenological approach was used to justify the commonalities of participants’ experience. The patterns and themes can bring researchers closer to the absolute meaning of the narratives. A phenomenological research design offered the researcher a lens to view the deeper meanings, representations, depictions, and facets of a concept (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

**Research Methods**

This section provides a review of the specific research methods used to apply the phenomenological research design in this study. The following information includes details of the study setting, sample, procedures, management of data, data analysis, and steps taken to establish trustworthiness.
Setting

To capture the diverse male perspectives influenced by factors unique to the campus environment, two sites in Southern California were chosen for this study. The setting was limited to one community college and one public university serving community college transfer students. Perspectives provided by current attendees, and recent graduates of the community college were crucial to the study. However, voices of past attendees who recall clear experiences with African American instructors will be considered valuable. In addition, gathering experiences from African American men who transferred from a community college offered a new and different perspective considering their successful matriculation to a university.

The two sites mirrored the diversity of the African American male population in the Southern California area. The campuses are miles apart. The distance was planned to represent participants whose responses may be impacted by the environmental norms of the contrasting locations. The California community college (CCC) system is considered the largest public education system in the nation and 5.9% of the student population identifies as African American (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office [CCCCO], 2018). The CCC includes a total of 115 colleges serving more than 2.1 million students (CCCCO, 2018).

Campus One

The first study site located in the north Los Angeles area is a community college that is part of a multiple college district in Southern California. According to the CCCCO Data Mart, in Spring 2019 the campus reported a 71.68% success rate for degrees attained and a 72.68% rate for successful transfer students (CCCCO, 2019). African American students represent 6.6% of the student population at the study site. Out of approximately 19,000 students 900 identified as African American. Other student identifiers showed 57% of the college’s students identified as first-generation. The college provided 160 associate degree and certificate programs from over 14 major areas of study. Their programs dedicated to serving African American students made the location ideal.
Campus Two

The second study site is part of the California State University system serving northern and southern California students. The campus is in the greater Los Angeles area. According to public university data, African Americans represented 2% of the student population in Fall 2019. In the categories of faculty and race, African Americans represent 3%, while White faculty represent 60% of the population. African American faculty are part of the smallest faculty groups on this campus and are 1% larger than the international faculty members. This campus was selected as a useful setting for their high transfer student acceptance rate, and high rank for awarding degrees to underrepresented students. This campus also has programs and centers geared toward African American students. At the time of the study the gender population was 42% male and 58% female with faculty gender reporting 51% female and 48% male.

Sample

This study focused on the African American male student experience with African American male faculty. Participants were asked questions regarding their academic efforts, sense of belonging, and the instructional efforts of the African American male instructor. This critical decision was made to pay attention to the level of support provided by African American male instructors related to sense of belonging and shared identity relationships. The experiences of participants will inform educators in ways that support the underperforming student population. The household culture of the first-generation college student could impact the guidance surrounding the concept of pursuing higher education.

Homogeneous Sampling

The sample selection process supported the topic, problem, and questions of the research as a homogeneous sampling approach (Creswell, 2017). Homogeneous sampling placed concentration on special and similar characteristics participants in the same subgroup. The selection of men who identify as African American and have experience with instructors of the same race and gender was crucial to this study. Students who completed at least one course with an African American male
faculty member qualified for this study. The strengths of homogeneous sampling allowed me to fully immerse myself in the shared commonalities of the group.

**Purposeful Sampling**

Experts in the technique describe purposeful sampling as a popular approach to qualitative research due to the direct nature of gathering a sample specific to the needs of the research questions (Creswell, 2014). The inclusion criteria strengthened the trustworthiness study intentions by only selecting participants able to effectively answer the study questions. Strategic measures of acquiring willing participants took place to gather the unique sample. This purposeful sampling attempt was aided by confirmed participants knowledgeable of other potential participants fitting the research criteria.

The snowball approach was a purposeful sampling technique highly benefitting the study. Participants who confirmed their involvement invited individuals in their network who fit the criteria and shared their experience (Creswell, 2014). The snowball process supported the study by accelerating the participant acquisition process considering the small African American male population. The referral nature of the snowball technique allowed participants to suggest more individuals who fit the requirements of the study (Creswell, 2014).

**Criterion Sampling**

The criterion or outcome sampling technique was fitting to the study considering the requirements students needed to meet for candidacy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Follow-up questions were asked to accurately confirm the study selection criteria while depending on the honesty of their identification. This method was crucial for the sake of trustworthiness. The criteria for selection are: (a) identification as a Black or African American man; (b) identification as a first-generation college student; (c) enrollment at one of the study sites, either part-time or full-time; (d) completion of a community college course taught by an African American male instructor between 2010 and 2020; and (e) at least 18 years of age.
Sample Selection

The maximum number of participants for this study was eight students. The goal was to gather between four and six students at each site and the minimum of four students per site was successfully acquired. The rationale for the specific participant count was supported by credible and reliable sources in qualitative research. Creswell (2012) agreed that responses from too many participants can defeat the purpose of a qualitative study designed to focus on the shared perspectives of an extremely unique experience. Creswell (2012) stated, “It is typical in qualitative research to study a few individuals or a few cases. This is because the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual or site” (p. 209). This research attempted to target a few unique experiences from a rare participant pool to avoid diminishing an in-depth portrait of a special group. Moreover, collecting data from the minimum of eight participants aligned with the expert opinion asserting that, “the larger number of cases can become unwieldy and result in superficial perspectives” (Creswell, 2012, p. 209). This supports the rationale for a participant count which ultimately maximized the depth and quality of data collection.

In addition, participants who fit the unique criteria of this study were gathered from institutions sharing less than 6% of an African American population. Although this factor could impact the participant count, it also justifies the need to give a voice to a small overlooked and struggling student population. This justified the decision to move forward with the minimum goal of eight participants of quality. Understanding the value of the unique experiences and commonalities of a small group helped to maintain trustworthiness of this rare and substantially informative study.

I ensured the ethical protection of my participants by using pseudonyms. This decision safeguarded identities by limiting the possibility of readers making connections to specific individuals, exact institutions, and participant experiences. The use of pseudonyms helped to protect sensitive information while avoiding the possibility of participant shame by the public. These efforts were made to respect the confidentiality of the experiences mentioned and the overall data of the study. Table 1
includes participants’ pseudonyms, site identification, athlete status, and the identification of focus group and interview participation.

Table 1. Participant Pseudonyms and Status: Focus Group and Interview Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College participants</th>
<th>University participants</th>
<th>Participation type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marquel (athlete)</td>
<td>Ahmad</td>
<td>Focus group &amp; interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elijah (athlete)</td>
<td>Alton</td>
<td>Focus group &amp; interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Tamir</td>
<td>Focus group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treyvon</td>
<td>Michael (athlete)</td>
<td>Focus group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection and Management**

In this section, I describe the instrumentation, procedures for data collection, and data management strategies used for this study. To understand how first-generation African American male community college students described their experience and efforts in class with shared identity instructors, I conducted one focus group session with four participants, and two individual semistructured interviews at both research settings. To conduct my study, I obtained institutional review board approval from the California State University, and my second study location.

**Instrumentation**

The theoretical framework for this study guided the development of the focus group and interview protocols (see Appendix A). A focus group environment placed participants in a relatable atmosphere of possible shared experience (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). This experience identified commonalities and provided deeper knowledge of the study phenomenon. The shared experiences taken from the focus group sessions helped to further inform the interview protocol which allowed me to empathetically deliver the semistructured, one-on-one interviews. The benefit of individual interviews is they are less intrusive in nature (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). The fluidity of two-way communication mimics a natural conversation. In an interview setting, the researcher can ask direct questions to a participant who may have feel silenced or intimidated by responses of a dominant
participant in a focus group. The results of this instrument enabled a trustworthy connection to discuss sensitive topics (Kate et al., 2012).

The interview protocol was impacted by the notes gathered after the focus group sessions. A total of nine open-ended interview questions was brought to the semistructured interview sessions. Semistructured interviews allow researchers to probe the interviewee to elaborate on unclear information (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). However, I was mindful of the relaxed fluidity of semistructured interviews and stayed focused to avoid topic deviation or suddenly drifts. Interviewers may feel tempted to ask questions that were not listed in the interview protocol leading to topic deviation, which is why constant referencing of the interview questions helped to maintain the structure of the study (Harrell & Bradley, 2009).

The semistructured interview protocol provided a foundation on which to elaborate. For example, asking students to describe their ideal image of a motivational and culturally supportive professor is a question in the protocol that elicited various responses as well as focus on the intended topic. By associating an ideal image to their definition of a supportive and inspiring instructor in the instrumentation process, I could compare these images and identify any themes during the data analysis process. Ultimately, a semistructured interview was a worthy instrument as it addressed the research questions while gathering suppressed or supportive information from the participant. The semistructured approach to data collection allows the conversation to go both ways (Kate et al., 2012). I was able to pinpoint a key word in a response and ask follow-up questions to benefit the entire study.

**Procedures**

This section includes the study procedures and the steps taken to transition from planning, to practice, and final data gathering. Preparation for this study began with solidifying partnerships with participating campuses after IRB approval. Meeting with respected individuals with whom I have developed good rapport and maintained regular communication with was foundational. Multiple sources of recruitment support were contacted to assure trustworthiness. The contact persons
included campus research office personnel, African American male instructors, and leaders of programs designed to support African American male students.

Access to potential participants for my research depended on collaboration with the institutional research offices of the study site, programs and organizations supporting the potential participants, and instructors. Proposals were approved by appropriate review boards at both study sites prior to student contact. Program liaisons included counselors, advisors, and directors of cultural, and gender-specific supportive programs. The details of my study and participant criteria were shared with all parties. The three partnering groups consisting of research offices, departments of institutional effectiveness, student support programs, and instructors received IRB-approved documentation and email letter of invitation (see Appendix B). This approval granted the recruitment of students who fit my criteria. I received campus approval to share the details of the study with supportive service programs. When students confirmed interest in participation by email, I replied with the date, time, and virtual meeting information.

Focus Groups. Before each focus group session, participants received a study consent form (see Appendix C) which reviewed all elements of informed consent for the focus groups and interviews. These forms were reviewed and signed before data collection. One copy of the signed consent form was given to the researcher and another signed copy was given to the participant to keep. The focus groups were conducted for approximately 45–60 minutes and were recorded using an online platform. Zoom was used as a virtual online platform to conduct focus groups due to institutional mandates limiting in person contact to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus at the time of the study. I requested students turn their cameras on as this feature aided in capturing nonverbal interaction during my note-taking process. At the conclusion of the focus group, I asked for volunteers to further aid in the research by participating in a one-on-one, semistructured follow-up interview.

Interviews. Participants selected for interviews received information on interview scheduling. Interviews were held with two students who represented each study site. Students were asked nine
open-ended questions. I used Zoom to conduct the 45–60-minute interviews. Justification for interview protocol usage comes from the need to refine topics and questions discussed during the focus group. Focus group data can be general, and interviews create a targeted and less evasive atmosphere. The nine open-ended interview questions were asked during the semistructured interview sessions. The probing nature of a semistructured interview style allowed both parties the freedom to elaborate further on the initial responses to the questions (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Semistructured interviews provided a mid-range level of control allowing the researcher the freedom to modify standard open-ended questions and ultimately widen the perspective of a specific issue (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). This exchange provided deeper meaning and foster greater understanding of the participant’s experience.

**Data Management**

All notes and data gathered from focus groups and interviews were carefully organized through Dedoose. This software provided helpful grouping of data, organization of focus group and interview data, and assisted with chunking, sorting, and coding of information. I used the examples in the software and model to organize data. This helped me identify, reanalyze, and define patterns and themes to provide general meanings of data. All tangible and electronic data were backed up to secure and password-protected cloud-based storage.

The digital data for this study, including video files, audio files, focus group transcripts, and interview transcripts, were stored securely on a password-protected external hard drive and a computer protected by a fingerprint scanning device that recognized me as the only authorizer. The Zoom application included a feature that allowed audio communication to be converted into written transcripts. I enabled this option, and the notes were downloaded for further review. I also cross-referenced data by viewing the recording while reading the transcript to assure all words were captured correctly in written form. Handwritten notes and consent forms were electronically scanned and kept on the secure computer. The original paper documents were kept in a locked file cabinet at
my residence. Data will be available for IRB evaluation upon request at any time and will not be destroyed for at least 3 years per IRB regulations.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

This section describes the data analysis process, rationale for the data analysis process, steps taken to ensure trustworthiness of the research, and the role of the researcher. These inclusions are crucial to the academic worth of this study.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative research demands the process of deconstructing the acquired data and grouping the portions in themes and concepts for the sake of identifying the true meanings (Creswell, 2014). Specifying each step in this process while meaningfully interpreting the material in such ways that provide an all-inclusive review is the rational approach to a huge body of information. The data analysis for this study required a 12-step process. The first five steps were applied first to the focus group data, the next five steps were applied to the interview data, and the last two steps consisted of comparing both sets of themes to determine overall findings.

Step 1 of the data analysis process consisted of transcribing the focus group and interview recordings. All verbal communication was converted into written form and labeled with the pseudonyms of the speakers. For the focus groups, this process included a detail-oriented step of sorting, cross-referencing, and matching the recorded data with the transcript. This task was accomplished in one sitting, but the entire data analysis process was revisited regularly to ensure refined quality and academic integrity. Because every detail of data could not be included in the final product of the study, ethical and accurate considerations were essential (Creswell, 2014).

Step 2 of the data analysis process included the application of meaning-seeking by a thorough reading of data. In reading through transcripts and field notes, I developed an understanding of the material to arrive at a labeled meaning (Creswell, 2014). The third step of data analysis included the coding process. This compartmentalized data for the goal of organizing related perspectives of participants (Creswell, 2014). To gain the best representation of my participants, I analyzed certain
crucial responses to interview questions. I reduced raw data acquired in key phrases of participants by grouping relative and substantial responses. I listed every code relevant to the student experiences to aid in accomplishing the next step.

Step 4 consisted of identifying the themes and required the repetition of rereading each transcribed document to identify any emerging themes (Creswell, 2014). This process also included visual aids to identify themes for the purpose of matching code relationships and association of participant reasoning. For example, the interview protocol prompted participants to associate any image or representation to their ideal definition of a supportive and inspiring instructor. Images or representations provided by participants in the interview were analyzed to identify a common theme. I did not provide images of people who embody culturally supportive and inspiring instructors as confirmation bias could potentially sway participant responses. The details found in the transcribed documents highlighting the unique experiences of students determined the final labeling of the themes. This led to Step 5, which provided the description of the labeled themes. This step was essential as it presented the meaning and clarification of data gathered in this qualitative process.

After the analysis of focus group data, all five steps were applied to data from the four individual semistructured interviews. This second analysis process was tracked as Steps 6–10, and mirrored Steps 1–5 in the focus group data. Mirroring Step 5 of the focus group, Step 10 provided the description of themes identified in the one-on-one, semistructured interviews. The two sets of themes were compared in Step 11. Finally, Step 12 required the identification of the overall themes from both sets of data. These themes ultimately described the phenomenon experienced by the African American male students in this study. The identification of convergent and divergent themes through analysis of field notes, recordings, and transcripts provided meaning and a description of the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Figure 2 provides a detailed process of each step in the data analysis process.
Procedures to Ensure Trustworthiness

To guarantee trustworthiness, I upheld ethics in research by ensuring a factual process added value to the study, and shared data that accurately answered the main research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) posited the worth of a research study depends on the evaluation of trustworthiness. The following checkpoints were present to guide the trustworthiness of my research. With data collected from various ideal participants at two institutions, and two data collection methods, this study benefits from triangulation and strengthened transferability and credibility (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I included the component of confirmability which ensured all ideas, perspectives, and experiences are reflective of the
participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The member checking technique was executed by letting participants review the presentation of my findings to clarify and confirm my interpretations of data they provided in the interviews. This technique established credibility in giving participants the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of their input prior to publication of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using member checking for a focus group setting is difficult; therefore, the chair, and research committee checked the interpretations of focus group data.

Debriefing with peers is a strategy employed to ensure trustworthiness as it requires obtaining input from educational experts familiar with the research to ensure dependability and the needed quality for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Peers aided in review of my focus group and interview protocols, study procedures, and labeling of themes, and when necessary, suggested adjustments to the data analysis process. I also kept a journal of reflections to ensure data were shaped by the participant and not altered by researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba 1985).

**Role of the Researcher**

Whether a researcher conducts quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods research, it is impossible for the researcher to be considered completely unbiased. Therefore, scholars should make clear to the reader their role in limiting the factors potentially affecting study findings due to their research position (Reed, 2018). I am aware of myself as a live instrument in the research; therefore, I minimized any biases to avoid inaccuracies by allowing the experiences of participants to guide the study.

I acknowledge my experiences in the field of education have formed my perceptions of the research topic. I reduced bias by maintaining a reflective journal which aided in identifying any natural biases that could be harmful to the study. I identify as an African American male, and I am recognized as a mentor and advocate by members in my personal and professional networks. Sharing the same characteristics of the researched demographic could have prompted me to predict certain responses. My role in acquiring data was to ask clarifying questions during the interviews and focus groups to minimize my own assumptions and confirmation bias. As the past faculty advisor and charter member
of the Black Student Union at one of my places of employment, I helped students who mirrored the sample of my study. To reduce bias, I decided not to conduct my research at that particular institution. Choosing not to include students who had a previous student-faculty relationship with me strengthened (a) my role as a researcher, (b) the study’s trustworthiness and integrity, and (c) data collected. As a critical race theory, gender theory, and validation theory research agent, my role was to add to topics that included just, equitable, and inclusive education. This process required a responsibility to ensure my results and interpretations of data were the absolute reflections of participants’ experiences. I consider this study to be a part of my life’s work and risking the trustworthiness of this needed research was not an option in my mind. Handling the role of the researcher with true care and support meant not allowing my biases to influence or impact the findings of the study.

**Chapter Summary**

This study addressed the problem of the lack of racial representation in higher learning causing low motivation and disconnections for African American college men in the academic setting (Walker, 2014). The lack of validation and supportive recognition of African American college men can also be caused by the absence of African American male faculty that provide needed recognition and sense of worth to the student group (Gooden, 2012). Research questions were created to phenomenologically explore how support, assistance, and general presence of faculty can be most impactful. The qualitative research questions were important to this research as they aided in bringing understanding to phenomena. The organization of my findings in Chapter 4 follow the form provided by the research questions and a prioritization of themes that emerged, to express the essence of the participant experience.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

The use of a qualitative methodology in this study aided in the description of the interactions between African American male community college students and African American male instructors in higher learning. The main research questions prompted participants to share their lived experiences in student effort, sense of belonging, and African American male instructors’ motivational efforts. Gathering findings relative to these three areas was accomplished through focus groups and semistructured interviews. This chapter presents findings in two parts. Guided by the main research questions, Part 1 delivers prominent categories in the data analysis process. Themes linked to the categories are presented and supported by participant quotations from focus groups and semistructured interviews. This chapter also contains unanticipated results. Part 2 reintroduces the research questions to summarize the findings and common themes found at both study sites. In this section, themes found most frequently in the categories are guided by the focus of the research questions.

Categories and Themes

Common themes express the essence of the participant experience. Table 2 presents findings and themes from the university interviews and focus group, and Table 3 provides findings and themes from the community college interviews and focus group. The chapter summary presents common themes that emerged at both sites. The five categories of findings framing the themes at both sites were guided by the same research and protocol questions. The categories are: (a) The Presence of African American Male Instructors Motivated Participation Efforts; (b) Shared Identity Enables Empathy and Understanding; (c) Inconsistent Instructor Representation Impacts Sense of Belonging; (d) Motivational Efforts through Supportive Program Advertisement; and (e) Caring, Passionate, and Energetic Teaching Motivates Student Success.

Table 2 presents findings and themes from university student participants. Column 1 organizes the focus of each research question guiding the study. Column 2 provides themes found in university
data guided by the research questions relative to student efforts, sense of belonging, and instructor efforts. Common themes at each site determine the overall findings of the study found in Column 3. Individual responses shared by all participants support the themes findings connected to the research focus in Column 1. Table 2 provides the research question focus, findings categories, and themes.

Table 2. CSU Interview/Focus Group: Research Question Focus, Findings Categories, and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question focus</th>
<th>CSU interview/focus themes</th>
<th>Findings categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience and effort in class</td>
<td>Self-efficacy amplified by professor to make a difference</td>
<td>The Presence of African American Male Instructors Motivated Participation Efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>Lack of compassion by other races and genders shared gender struggles</td>
<td>Shared Identity Enables Empathy and Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Validation of student perspectives and culture more than an athlete</td>
<td>Inconsistent Instructor Representation Impacts Sense of Belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>African American male professors don't stay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor efforts in motivating</td>
<td>Introducing students to program staff</td>
<td>Motivational Efforts through Supportive Program Advertisement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Energetic, and supportive in addressing student needs</td>
<td>Caring, Passionate, and Energetic Teaching Motivates Student Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participant voices contradicting the findings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 provides findings and themes from community college participants. Table 3 presents similarities to the first study site, which confirms unanimous findings in this study. Slight differences highlight the details unique to the nature of the community college participant experience. Column 1 represents the main research questions of the study. Column 2 presents unique themes at the community college that justify core findings of the study. Column 3 presents shared findings from both study locations. Themes at the community college site were determined by an analysis highlighting similarities in the community college participant experience. Protocol guided by the main research questions prompted each response. Table 3 outlines results that emerged from data analysis of community college participant responses.
<table>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor efforts in motivating</td>
<td>Life-changing campus programs and events</td>
<td>Motivational Efforts through Supportive Program Advertisement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Energetic, and supportive in addressing student needs</td>
<td>Caring, Passionate, and Energetic Teaching Motivates Student Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Race and gender are a plus, but care and passion are a must</td>
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**First Research Question**

How do first-generation African American male community college students describe their experience and efforts in class with African American male instructors?

**The Presence of African American Male Instructors Motivated Participation Efforts**

Study participants communicated the ways the existence of African American male instructors encouraged their academic success. Nearly all participants from the university setting added the professor increased their self-efficacy. The self-esteem and confidence students brought to the class were solidified by the sight of an African American male classroom leader.

**CSU: Self-Efficacy Amplified by Professor to Make a Difference**

The student–teacher dynamic ultimately enabled feelings of motivation, and inspiration generally increased their value as a student. Ahmad, an interview participant at the university, recalled their most memorable first impression, saying:
I think initially, the interaction that provided inspiration and motivation was the mere fact that I walked in the class, and I had a Black male teacher as a man who was my math instructor. So that was huge, in and of itself, because from my experiences, Black males really were not math instructors. Oh, I haven't seen that you know. I saw all other types of races, even Black women.

The presence of the African American male instructor also inspired participants to succeed so they could inspire other students who shared their identity. Ahmad shared their admiration for an African American male instructor in a class teaching a subject uncommon to their race and gender. Inspiration and motivation from this interaction had a large impact on the participant’s experience and efforts in class. During the focus group, Ahmad recognized this impact and questioned why he did not see more African American male educational leaders. This meant Ahmad wanted more representation. The inspiration moved beyond the math classroom and into Ahmad’s career; He said:

The fact they did not have more classes taught by African American professors, that inspired me to say I’m going to be a part of the change. So, I have to finish this, and the only way that I can be a part of the change is if I get these degrees and go back and help the same system that excludes us.

Other participants shared experiences indicating a sense of self-comfort leading to in class motivation. Michael described moments of accelerated self-efficacy caused by an African American instructor who was innately engaging; He stated, “He picked on me. Not picked on me negatively, but he made sure that I got my word in when I knew the answer.” Participants’ efforts to succeed in a class, motivated by the presence of an instructor who shared their identities, inspired them to make a difference for themselves and future African American male students.

**CC: Self-Efficacy and Determination to Make a Difference**

Findings from community college participant data were like university participant data. Like the university setting's responses, the presence of African American male instructors inspired participant efforts and success. This inspiration also motivated students to become an example for other African American male community college students by changing an exclusive system. Intrinsic motivation was often mentioned as a determining factor. Self-efficacy and internal determination were common themes in the efforts of community college students enrolled in courses with African American male
instructors. However, they were inspired to see African American males in high-ranking professional positions. Marquel, a student-athlete and projected NFL draft pick, wanted autonomy; he stated:

Higher-standing members in society [like] Barack Obama, Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., they were all educated Black men, so I knew that I wanted to be like them. But I wanted to also be different. I also wanted to have my own path. I also wanted to share my own dreams and things with the world. So, I think what inspired me is just to see Black faces in high places to know that they dealt with the same things that I'm dealing with, and they made a way out.

Another participant, Eric, interacted with African American male instructors who inspired him to explore high-ranking professions. His interactions inspired him to consider seeking professional roles placing him in the position to become a model of success for other young men in his community. Eric described his awareness of positive impacts due to representation during a focus group, stating:

I've debated if I wanted to go get my master's or anything. But if I do get my master's, it might be in counseling so that way I can kind of give back to the community that kind of uplifted and helped me discover the career path that I wanted to do.

Participants possessed an acute awareness of the general impact representation can have on a younger generation. Elijah remembered an experience with an African American male instructor. His instructor's words pushed him to inspire others. He said, "He basically told them, as a young man, knowledge is worth more than anything you can have." Participants' experiences with African American males helped them to make efforts in and out of the classroom. Various participants expressed they gained clarity of their professional goals due to the modeled success of their instructor. These experiences exemplify the ways instructors unknowingly impacted participants' college-to-career path.

**CC: Self-Efficacy and Determination by any Means**

Like university participants, the value and self-worth of community college participants were amplified at the sight of African American male instructors. Other students at the community college setting were highly motivated by beating the odds of existing statistics relative to African American male community college students. Although the presence of a male educational leader was good to hear and see, focus group participants agreed they needed to push past stereotypes and succeed by any means. Participants communicated an internal drive that could not be damaged by negative
external labeling. Marquel supported his resilience and efforts in classes taught by instructors who did not share his identity, saying:

   It's just like you really can't look down on us just because of how we look. You know, just because of how our hair is, our skin color is, so that's what really inspires me to succeed. I like proving people wrong because I've always been underdog, so I love doing that. That kind of motivates me, you know?

   Marquel, and the other focus group participants engaged in a brief dialog; they agreed males who appear to be athletic and are African American automatically receive judgment from the instructor. Marquel went on to state, “As soon as they walk in the classroom, they've already put us in the lowest of expectations, and that's something that really inspires me.” Marquel recalled how lack of support from his past instructors fueled his success. However, faculty members who were understanding and supportive made him feel better about his value. Marquel explained how he countered possible prejudgments about his participation in class:

   I want to be that person in that classroom who is, you know, always raising my hand. Always active, always trying to learn. Just because I know that this instructor is looking at me like, “Oh, he's not going to be active, he's not going to participate. He's going to be in the back of the class; he's going to be on his phone or whatever.”

   First-generation African American male community college students described their experiences and efforts in class with African American male instructors as an inspiring and motivational experience that strengthened their self-esteem to complete courses and be a good example. However, these efforts were covered in pressures caused by racial stereotypes specific to their gender and social category in the higher learning setting. During a focus group, Elijah provided reasons for confronting such stereotypes with resilience:

   I guess I got tired of teachers looking at me like I’m dumb, or crazy, or trying to impress girls and push my education away. So, like, from that moment I actually forced myself to sit down as “Okay, I’m going to think, and what I’m going to say is what I’m going to do.”

Although many participants in the study recalled the inspiring impact African American male instructors had on their academic success, self-efficacy of students from the community college level was connected to the need to prove nay-sayers wrong as opposed to proving their supporters right.
These findings from data specific to this site indicated the presence of African American male instructors was inspiring, but intrinsic motivation was a strong guide.

**Second Research Question**

How do first-generation African American male community college students describe their sense of belonging in classes taught by African American male instructors?

**Shared Identity Enables Empathy and Understanding**

Participants expressed a strong sense of belonging in classes with African American male professors. They described moments that made them feel acknowledged, validated, and culturally understood. Participants compared their support from African American male instructors to lack of compassion and patience they received from other professors. The most common examples that highlighted the lack of compassion were with White female instructors. The main feeling expressed in the comparison was the sense of disconnection. According to participants, instructors who were not African American males were not sensitive to common issues impacting the productivity of first-generation African American male community college students. Shared identity refers to two or more individuals possessing surface-level identity traits causing an assumption of shared realities mutually confirmed or not (Milner, 2016).

**CC: Lack of Compassion and Shared Gender Struggles**

During an interview, a participant shared how imperative it was to pursue goals and be the first to persistently do great things in their family. The first-generation community college student, who was the first to graduate high school, brought the pressure caused by family expectations and his lack of support. Marquel did not receive support from certain instructors, nor did he feel understood. He mentioned:

You know, being around like a White female teacher, I feel like there was just less compassionate, you know, in the classroom. You could be trying your hardest, you know, especially you go through a lot of stuff outside of the classroom, and I feel like sometimes they should be able to, you know, just be compassionate about that, but that just wasn't the fact.
Additionally, Marquel recalled a specific example when he faced hardship balancing personal life and schoolwork. He tried to explain his difficulties and reasoning to a professor who could not empathize or understand his perspective. He recalled:

I remember, for example, there was just a specific time when I know I let my heart out to this teacher about the things that I was going through, all of the outside things that were happening outside of the classroom and I feel like she just didn't really care you know what I'm saying? But versus going to Ms. M, I didn't have to say a word, and you know she instantly said, “Hey, you should go to Dr. C.”

The participant response addressed the original research criteria requesting experiences about sense of belonging. In addition to sharing experiences in classes taught by African American male instructors, Marquel provided his most memorable experience with a female instructor of another race. He added, “That pretty much changed my life. So, it's just like, the other teachers with different races, different gender, I really kind of like sometimes feel it's less compassionate in my experience.”

Similarly, Treyvon expressed a moment that formed a wedge between himself and instructors who did not provide a sense of belonging, saying:

Although I wasn't able to possibly complete all the assignments or turn in all the assignments that I needed to do, it wasn't that I wasn't trying to, it was just there wasn't enough time to necessarily do things because of the things that were happening within my life. Well, so the negative obviously stems from the professors that didn't want to take that understanding, even though you can email them a million times.

In response, Marquel acknowledged difficulties of managing time. He did not place blame completely on the instructor. However, his interactions with non-African American female instructors indicated a lack of empathy. He said:

I feel like it's easy to blame teachers when students don't hold themselves accountable, but at the same time, some of the responsibilities of students outweigh the class curriculum sometimes. Instead of doing that quiz online, you have to go to work for four hours, you know what I mean? You missed that quiz by a minute. You email your teacher like, "I missed a quiz. Can I make it up?" She's gonna tell you no because you had four days to do it, you know what I mean?

Treyvon and Marquel both felt their professors did not consider factors outside the classroom, such as family demands, work, volunteering, and student-athlete obligations. Marquel’s experience indicated African American male instructors possessed a stronger sense of understanding of his
matters and reinforced a sense of belonging. Marquel’s focus group statement validated this finding.

He said:

> With a Black Professor, oh like, well, this person understands. You know? I feel like with that representation, if he's a Black teacher, then I know that they're going to understand more so than a White, or Hispanic, or an Armenian, or Turkish person. You know what I mean? They're just going to understand my lifestyle a little bit better because they understand the struggle that I'm coming from because possibly they were within the same struggle.

**CSU: Lack of Compassion and Shared Gender Struggles**

Issues surrounding sense of belonging emerged as connected to cultural misunderstandings and a lack of compassion between participants and nonmale, non-African American instructors. The general finding, which housed the theme of compassion and understanding, was that shared identity enabled understanding and empathy. During a semistructured interview, Alton offered concise feelings of their experience and asserted, "Some professors, especially if they have full tenure and they are of another race, they tend to just push you on the back burner and just let, you know, let the adjuncts deal with it." Although the amount of compassion cannot be determined by academic rank, the experience of the participant was noted. The participant ultimately connected caring and compassionate characteristics to cultural understandings of shared identity instructors.

Experiences of lack of compassion for student issues were consistent with experiences of participants at both study locations. However, some participants at the university expressed how academic priorities came second to the fears of possible racially-charged attacks for African American males. This was an important theme. During a focus group, Tamir recalled an experience when he felt misunderstood by people of other races and genders, saying:

> Part of one of our class requirements was to have a one-on-one meeting with our faculty member and to check in and touch base. And so, when I went to the session we were talking about different things, and she had asked me what's one thing that you're afraid of that may affect your ability to complete your degree and the interaction we had was two different perspectives on that question. Because for her, she was thinking like, is the reading going to be excessive, are you nervous about your writing. I wasn't even thinking about that. And I literally said, “Well, my biggest fear is that, you know, this is a school in Orange County and I'm gonna get shot.” I really told her that and she was mortified.

The participant explained how the instructor did not know how to empathize, react, respond, or comfort the fearful thoughts of an outnumbered African American male student. His experience
communicated a high level of cultural misunderstanding. Tamir’s experience negatively impacted his efforts and overall experience. At both study sites, a shared struggle in gender norms caused by cultural misunderstandings led to development of sense of belonging among African American male instructors where students could possibly feel validated.

**CSU: More Than an Athlete**

The research question focused on sense of belonging. The protocol required participants to think about their social identity in relation to the community college environment. Participants were asked to share what inspired them to succeed in today’s higher education system. Despite experiences with unwelcoming staff and faculty, participants were intrinsically motivated to prove they deserved a good education. A common theme was countering negative stereotypes associated with norms of student-athletes. Participants who appeared to only be athletes were seen through the stereotypical athletic lens. Michael, in a focus group at the CSU, recalled his community college experience relative to sense of belonging. The protocol asked for campus-wide experiences, and stereotypical encounters were highlighted by participants.

As an athlete, peers expected Michael to depend on his athleticism to be successful; they did not consider his academic skills. When he decided to quit football, he recalled friends being shocked and genuinely worried for his future. In a statement recalling these moments, Michael added, "I wasn't too offended by them saying 'Oh, you're not in sports anymore?' But just their reaction from it. A lot of people would be like, oh, where's your life going now? Good luck bro." Michael's ex-teammate accepted a socially-forced idea that student-athletes were only valuable on the field or court. His perspective further motivated Michael to succeed academically and create a sense of belonging for himself. He stated:

When I told one of the people that I used to know, he actually was like, "I don't want you to end up like homeless or anything." And I'm like, okay, that's a very interesting comment on the basis of me not playing sports anymore. You think my life depended on it? Like [it] was very interesting and obvious grown up being in the only Black kid in school. It's like people really want (me) to be a part of that little whatever stereotype that they have in their brains of like, if I'm not in sports, or not doing something active, like I can't really bring it.
Other participants confirmed Michael’s challenges related to being an African American male student who wanted more than to be seen as an athlete. Ahmad, who did not compete in collegiate level sports, shared a moment during the focus group when an instructor assumed they were an athlete; this confirmed a generalized perception connecting the African American male college student to athleticism. Ahmad added, “On top of my professors asking me if I played sports, being one of the only very few and sometimes the only Black male in a class, that end of itself, I took those on as challenges.”

**CC: More Than an Athlete**

Participants at the community college shared similar sentiments. However, to combat the stereotype, Elijah shared he was told by his African American male instructor to always remember he was more than an athlete on campus. During a semistructured interview Elijah stated, "He showed me that as a Black man, you’re not just an athlete, you know. Like, you can be more than athletic. You can lead. And sometimes, most people don't know that they can be leaders." Reaffirming conversations between the African American male instructor and the participant validated the participant’s abilities, which is related to the sense of belonging finding.

Another participant at the community college added to the athlete theme. Marquel protected himself from prejudgments of professors; he said:

> Obviously as a Black man, I know that they’re gonna look at me first as like an athlete. I feel like they wouldn't really expect me to try to be active in a classroom and always raise my hand actively trying to learn and absorb. So, I mean, I kind of expected that.

Marquel described looking forward to proving wrong these types of instructors, which he mentioned when recalling previous experiences.

**CC: Validation of Student Perspective and Culture**

An example of cultural and perspective validation was the display of representation in the learning process for the African American male participants at the community college. An African American male community college instructor created relaxed atmosphere for Marquel. The instructor taught a 100-level course designed to aid students in their 1st year experience. Marquel felt
comfortable giving his cultural perspective and speaking on various topics about family. He recalled his culturally validating experience adding, "You know, I have to say I always had something to bring in culturally. I really felt like in that kind of classroom setting they [African American male instructor] really made it comfortable for a person like me who looked different you know, to actually be comfortable you know in that setting." According to Marquel's experience, the culturally validating experience began in the classroom led by the Black male professor. The instructor provided an opportunity to compare cultural experiences with other students in class. This inspired him to become comfortable regularly sharing his culture. Marquel was provided various moments allowing him to display his culture and validate his perspective. He shared:

Being part of Black Scholars, I remember me and a girl named Diana. Diana was Dominican and I’m Haitian. So we wanted to teach everybody, you know, cultural dances. So we kind of just brought a little bit of culture on to the show in just bringing them an event that was different. Different foods, dances stuff like that. Because you know, Dominican and Haitian culture is pretty similar. It's not too far away.

**CSU: Validation of Student Perspective and Culture**

At the university, Alton recalled his experience related to cultural representation. Prior to taking a course with an African American male professor at the community college level, he felt, “It was perceived as if lessons in the curriculum was set up for other races, there was nothing that we even needed to bring up or discuss related to what has happened to the Black community and interact the courses.” This was a topic of strong concern for Alton as he continued to exclaim during the interview, “The curriculum just did not include any of our history at all.” This was the norm until Ahmad enrolled in a math course led by an African American male. The experience with the professor contrasted prior courses that failed to validate his culture. Validation of Alton’s culture was displayed throughout the course; he said:

[In] my second year at the community college, I had a Black instructor who was very cognizant of the fact that math needed to also have some cultural relevance into it and trying to pull those things out and so he was really good at giving examples of mathematicians and other scientists and stem related individuals who were Black.

The African American male instructor strengthened sense of belonging in the class by connecting culture and race to the course subject. The race and culture of the participant were also
validated through their participation, which was welcomed regularly. In addition, their race and gender were commonly highlighted in lessons and course content provided by the African American male instructor. Alton felt seen and acknowledged by other students during these moments as well:

I think that was really, really good to show that this derived from our own ancestors. And so, he really was big on putting that historical perspective there even in terms of math as one of them, you know, most hated subjects for a lot of people. He made it very comfortable, made it very easy because he was able to even try.

The African American male professor intersected powerful examples of African American male pioneers in mathematics. The participant became more involved in lessons and formed a stronger connection to course curriculum. The memorable experience and impact made on Ahmad were due to identity representation in the lesson. Moments such as these addressed the research focus of sense of belonging received by participants. These themes also connect to the framework of the study in the area of validation.

**Inconsistent Instructor Representation Impacts Sense of Belonging**

When asked during a focus group if Eric could recall an experience at the community college when he did not feel supported or inspired by an African American male professor, he replied, "Not once did I not feel inspired." About instructors’ efforts, Eric began to share his concerns about the reality of professors suffering from burnout due to overwhelming workloads and not feeling valued. He shared the moments he did not receive inspiration occurred when the instructor was too busy due to a large student load, additionally stating, "I know Dr. C loves to work but someone needs to talk to him and ask him if he needs some help because it's a bunch of students." Eric understood how work conditions can result in instructors leaving the job they love. Data from other participants added to the theme that African American instructors do not stay around. This concern connects to inconsistent instructor representation for African American males in higher learning, which impacts their sense of belonging.

**CSU: African American Male Professors Don’t Stay**

The concern of inconsistency of African American male faculty and staff presence was consistent at both study locations. The concern to hire and create an atmosphere that makes staff
feel at home seemed to be a common need of institutions and participants. However, making this a reality seemed difficult to Tamir, as he recalled, "I would say, both as a student and a staff member my experience has been more of like it seems like they talk about it, but the actionable items never see follow through." The participant expressed they have seen African American male faculty come and go before they could consistently impact students of shared identity. Tamir continued to add, "You know, for the last 2–3 years, they've hired a lot more Black male staff and faculty, but the retention of those individuals is very, very low." The theme of professors fleeing the institution was validated by a powerful statement from Tamir stating, "I've seen more Black men quit than I have seen hired." Ahmad echoed the sentiment of a shortage of African American male instructors from his perspective. During the focus group he generally stated, “A lot of Black men don’t go into education in terms of teaching. It’s fact, you know? The number of Black women and other races far outnumber the Black men we have.” These realities can impact sense of belonging and persistence for African American male students and possibly remind them of the lack of male presence in meaningful positions connected to their personal lives.

**Third Research Question**

How do first-generation African American male community college students describe African American male instructors’ efforts in motivating them to pass their courses, pursue educational goals, or complete their academic programs?

**Motivational Efforts Through Supportive Program Advertisement**

This study included discovery of specific actions made by African American male instructors. The third research question guided protocol in the focus groups and semistructured interviews, which revealed a range of descriptions of interactions from being passionate and energetic about subject material to displaying care and patience. Prominent findings focused on instructor efforts at CSU and the California community college led to the theme of instructors connecting students to programs and support service staff.
CSU: Introducing Students to Program Staff

Alton's experience with his professor was encouraging and thoroughly helpful. The community college transfer student attributed his university success solely to their interactions and added, "Thanks to that class being one of the first [African American male instructors] and him, showing me what I need to improve upon, those As from my final paper and the final, I felt relieved, and I felt excited for the future." Alton's professor provided academic help and motivation. The assistance helped him reach goals outside the classroom as well. Being introduced to supportive service program staff set in motion a pattern of continued success for Alton:

But like, it's what happened after that course that really helped me and introduced me to the Umoja program. And then from there, it's from that program alone is where I got into the honor society, student senate, becoming student trustee, and then eventually when I transferred to Cal State. At my graduation, I was one of the top 10 students that got awarded the Student of the Year.

Alton held his African American male professor in high regard after sharing the connections that would enable his academic success. One of the most vital connections was between Alton, the instructor, and programs that provided crucial resources. Knowledge of resources and the influence of the professor made the connection possible. During the focus group, participants agreed with this perspective. Their experience collectively indicated how crucial supportive programming was to African American male student success. Tamir provided a personal experience from an instructor and his feelings toward administration, saying:

As for awareness, I actually would agree that they do a lot of promotion of diverse cultures, and the diversity spaces, and affinity spaces on campus. I think they do. But then, the administration as a whole doesn't really talk about the issues that will address why they are important.

Data acquired from responses to the research protocol about efforts of instructors provided shared perspectives of cultural program communication by instructors. This information formed the common theme of instructors introducing and sharing supportive programming.

CC: Life-Changing Campus Programs and Events

Marquel experienced strains with juggling the statuses of student, athlete, and active member in organizations on campus. He wanted to overdeliver in each role related to every status. This
resulted in overwhelming stress, according to Marquel. He recalled an experience with an African American 1st year experience instructor at the community college level who was instrumental in introducing him to campus opportunities. The instructor helped Marquel narrow his involvement to a program that could help him with all his needs. The instructor allowed Marquel to leverage time he spent at Afro-centric campus organization events by giving him extra credit in the course. It was described as life-changing by the participant. After taking the professor’s advice to explore student life, Marquel eventually developed healthy connections and experiences. He said:

That allowed me to kind of rest with the BSU, Black Scholars, and within that finding that niche of people. We were able to kind of come up with certain events, but we'd do a spin on it. We didn't want to be the same, so one of those events was called woke Wednesday, and it would showcase people of color, anybody really to kind of just come in and read a poem, sing a song, anything that kind of made them feel included.

The instructor’s efforts motivated Marquel to join a supportive program that gave him a sense of belonging and allowed him to earn points in class while maintaining enough energy for his athletic team obligations. Additionally, Marquel stated:

I feel like there’s just the teachers that are understanding in that aspect, they want to see their students do well, so they can help them by doing the most that they possibly can. Even if it’s ‘Come see this this event that the Black Scholars are hosting, I'll give you 10 extra credit points’ you know? You do that five times, that's 50 points.

This experience addressed the protocol and the main research questions of this study focused on sense of belonging and the motivating efforts of the African American male instructors. Treyvon shared a similar experience with the same instructor on campus and mentioned a fellow African American male community college student who accomplished successful goals due to the instructor's direction, care, and support. Treyvon observed the success of a student caused by efforts of their instructor, who happened to be a participant in the focus group, saying:

Coney [Black male instructor] was able to kind of get them in the system and get them to the program and help them get to where you need to be. So, I'm actually happy for him [Marquel] because he's a really good guy, you know what I mean? As far as athletics, his athleticism is crazy, like, I'm so excited that the NFL decided to pick him up for that drafting bowl.

The community college professor mentioned by participants provided solutions to participants’ previously mentioned issues. Student involvement in the programs shared by the instructor increased
knowledge of their cultures and aided participants with time management skills needed to accomplish assigned tasks while maintaining an active presence in student organization and sports.

**Caring, Passionate, and Energetic Teaching Motivates Student Success**

The final finding from data collected about African American male instructors’ efforts revealed instructors took extra care, were passionate, and were energetic about teaching subject material. This motivated the success of the study’s population. In addition, to justify findings supporting positive African American male instructor interactions, this section includes participant experiences and voices that contradict overwhelming evidence on gender and racial student–instructor interaction.

**CSU: Energetic and Supportive in Catering to Student Needs**

Ahmad received support in a subject he often tried to avoid; But mandatory math courses were not avoidable in his academic path. During an interview, Ahmad described feeling disconnected from the subject, including feeling isolated because no instructor took time and effort to understand why he was not grasping the learning material. This reality was common in many of Ahmad’s math courses until he met his African American male professor and became inspired by his teaching delivery. He said:

> The inspiration came from the fact that he was not just a Black male teacher, but the way he was able to break the lesson down is very inspiring. And the other piece that compelled me to move on is the fact that math is a gatekeeper course for every single degree or program that you try and go into. The other thing that my math teacher did do as well [was] adapt teaching pedagogy accordingly. Knowing how to read the room and knowing how to adjust and adapt your lesson plan so that Black students in particular, and all students, are able to not only connect with the lesson but gain something from it and meet the learning outcomes that have been established.

Alton was another participant at the site who described an experience that revealed caring and energetic characteristics by an instructor. In Alton’s interview, he recalled moments when he struggled with structuring his writing and needed to bring his skill level to higher learning standards. Rather than seeing the student failing and grading him accordingly, the professor reached out, was energetic about helping Alton, and never gave up on him. He recalled:

> Before the final, we had a final paper. He was like ‘I want you to look at this midterm short answer question. I want you to see what you got wrong on it. And then I want to help you improve upon it so that when you write your final paper, you'll get an A on it as well.’ And that's
when I got an A on that final paper because of the midterm. It was all because of that midterm and how he showed me what I was doing wrong in writing and how to improve upon that. I took that lesson. I applied it to the final paper that we had to do, and I got an A on it, and I was happy about that.

Like Ahmad, Alton gained the confidence he needed in an area that was holding him back due to care displayed in the African American male instructor's efforts. Alton added to his statement:

I was relieved and excited for the future, I thought, because in high school I was never good at writing papers or anything like that. My usual grades in writing were like Cs and D minuses at best. So, when I got that A, I was very, very relieved that I could do college.

**CC: Energetic and Supportive in Addressing Student Needs**

Eric shared an example of the supportive and professional nature of the instructor, which motivated his efforts as a student. Recalling his interactions, Eric shared to the group that: “He seemed to be professional about his approach to scholarship and students. His office was very scholarly. His approach, his comradery, and his personality are the characteristics that helped me become assertive in my approach to campus." Eric frequently mentioned the word “care” to describe the professor’s approach. The professor also took care in presenting himself as a comfortable and professional resource to other students. This inspired the participant to govern himself according to the characteristics of the African American male professor. The experience added to findings that showed how motivational efforts, including various forms of care, can impact a student’s steps toward success.

Elijah was another student at the community college whose experience revealed caring, passionate, and energetic teaching moments. Elijah had learning experiences he was able to use in and out of class. According to the participant's experience, the professor created and actively maintained a classroom atmosphere that turned knowledge into confidence. Elijah's academic confidence increased with each new lesson. He said:

I'd say he formed this confidence bubble and he allowed me to grow within my own confidence. He taught me a successful and healthy form of conceit, right. It went from cocky to confident. He told me there was nothing more dangerous to oppressors than the educated Black man. It's more than a form of entertainment. My professor basically protecting me from myself. He paved the way.
When asked to describe details of the relationship that inspired their academic success, the participant recalled an experience with the professor that mirrored a family-like connection. Elijah explained a student–teacher relationship that was actively supportive and professional:

I think it was more sort of like a familiar bond right. Instead of looking at me like a paycheck, or a student, I honestly in my heart believe he spoke to me like a like a brother. He looked at me like, I know you're going to mess up, but I can teach you how to take your mess-ups and turn them into this mount of greatness. He is the reason why my attitude shifted. I graduated, and he's the reason why I'm in the process of graduating now.

Marquel recalled an experience that aligned with the study's goal to explore supporting efforts of the instructor. In an interview, the participant shared his experience was a strong example of why representation for academically struggling, first-generation African American male community college student is needed. The most memorable experience of actionable care from an instructor was the moment he won an academic achievement award. He recalled:

I won like the Scholar of the Year award, and before I even won that award um, [long pause]. I was in the bathroom, and I was trying to tie a bow tie. But I never had no pops, you feel me, so I don't know how to tie a bow tie. But there, Dr C. was right there to help me tie a bow for me. So it is definitely, definitely something different when you've got somebody who's Black and the same gender as you looking out for you. You know what I'm saying it's like it just helps you be more productive of a Black man.

**CSU: Participant Voices Contradicting Main Findings**

The study explored the experiences of participants and revealed healthy student–instructor interactions attributed to the male African American identity. However, a few participants felt some of their biggest successful efforts were motivated by instructors of different races and genders. These commonalities were identified as divergent themes. This section includes those experiences and outlying feelings that revealed how students felt represented in ways other than race and gender.

Alton credited much of his success in transferring to a university to African American male instructors but generally received a sense of value from efforts of African American women, saying:

In my own opinion, I feel more valued as a student when there's a Black female as a professor than there is any other gender or race. I grew up in a family of females, so that's why I feel more comfortable in that environment. So, like from my point of view, that's how I feel. More valued there than in other places because I have very strong Black female family members who are always doing bigger and better things in their lives.
Alton continued to recall his comfort when he walked into a classroom led by an African American female instructor. He shared how he connected the female image in the classroom to his foundation of strong African American women who valued him at home. He would have loved to feel the same way toward male instructors initially; however, African American female instructors made him feel more comfortable. When it came to African American male professors, Alton asserted, "I always find a way to get that connection, a strong connection I would get with Black females. I always try to look for some type of connection I can have with them." Alton very much wanted that connection.

Ahmad recalled an experience contradictory to most of the positive moments with African American instructors. He agreed with Alton saying not all African American male instructors made him feel comfortable and he could not generalize his positive experiences. This reason was due to backfiring of professors’ inclusive intentions. Ahmad explained how an African American instructor tried to be too inclusive for other cultures, and, in the process, Ahmad felt ignored and uncomfortable. He stated:

In higher education, oftentimes we try and skirt around that [interaction] to save face and to make sure that everyone feels included while excluding our very own people. So, I think it's important to not leave any stones unturned in the sense of our students because that's one thing that does help to validate students. It's not necessary having to beat around the bush.

Ahmad’s views on the significant impact of acknowledgment and Alton’s connection to family and his African American female instructors reminded everyone in the focus group that unique experiences are difficult to generalize. Treyvon was another participant who provided contrasting feelings on gender and its impacts on shared identity. In response to protocol highlighting gender relations, Treyvon proclaimed, “I don't think that gender for the instructor has any real, lasting effects because of the field that I'm in. I think that the majority of the teachers that I've been with, they just want to make sure that you succeed.” Treyvon stated this perspective was normalized by the fact he had not seen many professors who shared his identity in his engineering major; therefore, his experience could not be generalized.
CC: Race and Gender are a Plus, but Care and Passion are a Must

Some participants agreed with the significance of race and gender in creating a relationship. However, some of them agreed that experiences, including care and passion, were most beneficial. This included experiences with instructors of various races and genders. One participant shared a moment with a professor who did not share their race but shared the same gender. The participant received positive characteristics such as care, passion, and energetic teaching. Michael felt he was supported in the course led by a White male, saying:

Here's something positive, not necessarily anything like negative, So I had a [White male] professor that taught me accounting. I'm an accounting major. When he saw me doing well, he definitely was always there for me as in actually trying to give me a leg up in terms of getting ready for the accounting world. That I could say. But it was actually a really good experience that I had at college with a professor of a different race.

Devoid of race and gender, some participants agreed the delivery in which an instructor communicates and engages students can have lasting impacts on the student learning experience. Alton highlighted care and energetic characteristics he felt should be possessed by successful instructors by saying:

For me it's all about the energy. If you're not into it, you're just phoning it in because it's just a paycheck. You're not that driving professor trying to change at least one student. Regardless of if the one student pays a visit to your office hours that one day, as long as you can change one student, that type of energy is what I am always looking for a professor.

Alton believed professors who did not share the race of the student could still be effective. He recalled a moment when a White male professor instructor took time to understand how race and ethnicity impacted the diversity of student learning. He said:

He told me that during their trainings before every semester, every faculty had to go through an ethnicity training for equality and treating all students fairly and like how to deal with racism in classrooms and how to address those issues, and he's one of these faculty. Some of the few tenured professors complained about how those are meaningless courses. That they shouldn't be in training, and that they didn't care about it.

Alton’s White male professor revealed to him that he was tenured, had to take an ethnic equity course, and enjoyed the experience while other faculty complained and thought it was a waste of time. Alton shared he could see the positive impact the training had on the professor. He added the professor began to purposely ask Alton’s opinion on class topics. Although the participant’s caring
experience was attributed to department trainings centered on equity and cultural student diversity, this was a testament to the existing population of professors who tried to learn how race, gender, and other social identifiers affect student learning.

Participants from the university who also attended a community college recalled prominent experiences of positive shared identity moments. For example, Ahmad believed positive female student–teacher relationships were the norm; therefore, seeing an African American male instructor was uncommonly powerful. Ahmad asserted, "I had a Black woman as a math instructor, but I never had a lot of male instructors, and the fact that this is a Black male instructor who was a math instructor was huge for me, so that in and of itself was motivating." Seeing someone Ahmad could visually relate to provided him an amount of motivation that required little dialogue.

Perspectives from community college participants supported common student–teacher interactions on race and gender. During a focus group, Treyvon supported the perspective that an unspoken connection can be caused by shared identity:

When you communicate with a Black teacher, it's completely different from when you communicate with other people of other races, just because they're Black. It's crazy to say that, and it's crazy to hear myself say that, but I just know. Like, it's weird how we have social cues like that.

Treyvon was hesitant to share how much of a significance race and gender had on student–teacher relations. However, other participants felt ignoring this reality could be problematic. Some participants seemed more comfortable attributing their success to intrinsic beliefs rather than making a direct connection to representation. Like Treyvon’s hesitation about fully agreeing to absolute benefits caused by shared identity, Elijah shared, “I graduated and he's the reason why I'm in the process of graduating now.” In the same breath, he stated, “It doesn't even have to be Black, White, purple, green; I don't care the color. Actually, it just resonates more when there's the Black man. It's like ‘Okay, I didn't know that we both come with this.'” Elijah and Treyvon’s contradicting beliefs about benefits of representation could be related to feelings of other African American male students. Further studies exploring why this population may struggle with conflicting beliefs may be beneficial to African American male students.
Chapter Summary

This study explored first-generation African American male community college students' experiences with instructors who shared racial and gender identities with participants. As a result of the methodology and process, participants' experiences revealed their determination was inspired by validation and motivation. Participants strongly credited their success to interactions with African American male instructors. Some felt the instructor's actions mattered just as much as race and gender, while a small number of participants preferred interactions with African American female instructors. Data revealed that, depending on students' social development and experiences, they interacted in their own ways with the African American male instructors. Instructor's validating efforts were also present in the participant experience. This exposure to validation, racial, and gender representation runs parallel to components of the study's CRT, validation, and gender theory analysis components. The next chapter explores findings through these theories, and the findings defend the existence of such theories.

Three research questions guided this study.

1. How do first-generation African American male community college students describe their experience and efforts in class with African American male instructors?

2. How do first-generation African American male community college students describe their sense of belonging in classes taught by African American male instructors?

3. How do first-generation African American male community college students describe African American male instructors’ efforts in motivating them to pass their courses, pursue educational goals, or complete their academic programs?

The core of each research question provided a guide that served as a tool in data analysis. Each research question controlled the study and included the guides (a) student efforts, (b) sense of belonging, and (c) instructor efforts. When I interpreted participant responses to interview and focus group questions, coded information elicited themes that emerged at both sites. Validated by participant quotations, two sets of themes were combined to determine five prominent categories of findings. Findings and themes mirrored the essence of all participant responses.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

This study explored interactions and impacts of African American male instructors on first-generation African American male community college students. The problems that motivated this study were isolation experienced by African American male community college students paired with academic withdrawal due to lack of shared identity support from instructors (Griggs & Dunn, 1996; Whitley, 2018).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate interactions of African American male community college students with faculty members of the same race and gender, identify and understand themes in student experiences, and gain insight into student–teacher interaction methods that are beneficial to the student group. To achieve this purpose, three research questions guided the study:

1. How do first-generation African American male community college students describe their experience and efforts in class with African American male instructors?

2. How do first-generation African American male community college students describe their sense of belonging in classes taught by African American male instructors?

3. How do first-generation African American male community college students describe African American male instructors’ efforts in motivating them to pass their courses, pursue educational goals, or complete their academic programs?

The framework used to design this study included critical race theory (CRT; Crenshaw, 2011), gender theory (Kimmel, 1994), and validation theory (Rendón, 1994). The CRT approach was used to explore shared identity student–instructor interactions and details within each experience relative to racial factors. Gender theory was used to consider participants’ unique life experiences associated to gender to explore the presence of those norms in the classroom. Validation theory added a perspective sensitive to the cause and outcome of reassuring students about their abilities (Rendón, 1994). All theories were combined to provide a framework to explore interactions of African American male students and instructors who shared identities. The qualitative approach included semistructured interviews to provide a balance of clarification and fluidity while gathering data about
experiences of each participant (Harrell & Bradley, 2009; Kate et al., 2012). Focus groups were also employed to provide a supportive and trustworthy environment for members to possibly explore shared experiences (Creswell, 2012).

Interpretations

Chapter 4 described findings that revealed participant and instructor characteristics, such as determination, validation, and motivation. Participants provided experiences supporting their academic success caused by the exposure to validation and racial representation. A 12-step data analysis guided by research questions targeting (a) student efforts, (b) sense of belonging, and (c) instructor efforts served to identify reemerging themes resulting in five prominent categories of findings. This section provides detailed interpretations of each finding. In addition to presenting meanings of each finding, strengths and limitations relative to the research design will be provided for each finding. Findings from previous literature and framework differences and similarities will be applied to support findings.

The conceptual framework will aid in synthesizing the findings in ways that depict relationships between each. These findings include: (a) The Presence of African American Male Instructors Motivated Participation Efforts; (b) Shared Identity Enables Empathy and Understanding; (c) Inconsistent Instructor Representation Impacts Sense of Belonging; (d) Motivational Efforts through Supportive Program Advertisement; and (e) Caring, Passionate, and Energetic Teaching Motivates Student Success. An additional lens is added in this section to view categories relative to gender relation. The core of gender schema theory argues that characteristics and norms associated to gender are formed in development stages of a child and reinforced by their environment to influence their behavior (Martin et al., 2002). Schemas formed serve as membership categories that allow limited gender role fluidity; this fluidity may force African American male college students to carry out counterproductive norms, such as silence during suffrage.
Resilience and Representation Motivated Participation

Three prominent themes emerged from the first finding category that the presence of African American male instructors inspired participation efforts. Main themes within this finding included: (a) self-efficacy was amplified by the professor, (b) self-efficacy and determination by any means, and (c) participants inspired to make a difference for African American male students. Participants described experiences with African American male instructors increased their confidence and the way they felt about their abilities in classes led by those instructors. The study revealed participants felt immediate confirmation and validation at first sight of the African American male instructor; student–instructor dialogue was not necessary. Initially, the student may not have known the instructor; however, they knew who and what the instructor reminded them of due to shared identities with the instructor. Most participants described experiences of comfort that inspired them to succeed in the course. Also, participants with African American male instructors, ultimately, felt they could focus solely on their academic responsibilities rather than counter stereotypes or prove instructors wrong by defending their cultural worth.

Some participants indicated they possessed the self-confidence and determination to succeed with or without the presence of a professor who shared their identity. Some college participants felt instructors who doubted their abilities motivated them to succeed, which communicated their familiarity with accepting challenges set by society. This finding was guided by the first research question on student efforts. Participant experiences revealed the sole presence of African American male instructors inspired them to become a successful example for other male students of shared identity. Participants in this study believed they were motivated to be successful due to exposure to successful African American male examples at the college and university.

Previous studies identified shared identity in higher learning as a positive impact on students (Chapman-Hillard et al., 2016). Participants agreed the feeling of relatability in interactions with the professor also motivated their efforts. This addressed the first primary research question relative to experiences and classroom efforts of the student. Although relatability motivating the success of
students was a strength, nongeneralizability was a weakness. Experiences highlighted were unique to interactions these students had with African American male instructors at their respective colleges and universities.

From the perspective of CRT, factors that consider cultural differences correlated to race can help individuals identify and confront stereotypes and prejudgments in the classroom (Levin et al., 2013). Relatability motivators connected to CRT were highlighted by Davis et al. (2015) in a 3-part model of best practice for African American males. Positive interactions and representations of a leader sharing the identities of their listeners in the academic or professional setting can inspire positive efforts. Participants also described their experiences of resilience and motivation as feelings they thought their instructor could relate to considering the possibility of shared experiences.

Participants also assumed a shared relationship of experiences associated to their gender. Shared feelings of resilience intersected with the gender schema perspective that argues environmental influences tied to gender allow individuals to form action categories; in this case, this may have warranted similar experiences for African American students.

**Shared Identity Enables Empathy and Understanding**

The second category—Shared Identity Enables Empathy And Understanding—contained themes that emerged from questions regarding a sense of belonging. The first central theme was lack of compassion from instructors of other races and genders. Participants stated experiences ranging from prejudgment of their performance abilities, lack of understanding of personal and external life obligations, and apathetic reactions to their life-threatening fears of being an African American male on campus during a tense social climate. Participants believed an instructor of shared identity would more likely be able to empathize with their racial and cultural realities. Participants provided experiences when their African American male instructor possessed a deeper understanding of what their race and gender brought to the classroom, thus creating an inclusive and validating learning environment. On the topic of validation, Hall (2007) suggested approaches instructors could apply to students who do not share similar identities. Hall added the first goal is to be honest about lack of
cultural knowledge and to be willing to learn from the student. This could prevent cultural clashes and feelings of disconnection indicated by participants in the study. Participants agreed about feeling unsupported in their efforts to succeed, and their excuses were not validated or taken into serious consideration. The racial stressors that hindered their success went unacknowledged and caused further isolation. Educational leadership author Tomlinson (2004), who viewed their work through Rendón’s (1994) validation theory, indicates invalidating students can defeat their motivation to perform and learn well. Hall and findings in this section, communicate that making a conscious effort to research the background of the learning audience can increase sense of belonging. This can be the first step to foster a sense of belonging by including cultural elements of the audience into curriculum.

Representation in the learning process was a theme relative to shared identity, empathy, and cultural understanding. Representation in lessons increased sense of belonging. Participants at both sites recalled moments, which provided them the ability to highlight their culture positively. Some African American male instructors allowed students to bring their material artifacts and nonmaterial cultural elements to the class, such as music, dance, poetry, and dialect. Other instructors tried to introduce the class to notable African American males who made significant contributions to the subject matter. Participants identified feelings of value and empowerment related to their identity. The participant who freed themselves from a haunting stereotype they formally believed was connected to African American male performance in mathematics courses attested to such empowerment. The participant felt inspired and academically capable after being exposed to pioneers in a STEM field who shared similar racial and gender identities.

Sense of belonging for participants was achieved with the presence of identity representation in curriculum. A platform was given to participants to educate other classmates on the value and principles of their families and cultures. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) suggested students perform better when doing so is the expectation. Furthermore, viewing the theme from CRT, gender, and validation theory frameworks confirms positive student outcomes caused by the instructors' ability to
avoid stereotypes that devalue a person’s racial and gender identity (Milner, 2016; Mitchell, 2018). The perspectives of such theories are present in the themes, findings, and sense of belonging highlighted in the research focus of this finding.

**Sense of Belonging for Faculty**

The next finding category—Inconsistent Instructor Representation Impacts Sense Of Belonging—was supported by the emerging theme communicated by participants that African American male professors do not remain at the institution. Professors leaving the institution occurred during their time on campus and was present throughout participants’ experiences. Some participants recalled how African American male instructors did not stay employed long enough to connect with their students. Other participants felt abandoned by instructors who cultivated a supportive relationship with them and left due to factors beyond their control or the control of students. Nonetheless, rotating African American male instructors rather than increasing hiring, or incentivizing permanent residency had an impact on participants’ feelings.

Findings indicated sense of belonging is not exclusive to African American male students. They were seeing instructors who look like them depart from their academic posts while non-African American instructors maintained their employment. This communicated a message of devaluing African American instructors, which participants connected to their sense of belonging on campus. Many participants felt pressured to live up to the role of an athlete to feel they belonged in higher learning. Displacement of the African American educator into stereotypical roles and the impact on representation align with findings by Medley (2012) who connected athletic leadership responsibilities to African American educators. This systemic shift became a norm participants played out on a student level. Participants shared their struggles battling stereotypes of a student-athlete while wishing to be accepted and seen as an accomplished student. Validation was a factor considering students form bonds with instructors who celebrate and validate their efforts (Milner, 2016). Validation theory supports the regular and consistent presence of an African American male instructor in an African American male student’s life. The interaction validated the presence, role, and belonging of
the thriving African American male students in this study. When students observe departments cultivating a culture of belonging for the African American male instructor, they may interpret the norm in ways that impact how African American male students see themselves and their sense of belonging in the classroom.

**Advertising Race- and Gender-Focused Resources**

The next finding category provided by the main research question and protocol focused on the motivational efforts of African American male instructors. The finding category revealed the theme Motivational Efforts Through Supportive Program Advertisements. Instructors’ knowledge about and their partnerships with campus resources were deemed beneficial and memorable to many participants. Gender schema theory would view this level of competency from a shared perspective that lends understanding to the significance of gender support and development. Participants described interactions with male staff they viewed as mentors, which confirmed the previous research finding that new characteristics of positive gender norms can be formed at young adult development stages (Martin et al., 2002). Shared-identity mentors did not perpetuate counterproductive behaviors culturally connected to masculinity isolation and silence through academic suffrage. The theme commonly mentioned within this finding was the ability of instructors to actively introduce students to program staff and share supportive programming. This form of intrusive advising was noted by scholars as an effective solution to isolated male students who often remove themselves from student life and struggle in silence (Wood et al., 2015).

Participants at the community college credited their academic success to instructors and the campus programs recommended by instructors, such as a group for Black scholars, the Black student union, and Umoja. For participants who matriculated to the university setting, programs such as a male success initiative, received credit as spaces that supported sense of belonging; specifically, they provided services and tools specific to struggles of male students of color. A study by Watson et al. (2015) used ethnic-centered programming to justify the need for culturally-specific mentoring methods for African American males. This is one example of many studies recommending a tailored approach
to this population. Successful efforts of instructors who offered extra credit to students for attending events or instructors who personally introduced participants to tailored programming were viewed from the lens of this study’s framework.

CRT examines the ways individuals interact with race and the beliefs, norms, and labels society assigns to various groups of people (Crenshaw, 2011). Considering cultural norms assigned to this student population, efforts of the African American male instructors mentioned in the study communicate the significance of supporting the African American male student. A validating statement from a participant showed understanding of preexisting detrimental norms countered by a tailored approach when he asserted, “My professor basically protecting me from myself.” The finding of the efforts connected to advertising gender and race-centered programs; the efforts communicated the instructors’ understanding of the holistic idea that it takes a village to support students.

**Successful Outcomes of Care, Passion, and Energy**

The theme within the finding—Caring, Passionate And Energetic Teaching Motivates Student Success—contained major implications on teaching practices. The theme of race and gender is a plus, but care and passion are a must, and represent the way some participants valued shared identity interactions. In contrast, others equally preferred acts of care as well as energetic and passionate content delivery. Inclusivity for both preferences would show an instructor pairing the influence and comfort caused by shared identity with their ability to empathize, genuinely care, and remain energized about the subject matter. This pairing may embody elements of an ideal professor for underrepresented students.

In areas of care, passion, and energetic teaching, participants described characteristics of the instructor that mimicked the qualities of a patient mentor, counselor, and facilitator. Instructors incentivized out-of-class program participation by offering extra credit and would attend minor and major program events themselves. Participants in the study directly identified the instructor as a mentor or would indicate actions implying roles like the responsibility of a present, helpful, and patient advisor. Participants recalled experiences of their African American instructors as genuinely
determined and dedicated to their learning process. Participants described moments when instructors would actively go beyond normal expectations of a professor to make sure the participant fully grasped the course content. According to participants, instructors' extra attention motivated their efforts and validated their existence in the course. Educational leadership author Tomlinson (2004) indicated the importance of validating a student to motivate successful performance. This pairs with the study framework, which supports encouragement, interaction, and involvement as elements required to provide growth and recognition of student success (Rendón, 1994).

**Implications**

Study findings support implications crucial to policy, practice, theory, and future studies in education. Findings focused on the first-generation African American male community college student can inform decisions made on an institutional- and state-wide level. The research provided stories needed to interpret the retention and graduation progress of this student population and should be used to redesign policies, procedures, and practices that are not supportive for this group.

The theoretical framework of the study did not change what exists in the study data; however, it was used to change how the I viewed the data and used findings to identify implications. Urgent recommendations described in this dissertation can be applied using the critical race and validation theory perspectives. Each implication stems from perspectives about subconscious ramifications of covert racism and perspectives indicating the benefits of student validation through supportive engagement (Barnett, 2011; Crenshaw, 2011).

**Implications for Policy**

Findings of this study would be helpful for leaders who seek to develop and maintain a just, equitable, and inclusive atmosphere for African American male students in higher education. Findings supported by themes and voices of participants imply the need for budgeting that responds to the emergency needs of African American male instructor and student, specifically related to their enrollment and graduation rates. African American male students continue to place lowest in most California statistics regarding student success, including enrollment rates and graduation rates.
Information on student efforts, sense of belonging, and African American male faculty support could point to the need to hire qualified individuals. Although some institutions have responded to needs of this student group by diversifying their departments, more work can be done in areas of hiring for longevity rather than contracting seasonal experts.

Hiring an expert to facilitate workshops for staff about how to cultivate an effective learning environment for African American male students is ideal; however, the expert can provide consistent value if hired as full-time staff. This administrative decision can deliver representation in the classroom for African American male students and save the department on costs of hiring external experts. CRT is present in implied administrative decision making by recognizing the value of qualified African American male professionals who are not only contracted to address a moment but are hired for the long-term equitable movement. The values of an institution are often correlated with its budget planning and spending habits. Participants feared the result of their instructors leaving the institute when they shared examples of the overworked and undervalued conditions of their favorite African American male instructors. Current educational leaders should dedicate funds and resources to the development of hiring and ongoing support for a permanent presence of African American male staff and faculty.

Implications for Practice

The theme of Finding, Caring, Passionate and Energetic Teaching Motivates Student Success contains prominent implications for teaching practices. Although most participants valued the comforting benefit of shared identity, some equally preferred acts of care, paired with passionate content delivery. Inclusivity for each participant viewpoint depicts an instructor who combines the influence and comfort caused by shared identity with their ability to empathize, genuinely care, and remain energized about the subject matter. This type of instructor will generally embody elements of an ideal professor for the underrepresented student.

Feedback from participants in this study communicated an unmet need for faculty who share their identity and stories. Findings revealed relatability enhanced sense of belonging. Sense of
belonging did not end at representation for the student. However, it was amplified by the instructors’ ability to passionately incorporate their race, gender, and culture into learning content. Educators can develop ways to implement a similar approach that can include African American males and other student groups who feel neglected by the curriculum.

Implications for Theory

Based on findings from CRT, gender perspectives, and validation theory angles, this study provides implications for its usage with African American male community college students. CRT and gender theory was employed to view positive classroom experiences of participants sharing similar identities as their instructor. When participants indicated their unspoken sense of belonging and relief caused by the sight of a gender and racially relatable classroom leader, the impacts of race argued by CRT and gender theory was supported. CRT applied to this study implies race impacts educational outcomes for African American male students (Davis et al., 2015). Gender theory proves shared experiences connected to gender can promote validation and formation of bonds also cultivating a sense of belonging (Kimmel, 1994; Rendón, 1994). Racial foundations of the theory also highlighted role modeling for participants who confirmed the presence of the instructor strengthened their college-to-career paths.

Use of validation theory to analyze the African American male student-instructor interaction evoked crucial implications. Based on study findings and validation theory, African American male students found a strong sense of validation in identity and academic ability. Educational leaders should consider exploring areas of validation for this student group that felt most accepted in classroom environments that acknowledged them positively. Student engagement limited isolation and could bring forth similar outcomes for students who habitually retreat (Barnett, 2011). The presence of validation theory in this study justified the need to encourage marginalized students (Rendón, 1994). Findings imply future use of the applied theory will continue to be beneficial to a population with an unmet need for validation. Faculty mentioned in this study applied elements of validation theory to help support participants’ success stories.
Implications for Future Research

This study reached a stopping point at interpretations of the participant experience with African American male instructors. Data described efforts made to support African American male students during their process toward graduation. Study findings communicated long-lasting positive results for participants who successfully enroll and implied cultivating the student–instructor dynamic as a suggested goal. Future research should take one step back and examine transfer processes from high school to community college and from community college to universities. The study population can be high school and college counselors in charge of preparing underrepresented students for the next stage and members of admissions committees at the college and university levels. Questions guiding the research should examine diversity measures and determine the exact characteristics qualifying and admitting the ideal student candidate into the college and university. Information from admissions could inform counselors at the high school and college levels. Information from counselors could inform admissions committee members to ultimately bridge gaps between high schools, community colleges, and universities. This crucial research could impact enrollment policy for students greeted by faculty equipped with skills to help them graduate from that academic stage.

Future research should also explore instructors’ difficulties making all students feel included while remembering not to ignore students who possibly share their race, gender, and culture. This recommendation is inspired by outlying experiences shared by study participants. One participant acknowledged a harmful impact that could be shared among other students in higher education, attesting, “Oftentimes we try and skirt around that to save face and to make sure that everyone feels included while excluding our very own people.” Further research could examine why students, faculty, and staff view race topics as hurtful and harmful rather than helpful and empowering.

Recommendations

Considering the literature review and study findings, this section includes recommendations for three areas in higher education. Central to the elements of just, equitable, and inclusiveness, these recommendations will address areas of (a) theoretical changes and considerations, (b) state and
institutional level policy, and (c) changes in educational practice. The section builds on the study’s implications to provide more profound and specific ideas about of how study findings should be applied.

**Theoretical Considerations**

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) suggested using CRT to examine classroom structures with a foundation of White privilege to identify impacts on marginalized and excluded students. Scholars of CRT and advocates of inclusion should consider broadening theoretical reach by partnering with critics who believe White privilege does not exist to explore perspectives of contrasting views of scholars. Understanding the experiences supporting the foundation of counter CRT arguments may inform CRT scholars to develop new studies using the theory. Quantitative researchers and critics target CRT scholars for the subjective nature of findings validating racial inequities' lived experiences and realities (Hartlep, 2009). Proving CRT can exist in quantitative and mixed method studies by providing strong, valid, and trustworthy results may increase the credibility and respect for CRT among successful researchers. CRT argues covert racism is the main problem and investigating unobvious causes and effects of racism is the ideal use of the theory (Crenshaw, 2011). However, because covert racism is difficult to see, critics can easily claim it does not exist. Pairing qualitative results found in this study with new mixed method studies can begin to warrant acceptance of traditional researchers who dispel CRT arguments. Experiences seen through the lens of CRT can also explain existing numeric data comparing African American male student outcomes to other genders or racial categories.

Kimmel’s (2000) gender perspective was seen in the way participants received confirmation that the version of themselves society told them to suppress actually exits in the classroom. In addition, this version of their masculine selves was not aggressive, and it did not come only in the form of an athlete. Participants saw this validated version of themselves could be patient, professional, and could be an educator. This study proved Kimmel’s theory that dominant educational structures in society that perpetuate gender stereotypes can be reconstructed so young men can be
proud of their true selves. Whether the restriction is delivered in the form of a “gendered straitjacket,” a “gendered blazer of success” or for athletes, a letterman jacket of respect, students can receive help removing restrictions preventing them from bringing all of who they are to learning environment (Harris, 2015). Future scholars in this area of focus should begin their literature considering theories and concepts highlighted in early works relative to African American males and manhood by Majors and Billson (1992), and the interaction of roles, symbols, and beliefs around Black masculinity (Majors et al., 1994). Further recommendations include visiting the work of Harris et al. (2011) to unbox how the concept of “cool posing” and masked identities are displayed on college campuses.

State and Institutional Level Policy

Findings highlighted in this research provide targeted state and institutional recommendations. The following educational tools may inspire decision makers to develop ways to prevent college students from feeling they are an afterthought. Implementing the following recommendations can communicate a high level of diversity support to students, partners, and donors. The recommendations are supported by study findings.

On-Campus Staff and Faculty Internships

One step is creating African American male staff and faculty internship programs to make candidates more marketable for long-term contracts and full-time positions. The program development can provide students with consistent representation needed to help them succeed mentioned by participants in this study. Decision makers in education must hold themselves accountable to the diversity goals, values, and principles illustrated in announced job postings. The just, equitable, and inclusive principles of a leadership team include taking time to learn and understand the value, abilities, and skill set of African American male instructors’ impactful interactions with struggling students. Creating programs that strengthen their existing abilities and skills will help instructors exceed faculty role expectations to become marketable and qualified for higher demands of institutions. This study recommends state and institutional level leaders exercise their power not by approving temporary partnerships but cultivating long-term staff relationships.
warranting regular and permanent professional inclusion. Doing so may fulfill an increasingly unmet need to support the success rates of African American male students.

**Empower Existing Male Faculty of Color**

Representation begins with the hiring process. However, hiring and cultivating an atmosphere supporting the development of existing faculty can increase full-time and tenured African American male faculty, thus, causing a shift in academic norms of the African American male college student. Empowering existing faculty by allowing them to facilitate African American male-centered internship trainings can have departmental and campus-wide benefits. Interns can learn from existing faculty who share their identity and possible struggles. Existing faculty might feel partially responsible for ushering in the new team of African American male educators, qualified interns could guest lecture courses, and departments can cut spending costs by hiring external intern course facilitators.

This study included subquestions designed to examine student efforts, sense of belonging, and instructors’ efforts. Findings revealed student success was motivated by the active presence of African American male instructors. Based on these findings, it is recommended leaders and decision makers use their privilege to challenge the status quo. Seeing inequities as a matter of urgency and implementing inclusive systemic program change is a major recommendation. Becoming a powerful ally means more than typing “Black Lives Matter” in an email signature. Instructors of color share the same earned degree and experience as other races. Rather than standing by, powerful allies can create processes, fund programs, and make decisions to include these instructors as representatives of the institution’s fabric. These types of leadership decisions would actively practice mission statements and department principles preached on websites of many institutions.

**Changes in Educational Practice**

Creating a caring and supportive learning environment can have positive impacts. However, actionable methods, as well as measurable progress toward specific goals can make success for African American male students a clearer reality. This section will provide detailed recommendation
specific to changes in educational practice. These recommendations are intended for educators in roles who have regular contact with the African American male student demographic.

**Student-Instructor Mentorship Programs**

Gender-specific campus programming should develop and operate student-instructor mentorship programs. Research on culturally specific mentoring for African American males suggested this form of tailored mentoring could be beneficial to academic development and can potentially remove culturally specific barriers (Watson et al., 2015). A study by Brooms and Davis (2017) found pairing peer-to-peer bonding found in campus fraternity settings with African American male student-faculty mentoring caused a positive and productive college experience. Students in the study shared interacting with a responsible adult in their professional field of interests provided motivation to succeed academically, as well as comfort from alienation and racial hostility on campus (Brooms & Davis, 2017). African American male instructors would have the ability to partner with programs such as the Male Success Initiative, UMOJA, and A2MEND. Faculty should volunteer mentoring hours to advise male students with shared career and discipline interests. The interaction could include progress reports and documentation needed to receive extra credit in other courses taken by the student. Also, students will build a rapport with instructors while securing creditable references in their career interests to enhance their career trajectory. This same suggestion can develop into a fully funded and functioning internship program solidifying a college-to-career process that will cause upward mobility.

**Culturally Relevant Curriculum**

A math instructor, mentioned in this study, provided successful examples of African American men in the math discipline to successfully inspire retention and maintain the participant’s interest in math. Adding a curriculum that directly and indirectly implements positive and powerful examples of underrepresented races, genders, and cultures could increase student participation. Students could make a stronger connection to the learning process if they are represented in learning content. One step for educators can be learning the cultures of students to incentivize campus and classroom
participation. A culturally relevant curriculum could expand from the classroom and include options for students to earn credit for exploring cultures outside of their own. Students can build on transferable professional skills as well. For example, to help with time management, an African American male instructor mentioned in the study created an opportunity for the participant to leverage their extra credit assignments. The participant managed their time effectively by exploring campus culture for extra credit points, while becoming a member of a racially focused counseling program. This success can apply to other educational practices regarding race, culture, and sense of belonging. African American faculty and faculty of other races should incentivize the discovery experience by proposing cultural discovery exercises. The experiences could be discussed in classes to intersect culture and course content and, ultimately, reach inclusivity goals. Department chairs could encourage instructors to create topics that highlight cultures of a diverse audience while communicating culturally tailored resources to students. This encouragement can ensure African American males, their history, and communities are displayed in a positive light.

Summary of the Dissertation

Lack of African American male representation can limit inspiration, academic abilities, and access to professional opportunities (Harris et al., 2011). Supportive shared identity student–instructor interaction can decrease 1st year college dropout rates for African American male students (Sanon-Jules, 2006). This study interviewed African American male students who recalled experiences with African American male instructors. Each participant in the study indicated instructors’ ability to culturally empathize, honestly care, and create active learning moments for them (Roulard et al., 2014).

Focus groups and semistructured interviews helped identify findings relative to questions highlighting student educational efforts, sense of belonging, and efforts of African American male instructors. CRT, gender, and validation theory served as a tool to analyze the interactions. Nonempathetic instructor experiences shared by students aligned with the first major tenet of CRT, which states that racism has an ordinary presence hiding behind color-blindness and meritocracy to
give oppressors a sense of irresponsibility for the misfortunes of African Americans and people of color (Hartlep, 2009). Gender theory describes the ways male privilege can impact gender beliefs that prioritize men over women and could inevitably present itself in settings of higher learning (Kimmel & Wade, 2018). Findings also revealed characteristics of African American male instructors who were cognizant of participant hardships. Finding categories connected to sense of belonging and caring instructor efforts communicated a patient and supportive environment free of stigmas, labels, and judgment. Participants felt their African American male instructor was aware of the need to provide reinforced encouragement to confirm student abilities aligning with the purpose of validation theory (Rendón, 1994).

Educational leaders and allies of all forms can use these findings to inform their methods and intentions involving African American male students. This study calls to action strategic planners, development officers, and key stakeholders of colleges and universities in California with African American male student enrollment. Directors can benefit their institutions by using cases shared in this study to better support this demographic. Providing a safe, supportive, and successful academic experience to this student population is a giant step in the direction of facilitating just, equitable, and inclusive education.
APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

This protocol is derived from the research questions guiding the study. The focus group protocol will contain general questions gauging the magnitude of topic understanding of the participant. It will also identify general experiences related to the topic. The interview protocol contains questions targeting the details of the student experience with African American male professors.

1. How do first-generation African American male community college students describe their experience and efforts in class with African American male instructors?
2. How do first-generation African American male community college students describe their sense of belonging in classes taught by African American male instructors?
3. How do first-generation African American male community college students describe African American male instructors’ efforts in motivating them to pass their courses, pursue educational goals, or complete their academic programs?

Focus Group Protocol

1. Please share your campus experience as it relates to awareness of ethnic culture.
2. Please describe your interaction with instructors of different race and gender.
3. Think about your social identity in relation to the college environment. What inspired you to succeed in today’s higher education system?
4. What examples of cultural support and validation do you receive in class?
5. What effect does gender and the instructor have on the inspiration of learning class material?
6. What effects do you feel race may have on the quality of learning for African American males?
7. How would you describe your experience with a college professor of the same race and gender?
Interview Protocol

1. Reflecting on your interaction with instructors of the same gender and which interactions provided the inspiration, motivation, and support needed to be successful?

2. Reflecting on your interaction with instructors of the same gender and what interactions did not provide inspiration, motivation, and support needed to be successful?

3. Please describe the inclusive characteristics and practices implemented by the instructor.

4. How would you describe your sense of value and magnitude of support in a classroom with an instructor of similar race, ethnicity, and gender?

5. What contributions from the instructor aided in the development of the skills needed to perform in and out of the class?

6. How did the instructor acknowledge and validate your race and gender in their teaching role?

7. If you were an instructor, what steps would you take toward attracting the African American male student to your class in ways that would inspire them to believe higher education is a desirable need for increased success?

8. Please describe your most memorable success in a class with an African American male instructor and explain the feelings you encountered and connected to the moment.

9. What image or embodied representation comes to mind that represents your ideal definition of a culturally supportive and inspiring instructor?
APPENDIX B

EMAIL LETTER OF INVITATION

Attention African American Male College Students

Greetings!

You are invited to participate in a study to help gain a better understanding of the experiences that African American male students have with African American male instructors. Students will receive a $10 Amazon gift card for their participation.

Brandon D. Harris, faculty member at Los Angeles Valley College and doctoral student in Educational Leadership at California State University, Fullerton, will conduct this study under the supervision of the chair, and research committee.

If you identify as male or man of African American descent, completed a course with an instructor of same race and gender at the community college level, and are at least 18 years of age, you are eligible participant for the study.

You will be invited to one focus group and one individual interview if necessary. When you reply with your confirmation, you will receive an email with focus group date, time, and location information. You may exercise the right to decline or exit any part of the study process at any time after your confirmation. Data for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. I will use a pseudonym (alias) in place of your name in the documents associated with this study. Identities of all participants in this study will remain confidential.

If you would like to participate in this study, please let the sender know. If you have questions regarding details, please contact, Brandon D. Harris at xxxxx@csu.fullerton.edu. For further research verification please contact the dissertation chair (advisor) Dr. Ned Doffoney at xxxxx@xxxxx.

If you require more information on the rights of human research participants, please contact the CSUF Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (657) 278-7640 or irb@fullerton.edu.

Thank you in advance for your interest in this study!

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PT/Faculty at LACCD, SOC Department
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