Non-Cognitive Factors that Contribute to the Black Gender Gap in Community College Persistence

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

NON-COGNITIVE FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE BLACK GENDER GAP IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE PERSISTENCE

By

Simeon Antonio Richardson

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NON-COGNITIVE FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE BLACK GENDER GAP IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE PERSISTENCE

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Although female college students in the United States from all racial and ethnic groups outperform their male counterparts in key academic areas, including retention and persistence rates, the college persistence gap between Black women and Black men is the widest. The purpose of this study was to explore if there is a difference in intent-to-persist between Black males and Black females, and to identify the role non-cognitive factors may play. The survey results obtained from self-identified Black students at one community college were analyzed using a hierarchical multiple regression with four subsequent blocks to explore the effect on intent-to-persist using student gender, grit, family influences, sociocultural influences, and their interactions as predictors. The results of the study showed that family influence was found to be a significant predictor of persistence, regardless of gender. Also, while the persistence of Black males was virtually unaffected by sociocultural influences, Black female persistence was significantly, negatively affected by the same sociocultural influences. The results suggest that higher education personnel should validate all students but especially community college students who may be nontraditional, Black students should continue to overcome environmental pull while continuing to assertively pursue their academic goals and families should support their college students without exerting excessive pressure. Future research recommendations are provided.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2016) reported that the number of postsecondary degrees conferred has increased for all racial/ethnic groups since academic year 2002-2003. Bachelor’s degrees earned by Hispanics more than doubled in 10 years, a 110% increase—from 89,000 to 187,000. In the same span, the number of bachelor’s degrees earned by Blacks increased by 54% (124,000 to 191,000); Asian/Pacific Islanders by 48% (88,000 to 130,000); Whites by 23% (995,000 to 1.2 million); and American Indian/Alaska Native students by 16% (9,900 to 11,400) (NCES, 2016).

Across many racial and ethnic groups, it has been widely known that female students excel far more than male students in terms of enrollment and graduation rates at higher education institutions. For instance, NCES reported that larger shares of undergraduate degrees were awarded to female students than to male students in 2012-2013. Specifically, the proportion of bachelor’s degrees earned by female students were 65% for Blacks, 60% for American Indians/Alaska Natives and Hispanics, 59% for those of two or more races, 56% for both Pacific Islanders and Whites, and 54% for Asians (NCES, 2016).

Although female college students in the United States across all racial and ethnic groups outperform their male counterparts in key academic areas, including college grade point average, graduation rates, enrollment rates, and retention or persistence rates, the performance gap between Black women and Black men is the widest. Of undergraduate degrees awarded to Black students, Black women earned about 66% while their male counterparts earned 34% (NCES, 2016). Such gender disparity was much wider among
Blacks who pursue associate degrees. NCES (2016) reported that women have earned more associate degrees in academic years 2002 and 2012, which were shown as 57% of Asian women, 61% of White women, 62% of Hispanic women, and 56% of Pacific Islanders women. However, the largest difference was found among Blacks, showing Black women earned 67% of all associate degrees earned by Black Americans, while Black men earned 33%. A question lies in why the gender disparity among Blacks is significant in associate degree completion, which is the focus of the current study. The general purpose of this study is to find if there is a difference in intent-to-persist between Black male and female college students. Furthermore, the study seeks to discover whether non-cognitive factors including levels of engagement, levels of motivation, family influence, and sociocultural influence explain gender gap in college degree persistence among Blacks.

**Defining Black Students**

Many have considered African American as a formal way of describing a member of the American Black community; however, Black immigrants and their descendants can also be considered alongside native-born Blacks and their descendants. Moreover, many Blacks, as well as immigrants in general, primarily were identified based on their country of origin or religion in lieu of their actual, or socially constructed, race. Therefore, it should be first noted that in the current study, Blacks are defined as people whose lineage originated from the African diaspora and all students that identify themselves as such. Therefore, in the current study, no distinction was made among diverse subgroups of the Black community in America. The terms used to describe Black in the United States have not changed over time, but those who are not Black have also mainly ascribed them.
Whether Blacks were considered or called colored, Negro, African American, or much worse, how to describe people based on their melanin level as well as the origin of their ancestors have long been met not only with intentionally demeaning ideas of inferiority but also with altruistic ambiguity.

**Persistence and Retention of Students in Higher Education**

Student attrition has been one of the outstanding issues for the higher education institutions since rankings and funding are usually tied to student retention, among other things (Education Trust, 2009). Retention and graduation rates also play a vital role in accountability initiatives. Postsecondary institutions are now mandated to report retention and graduation rates as part of “Student Right to Know” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Ideally, the best tool for preventing student attrition is the effective combination of the institution’s strategies to keep the student, or retention, and the student’s ability to continue until completion, or student persistence. Higher education institutions espouse the importance and need for diverse student bodies, but they also have the responsibility to address students’ needs and provide educational and social settings that are conducive to diverse student learning, engagement, and success.

Persistence and retention are vital for the success of students and institutions of higher education. Tinto (1982) emphasized the importance of retention and persistence in higher education, which represent two slightly distinct constructs. Retention is focused on the collective characteristics of the social and academic systems of the college or university to support student completion. On the other hand, persistence is focused on the attributes, skills, values, and commitment levels of students that contribute to the completion of their educational careers (Tinto, 1982). Students might leave college
because of the educational and social environment of the college. Others might leave college because of financial, family, or motivational factors while still others leave due to academic failure or other external or internal influences.

All students, specifically minorities, must overcome the institutional, academic, social, family, or psychological barriers they may face. Lederman (2011) reported that minority students receive almost half of need-based funding such as the Federal Pell Grant, even though they make up 38% of the college population because they are more likely to come from low-income families. Moreover, white students receive two times as much merit-based aid that minority students receive. This disparity in the awarding of merit-based aid means that when educational institutions decide who receives merit-based aid, even when academic factors are equal, this aid benefits far more whites than minorities. However, most need-based aid, specifically the Pell Grant, penalizes students heavily for failing to meet academic standards—this includes maintaining a passing grade point average and successfully completing the majority of attempted credits. Failure to do so, especially for students who receive need-based financial aid, may very well spell the end of college aspirations for low SES students who do not persist. In sum, it is pertinent that students who receive some sort of financial aid persist until completion. Therefore, the current research focuses on students’ ability to persist until completion without specific regard for institutional efforts.

**Gender gap in persistence to college completion among Blacks.** Black males lag behind their female counterparts and/or other racial and ethnic groups in key educational outcomes (Harper, 2006). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2012, 15% of all U.S. college students were Black, with Black females showing a substantially
higher enrollment rate than their male counterpart (Census, 2012). Additionally, Harper (2006) found that, “In 2002, Black men comprised only 4.3% of all students enrolled at the institutions of higher education, the same as in 1976” (p. vii). Although the overall number of Black male graduates is low, Toldson (2014) stated, “Black males are not underrepresented in the institutions of higher education. Currently, however, the 12.7 million Black males who are 18 years old and older comprise 5.5% of the adult population in the United States, and the 1.2 million Black male college students comprise 5.5% of all college students” (p. 12). According to Toldson (2014), if the 1.2 million students who were enrolled in undergraduate programs eventually graduated, then the total number of Black males within that age group with college degrees would increase by a startling 71%. Black male representation in college is proportional to their representation in the United States population. However, the salient issue is less related to college enrollment rates of Black men and more so to the rate of college persistence of Black men.

Black women graduate with associate degrees at twice the rate of Black men, 67% to 33%, which is even larger than the gender gap between Blacks who earn bachelor’s degrees (NCES, 2016). In addition, Wood and Williams (2013) found that most Black male students begin their postsecondary education in a community college. Because Black women earn twice as many associate degrees and most Black males begin their higher education in community colleges, it is necessary and pertinent to study the persistence to completion gap between Blacks specifically in community college-type institutions.
Not only have researchers acknowledged gender gap, but they have raised concerns. Baum and Payra (2004), and Laura (2005) acknowledged that some of the benefits of earning a college degree include gainful employment, improved living quality, and becoming an informed and democratic citizen (as cited in Tekleselassie et al., 2013). So, if potential earning in addition to the aforementioned benefits of higher education are valid, then how will this affect the current and next generation of Black men and their ability to compete college in a global and dynamic world, establish financial independence, and secure the future of their families? That Black men have the lowest proportion of earned college degrees across all races and ethnic groups is an important generational issue.

Therefore, this study seeks to identify the potential non-cognitive factors that might explain why Black males are less likely to persist in college than Black females. If the non-cognitive factors, such as grit, family influence, and sociocultural influence impact same-race genders differently, then higher education professionals, families, school systems, researchers, and communities can better understand the differential roles that these factors may play in student persistence for this group of students.

Factors Explaining Gender Gap in Persistence to College Completion Among Blacks

There are several potential factors that researchers have attributed to persistence or attrition in college. Examples of these factors include previous academic achievement (Braxton, Duster, & Pascarella, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980), race (Braxton, Duster, & Pascarella, 1980), socioeconomic status (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983), gender (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980), psychological factors such as tenacity and optimism (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), and family influence (Smith & Fleming, 2006).
**Previous academic achievement.** College preparation in high school is one barrier impeding the college success of Black male students. Preparation includes grade point averages (GPA), SAT/ACT scores, college preparation and Advanced Placement courses. Black male students are disproportionately placed in special education and are underrepresented in gifted and advanced placement classes at the high school level compared to their White male counterparts (Toldson, 2008). Some inner-city schools lack the resources to provide these students with technology and instructional personnel to provide a quality, competitive education (Adelman, 2006). In addition, concentrated Black populations suffer from poorer facilities, less-qualified educators, and outdated learning materials (Schmidt, 2009).

In addition, studies have found that Black men are likely to experience more aggressive and harmful discrimination and stereotyping in K-12 settings (Green, 1991; Majors & Billson, 1992). Although academic preparation is a factor in college persistence, previous academic performance, including GPA and test scores will not be considered in this study because this research is designed to determine if non-academic factors like grit and family influence impact students’ ability to persist. Furthermore, the setting of the research is a community college-type environment. These institutions only require high school completion for admission; therefore, many students have not taken standardized college entrance exams, and students are accepted without regard for their high school GPAs.

**Psychological factors.** Several researchers have argued that there are more phenomena at play when it comes to student success in the world of academia (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976; Sellers, Chavous, & Cooke, 1998; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984). One area
that has received attention for understanding persistence and completion of Black college
students is sheer will and related intangibles. In a qualitative study of 24 high-achieving
Black male students on a predominantly white college campus, researchers found that
these men of color employed a “prove-them-wrong” coping mechanism. This
psychological response to an unfounded view of Black intellectual inferiority was
observed through the adoption of a hyper-assertive academic posture (Moore, Madison-
Colomore, & Smith, 2003).

Moreover, a key focus for this study is whether same-race male and female
students display different levels of grit, which is defined as a non-cognitive factor by
Duckworth and Quinn (2009). Grit is the ability to persevere and accomplish objectives
when faced with external or internal obstacles, deterrents, and setbacks. It focuses on the
ability to adapt, adjust, or change the individual’s mentality in order to meet the objective
and as a precursor for learning. In essence, grittier people persevere and refuse to quit and
thus ultimately reach their goals. While some people may be innately gritty, the skills and
traits necessary to become gritty can be taught, so if grit can be successfully adopted,
then students can be taught to persist and thus increase completion rates.

**Family influence.** Lastly, the impact of family expectations, support, and
attitudes may also be an element that should be considered in understanding gender gap
in persistence to completion gap between Black women and Black men. Researchers
have identified family factors that contribute to variation in college performance (Clark,
1983; Schmidt, 2009; Smith & Fleming, 2006). The expectations and involvement of
parents in their students’ education seem to play a prominent role in desired outcomes.
This seems to be especially relevant for minority families. For Black families, in
particular, Smith and Fleming (2013) found that parents displayed different guidance tendencies when it came to their sons and daughters. For their sons, the parents in the study guided their sons based on the fear of their sons running into trouble or potentially volatile situations involving the legal system, drugs, or overt racism and thus believed that it would be best to set reasonable and flexible postsecondary goals for their sons.

On the other hand, the parents in Smith and Fleming’s (2013) study thrust their daughters onto a college pathway with much less worry about criminal activities, institutional racism, and tragic outcomes. The motivation was the fear that, without a college degree, their daughters would become dependent on another person or system. In sum, the study found that Black parents, disproportionately single and female, raised their daughters to become academic achievers in order to attain financial independence, while they raised their sons to avoid the entrapments of criminal activity and racism (Smith & Fleming, 2013). While the fears and motivations of the parents studied were realistic and altruistic, the long-term results of more consistent educational involvement, higher educational expectations, and positive affirmations and reinforcement seem to be factors that will continue to benefit their daughters and, if not addressed, be a detriment to their sons.

Sociocultural influence. Many researchers have also attempted to explain the gender gap in college persistence based on sociocultural factors. First, the lack of Black male teachers at the high school level is another barrier to the positive role modeling and cultural capital necessary for Black men to excel in high school and exhibit college preparedness. Minority teachers seem to understand minority students better (Scott, Taylor, & Palmer, 2013). Toldson and Snitman (2010) reported that there were 987, 508
Black female elementary teachers and 66,854 Black male teachers. Given that women choose the K-12 teaching profession far more than men across all racial and ethnic groups, it is still worth noting the absence of Black males in the most formative education years.

Not only are there fewer Black male teachers in K-12, but there are fewer Black male instructors at higher education institutions. A study conducted by Tinto and Russo (1993) found that, “Many students commented on the range of diversity as a way to learn more than just about each other. They saw student and faculty diversity as important factors in learning about the content” (p. 23). Furthermore, Smith and Fleming (2016) add:

Sociologists posit that society does not adequately reward Black men for academic achievement, whereas economists explain that Black men exhibit typically pragmatic, male tendencies by conducting cost-benefit analyses that result in post–high school choices other than 4-year college enrollment (p.72).

**The Current Study**

The current study is not designed or intended to add to the litany of research that seeks to explain the “problems” with Black male college students (Aronson & Steele, 1995; Ogbu, 2008; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Rather, the intent of the study is to explore if there is a gender difference in intent-to-persist, and whether Black men and women exhibit different level of grit and are impacted by family and sociocultural factors differently. The purpose of the study is to examine if Black males and females intend to persist at similar rates, and to identify key areas in which same-race students can employ or develop similar non-cognitive skills as same-race peers.
Since research (Tinto, 1982; 1993) has shown that unwelcoming college environments that do not fit well with the individual’s characteristics can lead to attrition, and since Black women would logically share these experiences as well as Black men, then why do Black women persist at a higher rate than Black men? In addition, since racism and microaggressions affect some Black college students and contribute to attrition, and although Black men may encounter more aggressive forms of racism than Black women, racism and microaggressions still affect Black women also. Yet, Black women persist and complete at twice the rate of Black men. Furthermore, although academic and social engagement and involvement seem to be the most consistent theories related to student persistence and completion, for community college students, there seems to be a more outstanding disparity between the needs, the opportunities, and the importance of social engagement. However, would this not affect Black women at community colleges also? Since the answer is assumed to be affirmative, why do Black women still persist and complete associate degrees at twice the rate of Black males?

In sum, the current study aims to identify, primarily, if there is a difference in level of persistence between Black males and Black females, and then determine the role of grit, family influence, and sociocultural influences in persistence to completion between Black women and Black men. If Black women are grittier and experience or interpret family and sociocultural influences differently, then these could differentially affect the persistence of Black men who may be taught to employ similar attitudes and skills when compared to Black females.
Research Questions of the Current Study

The current study aims to identify the role of non-cognitive factors that contribute to the gap in persistence to completion between Black women and Black men attending community colleges. The research purpose was answered by statistically examining the following research questions:

1. Is there any gender gap in persistence to completion among Blacks who attend community college?
2. To what extent has grit explained gender gap in persistence to completion among Blacks who attend community college?
3. To what extent have family influence explained gender gap in persistence to completion among Blacks who attend community college?
4. To what extent have sociocultural influence explained gender gap in persistence to completion among Blacks who attend community college?

Theoretical Framework

Persistence and retention are obviously vital for the success of students and institutions of higher education, especially since retention and graduation rates are now consistently connected to institutional rankings and, more altruistically, connected to the mission of community colleges. Many theories and models have proposed to explain student persistence and sought to explain the experiences of Black college students. Of them, the current study was based on (1) Tinto’s Model of Student Departure, (2) Chickering and Reisser’s Seven Vectors of Identity Development, (3) Cross and Fhagen-Smith’s Model of Black Identity Development (2001), and (4) Rendon’s Theory of Validation.
**Tinto’s model of student departure.** Tinto’s Model of Student Departure (1988; 1993) posits that students enter higher education with specifically unique characteristics including socioeconomic factors, family influence and support, and cultural values. Tinto proposed that the institution also has unique qualities. When the culture of the institution fits well with the individual’s characteristics, then the student is more likely to stay. If there is unresolved conflict, however, the student may depart or drop out. Students leave for various reasons including career concerns, family needs or changes, as well as health-related factors, so fit matters, but it is not the only determinant.

**Rendon’s validation theory.** Rendon’s Validation Theory (1994) posits that students, especially “nontraditional” students, have different motivations to navigate the transition to college. “The impact of validation on students who have experienced powerlessness, doubts about their own abilities to succeed, and/or lack of care cannot be understated” (Rendon & Munoz, 2011, p. 12). Rendon’s Validation Theory (1994) is concerned with the plight of low-income, first-generation, and adult students that prioritizes the proactive affirmation of students by in-class agents such as faculty and other students as well as out of class agents such as friends and family. This validation of students as capable, knowledgeable, and valuable members of the college community results in personal development and appropriate social adjustment (Rendon & Munoz, 2011). Although the current study institution offers baccalaureate programs, the majority of degrees awarded are by far associate degrees; therefore, the population and institution has the characteristics of a community college. The importance for faculty-inspired validation is even more pertinent since Rendon (1994) found that, “the greatest need for
academic validation was expressed by community college students and students attending a predominantly Black, urban university” (p. 40).

**Chickering and Reisser’s seven vectors of identity development.** Chickering and Reisser’s Seven Vectors of Identity Development (1993) offers that students’ concepts of themselves as independent individuals with strong opinions, talents, skills, and ethics help define their identity. Chickering believes that the first four vectors occur within the first two years of college, which would be equal to the two-year scope of community colleges. The new experiences and knowledge that students explore and face in the first few years of college as well as the importance of managing their emotions make this theory relevant to this study. Many community college students may struggle to successfully move through the third and fourth vectors in which they move through autonomy and understand that they are completely responsible for achieving their goals.

**Cross and Fhagen-Smith’s model of Black identity development.** Cross and Fhagen-Smith’s Model of Black Identity Development (2001) conceptualized the process of Black identification using six sectors. The first few sectors depend on external factors like parents, family, and society. However, by the third and fourth sectors, individuals begin to develop a Black self-concept based on their own internal beliefs as well as external influences. Since many community college students are not the traditional age and since the sectors are not age-fixed, many students experience sector five or Adult Nigrescence while in college.

In sum, these four theories are the foundations for this study. Whether the culture of the institution affects these students in different ways could impact their decision to persist until graduation. Next, Rendon’s Validation Theory helps to understand the plight
of low-income, minority, and first-generation students who may have experienced invalidation from family, society, and in educational settings. Finally, Cross and Fhagen-Smith’s Model of Black Identity Development is important because the current study seeks to determine the significance of experiences of Black students as they move through the stages of Black identity formation. If there is a gender difference in the way these stages are perceived and addressed, then there may be clarity and, more importantly, great opportunities for Black college students, higher education professionals, and families to glean coping strategies.

**Significance of the Current Study**

Specifically, of the 120 Black students that began at the studied campus in fall 2014, only 62 or 51.7% returned the next semester (Alvarez, 2016). If there is a gender difference in whether Black college students intend to persist toward and ultimately meet their educational goals, and if Black women employ attributes such as grit and interpret or are affected differently by family influences and sociocultural factors, then others can be taught to employ those same skills and attitudes. In addition, and just as importantly, if some families and society are presenting gender-biased messages that significantly affect the gap in persistence to completion, then the results of this study can help make them aware of and begin to alter these messages. By doing so, more students - and specifically those Black males that struggle to persist to completion - can realize the benefits of earning a college degree, higher education professionals can retain more students, and more concrete strategies can be added to the void of research concerning gender gaps between Black students in community college settings.
As stated earlier, according to Toldson (2014), “if the 1.2 million Black male students who were enrolled in undergraduate programs eventually graduated, then the total number of Black males within that age group with college degrees would increase by a startling 71%” (p. 13). This underlies the importance of identifying why some Black women persist and complete when faced with many of the same obstacles as some Black men. Racially-charged mistreatment, lack of consistent financial support, unfortunately large proportion of single-family homes, and the impact of being a first-generation college attendee are issues that affect Black men and Black women and, of course, these issues affect other racial and ethnic groups as well. According to Smith and Fleming (2006) “Empirical research has little to say about how Black families might unintentionally contribute to the phenomenon of African American male-to-female college enrollment disparity at the micro level” (p. 72-73).

The need for this study is long overdue. Black men are attending college more now than ever before, but they are not persisting to completion at the rates of other males and their same-race female counterparts. There are few studies that focus on why Black males are dropping out of community college, specifically. There is substantial research regarding Black male attrition at four-year institutions; however, Wood and Williams (2013) questioned the value of applying research gained from studying Black male students that attend four-year institutions when juxtaposed with those that attend community colleges. Thus, it is important to explore why Black males are less likely than Black women to persist in community colleges.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The main focus of this research is to determine if non-cognitive factors represented as grit, family influence, and sociocultural influence contribute to the gap in persistence to completion between Black female and Black male college students. First, Black students in higher education will be reviewed, including a brief history and how Black students perform in comparison to other groups. Next, the gender gap among Blacks in higher education is discussed and juxtaposed to other groups. Then persistence to completion, as it pertains to Black college students, are explored just before possible factors that contribute to gender gap are offered. The community college environment and specifically the relationship between Black students and community colleges subsequently is considered. Lastly, foundational theories as well as prior and recent research are discussed.

Blacks and Higher Education

Before the American Civil War and more specifically the Emancipation Proclamation, there were about 28 Blacks with baccalaureate degrees in the United States (Drewry & Doermann, 2001). The Morrill Act of 1862 sparked the construction of several colleges but those colleges largely refused Black applicants. Roebuck and Murty (1993) state that the reason Historically Black Universities and Colleges were developed mainly, “To get millions of dollars in federal funds for the development of white land-grant universities, to limit African American education to vocational training, and to prevent African Americans from attending white land-grant colleges” (p. 27). Several Black colleges were established during Reconstruction. The Morrill Act of 1890, however, provided federal funds and land for the establishment of more Black colleges such as Florida Agricultural and Manufacturing University, Fort Valley State, Alabama
Historically Black colleges, such as those in operation in Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, and Delaware, were born out of necessity due to racism and segregation.

Cowan and Maguire add that, “By 1900, there were more than 20,000 Blacks in college and more than 2,000 Black college graduates, most of whom attended Historically Black Colleges (HBCUs)” (as cited in Smith & Fleming, 2006, p. 74). From the mid to late 19th century until the middle of the 20th century, most Black colleges also existed as elementary and secondary schools. However, in 1953, Black colleges became higher education institutions. Since 1954’s Brown vs Board of Education ruling outlawed segregation in public schools, Black students steadily decided not to attend the Historically Black Colleges (HBCUs) and Universities that were usually their only opportunities to obtain college degrees and instead chose to attend predominantly White institutions across America.

This transition from HBCUs to Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) for Black students happened rather quickly. According to Harris et al. (1975), in 1950, there were 118 Black higher education institutions with all but 4 of them in the south, and these institutions educated 85% of Black college students. Lyons (1974) added that in 1970, less than two decades after Brown vs Board of Education, “In Kentucky 72%, Florida 54%, Tennessee 37% and South Carolina 28% of the Black student enrollment was at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)” (as cited in Harris et al., 1975, p. 61). Therefore, over the past 100 years, there has been a transition from the vast majority of Black college students attending HBCUs, to the steady retreat of the Black community from HBCUs and into state universities, for-profit institutions and community colleges.
According to Humphries (1994), in 1950, there were 50,000 total Black college students and some did attempt to attend PWIs in the south such as the University of Georgia. In 1951, the Georgia state legislature, however, threatened to cut off all state funding to any Georgia institution that admitted a Black student. In 1960, there were 200,000 Black college students with 90% enrolled in HBCUs. The south was very slow about implementing the 1954 Brown vs Board of Education ruling, and therefore, it took years for southern higher education institutions to integrate, with University of Georgia allowing its first two Black students, by court decree, in 1961 (Hatfield, 2016). In 1970, there were nearly 470,000 Black college students and the majority of them were no longer enrolled at HBCUs (Humphries, 1994).

One of the factors related to the steady increase in college enrollment and completion for white men was the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 or G.I. Bill of Rights (G.I. Bill), which afforded college tuition and other benefits to war veterans (McDaniel et al., 2011). Black men, on the other hand, especially those in the south, benefitted much less than their White counterparts, due in part to segregation and severely constrained state financial investment in institutions that Blacks could attend (Rury, 2009). White women also made substantial gains in college completion in the period after World War II and the Korean War. One reason for this increase was their marked increase in the labor force. Participation in the labor force for all women increased from 20% at the beginning of the 20th century to 60% by 2000 (Fischer & Hout, 2006). Prior to the 20th century, most teachers were male, and women were not allowed to become teachers if they were married. However, by the 1940’s, those exclusions began to wane and women flooded higher education in order to become
teachers as well as nurses (Rury, 2009). In addition, Goldin and Katz (2001) added that women’s liberation movements and contraceptive methods allowed women to control their fertility and thus mitigate some barriers to their pursuit of college degrees and more lucrative careers (as cited in McDaniel et al., 2011).

McDaniel et al. (2011) stated that White females surpassed White males in bachelor degree completion in the mid-1980s. In contrast, Black women made up more than half of the enrollment in historically Black colleges and universities in the early 1950s. Prior to 1974, degree completion by race and gender data was not consistently tracked. Interestingly, the current phenomenon of Black women graduating at higher rates than Black men seems to reflect a long-term female advantage. To be clear, the gender gap in college completion has existed since 1940 for Blacks but only over the last few decades for Whites. The number of degrees completed by Blacks has steadily increased over the past century but more rapidly for Black women (McDaniel et al., 2011).

Although Black students attend all types of institutions, according to Trends in Community Colleges (2016), Black students were overrepresented in for-profit institutions, with Blacks making up 25% of all for-profit students. Horton (2015) stressed, however, that Black males are currently more likely to begin postsecondary education via community colleges. Black males, just as all community college students, are more likely to be older, employed or seeking employment, and independent. They may also generally have lower degree expectations. Many Black male students, like other races and ethnicities, have children, and when combined with outside employment, they may not realistically see long-term schooling or graduate programs in their future,
especially if they do not have sustainable financial resources. Lederman (2011) added that minority students receive 45.8% of need-based funding, like the Federal Pell Grant; even though they make up 38% of the college population because they are more likely than white students to be low-income. The aforementioned challenges these community college students face and juggle further justify this study in hopes of identifying elements that contribute to persistence to completion that their Black female counterparts either do not share, experience differently, or are able to overcome.

Throughout history, and currently, Black men with bachelor’s degree had lower employment rates than White men with the same level of education. McDaniel et al. (2011) suggests, “Even highly educated Black males faced barriers to employment commensurate with their level of education” (p. 894). Rury (2009) added that racism against Blacks was so pervasive in the employment market in the north and especially in the south that it seriously hampered the advantages of attending and completing college (as cited in McDaniel et al., 2011).

Although women in general were affected by the labor market, Black women in 1930 were three times more likely than White women to work even though by 1970, that gap had shrank to 1.3 times more likely (McDaniel et al., 2011). Goldin (1977) added that Black women worked more than White women regardless of educational level, number of children, or income. “Historical differences in labor force participation rates of Black and White women arguably contributed to the higher rate of college completion of Black women relative to Black men” (McDaniel et al., 2011, p. 895).
In sum, Black women have completed college at a higher rate than Black males for over 70 years, although the gap was much smaller in decades prior to 1980. This historical gender gap in completion between Blacks seems to be based on a lack of access to equal resources, lack of access to high-paying occupations, and women’s incentives to complete college and enter the labor force. In addition, since working was more socially acceptable for Black women than White women, incomes were lower in Black families. Black women seemed to have more incentive to attend and complete college than Black men (McDaniel et al., 2011).

Currently, the gender gap in educational attainment is larger for Blacks than whites. This is the result of different historical trends in Black and white men's and women's college completion. Black women's large advantage in higher education relative to Black men has significant social, economic, and demographic consequences for the Black population (McDaniel et al., 2011).

**Theoretical Foundations**

For the specific purpose of this study, several foundational theories were selected in order to support the key components of this study. To begin with, since Black students move through Chickering’s Vectors and Cross and Fhagen-Smith’s stages of Black identity development simultaneously, these theories help to identify how one gender may interpret or address challenges differently and may help identify issues that may eventually lead to closing the persistence to completion gap. Next, Tinto’s seminal theory about the importance of integration for college students as a precursor for student persistence was also foundational for this study. Tinto’s Model of Student Departure is a foundational theory for this study because intent to persist is the dependent variable.
Finally, the feelings and experiences of validation for these college students will be measured in this study. Thus, Rendon’s (2011) Theory of Validation is a foundational theory for this study. Validation will not be measured in the classroom, but hypothetically, if Black females feel more validated by their families and peers than Black males, this could provide insight into the impact and influence of genuine and consistently supportive reaffirmations that all students can succeed.

**Chickering’s seven vectors of development.** Chickering’s Seven Vectors of Development (1969, 1993) are psychosocial developmental tasks or projects that undergraduate students face. The seven vectors help demonstrate how the college environment can affect students emotionally, physically, intellectually, and socially as students move through stages that help form identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

First, developing competence includes intellectual, physical, and interpersonal competence. Interpersonal skills include listening, comprehending, and effectively functioning in relationships. In this vector, students may enter college with a specific tangible goal but find that their interests, relationships, and motivations change. Second, managing emotions like anger, depression, frustration, and sexual desire without completely stifling these emotions are one of the keys to transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. Third, moving through autonomy toward Interdependence includes developing the ability to take care of oneself, especially when, usually for the first time, the student’s family is no longer primarily responsible for his or her success or failure. The creativity to discover new ideas and then displaying the discipline necessary to implement them is key for this stage.
Fourth, developing mature interpersonal relationships involve tolerating and accepting cultural differences and intimacy. Understanding and respecting individuality instead of prejudging or generalizing is tolerance, while creating genuine and enriching symbiotic relationships is intimacy. Fifth, establishing identity synthesizes all four previous stages and encompasses knowing one’s self. This stage is key to the current study since it encourages grit or the ability to persevere and it is related to validation from valued others. Sixth, developing Purpose includes understanding one’s purpose for attending college. It also involves determining goals, decision-making, and commitments to oneself and others. This stage in particular is of specific importance to the current study since students may struggle to balance commitments to themselves and their families as well as their present and their future. Students may struggle to justify the decision to stay persist for future goals rather than withdraw to pursue current needs such as employment. Lastly, establishing integrity for one’s purpose, values, and the values of others while maintaining self-respect is the focus of this last stage (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Chickering’s Seven Vectors of Development (1993) have been challenged especially as it relates to Black students who are usually developing racial identity at the same time as well as other minorities and low-income students regardless of race.

**Cross and Fhagen-Smith’s model of Black identity development.** Cross and Fhagen-Smith’s Model of Black Identity Development (2001) conceptualized the process of Black identification using six sectors. Palmer, Wood, Dancy, and Strayhorn (2014) argue that “Black racial identity is rooted in William E. Cross’s model of nigrescence [the process of becoming Black]” (p. 81). Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001) emphasized sector five or Adult Nigrescence. This pivotal sector is made of four stages. The first
stage, Pre-encounter, is where students may either appreciate Black culture or have internalized racism. Encounter is when an event causes questioning or conflict with the individual’s Black identity. That event could happen in a classroom, in a social setting, or during some other college-related situation. The experience results in Immersion into the Black culture and causes students to become primarily concerned with issues that mainly affect Blacks. The final stage, Internalization, is when students attempt to integrate their Black culture with the dominant culture. Those that are able to integrate Black and dominant cultures successfully reach wisdom, which is a firm comprehension and internalization of their Blackness.

**Tinto’s (1993) interactionalist theory.** Tinto’s (1993) interactionalist theory about student persistence and retention proposes that students arrive with varying levels of preparation, needs, socioeconomic statuses, abilities, and family backgrounds. Students also arrive with individual academic goals. Furthermore, Tinto believes that individuals and educational institutions constantly exchange socially and educationally, and the student’s integration into the environment is the key to the student’s ability to persist. So, this persistence, according to Tinto’s theory, is based on building educational networks and communities inside and outside of the classroom that integrate students into the social and academic world of the college. Tinto postulated 13 propositions in his 1975 theory.

Braxton et al. (1997) found that based on empirical testing, four of Tinto’s 13 propositions are strongest. One is that student entry attributes impact institutional commitment level. Student entry attributes include family background factors such as socioeconomic status and family education level as well as individual attributes (e.g.,
academic ability, race, and gender). In addition, the initial level of commitment to the institution affects the subsequent commitment level, the level of institutional commitment is positively affected by successful social integration into the institution, and the higher the level of social integration then the higher the chances of student persistence (as cited in Braxton et al., 2000).

Tinto has been criticized by his lack of emphasis on economic concerns that contribute to student attrition (Breier, 2010) as well as the theory’s failure to capture the experiences of nonwhite students (Tierney, 1992). Tinto posits that financial or economic issues may be important to the persistence of some students mainly when those students are deciding where and whether to attend initially. Those students are usually the economically disadvantaged and working class, and most other students are not affected by financial considerations (Breier, 2010). However, 44% of low-income students initially enroll in community colleges while only 15% of high-income students initially choose community colleges.

In addition, the aloofness with which Tinto engages with financial concerns of students seems to disconnect with the trends in community college enrollment. For example, in Trends in Community Colleges, Ma and Baum (2016) reported that 56% of Hispanics, 44% of Blacks, and 39% of Whites enrolled in community colleges in fall 2014. Overall, 42% of all college students enroll in community colleges. Therefore, the impact of the plight of low-income and minority students must be considered in light of Tinto’s assertion that student integration played the most pivotal role in student persistence or attrition.
Although many have questioned whether Tinto’s model and other researchers who tout person-environmental models have relevance to the experiences of the community college student, Halpin (1990) found that there is relevance. The results of Halpin’s (1990) study showed that the academic integration aspect of Tinto’s model does predict persistence. While Tinto’s Model of Student Departure (1993) and Chickering’s Seven Vectors (1993) both look at students’ abilities to interact with the culture of college and that successful assimilation/acculturation of minority or nontraditional students is the key to college success, some researchers have challenged this conceptualization as it relates to minority student college retention and persistence. In particular, the assumption that minority students must separate from their cultural realities and take the responsibility to become incorporated into colleges’ academic and social fabric in order to succeed (with little or no concern to address systemic problems within institutions or to the notion that minority students are often able to operate in multiple contexts) becomes central to the critique of Tinto’s student departure model (Braxton, 2000).

**Rendon’s theory of validation.** According to Rendon and Munoz (2011), “nontraditional” students often attend more affordable community colleges and minority-serving institutions instead of elite, expensive universities. They may not come from families that have constant conversations and high expectations about college, and these students are more likely to be burdened with the costs of college unlike many of their more affluent “traditional” peers. “Nontraditional” students may question their academic abilities due to past invalidation during school and they may have fewer role models or family members that can help them navigate the world of academia, including
understanding the cultural and college capital needed to enroll and persist. Rendon asserts that validation is not akin to coddling and she concedes that many college students should and do persist on their own. She poses that authentic, non-patronizing validation does not make students weaker, rather it makes them stronger by helping them believe in their self-worth and ability to learn.

**Summary.** The foundational theories selected for this study all address the most critical and preeminent areas of the target population. A key to this study is whether Black students interpret and experience the challenges, and stages of Chickering’s vectors and Cross and Fhagen’s path to Black identity in different ways based on their gender. Furthermore, Chickering and Reisser’s Seven Vectors of Identity Development is important because the current study is being conducted in a community college environment, and a focus of the current study is to determine if levels and understandings of autonomy, emotion management, and self-responsibility differ between genders of the same race.

Student persistence is one of the indicators for the success of Black male students, just as it is for all students, so Tinto’s seminal theory of student involvement was used as a foundational theory for this study. Furthermore, for this study, students’ family and out of class support will be measured, justifying the need for Rendon’s Theory of Validation. Further research is necessary to determine how instructors, other students, and college staff influence the sense of validation for particular groups of students, especially in community colleges. This could create a more supportive and affirming atmosphere at home, on campus, and in class that could result in an increased level of confidence, self-worth, and ultimately persistence for all students.
Community College Students and Environment

Community colleges and those institutions that primarily serve two-year degree-seeking students have several key functions. One role of community colleges is to provide students with a two-year degree that prepares students for immediate entrance into their career field of choice. However, arguably, the greatest role of community colleges is to prepare students to transfer to a four-year program after completing their two years of foundational coursework. Bragg (2001) offers that the combination of academic as well as vocational education is positive since it prepares students to understand and succeed in the current global, diverse, and technologically advanced work place.

As discussed earlier, prominent researchers have touted the importance of engagement and involvement for decades. However, student engagement may manifest differently in community college settings, where there is no residential life and all students are transient students. Tinto and Russo (1993) found that in addition to the lack of involvement at community colleges, there are several other factors that affect these students in particular. “Most two-year institutions especially those in urban settings, are non-residential; and a great majority of their students are older, employed while in college, and have multiple obligations that constrain their involvement in college” (p. 16).

Factors Explaining Gender Gap in Persistence to College Completion Among Blacks

Some research has been conducted to attempt to explore factors affecting the gender gap between Black men and women. Brown, Linver, Evans, and DeGennaro (2008), and Hill (2001) have suggested that “gender socialization, along with objective
factors, such as the family’s socioeconomic status (SES), may contribute to variations in educational outcomes between African American men and women” (as cited in Tekleselassie et al., 2013, p. 140). While research has been conducted to study gender differences as it relates to performance and enrollment and while there is research concerning the performance and enrollment of Black students in comparison or contrast with students of other races and ethnic groups, there are still few clear answers that explain and offer strategies for closing the persistence to completion gap between Black women and Black men, especially at the community college. Tekleselassie, Malery, and Choi (2013) admitted the following:

Research in higher education has provided ample evidence of the differences among men and women on college enrollment and degree attainment. The research evidence, however, is unclear about which factors contribute to this gender gap and what strategies help reduce the gaps (p. 140).

Tekleselassie, Malery, and Choi (2013) conducted a study, in which the gender gap in postsecondary participation was thoroughly explored. However, it served to identify factors that contribute to the enrollment gap between Black women and Black men. In short, the focus of the current study was not to determine why more women attend college, but the focus is to determine gender proportionality in college persistence to completion.

**Grit as non-cognitive factor.** Palmer et al. (2014) define non-cognitive skills as “those attitudes, behaviors, and strategies [such as] motivation, perseverance, and self-control, which facilitate success” (p. 80). Similarly, Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) defined “grit as one’s passion and perseverance toward long-term goals” (as cited in Muenks, Wigfield, Yang, & O’Neal, 2017, p. 599). Duckworth et al. (2007) describe grit as a characteristic similar to self-awareness and self-control specifically
related to long-term, sustained commitment towards one’s goal. Grit has two components: consistency of interests (e.g., “Setbacks don’t discourage me”) and perseverance of effort (e.g., “I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.”).

The 12-question Grit-S includes 6 items that measure these two separate but related areas. Consistency of interest refers to one’s ability to stay interested in a particular activity over a long time, while perseverance of effort refers to one’s ability to overcome obstacles until the objective is met. Muenks et al. (2017) state that a pertinent part of self-control, which is an element of grit, is the ability to overcome urges and resist impulses leading to undesired behavior while Duckworth (2007) contrasts grit from self-control because she believes that self-control refers to short-term temptations while grit refers to “passion and sustained efforts over the long term” (as cited in Muenks et al., 2017). Research has demonstrated that when students self-regulate their learning they perform better, maintain their interest in their tasks, and feel positive about their tasks. This ability to self-regulate is parallel with many elements of grit. Thus, self-regulation and effort regulation seems quite relevant to perseverance of effort, which is one of the two major areas encompassed under grit (Muenks et al., 2017).

**Grit and gender gap in persistence to college completion among Blacks.**

Researchers suggest that gender socialization may add to the differences in educational outcomes amongst Black males and Black females (Brown et al., 2008; Hill, 2001). Research has explored how educational expectations, which include desire, attitude, and motivation, can explain the differences in college outcomes for Black men and Black women.
Research on gender differences in educational expectations among African Americans and Caucasians indicates that females surpass males both in terms of setting higher educational expectations and in actualizing their expectations into attainment (Tekleselassie & Lee, 2007, p. 140).

Overall, research that attempts to discover the role that gender plays in college outcomes is unfortunately limited. According to Tekleselassie et al. (2013), even though there is ample research about the gender differences in educational outcomes, there is little research that identify factors that contribute to this gender gap and strategies for addressing it. However, some researchers have identified certain attitudes like “prove-them-wrong” and grit, that many successful students but particularly successful Black male students display that can positively affect their persistence (Moore, Madison-Colomore, & Smith, 2003). Black women display this attitude as well. It seems that these successful students, regardless of gender, realize that there are external and internal forces that they must overcome, like racism and distractions respectively. While addressing the importance of removing racist barriers from the classroom, Shaun Harper adds:

You can spend hundreds or even thousands of hours helping a Black student learn to be resilient and resist harmful racial stereotypes, but if the guy goes back into a classroom and the professor is still behaving in a racist manner, or has unchecked assumptions about the student’s background, that resilience only goes so far (as cited in Gose, 2014).

Dofat (2015) adds, “So many of America’s students show grit by continuing to show up to school despite what life has thrown at them. It is incumbent upon the rest of the village to show more resilience and help them across the finish line” (p. 37).

Aggressive educational environments affect students’ self-esteem, mental health, and academic achievement (Nadal et al., 2014). In Harper’s (2012) study, the researchers explored institutional programs, peer and familial relationships, and the effects of
individual prowess in garnering social capital in support of the individual’s academic goals and found that these men shared several factors that attributed to their success. Self-determination drives many Black students as it does students who are not Black.

Similarly, Palmer and Strayhorn (2008) delineated how students’ personal goals served as indicators of future achievement, noting that students needed to be aware of their visions and future goals, remain focused, and work tirelessly to realize those.

**Family support and gender gap in persistence to college completion among Blacks.** Researchers have identified several home-related factors that contribute to Black student persistence. Of such factors, involvement with their students’ education and parental expectations are the primary contributors (as cited in Tekleselassie et al., 2013; Clark, 1983; Smith & Fleming, 2006). Although Tinto (1993) asserts that students should disconnect themselves from their past neighborhoods, family, friends, and beliefs in order to be fully integrated and engaged in the college’s culture, for Black and other minority groups, family support is paramount (Barnett, 2004; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Family support was found to decrease stress and provide moral support for Black male students at an Ivy League university (Barnett, 2004). Similarly, Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2014) found that family support was also a key success element for Black male students at an HBCU (as cited in Palmer et al., 2014). Palmer et al. (2014) found that Black male community college students that are overwhelmed by family responsibilities were less likely to be successful.

Although family support and engagement are positively correlated with Black student success, researchers have found that types of familial support and encouragement can vary based on gender. These variations seem to favor Black females over Black
males (Smith & Fleming, 2006). That does not mean that Black parents love their daughters more than they love their sons, rather, that they may unknowingly or purposely set different expectations for their sons and daughters. According to Smith and Fleming (2006), while their fathers dominantly influence white children, Black and Latino children are more likely to be influenced by their mothers. However, Smith and Fleming’s (2006) study on the impact of parental influence on the college choices of Black students, the mothers admitted that American society could be unforgiving and cold towards young Black men. Even so, the parents guided their sons and daughters differently, yet strategically. The mothers in the study of 39 teens generally agreed that they had to use more intrusively vigilantly monitor their sons’ activities and behaviors to ensure that they did not engage in illicit activity. One mother in the story posited that the trend of decreasing Black male involvement in higher education is a direct link to the increase in Black and brown men entering the prison system.

Parents in Smith and Fleming’s (2006) study feared incarceration for their sons and guided them in ways that they could closely monitor their activities; however, for their daughters, these same parents feared dependence more than survival. They share very similar views of other parents that guide their children based on love and parental fears. Nevertheless, it seems that these fears manifest in disparate forms of educational support and expectations for their sons and daughters. Since these parents feared their daughters being dependent upon others or unable to provide for themselves and their eventual children, they steered their daughters to be stronger, more responsible, and more ambitious about college choice. “The assumptions are that sons will get into trouble, and daughters will get into situations that will make them dependent” (Smith & Fleming,
Parents encouraged their daughters to aim as “high and far” as their aptitude and dreams would allow in hopes that they would attain financial freedom and independence; on the other hand, their sons were encouraged to fly but at a lower altitude and closer to home so that they could continue to protect them from the evils of society like criminal behavior, racism, and an unfair justice system. Albeit altruistic and definitely not far-fetched, the long-term effects of such different guiding educational principles seem to have unintentionally contributed to the gender gap in Black college students (Smith & Fleming, 2006).

**Sociocultural influences and gender gap in persistence to college completion among Blacks.** Sociocultural influences, or what some researchers refer to as environmental factors, are forces and pulls within societies and cultures, such as discrimination, ethnic identities, and attitudes as well as work hours, peer pressure, and media influences that affect the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of people in and around the culture. Several studies have examined the relationship between student persistence and these environmental factors (Mason, 1998; Wood, 2012). Such sociocultural influences and environmental factors are sometimes referred to as “environment pull” and are situations, factors, and influences that mainly occur away from the campus but can definitely affect student success on the campus (Wood & Williams, 2013). Many researchers attribute the struggles of Black male students in particular on sociocultural influences such as financial needs (Tinto, Russo, & Kadel, 1994), lack of cultural capital (Smith, 2001), media portrayals of Black males as endangered species (Gibbs, 1988; Staples, 1991), depictions of being threatening and lazy (Gibbs, 1988; Majors & Billson, 1992; Parham & Moore, 2004), and self-threatening or self-defeating (Steele, 2000).
Wood (2011) suggested that psychological factors are one of the most significant barriers preventing Black students from achieving at similar rates as others, and these psychological factors result from negative messages and inside and outside of the college environment. Wood discussed the influence of social media, the media in general, music and the like that purport negative messages about Blacks and added that these messages reflect in the classroom via teachers, other students, and staff. Therefore, sociocultural influences such as lack of same-race academic role models- especially at community colleges where most Black students begin postsecondary education- academically contradictory messages in music and media, internalization of racist or discriminatory biases in school and the environment, the pull to work more than the research-based 25 hours per week, and other environmental distractions could adversely affect the academic confidence in minority student.

**Summary.** The current study seeks to explore how grit, family influence, and sociocultural influence are related to how Black community college females and males are persist at different rate. Throughout the current study, grit is defined as the ability to stay committed and focused on one’s goal while overcoming and persevering until the goal is complete. Family influences are the attitudes, expectations and behaviors of students’ families that validate the students as valuable, capable individuals. Positive family influence also includes providing a home environment conducive to academic success. Finally, sociocultural influences are factors, such as racism, peer pressure, negative thoughts and beliefs, and moral temptations that usually occur away from the campus but can affect student academic performance and persistence.
Chapter 3: Methods

The current study aims to explore if there is a difference in intent-to-persist between Black males and Black females, and to identify the role of non-cognitive factors that may explain the gender gap in intent-to-persist among Blacks who attend community college using the data collected from self-identified Black, non-Hispanic students. The specific research questions examined in the current study are: (1) Is there a gender gap in persistence to completion among Blacks who attend community college?, (2) To what extent has grit explained gender gap in persistence to completion among Blacks who attend community college?, (3) To what extent have family influences explained gender gap in persistence to completion among Blacks who attend community college?, and (4) To what extent have sociocultural influences explained gender gap in persistence to completion among Blacks who attend community college? In this chapter, details related to population and sample, research design, data collection, variables and measures, and statistical analysis are discussed.

Population and Sample

The target population of this study is self-identified Black degree-seeking students that attend associate degree granting public institutions in the U.S. These inclusive and academically comprehensive institutions are open access, meaning that they accept all students regardless of academic preparedness, income, or racial/ethnic background. In order to make inferences for the population, this study was based on Black non-Hispanic males and females that attend one very large, urban, associate and bachelor-granting institution located in the southeastern United States. In order to be included in this sample, students must be enrolled in a degree-seeking program and not eligible for graduation at the time of research.
The institution where sample was drawn enrolls and graduates more Hispanic students and confers more associate degrees to Black students than any institution in the country. There were 92,085 credit-seeking students enrolled in academic year, 2014-15 and in 2013, 82% of associate of arts graduates had transferred to state universities and colleges within one year of graduation. Of the over 92,000 student enrollments, 17% or more than 15,000 are Black non-Hispanic, while 71% are Hispanic, 9% are White non-Hispanic and 3% Other. Reflecting most community colleges in the country, the average age of credit students is 25, yet 33% of the student body are the traditional age of 18 to 20. To understand the level of college readiness, 51% of incoming students in the community college where sample was drawn needed developmental education in reading, writing, math, or some combination. The high school graduates of this large, urban to suburban county school system were 89% minority, compared to the statewide public-school average of 49% (Miami Dade College Highlights and Facts, 2014).

On the specific campus where the study was conducted, 52.5% of Black students either persisted from fall 2014 to spring 2015 or graduated that spring. For the sake of comparison, 61.8% of White students and 66.2% of Hispanic students from the same campus returned or graduated. In slight contrast, across all campuses of the studied college, 56.9% of Black students persisted or graduated during the same period. Specifically, of the 120 Black students that began at the studied campus in fall 2014, only 62 or 51.7% returned the next semester. Although gender and race specific data was not available, the retention rates of the studied group are concerning (Alvarez, 2016).
Research Design

The current study is cross-sectional and correlational in nature, where data is collected by survey questionnaire administered online. Data collected via survey might suffer from poor student recall or participants may not accurately remember the information being asked and the generalization of questions, which may be inappropriate for some participants. However, due to a high degree of representativeness, lower costs, convenience and precise results since they provide standard definitions to all survey participants, the current study employed a survey methodology for data collection.

Data Collection

The list of the potential sample students for the current study was obtained from the Office of the Registrar in fall 2017. An email was sent to all current students that self-identified as Black non-Hispanic on the college application. The email (See email in appendix A) consisted of a link to the Qualtrics survey questionnaire, student consent form, IRB approval, and four survey sections consisting of general demographical information, intent to persist, the Grit-S survey, and family influence variables. The survey was conducted during the last few weeks of the fall 2017 semester. The survey was open for three weeks, and three separate emails (See appendix B) were sent, with the initial email being sent on 12/7/2017 and two reminder emails on 12/14/2017 and 12/21/2017. The survey was closed on 1/3/2018.

Variables and Measures

In this section, variables and their measurement characteristics are described. The variables used in the current study include students’ perceived persistence to complete
associate degree as a dependent variable, gender, grit, family factors, and social/cultural factors.

**Persistence to college completion.** The dependent variable of this study was persistence, specifically intent to persist. Intent to persist is measured by three items obtained from Davidson et al.’s (2009) College Persistence Questionnaire (CPQ) in the survey. Three questions include: “How likely is it that you will reenroll here next semester”, which specifically measures short-term persistence on a 7-point Likert response scale. Secondly, “How likely is it that you will earn a degree from here”, which measures commitment to the current institution on a 7-point Likert response scale. The last item is “How academically persistent are you?”, which refers to overall persistence on a 10-point Likert response scale.

**Grit.** The Grit-S survey (Appendix 2), which was originally developed by Duckworth and Quinn (2009), consists of 8 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (very much like me). In particular, 1 indicates that the student exhibits a low level of grit, while 5 indicates a high level of grit (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009).

Grit-S is an economical measurement tool for determining persistence and intensity for long-term goals. Sample items include “I finish whatever I begin” and “New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.” A composite score representing one’s level of grit is computed by summing responses on all eight items whose score ranges from 1 to 40, with a higher score indicating higher level of grit. According to Chang (2014) Grit-S shows medium to strong predictive validity with unstandardized regression coefficients associated with grit scores’ ability to predict
student performance ranging from 0.22 to 0.55 and associated odds from 0.80 to 1.73. It also displays reasonable model fit from a second-order confirmatory factor analysis model with RMSEA index ranging from 0.06 to 0.10 (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009).

Duckworth and Quinn (2009) suggested that Grit-S has two underlying factors in which four questions represent Consistency of Interest and the other four questions represent Perseverance of Effort. Both factors show adequate internal consistency and were strongly intercorrelated ($r = .59, p < .001$). Items measuring the first subscale, “consistency of interest”, are: (1) New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones; (3) I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest; (5) I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one; and (6) I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.

For the current study, a subscale score representing consistency of interest was computed by summing responses on four items whose score ranges from 1 to 20, with a higher score indicating higher level of consistency of interest. Moreover, items measuring the second subscale “perseverance of effort” are: (2) Setbacks don’t discourage me; (4) I am a hard worker; (7) I finish whatever I begin; and (8) I am diligent. For the current study, a subscale score representing perseverance of effort was computed by summing responses on four items whose score ranges from 1 to 20, with a higher score indicating higher level of perseverance of efforts.

**Family influence.** Family influence to include encouragement, support, and expectations were measured using five researcher-created survey items (Appendix 3). Examples of the items include “My family expects me to graduate college” and “My
family creates an environment at home that makes it easier for me to stay in college.”

The answers were given points based on the 5-item Likert scale, ranging from 1 for Strongly Disagree to 5 for Strongly Agree. A composite score was computed by averaging responses on 5 items, with higher score indicating more family influence.

**Sociocultural influence.** Sociocultural influence focused on determining the existence and effects of experiences related to racism, invalidation, and gendered, cultural stereotypes was measured using researcher-created survey items (Appendix 4). Examples of the items include

“The media (television, music, videos, etc.) that I enjoy positively influences me to stay in college,” and “I have experienced racism from a different race while in a school setting.” The answers were given points based on the 5-item Likert scale, ranging from 1 for Strongly Disagree to 5 for Strongly Agree. A composite score was computed by averaging responses on 6 items, with higher score indicating more sociocultural influence.

**Power Analysis**

A priori power analysis was conducted to determine the necessary minimum sample size for finding the effects of gender, grit, family influences and sociocultural influences as focal variables in the multiple regression analysis. A significance level (α) of .05, a statistical power of .80 (Cohen, 1992), and 7 predictors (one variable for: a dummy-coded gender variable, GRIT-S scores, family influence scores, sociocultural scores and three-way interactions, giving a total of 7 predictors), a priori power analysis using GPOWER (Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner, 1996) indicated that a sample size of 81
would be necessary to determine the significance of the model predicting persistence using gender as a focal variable with 7 predictors.

**Statistical Analysis**

SPSS was used to analyze the data to answer research questions. First, descriptive statistics on the variables including mean and standard deviation were summarized. Next, a hierarchical multiple regression with four subsequent blocks was used to explore whether persistence is related to student gender, grit subscale scores, family influence, and sociocultural influence. Variables were entered into the four blocks (Figure 2). The first block included student gender. Block 2 included students’ two subscales of grit, family influence, and sociocultural influence. Block 3 included interaction between gender and each of predictors including two subscales of grit, family influence, and sociocultural influence. Block 4 included interactions among pairs of predictors including two subscales of grit, family influence, and sociocultural influence. The significance of each additional variable was examined based on $R^2$ change and its significance using $F$ statistics. The significance of the final model was examined using $F$ statistics, followed by examining the significance of individual slope using $t$-statistics. Prior to running the model, the underlying assumptions of homoscedasticity, linearity, and normality were tested.
Chapter 4: Results

The participants’ responses on the survey items were analyzed to answer research questions posited in the current study, using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, IBM Corporation, 2016). In this chapter, individual characteristics of students who participated in the survey were first described, followed by summarizing descriptive statistics for variables used in the subsequent statistical analyses. Second, results from a series of the independent samples $t$-test were discussed to summarize gender difference on variables. Third, the relationship among variables were summarized based on Pearson Product Moment Correlation coefficients, and finally, results from a series of hierarchical multiple regressions analyses were discussed to understand how a number of exploratory variables are related to each of three dependent variables measuring student’s persistence upon checking the underlying assumptions.

Sample Characteristics

At the sample institution, there were 683 Black Non-Hispanic students enrolled for Fall 2017. Of the 683 Black students, 81 students voluntarily took part in the survey. Table 1 shows the frequency of participants by gender and ethnicity. Of the 683 Black students enrolled for that semester, 435 identified as female while 247 identified as male. Particularly, 64% of the Black students are female while 36% of the Black students are male. Interestingly yet coincidentally, 29 of the survey respondents were male while 52 of the respondents were female. This resulted in the female-to-male ratio of survey respondents mirroring the Black student gender makeup of the studied institution. More female students responded to the survey than male students, which reflect gender ratio at the sample institution. Furthermore, 42 (51.9%) of the respondents identified as African
American, 3 (3.7%) identified as Caribbean American, 14 (17.3%) identified as Haitian American and 11 (13.6%) identified as biracial or multiracial. 11 respondents (13.6%) did not identify an ethnicity.

**Descriptive Statistics**

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics regarding the sample’s ages and number of work hours. The mean number of work hours for the sample was 29 hours per week ($SD = 12.38, n = 65$) with responses ranging from 0 to 50 hours per week. Additionally, the mean age for the sample was 22.71 ($SD = 5.55, n = 81$) with ages ranging from 18 to 44 years old. As shown in Table 3, the dependent variable, intent-to-persist, was measured based on responses to three questions. The first intent-to-persist question measured short-term persistence, specifically, the sample’s commitment to re-enroll the very next semester, whose mean was 6.14 ($SD = 1.67, n = 81$) with scores ranging from 1 to 7. The second intent-to-persist question measured the sample’s perception of their overall level of persistence whose mean was 8.75 ($SD = 1.75, n = 74$) with scores ranging from 2 to 10. The third intent-to-persist question measured the sample’s commitment to the institution by asking how likely they were to graduate from the studied institution, whose mean was 6.10 ($SD = 1.58, n = 81$) with scores ranging from 1 to 7.

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of grit, family influence, and sociocultural influence scores for the sample. The mean grit score for the sample was 3.04 ($SD = 0.49$) with scores ranging from 1.75 to 4.13. Grit is composed of two distinct subcategories: consistency of interest (e.g., “I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest”) and perseverance of effort (e.g., “I finish whatever I begin”). The mean consistency of interest score was 2.75 ($SD = 0.94$) with scores ranging
from 1.25 to 5. The mean perseverance of effort score was 3.34 ($SD = 0.49$) with scores ranging from 2.00 to 4.25.

Family influence represents the level of perceived family and household support, and how those affect student (e.g., “My family expects me to graduate college”), while sociocultural influence represents the perceived level of societal support and its perceived influence on student (e.g., “I have experienced racism from a different race while in a school setting”). As shown in Table 4, mean family influence score was 4.23 ($SD = 0.91$) with scores ranging from 1.00 to 5.33 and mean sociocultural influence score was 4.50 ($SD = 0.78$) with scores ranging from 1.86 to 6.57.

**Gender Difference on Intent-to-Persist, Grit, Family Influence, and Sociocultural Influence**

Table 5 shows the results of independent samples $t$-tests performed to compare mean scores on intent-to-persist, grit, family influences, and sociocultural influences between female and male. As shown in Table 5, mean scores of male and female respondents were not significantly different on all variables except one ($t(79) = 0.69, p = .49$ for commitment to re-enroll next semester; $t(70.14) = 0.26, p = .79$ for overall level of persistence; $t(79) = 0.26, p = .79$ for consistency of interest; $t(79) = 1.44, p = .15$ for perseverance of effort; $t(79) = 0.96, p = .34$ for total grit; $t(79) = -0.23, p = .82$ for family influence; $t(79) = 0.61, p = .54$ for sociocultural influence). For intent-to-persist question 3, which measured the sample’s commitment to the current institution, the mean score for males was 6.48 ($SD = 0.82, n = 29$) while mean score for females was 5.88 ($SD = 1.85, n = 52$). For intent-to-persist question 3 regarding commitment to institution, the difference between males and females was statistically significant ($t(76.27) = 1.99, p = .05$).
suggesting that male students showed a higher commitment to the institution than females. The computed effect size quantifying gender difference on commitment to the institution was positive and medium at its magnitude ($d = .42$), indicating that on average commitment to the institution for males is found to be higher by .42 of a standard deviation than females.

**Relationship among Variables**

Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients were used to summarize the relationships among variables in the regression model, as shown in Table 6. Logically, two subscales of grit (i.e., consistency of interest and perseverance of effort) and a composite score of grit were correlated with one another. Furthermore, as shown in Table 6, positive and significant relationships were found between the following pairs of variables: family influence and short-term persistence ($r = .35, p < .05$), family influence and overall persistence ($r = .30, p < .01$), family influence and commitment to institution ($r = .33, p < .01$), and family influence and sociocultural influence ($r = .38, p < .01$). For the total sample, a significant negative relationship was found between consistency of interest and overall persistence ($r = -.32, p < .01$).

As shown in Table 7 that displays correlation coefficients among variables separately by gender (values above the diagonals for female and values above the diagonals for male), positive relationships between the following pairs of variables were found for males: sociocultural influence and overall persistence ($r = .65, p < .01$). For the female, positive relationships between the following pairs of variables were found for females: sociocultural influence and commitment to re-enroll next semester ($r = .28, p < .05$), sociocultural influence and commitment to institution ($r = .39, p < .01$), family
influence and commitment to re-enroll next semester \( (r = .39, p < .05) \), family influence and overall persistence \( (r = .33, p < .05) \), family influence and commitment to institution \( (r = .42, p < .01) \), and family influence and sociocultural influence \( (r = .46, p < .01) \). For females, there was a significant negative relationship between consistency of interest/ grit and overall persistence \( (r = -.32, p < .01) \).

**Results from Hierarchical Regression Model Predicting Commitment to Re-enroll**

A hierarchical regression model was performed to predict student’s commitment to re-enroll next semester using a number of variables in four different blocks: Block 1: Gender with female as a reference group; Block 2: Gender with female as a reference group, consistency of interest, and perseverance of effort; Block 3: Gender with female as a reference group, consistency of interest, perseverance of effort, family influence, and sociocultural influence; Block 4: Gender with female as a reference group, consistency of interest, perseverance of effort, family influence, sociocultural influence, and all two-way interactions among variables.

Based on the comparisons of all four models \( \Delta R^2 = .04, F(\Delta R^2) (2, 77) = 1.60, p = .21 \) for model 1 vs. model 2; \( \Delta R^2 = .11, F(\Delta R^2) (2, 75) = 4.90, p = .01 \) for model 2 vs. model 3; \( \Delta R^2 = .04, F(\Delta R^2) (2, 77) = 1.60, p = .10 \) for model 3 vs. model 4, and significant higher-order interactions, the model with all predictors including gender with female as a reference group, consistency of interest, perseverance of effort, family influence, sociocultural influence, and two-way interactions among those variables was chosen as the final model. Below, results from model 4 are only summarized.

The overall model 4 was found to be statistically significant \( (F(14, 66) = 2.18, p = .02) \), suggesting that at least one of the predictors included in model 4 was found to be
statistically significant. The $R$-squared value of .17 suggest that 17% of total variance in outcome variable was explained by the predictors included in the model, showing a large relationship between outcome and all variables included in the model 4 ($R = .56$). Of all predictors included in model 4, commitment to re-enroll next semester was significantly predicted by the following variables: intercept ($b = 6.31$, $SE = 0.23$, $t(66) = 27.85$, $p < .01$), family influence ($b = 4.14$, $SE = 1.94$, $t(66) = 2.13$, $p = .04$), a two-way interaction between sociocultural influence and family influence ($b = -1.14$, $SE = 0.36$, $t(66) = -3.21$, $p = .002$), and a two-way interaction between family influence and consistency of interest ($b = -0.92$, $SE = 0.33$, $t(66) = -2.79$, $p = .007$).

The significant intercept of 6.31 suggests that the expected commitment to re-enroll next semester is 6.31 for female students, after controlling for all other predictors. Second, the significant slope of 4.14 related to family influence indicates that the expected commitment to re-enroll next semester is increased by 4.14 for every additional increase in family influence, when controlling for all other predictors. It was also found that the effect of family influence on the commitment to re-enroll next semester is moderated by both consistency of interest and sociocultural influence.

Figure 3 displays two-way interaction between family influence and sociocultural influence on commitment to re-enroll next year. As shown in Figure 3, students who perceived lower level of family influence are less likely to be affected by sociocultural influence in their commitment to re-enroll next year, when compared to those who perceive higher level of family influence. As shown in Figure 4, the impact of family influence on commitment to re-enroll next year was found to be much stronger for students with less consistent in their interest, when compared to students possessing more
consistency in their interest. In other words, it was found that students holding lower level of consistency of interest are less likely to commit to re-enroll next year, as they perceive to have lower level of family resource.

**Results from Hierarchical Regression Model Predicting Overall Persistence**

A hierarchical regression model was performed to predict student’s overall level of persistence using a number of variables in four different blocks: Block 1: Gender with female as a reference group; Block 2: Gender with female as a reference group, consistency of interest, and perseverence of effort; Block 3: Gender with female as a reference group, consistency of interest, perseverence of effort, family influence, and sociocultural influence; Block 4: Gender with female as a reference group, consistency of interest, perseverence of effort, family influence, sociocultural influence, and all two-way interactions among variables.

Based on comparisons of all four models ($\Delta R^2 = .14, F(\Delta R^2) (2, 70) = 5.84, p = .005$ for model 1 vs. model 2; $\Delta R^2 = .14, F(\Delta R^2) (2, 68) = 2.49, p = .019$ for model 2 vs. model 3; $\Delta R^2 = .25, F(\Delta R^2) (9, 59) = 2.01, p = .05$ for model 3 vs. model 4) and two significant two-way interactions, the model with all predictors including gender with female as a reference group, consistency of interest, perseverence of effort, family influence, sociocultural influence, and all two-way interactions among those variables was chosen as the final model. Therefore, results from model 4 are only summarized below.

The overall model 4 was found to be statistically significant ($F (14, 59) = 2.69, p = .004$), suggesting that at least one of predictors included in model 4 was found to be statistically significant. The $R$-squared value of .39 suggest that 39% of total variance in
outcome variable was explained by the predictors included in the model, showing a large relationship between outcome and all variables included ($R = .62$). Of all predictors included in model 4, student’s overall level of persistence was significantly predicted by the following variables: intercept ($b = 8.32$, $SE = 0.24$, $t(59) = 36.74$, $p < .01$), consistency of interest ($b = -0.64$, $SE = 0.27$, $t(59) = -2.37$, $p = .02$), a two-way interaction between sociocultural influence and gender ($b = 1.57$, $SE = 0.60$, $t(59) = 2.58$, $p = .01$), and a two-way interaction between family influence and consistency of interest ($b = 0.70$, $SE = 0.34$, $t(59) = 2.04$, $p = .045$).

The significant intercept of 8.32 suggests that the expected level of persistence is 8.31 for female students, after controlling for all other predictors. Second, the significant but negative regression slope of -0.64 related to family influence indicates that overall level of persistence for males is decreased by 0.64 for every additional increase in family influence, when controlling for all other predictors. It was also found that the effect of sociocultural factor on overall level of persistence differs between males and females, showing positive relationship for males yet negative relationship for females.

In particular, as shown in Figure 5, males are found to be more likely to be persistent, as they perceive more on sociocultural influence, while females show lower level of persistence as they perceive on more sociocultural factors. As shown in Figure 6, for students possessing higher level of consistency of interest, the overall level of persistence was found to be increased as family influence is increased. However, family influence is negative related to overall persistence for students holding lower level of consistence of interest.
**Results from Hierarchical Regression Model Predicting Commitment to the Institution**

A hierarchical regression model was performed to predict student’s commitment to the current institution using a number of variables in four different blocks: Block 1: Gender with female as a reference group; Block 2: Gender with female as a reference group, consistency of interest, and perseverance of effort; Block 3: Gender with female as a reference group, consistency of interest, perseverance of effort, family influence, and sociocultural influence; Block 4: Gender with female as a reference group, consistency of interest, perseverance of effort, family influence, sociocultural influence, and all two-way interactions among variables.

Based on comparisons of all four models ($\Delta R^2 = .05, F(\Delta R^2) (2, 77) = 1.98, p = .15$ for model 1 vs. model 2; $\Delta R^2 = .12, F(\Delta R^2) (2, 75) = 5.37, p = .007$ for model 2 vs. model 3; $\Delta R^2 = .16, F(\Delta R^2) (9, 66) = 1.75, p = .07$ for model 2 vs. model 3) and two significant two-way interactions, the model with all predictors including gender with female as a reference group, consistency of interest, perseverance of effort, family influence, sociocultural influence, and all two-way interactions among those variables was chosen as the final model. Therefore, results from model 4 are only summarized below.

The overall model 4 was found to be statistically significant ($F (14, 66) = 2.54, p = .006$), suggesting that at least one of predictors included in model 4 was found to be statistically significant. The $R$-squared value of .35 suggest that 35% of total variance in outcome variable was explained by the predictors included in the model, showing a large relationship between outcome and all variables included ($R = .59$). Of all predictors included in model 4, commitment to re-enroll next semester was significantly predicted...
by the following variables: intercept \((b = 6.08, SE = 0.21, t(66) = 28.90, p < .01)\), a two-way interaction between sociocultural influence and family influence \((b = -0.93, SE = 0.33, t(66) = -2.86, p = .006)\), and a two-way interaction between family influence and consistency of interest \((b = -0.62, SE = 0.30, t(66) = -2.04, p = .045)\).

The significant intercept of 6.08 suggests that the expected commitment to the current institution is 6.08 for female students, after controlling for all other predictors. It was also found that the effect of family influence on the commitment to the current institution is moderated by either consistency of interest or sociocultural influence. Figure 7 displays two-way interaction between family influence and sociocultural influence on commitment to re-enroll next year. As shown in Figure 8, students who perceived lower level of family influence are less likely to be affected in their commitment to current institution by sociocultural factor, when compared to those who perceive higher level of family resources. As shown in Figure 6, the relationship between consistency of interest on one’s commitment to current institution is positive for student with lower level of family influence. However, the odds of commitment to current institution is reduced as the level of consistency of interest is increased for students perceiving higher level of family influence.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to identify non-cognitive factors that may explain why Black men appear less likely to persist in college than Black women. The study sought to examine whether persistence levels differed between Black males and females and whether such non-cognitive factors such as grit, family influence, and sociocultural influence are differently related to their persistence. Although there is research on the performance of Black students in historically Black institutions and predominantly White institutions, research is limited that focuses on Black student persistence in community colleges, including their perceived intent to persist and the roles non-cognitive factors may play in their persistence. Specifically, because over half of all Black male students begin at a community college, and the likelihood of Black male persistence to graduation is unfortunately low, the current study sought to shed more light on factors that could support Black males in successfully persisting to degree or program completion (Wood & Turner, 2011).

For Black men to earn more college degrees and gain a real opportunity for personal and socioeconomic progress, it is crucial to better understand what deters their college completion, particularly in light of the fact Black women are achieving more academically. While female college students in the United States of all races and ethnicities outperform their male counterparts on a range of college indices, the completion gap is widest between Black women and men. Most concerning is that of the total number of undergraduate degrees awarded to Black students, women account for 66%, while men account for only 34% (NCES, 2016). The research questions for the current study were:
1. Is there a gender gap in persistence to completion among Blacks who attend community college?

2. To what extent has grit explained the gender gap in persistence to completion among Blacks who attend community college?

3. To what extent have family influences explained the gender gap in persistence to completion among Blacks who attend community college?

4. To what extent have sociocultural influences explained the gender gap in persistence to completion among Blacks who attend community college?

**Summary of Findings**

The current study resulted in several significant findings. Sociocultural influences were found to negatively influence the perceived persistence of Black female respondents, yet be positively related to Black male respondents. Sociocultural influences, or what some researchers refer to as environmental factors, are forces and pulls within societies and cultures that affect the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of people. The current study revealed that Black male students were less susceptible to sociocultural influences, such as racism, negative peer support, negative media images, and lack of same-race, same-gender role models, than same-race females. In other words, the more that male respondents perceived sociocultural factors, the more likely they were to persist. For Black females, however, the more they perceived these sociocultural influences, the less likely they were to persist.

The results of the study also revealed that, regardless of gender, Black college students with a higher perception of their family influences, which include family support, home atmosphere, and family validation, showed higher short-term persistence.
and commitment to their current institutions. One exception was the negative relationship found between family influences and overall level of intent-to-persist, indicating that students with higher perceptions of their family influence were less likely to continue over the long term. It seems that there is a delicate balance between adequate family support and excessive family compulsion that can cause families to unwittingly exert so much pressure that it can adversely affect student persistence.

Furthermore, there were a number of significant interactions among variables on each outcome measuring intent-to-persist. The first significant interaction was the effect of family and sociocultural influences on short-term persistence and institutional commitment. The results suggest that the negative relationship between sociocultural influences and intent-to-persist is mitigated by student perceptions of higher levels of family influence. To be clear, the impact of negative peer pressure, lack of same-race, same-gender role models, and negative music and media were less likely to negatively influence Black male students with strong, positive perceptions of family support.

On the overall level of persistence, there was a significant interaction effect between family influence and consistency of interest. Particularly, students holding lower levels of consistency of interest were less likely to persist in the end even when they perceived more family influence. Such interaction effect was also found on short-term persistence (re-enrolling next semester) and commitment to current institution. Therefore, even though strong perceptions of family influence were able to mitigate sociocultural influences and their effects on short-term persistence and commitment to the institution, family influences were not enough to diminish adverse effects on persistence when these students also showed a low consistency of interest. Clearly, students who show low
consistency of interest, which is a grit subscale measure, are less likely to persist even with strong family influence.

Study results also showed that Black males had a significantly higher level of commitment to the current institution than Black females, suggesting that Black males are more likely to pursue their degree at the sample institution. There was no significant gendered difference in overall intent-to-persist or in short-term persistence. In other words, Black females and males who responded shared the same perception of their overall level of persistence and their likeliness to return for the following semester.

Finally, there was no gender difference found in the relationship between overall grit and intent-to-persist among Black students, suggesting that grit does not explain the gender gap in persistence to completion among Black students.

**Linking Study Findings to Theory and Research**

While some findings reflect prior research, others do not and are noteworthy. Several researchers have found that factors contributing to the gender gap in college persistence include previous academic achievement (Braxton, Duster, & Pascarella, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980), race (Braxton, Duster, & Pascarella, 1980), socioeconomic status (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983), financial aid (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Tierney, 1999), psychological factors such as tenacity and optimism (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), and gendered family influence (Smith & Fleming, 2006). However, while the aforementioned factors and influences remain relevant within the discussion of Black student persistence, they were not significant factors in the current study.
Sociocultural influences on Black students. Sociocultural influences or environmental factors such as number of work hours, peer influences, media images, and racism can negatively affect students on college campuses. Studies have examined the relationship between student persistence and these environmental factors (Mason, 1998; Wood, 2012). Such sociocultural influences and environmental factors are sometimes referred to as “environment pull” and are situations, factors, and influences that mainly occur away from the campus but can definitely affect student success on the campus (Wood & Williams, 2013). Miller and MacIntosh (1999) studied the impact of cultural factors on academic resilience and found no statistical significance; on the other hand, the results of this study revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between sociocultural factors and academic persistence or academic resilience for female respondents.

Black females. Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) stress that the role of external commitments such as work and family life can adversely impact the odds for academic success of Black female community college students. The same study of 215 Black female community college students also found that “detractors or external commitments such as work duties, family responsibilities, children and other dependents, and financial worries” affect Black women’s educational experiences at community colleges (p. 546). The intersection of social identities of race, class, and gender with ecological factors such as work and family responsibilities influence students’ beliefs and intentions (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014).

Bartman (2015) argues that despite their successes, African American women are a marginalized demographic made more susceptible to attrition because of an unfavorable
environment when compared to White, Latina, and Asian American women. This unfavorable environment involves the following: a.) those who self-identify as both Black and women are subject to dual oppression, b.) there is little sense of community, support, or belonging, and the most damaging result of this level of isolation is burnout, which negatively impacts retention and attainment rates; and c.) there is the responsibility for upholding the race which runs throughout the history of Black women. Thus in the face of negative sociocultural influences, upholding the race is about trying to uphold and defend the dignity of Black people against injustice, which can lead to culture fatigue and a real or perceived emotional or psychological burden that can affect persistence.

The current study also measured in-school and perceived societal support reflecting Rendon’s Theory of Validation (1994), which stresses the need for validating experiences inside and outside of the classroom for nontraditional students. Several researchers have found strong correlations with societal and environmental factors and their negative impact on Black student persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Freeman & Huggans, 2009).

Henry, West and Jackson (2010) also found that hip-hop music’s negative images and portrayals of Black women have reached college campuses and can lead to the demoralization and objectification of Black female college students. The multitude of disparaging images promulgated by many hip-hop artists and videos can perpetuate negative stereotypes that create a grossly false idea of what it means to be both Black and female. Thus, the demoralizing influence of some hip-hop music contributes to stereotypes and microaggressions that can thwart the persistence of Black female college students. However, there are many hip-hop artists and communities who provide
uplifting, soul-searching, conscious entertainment that is edifying to Black women. To project an all-encompassing image of hip-hop music and culture as negative and self-defeating is not the intent of this study.

**Black males.** In the current study, Black male students were less affected by sociocultural influences and, in fact, increased their likelihood to persist. This finding contradicts research that attributes Black male college struggles to financial burdens (Tinto, Russo & Kadel, 1994), lack of cultural capital (Smith, 2001), media references to Black males as an endangered species (Gibbs, 1988; Staples, 1991), depictions of being threatening and lazy (Gibbs, 1988; Majors & Billson, 1992; Parham & Moore, 2004) and self-threatening or self-defeating (Steele, 2000).

On the other hand, these male respondents seem to reflect the research of Moore et al. (2003), who found that successful Black males invoked a prove-them-wrong, hyper-assertive attitude when faced with negative stereotypes that helped them overcome external barriers. The results of the study also indicated that parents and family support played a critical role in the educational decisions of these students, along with meaningful academic experiences and relationships with school personnel. Carter (2009) suggests that “an awareness of structural barriers to success can motivate many African American youth to take on a ‘prove-them-wrong’ attitude about schooling using racial discrimination and social inequality as reasons to persist academically” (p. 14). Black students with a positive racial identity coupled with a pragmatic attitude about the usefulness of school are more likely to achieve their academic goals despite facing structural and economic impediments (Carter, 2009).
Hargrove (2014) found that Black male college students increased academic work performance, focus, and tenacity in order to disprove stereotypes attributed to Black male collegians. This study, along with Carter (2008) and Moore (2003), helps to explain not only the increased intent of these students but also the positive relationship between the perceptions of these sociocultural influences and intent-to-persist. The more they experienced these influences, the more they seemed to internalize the need to perform, to excel, to overcome, and to prove “them” wrong, even when the “them” included themselves.

Other factors may help explain the phenomenon of this resurgence of Black male collegians and their rejuvenated drive toward academic excellence. In 2007, America elected its first Black president and over the next eight years watched as President Barack Obama navigated the world of domestic and international politics with charisma, intellect, class, and wisdom. Surely, his influence permeated Black America and offered Black men and all people an example of what a college education, dedication, and a loving, supportive family could provide. Black males have also witnessed the positive images of political figures such as Senator Cory Booker, and in 2017, the largest number of Black congressional leaders ever recorded were elected to serve their constituencies (Bialik & Krogstad, 2017). Other developments that may have sparked a renewed focus and motive for Black men to excel include Emmy-winning television shows such as “Blackish,” “This Is Us,” and other productions with positive Black male leading actors, and the Black Lives Matter Movement and its rallying force following the killings of Trayvon Martin, Walter Scott, Philando Castile, and others.
Intent-to-persist. Black males in the current study displayed a higher level of institutional commitment than Black females. Tinto’s finding of the correlation between increased persistence and higher levels of institutional commitment are useful in the way of general context (1975).

More specifically, Wood (2012) found that Black male students were less likely to leave community colleges because of program dissatisfaction and more likely to leave because of external reasons, which helps to explain why these students, more than their female counterparts, stated that they were more likely to finish their degree at the studied institution. Black male students and Latino males have a more positive perception of community colleges and view community colleges as venues that can facilitate their academic and career advancement (Bush, 2004; Bush & Bush, 2005). Strayhorn (2012) also found positive relationships between Black male students and institutional commitment when they feel a strong sense of belonging at their institution. In addition, Renn (2013) found that students assess their social and academic integration, revisit their initial goals and institutional commitments, and make a decision about whether to proceed and persist. The current study respondents likewise displayed a positive perception regarding their decision to proceed and persist.

Family influence. The current study found no significant difference in perceived familial support between genders and among the African diaspora. These results contradict Smith and Fleming (2013), who found that parents displayed different guidance tendencies when it came to their sons and daughters. Other researchers have identified family factors that contribute to variation in college performance (Clark, 1983; Smith & Fleming, 2006; Schmidt, 2009). However, the results of this study revealed no
significant gendered difference between the level and type of familial support these students received.

Furthermore, the results of the study showed that for both groups, family influence had significant positive correlations with each persistence-related question, except the overall level of persistence. It is possible that the same family support and validation that correlates with short-term persistence and commitment to the institution could, over the long term, result in added pressure that affects students’ overall persistence. The respondents, male and female, generally felt that their families supported their educational endeavors and provided a home environment conducive for academic success. These results mirror Rendon’s Theory of Validation (1994) and the Ego-Extension dimension of Schlossberg’s (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering that highlight validation and approval derived from the knowledge of having someone who is proud of one’s achievements and offers support during failures.

Likewise, researchers (Hotchkins, 2014; Warde, 2008; Strayhorn, 2012; Stevens, 2006) have identified several home-related factors that contribute to Black student persistence, such as remaining connected to nuclear families and identifying fictive kinships (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015). Of such factors, involvement with their students’ education and parental expectations are the primary contributors (as cited in Tekleselassie et al., 2013; Smith & Fleming, 2006). For Black and other minority groups, family support is paramount (Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Barnett, 2004). According to Strayhorn (2012), a student’s desire to make family members proud is a motivational factor for Black students and can thus result in increased persistence. In addition, Hebert (2002) found that family validated students and positively influenced their academic success,
and that those who were supported and validated at an early age were more likely to find academic success (as cited in Eunyoung & Hargrove, 2013).

In addition, Miller and MacIntosh (1999) found that Black parents instruct their children on how to circumnavigate racial conditions while simultaneously instilling racial pride, which coincides with Cross and Fhagen-Smith’s Black Identity Model (2001). During the Encounter stage of this model, young Blacks experience an events that challenges low-salient racial ideas or Eurocentric ideals and cause questioning and self-identity conflict. One of the resulting identities of this internal conflict is Black immersion in which, because of the encounter, the young Black person becomes pro-Black to the extent that he or she becomes fully immersed into Black culture and issues. However, when other Black family members have experienced a similar encounter or something that led to similar Black immersion, those family members are able to help the young person out of the immersion stage and into the wisdom stage of Cross and Fhagen-Smith’s (2001) model. In this final stage of the model, Black individuals are able to situate their Blackness in a multicultural America and, most importantly, identify a role for him or herself to contribute to the uplifting of Blacks.

However, parental influence has limits. Gilford (2010) submits the idea of “parentification,” which involves young people from children to traditional college-aged being depended upon to assume a parental role and provide emotional, mental, physical, and financial support to their families. This is the result of financial struggling and is sometimes necessary for the survival of the family. McMahon and Luthar (2007) believe that delegating responsibility to children can build self-esteem and empathy and help to forward the family into stability. However, according to Jones and Wells (1996), if the
extra role is detrimental to the child’s identity and self-efficacy and inhibits the child’s age-appropriate activities and development, parentification is adversely affecting the child (as cited in Gilford & Reynolds, 2010).

The results of the study indicate that family influence in the form of validation and support is valuable and a salient key to Black student persistence, while an overabundance of family pressure in the form of dependence on the student for time-constraining, out-of-class responsibilities and a reliance on the student for financial support instigates lower overall persistence for Black students.

**Student employment.** Breier (2010) found that students who attend community colleges are usually economically disadvantaged and working class. Tinto and Russo (1993) found that, “Most two-year institutions, especially those in urban settings, are non-residential, and a great majority of their students are older, employed while in college, and have multiple obligations that constrain their involvement in college” (p. 16). Wood (2011) found that Black male community college students were more likely to be older, have dependents, be independent, and have lower levels of social and academic engagement (as cited by Wood & Williams, 2013).

Similarly, this study showed that 80% of the respondents on the nonresidential campus were employed and worked an average of 29 hours per week; their average age was 23 (Table 5), and the vast majority had multiple obligations in addition to their studies and their jobs. These results align with Wood (2012), who found that students with greater levels of family responsibilities, specifically financial responsibilities, were less likely to persist. So although the respondents, both male and female, showed high intent-to-persist, the other variables such as work hours and out-of-class responsibilities
aligned with research that indicates the academically precarious situations these students face.

**Implications for Practice**

This section focuses on practice implications for Black student persistence with a special focus on sociocultural influences and the community college setting.

**Institutions and educators.** Higher education professionals must understand the events, beliefs, and people who influence its mission. The current study offers significant practice implications for institutions and educators.

**Black female students.** One of the key findings of the current study was the negative effect of sociocultural influences on intent-to-persist that significantly affected Black women but had no effect on Black men. Although subsequent sections will provide practice implications for involved entities, it is important to note that there are very few suggestions that are needed simply because of one’s race. The intersectionality of race, gender, ethnicity, and income, for example, allows for specific, research-based best practices. Clearly, the need for practice implications for Black female students are only necessary because of gender bias and racism that has always existed and continues to negatively influence America’s laws, society, and schools.

For Black women specifically, it is important for higher education personnel to provide safe expression platforms, strong organizations, and culturally aware staff and administrators that understand and value their educational and societal contributions. In addition, faculty should infuse the works and images of Black women into their curriculum. This helps to validate the experiences of these women as well as offers a counter-narrative that thwarts the negative stereotypes attributed to Black females.
Faculty should also be encouraged to establish and cultivate relationships with these students. Mentorships are valuable for all students, but even more so for minorities, such as Black women who are unfortunately far less likely to find other Black female community college professors. Obviously, none of the aforementioned suggestions implies Black academic inferiority; rather, these are purposeful strategies geared towards increasing the visibility, representation, and validation of Black women.

**Retention efforts.** Institutional leadership and personnel must prioritize the enhancement of retention rates of all students, be knowledgeable about current trends in education, and be prepared to implement research-based practices to curtail the attrition of at-risk and high-risk students. Harper and Kuykendall (2012) suggest that institutions become data-driven and transparent instead of hiding data because of fear of damage to the institution’s reputation. Thus, administrators must stay abreast of new research that affects current students and trends specific to their institution type in order to effectively implement successful strategies. In the case of this study, community college leaders should use information about the needs, characteristics, goals, and outcomes desired for the college’s students in its retention plan. For example, they should continue to invest in summer bridge programs for incoming community college freshmen. Strayhorn (2011) found that these intentional, targeted programs offer crucial academic remediation, study skills and engagement opportunities for new college students. Black students do not need special retention efforts simply because they are Black, but more so because of the intersectionality with other identities, i.e., being low-income, first-generation college students. Therefore, programs that implement strategies that address such overlapping identities should benefit Black students.
Academic support and alternate programs. Institutions and especially community colleges, where more than half of all Black college students begin, must provide the academic support necessary to meet students where they are and assist them with reaching their academic goals. Tutors, learning software, and peer learning/ study groups should be provided and/or encouraged. In addition, knowledgeable and empathetic counselors or advisors should be provided and encouraged to make assessments and suggestions to students based on their academic performance and stated goals. Helping students articulate and set realistic goals are necessary, as students often declare majors and degree programs while knowing that they will not persist until completion. In such a case, advisors should be adept at suggesting certificate programs that could be more realistic for these students while also offering other options that would challenge their preconceived notions about their career trajectory. This would not only increase retention rates by properly situating students in realistic programs but it can also encourage students to persist until completion since certificates may be used as a fraction of the credit requirements for associate degrees.

Dual enrollment. A key implication for community college administrators and enrollment managers is to have an increased focus on dual enrollment opportunities. Community colleges should create task forces or committees committed to increasing representation and diversity. These dedicated individuals must create relationships with local high schools and middle schools and create realistic, symbiotic relationships that seamlessly introduce adept middle and high school students to academia. Another benefit of dual enrollment is that for most programs, tuition, fees, and textbooks are completely paid for by the school district and not the college or the student. This helps to mitigate the
cost of college for high achieving students and bolster academic and cultural capital, which are often lacking among young Black students. This can aid in their eventual persistence in college.

*Family outreach.* Institutions should engage families and encourage them to participate in workshops, symposiums, and community education classes as well as other events that bring families together with students. Specifically, community colleges could provide 24-hour access to study areas and software so that students are better able to balance working and studying. In addition, reasonably priced or free day-care accommodations on campus, or via a partnership with a local establishment, could help mitigate familial responsibilities that can impede academic progress. Finally, community colleges could collaborate with local governments to provide free or discounted residential internet access to students so that they can conduct research and access course materials. This type of academic support will negate some of the challenges and impediments that nontraditional students face at community colleges.

*Engagement opportunities.* Institutions should foster a climate of engagement. Students, and especially nontraditional students at community colleges, should be educated about the value of involvement and its connection to success (Astin, 1993). Institutions should provide opportunities for involvement in organizations, events, and activities that celebrate diverse student groups. All students should be encouraged to attend these events, join organizations, and remain productive, valuable, and contributing members of the student body. Institutions should provide on-campus activities that celebrate diversity, workshops that build necessary skills, and events that provide academic support, financial awareness and training, and community-building
opportunities. These events should go beyond the clichéd heritage months that celebrate the histories of Blacks, women, and Hispanics one month of each year. In addition, these events should balance historical struggles, movements, and experiences of high profile persons with contemporary concerns and accomplishments. Institutions should collaborate with neighboring community agencies to offer off-campus culture-building activities that may also help students increase their awareness of opportunities and needs in their existing communities and beyond. Service learning, for example, offers many rewards for community college students; however, given that 80% of the current study respondents work an average of 29 hours per week, service learning should be optional—for extra credit or flexible enough to accommodate the external responsibilities of students.

Diversity actions. Diversity is more than particular groups and individuals; it should be a central frame to the institution’s mission rather than something espoused and celebrated as a mechanism for improving rankings and ratings. The focus on embracing and internalizing diversity should also be reflected in academic learning outcomes and intergroup relations on each campus. Leadership should encourage honest, open discussions about race and related issues. Diversity is crucial to developing new and more current knowledge while leadership diversity can help facilitate the development of new relationships with diverse communities and students. Administrators should establish offices of diversity and inclusion to ensure that every area of the college reflects the mission of diversity and inclusion. Smaller institutions can hire knowledgeable, research-focused diversity and inclusion personnel to accomplish some of the objectives of offices of diversity. At a micro level, creating a task force that addresses these issues and ensures
that the spirit of inclusion and diversity permeates the campus and campus culture is a viable and cost-friendly step in the right direction.

Institutions should re-evaluate their hiring practices to ensure that there are no unintentional biases within policies, practices, or personnel that dissuade Blacks and others from applying for instructional positions or receiving tenure, if applicable. Institutions can also remove identifying features such as names and gender from applications to reduce the role that unconscious biases may play in personnel determinations. In addition, institutions can create symbiotic relationships with HBCUs and their graduate programs to create pathways for more diverse faculty applicants.

Moore and Toliver (2010) pointed to the need to increase representation of Black faculty members to avoid the overburdening of Black faculty members who feel pressured to fulfill teaching expectations and mentor as many Black students as possible. Thus, institutions should make a concerted effort to increase the diversity of their campuses and their faculty. Finally, faculty and staff should be recognized on performance evaluations and other ways when they initiate measures that celebrate and encourage diversity, especially when this diversity is celebrated in the classroom as part of scholarly endeavors that help students reach academic learning outcomes and increase their social awareness and engagement.

Diverse faculty, staff and leadership help institutions in making better-informed decisions, policies, and practices. Diverse faculty members can serve as role models for a diverse student body; the more faculty from less-represented communities, the less likely that a handful of “nontraditional” faculty members may experience culture fatigue. When students from different backgrounds, specifically Black students see themselves in
academic positions, they are often encouraged to set higher academic goals for themselves. Diverse faculty members, as well as faculty members knowledgeable about the value of diversity add new concepts and new perspectives to mainstream topics and discussions. Faculty members should include diversity-related content in the curriculum and encourage all students to participate in class discussions since the opinions and views of all students are important. This benefits all students as it prepares them for the diverse world in which they will soon attempt to establish a career and engage civically. Team-based learning and learning communities create opportunities for collaborative learning and allow a space to address sensitive topics while creating a culturally rich experience for all students (Hunn, 2014). Since students who are invalidated by friends or even family will likely leave college if not validated by faculty, staff and/or the campus culture, institutions should provide faculty with annual demographic profiles of the institution’s student population. They should also provide workshops geared toward understanding nontraditional and minority students (Rendon, 1994).

**Faculty.** Faculty members have opportunities to engage their students in many ways. One important way, especially when understanding Black students, is to be aware that many students enter higher education institutions with little if any validation or confidence that they belong. At times, these students have been ignored or have barely existed on the fringe of K-12 class discussions and activities. Many feel ignored and question if they even belong in college, yet they enroll, and so the onus is on the classroom leader to create spheres of validation. Faculty should treat students equally, structure learning experiences that allow all students to feel secure that they are capable of learning, provide meaningful feedback to students and be approachable and welcoming
to all students (Rendon, 1994). It is important to be this way for all students since race, gender, language, age, etc., do not signify validation or invalidation.

Finally, administrators, and especially faculty members at community colleges where class sections may be limited, must ensure that courses are offered that illuminate the history, literature, and culture related to the African diaspora. STEM courses should have diverse viewpoints infused into the community college curriculum so that there is adequate representation of minorities, especially women, Blacks, and Hispanics. Courses such as African and African American History, African American Literature, African American Popular Culture, Caribbean Literature, and many others can assist a campus in making strides toward infusing an appreciation for the history and literature of all Americans, bridging gaps of understanding, and establishing an affinity instead of an aversion to learning about others.

*Mentoring and advising.* Mentoring programs that provide academic support, consistent advisement, and social development can also be helpful for increasing the persistence and decreasing the attrition rates of Black students. Programs like TRIO that target first-generation students, the Black Male Initiative, summer bridge programs, and a plethora of other research-based programs across the country that combine academic support, mentorship, intrusive advisement, community service opportunities, and leadership development are honing the recipe and setting the standard necessary to improve Black student persistence. Higher education professionals must seek to connect these students with those who have lived their struggle and persisted or those who are knowledgeable and simply care enough to help them reach their academic goals. Mentors
should discuss serious topics such as safe sex, date rape, and alcohol and drug abuse along with goal setting, life balance techniques, and stress-management strategies.

Although many community colleges do not have on-campus representation of historically Black fraternities and sororities, connecting and creating mentor relationships with universities that do can be an effective strategy for exposing community college students to these organizations. Black fraternities and sororities have existed for more than 100 years and helped to usher in a wave of Black intellectuals, social activists, and otherwise concerned, productive members of society.

As students progress through identity phases that can have positive or adverse effects on their ability to persist as well as their overall emotional stability, the ability to reconcile their racial experiences is crucial to the individual student’s need to progress. Many students come to this point in high school or in college. If they experience racial encounters in community college, there should be research-based programs and knowledgeable people in place to help lead them out of the encounter stage. If students do not have mentors to help them out, they may remain in the stage and fail to understand that it is just a stage from which they will emerge with a newfound respect for themselves and their history along with the ability to empathize and situate themselves in America without choosing to be only Black or only American. Some students will simply quit school. They will say that they felt out of place or that college was not for them. The importance of initiatives across the country that support students and their identities should not be minimized, even at the community college level. When administrators and faculty know better, then they should also do better. Otherwise, students may traverse
well-known stages of well-known theories at well-known institutions, and they may quit because of well-known reasons.

Although the current study did not measure advisement, higher education personnel and administrators can continue to improve in these areas. Intrusive advising, where students are connected to an advisor or a faculty member who serves in that capacity, is crucial in assisting Black students and all students in developing an academic plan that mirrors their future goals. These students will benefit from having concrete goals and short-term, semester-by-semester objectives for meeting those long-term goals. Black male students often question the value of college degrees but perform better when they believe in their program and are optimistic that completion of the program will result in upward mobility.

When students begin struggling in a class or consider quitting, the relationship with these advisors or mentors can be crucial in providing strategies and support that may stabilize or improve the students’ ability to persist. Student orientation facilitators should meet family members to define academic terms and provide other academic capital that can allow families of first-generation students to better support those students. In addition, mental health therapists, group sessions, or safe spaces for discussions about mental health, coping strategies, and stress-management can be beneficial to diverse student bodies at community colleges where students may come from families that are not financially able to provide outside counseling services (Hargrove, 2014).

**Student employment opportunities.** Lederman (2009) found that students working fewer than 20 hours a week on campus reported higher levels of engagement, which had a positive effect on academic performance. On the other hand, working more
than 20 hours off campus negatively and significantly affected students’ academic performance. Since 80% of the respondents in the current study reported that they worked an average of 29 hours per week, community colleges should increase on-campus student employment opportunities by creating positions to fill significant needs of the institution, expanding work study offerings, or collaborating with local businesses or government entities to bring new or existing jobs onto campus so that more students can decrease their work hours. This effort could help increase retention and persistence while not trivializing the financial needs students have.

**Black students.** The current study results offer implications for Black students as well. Many issues, such as the overrepresentation of Blacks in prison, underemployment or unemployment, and the overrepresentation of single-parent households are not only due to the poor decisions of some individuals, but also to deficiencies in American society created by policy makers, media bias, and systemic racism. If such issues are to be seriously addressed, it will take greater self-reflection and better decision-making in Black households as well as the acknowledgement and destruction of the institutional racism that has historically contributed to keeping people of color unemployed, undervalued, and undereducated.

Wood (2011) suggested that psychological factors are one of the most significant barriers preventing Black students from achieving at similar rates as others, and that these psychological factors result from negative messages both inside and outside of the college environment. Wood discussed the influence of social media, the media in general, music, etc., that convey negative messages about Blacks and added that these messages are reflected in the classroom via teachers, other students, and staff. Black students
should select music, media, and television that have positive images of Blacks and their communities, and engage with friends, images and entertainment that inspire and endure.

There are many Black students across the country who are persisting and persevering and will continue to do so until they reach their academic goals. Black male students employ some of the same skills that their Black female counterparts use to persist at the rate that they do. There are strategies, beliefs, and attitudes that can be gleaned from these students. One strategy is to counteract negative stereotypes with academic commitment and purposeful involvement on campus. Many students exhibit a prove-them-wrong attitude that reinforces tenacity and provides motivation during difficult times. In addition, students should make the most of academic support, visiting professors during office hours, asking questions in class, participating in group discussions, visiting academic support labs as often as possible, and forming or participating in study groups. Students also should join organizations that mirror their interests, whether the organization is academic or social; aspire for leadership roles that will help build skills and establish networks; and apply for jobs on campus.

**Family support.** The results of the current study offer critical implications for families as well. The study revealed no significant gendered difference in the perception of familial influence, support and validation; however, for both genders, family influence and support had significant correlations with persistence. Families are crucial to the feelings of support and validation for respondents, but excessive family pressure, especially as it pertains to financial issues that increase the need for students to work, negatively affected the overall persistence of respondents. Families should continue to stay involved and provide support for Black male and female students. They can
accompany students to orientation so that they understand the academic, financial, and time expectations the institution will add to their children’s lives. Families can also help validate their college student by being sincerely concerned and supportive. They should ask about their classes, study topics, and upcoming assignments and, more importantly, provide a stable environment with the necessary technology that is conducive to studying.

It is difficult for some families to curtail their daily activities in order to embrace the time and other expectations that come with attending college. This academic capital is even more difficult to comprehend when parents and other family members did not complete college and thus may not understand the expectations and the differing high school requirements. However, as the number of Black college graduates increase, the amount of collective academic or college capital will likewise increase.

It may also be difficult for parents to reduce the number of household chores or the financial pressures that require students to have jobs; however, there are negative consequences for their not being able to do so. The majority of respondents (80%) work an average of 29 hours per week. The combination of 29 off-campus work hours and numerous household responsibilities while trying to acclimate oneself into a new social and academic environment can be insurmountable for many students and thus contributes to the attrition of many.

**K-12 schools.** Palmer, Maramba and Dancy (2011) found that study participants indicated, “Retention and success in STEM is connected to elementary and secondary preparation. Accordingly, students of color credited their success to the strong academic preparation that they received in K-12 educational contexts” (p. 491). Black male students are disproportionately placed in special education and are underrepresented in
gifted and advanced placement classes at the high school level compared to their White male counterparts (Toldson, 2008). However, according to Rendon (1994), “Even the most vulnerable nontraditional students can be transformed into powerful learners through in- and out-of-class academic and/or interpersonal validation” (p. 37). When students are validated at school, they undergo a process that affirms and supports their ability to fully develop themselves as students and individuals. K-12 teachers can help to validate students by demonstrating genuine concern for students, treating students equally, and being approachable. “Having the support of caring Black and non-Black adults in the school environment has proven to be a major factor in the academic performance of high-achieving Black students” (Carter, 2008, p. 22).

Teachers can also provide validating experiences by structuring learning opportunities that allow students to establish confidence in themselves as capable learners while providing relevant feedback and support before or after class (Rendon, 1994). Students that already feel invalidated probably will not seek out assistance, even if needed, from a teacher who appears cold, dismissive, or too busy. Finally, teachers should allow students to share their ideas and learn collaboratively by incorporating demonstrations, field trips and participation in on-campus and off-campus enriching activities and events.

Limitations and Future Research

Intent-to-persist. The first limitation of this study is the wording of the intent-to-persist survey and how it seems to measure persistence but in three different ways. The first intent-to-persist item focused on the likelihood of returning next semester. The responses to this very short-term item can be completely different from whether or not a
student intends to graduate from the institution. The second question measured overall persistence while the third question measured the likelihood of the respondent graduating from the current institution. Interestingly, students can be persistent without completing the program at the same institution. If the student decided to apply to another institution and did so without missing any time in school, then the student would have persisted even though the institution did not retain him or her. In addition, students’ perceptions of their persistence may be different from their actual persistence. However, researchers should continue to encourage students to answer as honestly as possible, and with the constraints innate to measuring actual persistence, intent-to-persist is a viable way of capturing students’ attitudes about persistence at a particular moment.

**Social desirability bias.** Social desirability bias is an obvious limitation when using self-report surveys. Respondents may simply lie to appear better to themselves or others. Reference bias, which occurs when responses are influenced by subjective standards, is another limitation of self-report surveys. Respondents may have different standards of being a hard worker or persistent, while others may have varying views of whether a family makes a home conducive to studying. Female respondents may have employed reference bias and measured themselves and their intent more harshly than males. However, there is high value in validated and reliable surveys. Future research can combine quantitative measures with qualitative measures, and instructors, family members, and advisors can serve as informants who can complete a portion of the otherwise self-report survey. The values of the self-report survey computed with the informant-report survey may provide clarity and a more accurate depiction of a student’s habits, strengths, weaknesses, and perceptions.
**Sample size and ethnicity.** Eighty-one students responded and completed the survey; thus, future research should gather a larger sample of respondents to increase generalizability. In addition, 11 respondents did not declare an ethnicity. Although no individual has permission to question the race or ethnicity of others, the most common and most likely ethnicity options were available and these 11 students chose “other.” These students may fit another less-known category, or they may have chosen not to reveal their ethnicity for other reasons; but there is also the possibility that someone who was not Black responded to the survey. This is possible but not likely since the emails and links were sent to the students who self-identified as Black. Future research should go further to ensure that respondents self-identify as Black, perhaps on the student consent page, with an opportunity to exit the survey if they choose.

**Institution type.** The current study used data from one of eight campuses in one large college system. The experiences of Black students in a Hispanic-serving institution may be different from those of students in other areas and institutions; thus, the generalizability is limited.

**Work hours.** The current study found that of the 81 respondents, 65 held jobs where they averaged 29 hours per week. Although the current study did not compute correlations between work hours and persistence, the negative relationship between increased work hours and college performance is well known. Thus future research should intentionally measure the relationship between work hours and intent-to-persist or another important predictive variable, such as grade point average.

**Family support.** Furthermore, family support was measured by addressing related items solely to the student respondent. The students’ perception of their family
influences and support may differ from the perceptions of other family members. Future research on the relationships between family and other variables can ensure a more accurate account if information can be collected from the family as well as the student. In addition, since some measures of family support positively affected short-term persistence and commitment to the institution while certain family influences negatively affected overall persistence, future research should have subscales or other technical ways of measuring types of family influences and thus determining the potential impact on student persistence.

**Sociocultural influence.** First, sociocultural influences seem to closely resemble the more popular term environmental factors. Thus, future research should determine the possibility of using the less ambiguous term environmental factors. In addition, sociocultural influence was measured by asking general questions about the experiences of Black college students. Since the negative relationship between sociocultural influences and persistence was the most noteworthy result of the current study for Black females as opposed to Black males, future research should expand and focus on these sociocultural influences to explore and ascertain the most salient issues. More specifically, research should continue to identify specific variables that affect Black female students. Quantitative studies can help reveal many of the general experiences, but the value of subsequent qualitative research to gather the voices and experiences of this extremely important demographic is ripe for exploration. In addition, future research should include qualitative research to understand why Black males are less impacted by these influences and compare other campuses of the studied college system to ascertain whether the findings are consistent across campus cultures.
There is still insufficient knowledge about the gender gap in Black college student persistence and about Black student persistence overall. Many researchers have investigated the successful strategies and attitudes Black students employ while others have looked at the deficits. Future research should focus on the gender gap between Black women and Black men, instead of or in addition to different-race and same-gender comparisons. Black women have overcome many of the same hurdles Black men have had to overcome. What are they experiencing or internalizing differently? It seems that in spite of the oft-repeated statistics about the majority of Black students starting at community colleges, researchers have continuously focused on the needs of Black students at other types of institutions such as PWIs, HSIs, and HBCUs.

**Final Thoughts**

The results of the current study showed that Black female college students’ perceptions of their level of persistence were strongly influenced by sociocultural influences, including negative peer pressure, other external pressures, and the influence of media portrayals. In light of the current study, researchers should not miss the academic prowess of Black females who have persisted and disproportionately earned college degrees when compared to Black males. The results of this study in no way indicate or project a decline in the academic abilities of Black women. Rather the results show that sociocultural influences can negatively affect them as well as Black males. Black females have accomplished far more than their “share” of contributions, both academically and socially, to the Black community in particular and America in general.

Similarly, the results of this study do not intend to suggest that the barriers Black males must overcome have been absolutely identified or resolved.
although very valuable, is not actual persistence. That the Black male respondents of the current study indicated that they intend to persist until they meet their academic goals is a positive step toward increasing the actual persistence of this important group of students, and that they are aware of influences and pulls that can inhibit their program completion is valuable and commendable. The results of this study indicate that there may be a shift in the attitudes of Black male college students. Perhaps this shift is partially the result of watching Black women overcome many of the same obstacles that caused many Black males to drop out of college. The positive images and intellectual representations of Black males have increased, and it is the hope of the researcher that Black males en masse will continue to close the gender gap and increase the overall percentage of degree completion for both males and females. Thankfully, it appears that the political support, outreach organizations, mentoring, increase in positive media representations, individual decisions, family support and constant support from the overwhelmingly higher number of Black female academic role models in K-12 have all led to a renewed focus for Black male academic persistence; however, it is paramount to ensure that community colleges personnel, families, and others increase the support necessary for Black women to continue to resist sociocultural influences.

The Black family, from which so many Black college students draw their motivation and ability to persevere and persist, can unconsciously increase the pressure on Black students to the point that it negatively affects their overall ability to persist. Overall, these students intend to persist, and they value the support of their families. Black students are not and have never been intellectually inferior; however, stressors,
pressures, and distractions with which few other demographics have had to contend have historically confronted them.

The internal, external, societal, political, and institutional barriers these students face can be overcome. Black college students must continue to persist and understand that their value lies in what they are able to contribute to their futures, their families, their communities, and their institutions. These students need not shed the culture and experiences with which they enter college classrooms, dormitories, and admissions offices; rather they must internalize that they have knowledge to offer and believe that their knowledge and viewpoints are just as valuable as others. Institutions, in turn, must commit to the same belief and validate Black student experiences, knowledge, needs, and presence.
Table 1.

*Frequency of Sample by Gender and Ethnicity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background Variables</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<td>African American</td>
<td>42</td>
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<td>Caribbean American</td>
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<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
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<td>Haitian American</td>
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<td>17.3</td>
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<td>Biracial/Multiracial</td>
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Table 2.

*Participant’s Age and Hours Worked per Week*

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<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
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<td>22.71</td>
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<td>Work Hours</td>
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Table 3.

*Intent-to-Persist (Dependent Variable)*

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<td>6.14</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
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<td>1.75</td>
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<td>Commitment to the institutions</td>
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<td>6.10</td>
<td>1.58</td>
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Table 4  
*Descriptive Statistics for Grit, Family Influence, and Sociocultural Influence*

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<tr>
<td>(Grit subscale 1)</td>
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<td>Perseverance of Effort</td>
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<td>(Grit subscale 2)</td>
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<td>Total Grit</td>
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Table 5.

*Results from Independent Samples t-Test by Gender*

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<td>SD</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<td>df</td>
<td>p</td>
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<td>.31**</td>
<td>.85**</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *p* < .05; **p* < .01; ***p* < .001; 1. Consistency of interest; 2. Perseverance of effort; 3. Total grit; 4. Family influence; 5. Sociocultural influence; 6. Commitment to re-enroll next semester; 7. Overall level of persistence; 8. Commitment to the institutions
Table 7.

*Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients among Variables for Female (Upper Diagonal) and Male (Lower Diagonal)*

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<td>.39**</td>
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<td>-.04</td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>.01</td>
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</table>

*Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; 1. Consistency of interest; 2. Perseverance of effort; 3. Total grit; 4. Family influence; 5. Sociocultural influence; 6. Commitment to re-enroll next semester; 7. Overall level of persistence; 8. Commitment to the institutions*
Table 8.

Results from Hierarchical Regression Model on Intent-to-Persist 1 (Commitment to Re-enroll Next Semester)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>6.04*</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>6.07*</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>6.06*</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>6.31*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consistency of interest</td>
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<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perseverance of effort</td>
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<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.52</td>
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<td>4.14*</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perseverance of effort * Gender</td>
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<td>-0.64</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Family influence * Gender</td>
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<td>0.49</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Sociocultural influence * Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sociocultural influence * Consistency of interest</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.28</td>
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<td>0.91</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family influence * Consistency of interest</td>
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<td>Family influence * Perseverance of effort</td>
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</table>

\[
\Delta R^2 = 0.04 \quad 0.11 \quad 0.16
\]

\[
F(\Delta R^2) = 1.60 \quad 4.90* \quad 1.72
\]

\[
df_1 = 2 \quad 2 \quad 9
\]

\[
df_2 = 77 \quad 75 \quad 66
\]

\[
R^2 = 0.006 \quad 0.05 \quad 0.16 \quad 0.17
\]

\[
F = 0.49 \quad 1.23 \quad 2.77* \quad 2.18*
\]

\[
df_1 = 1 \quad 3 \quad 5 \quad 14
\]

\[
df_2 = 79 \quad 77 \quad 75 \quad 66
\]

Note. p < .05; n = 81
Table 9.

Results from Hierarchical Regression Model on Intent-to-Persist 2 (Overall Level of Persistence)

<table>
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$\Delta R^2$                                    | 0.14   | 0.06|   | 0.19   |     |

$F(\Delta R^2)$                                 | 5.84*  | 2.49|   | 2.01*  |     |

$df_1$                                        | 2      | 2   |   | 9      |     |

$df_2$                                        | 70     | 68  |   | 59     |     |

$R^2$                                         | 0.001  | 0.14|   | 0.20   | 0.39|

$F$                                           | 0.05   | 3.91*|   | 3.44*  | 2.69*|

$df_1$                                        | 1      | 3   |   | 5      | 14  |

$df_2$                                        | 72     | 70  |   | 68     | 59  |

Note. $p < .05$; $n = 74$
Table 10.

Results from Hierarchical Regression Model on Intent-to-Persist 3 (Commitment to the Institutions)

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| $\Delta R^2$ | 0.05 | 0.14 | 0.21 |
| $F(\Delta R^2)$ | 1.98 | 5.37*| 1.75 |
| df1  | 2   | 2   | 4   |
| df2  | 77  | 75  | 71  |
| $R^2$ | 0.03 | 0.08 | 0.20 | 0.35 |
| $F$  | 2.71 | 2.24 | 3.65*| 2.54*|
| df1  | 1   | 3   | 5   | 14  |
| df2  | 79  | 77  | 75  | 66  |

Note. $p < .05$; $n = 81$
Figure 1

Effect of grit, family influence, and social influence on persistence
Figure 2

Proposed hierarchical multiple regression model
Two-way interaction between family influence and sociocultural influence on commitment to reenroll next semester.
Figure 4

Two-way interaction between family influence and consistency of interest on commitment to reenroll next semester
Figure 5

Two-way interaction between gender and sociocultural influence on overall intent to persistence
Figure 6
Two-way interaction between family influence and consistency of interest on commitment to reenroll next semester
Figure 7
Two-way interaction between family influence and sociocultural influence on commitment to current institution
Figure 8

Two-way interaction between family influence and consistency of interest on commitment to current institution
References


Hargrove, Demond T. (2014). *This is How We Did It: A Study of Black Male Resilience and Attainment at a Hispanic Serving Institution through the Lenses of Critical Race Theory*. eRepository @ Seton Hall.


Appendix 1

Student Email Invitation to Participate

Dear Prospective Survey Participant,

I am a doctoral student from the University of Miami, and I am conducting a research study as part of my doctoral degree requirements. My study is entitled, Non-academic Factors that Contribute to the Gender Persistence to Completion Gap Between Black Male and Female Community College Students. This is a letter of invitation to participate in this research study. The purpose of the study is to determine, most importantly, if there is a difference in intent-to-persist between Black male students and Black female students and secondarily if there is a difference in the way Black men and women exhibit grit and are impacted by family and sociocultural factors.

By agreeing to participate in the study, you will be giving your consent for the researcher or principal investigator to include your responses in his data analysis. Your participation in this research study is strictly voluntary, and you may choose not to participate without fear of penalty or any negative consequences. You will be able to withdraw from the survey at any time and all survey responses will be deleted, including the informed consent agreement. An informed consent agreement will appear on the first screen page of the survey. There will be no individually identifiable information, remarks, comments or other identification of you as an individual participant. All results will be presented as aggregate, summary data. If you wish, you may request a copy of the results of this research study by writing to the researcher at:

Simeon Richardson
500 College Terrace #B-143
Homestead, FL 33030

The survey should take about 10 minutes. Your participation will contribute to the current literature about Black community college student persistence. No compensation will be offered for your participation. If you would like to know more information about this study, an information letter can be obtained by sending a request to: drrich75@miami.edu If you would like to participate, you can access the survey from a link at: https://umiami.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2n11Kon4VGEXXkF
Appendix 2

GRIT-S SCALE

Short Grit Scale (Grit-S)

Directions for taking the Grit Scale: Please respond to the following 8 items. Be honest – there are no right or wrong answers!

1. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.*
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
   - Not much like me
   - Not like me at all

2. Setbacks don’t discourage me.
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
   - Not much like me
   - Not like me at all

3. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.*
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
   - Not much like me
   - Not like me at all

4. I am a hard worker.
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
   - Not much like me
   - Not like me at all

5. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.*
6. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.*

7. I finish whatever I begin.

8. I am diligent.

Scoring:

1. For questions 2, 4, 7 and 8 assign the following points:

5 = Very much like me
4 = Mostly like me
3 = Somewhat like me
2 = Not much like me
1 = Not like me at all
2. For questions 1, 3, 5 and 6 assign the following points:
1 = Very much like me
2 = Mostly like me
3 = Somewhat like me
4 = Not much like me
5 = Not like me at all

Add up all the points and divide by 8. The maximum score on this scale is 5 (extremely gritty), and the lowest score on this scale is 1 (not at all gritty).

Grit Scale citation


http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckwort/images/Grit%20JPSP.pdf
Appendix 3

Family Influence Questionnaire

*My family expects me to graduate from college.*

*My family encourages me to stay in school and finish my degree.*

*My family would be disappointed if I dropped out of college to work more.*

*My family routinely asks about my progress in my college classes.*

*My family creates an environment at home that makes it easier for me to stay in college.*
Appendix 4

Sociocultural Influence Questionnaire

The media (television, music, videos, etc.) that I enjoy positively influences me to stay in college.

I believe that society views me as a threat.

My friends of the same gender and race encourage me to pursue my college degree.

I have experienced racism from a different race while in a school setting.

I have experienced racism from my same race because of something related to school.

I have had professors of my same race and gender that have positively influenced me.

How many hours do you work?

I feel compelled to do something other than attend college.

If I feel compelled to do something other than attend college, from where does the temptation come?