

LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF ADULT AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AT SELECTED  
MIDWEST POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

By

LAURA CONTENT PECK

B.S. Kansas State University, 1977  
Graduate Naval War College, 1990

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Educational Leadership  
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2010

## **Abstract**

This study examined how adult African American women experienced learning at two post-secondary institutions in the Midwest; a diverse, urban community college, and a predominantly white research university. The study also considered how barriers, challenges, responsibilities, and support systems impacted their learning experiences. Gender, race and age were variables of interest, and three theoretical lenses; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule's *Women's Ways of Knowing*, McClusky's *Theory of Margin/Adult Roles and Responsibilities*, and Critical Race Theory were used to explore the participants' experience of learning. This topic was of interest due to the paucity of research conducted in the area of post-secondary institutions, with adult African American women in the Midwest. This study found that learners used active learning, linked their learning to their life experiences, encountered racism, experienced barriers; situational, institutional, dispositional, and information; utilized familial, instructor, peer and spiritual support systems, would benefit from career advising, and that career goal uncertainty was a common obstruction. The women participating in this research were determined, motivated and goal oriented, and served as role models for their children, sought education to improve their lives, and emphasized the importance of education to reach career and life goals.

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Approved by:

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## **Chapter 1**

Although African American women comprise the largest number of students of color at the graduate and undergraduate level (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2006), their numbers at colleges and universities are disproportionately low when compared to their representation in the total population of the United States. African American women comprised 1,440,400 enrolled at all postsecondary degree granting institutions, with 204,497 granted degrees; associate's (62,165), bachelor's (94,341), master's (42,017), doctoral (2,041), and professional degrees (3,933) (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

This study examined how adult African American women reacted as they experienced learning at the post-secondary level, specifically in the Midwest, and how barriers, challenges, responsibilities, and support systems impacted their learning experiences. Of special interest are three intersecting variables; race, gender and age, and three theoretical lenses will be used to explore learning and knowledge construction, barriers, challenges and support systems; Women's Ways of Knowing; the literature on adult roles and responsibilities with an emphasis on McClusky's Theory of Margin, and Critical Race Theory.

### **Background**

Presently the U.S. population is 50.8% female and 49.2% male (U.S. Census 2009 Feb 19 update). Women reached parity with males in college enrollment nationwide in 1978. Since then, more women than men have enrolled at the rate of 126 women to 100 men for whites, 130 women to 100 men for Hispanics, and 166 women to 100 men for Blacks (Sum, Fogg & Harrington, 2003). The largest proportional increase in learners who choose to study at colleges and universities are women of color (Sum, et al., 2003). In order to learn about a significant

population of learners in higher education, adult Midwest African American women were selected as the focus for this study. In part, the reasoning for the selection of African American women was little has been written about the undergraduate African American woman. There is some research concerning motivation, challenges and sources of strength (Coker, 2001) and research on African American Women in higher education in the state of Minnesota, (Fry, 2002).

Adult education literature, as well as qualitative research literature emphasized that if a researcher was going to comment on a specific population, then the research that s/he did ideally should be conducted with that population. Learning styles, developmental stages, moral and ethical development , and social issues research should not be conducted on white, upper middle/upper class males of college age and then generalized to fit all other races, classes, and ages (Belenky, Clinch, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Berg, 2008; Creswell, 2006; Esterberg, 2001; Gilligan, 1993; Kohlberg, 1984; Perry, 1968; Seidman, 2006 ).

### **Current Research**

Of the 40 studies related to African American women at nation-wide post-secondary institutions, nine studies were related to African American adult women learners in the Midwest; one explored self-efficacy as the primary success factor for nontraditional women pursuing college degrees; one was a narrative of native born African American women at urban community colleges; one was a narrative inquiry into lives of low income nontraditional African American community college students; one described the good, bad and ugly experiences of African American doctoral students; one concentrated on professional development; one examined race, class and gender effects on higher education; one portrayed an orientation program for first generation African American women college students; one explored the silencing of African American women voices; one researched the social experiences of African

American women learners in a predominantly white college. While some of the studies investigated touched on one area of the proposed research, none included all three factors; how adult Midwestern African American women learned, especially as described by Belenky, et al., (1986); the barriers that they encountered which can be found in Critical Race Theory; or the support systems that they employed, as found in the literature on the roles and responsibilities of adults and McClusky's Theory of Margin ( Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Freeality.com search, 2007; Johnson-Bailey, 1994; Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002 ; McClusky, 1963; ProQuest Dissertation Search, September, 2008; ProQuest Dissertation Search, July 2010).

### **Regional Differences**

Regional differences in culture, institutions and historical elements existed among the Midwest, the South, New England, and the Pacific Northwest (Hall, 2000; Perez, 1998; Pratt and Nesbitt, 2000; Yon, 2000). Therefore, this research's focus on the Midwest was illuminating and the different venues of urban and research universities in the Midwest added depth to the research. According to Lave & Wenger (1991), learning occurs contextually, in a physical locality with the setting of the learning activity impacting all learning experience. There is a tendency to view learning solely in context of the physical locality and the setting of the learning activity. Context goes beyond locality; it includes such factors as the individual, culture, social, institutional and historic locations, and is an important foundation of the social aspect of adult education (Gee, 1990; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000; Tisdale, 1993).

## **Racial Etymology Evolution**

Words and terminology change over time (Dunmore & Fleischer, 2008). Racial terminology has changed over time, and descriptors of race are not immune to such changes. "As blacks established national institutions such as churches, colleges and economic associations, they adopted various racial labels to define themselves as a people (Smith & Davis, 1992, p. 496). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both whites and Blacks referred to African Americans as "colored." Beginning at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans were referred to as "Negroes." Somewhere between 1950 and 1960, African Americans began referring to themselves as "Black" (Cross, 1991; Jackson, 2003; Smith & Davis, 1992 ). The term Black was promoted as being powerful, militant, showing pride of race, and as a rejection of the status quo. (Smith & Davis, 1992). By the 1970s the term Black was predominately used by both whites and African Americans (Cross, 1991; Smith & Davis, 1992). From 1970 to the late 1980s the term Black was almost exclusively used. In 1988, Ramona H. Edelin, president of the National Urban Coalition, suggested that the term African American replace Black when referring to people of African American ancestry. There was a widespread campaign, and the news media, and American society on the whole tended to accept the term (Cross, 1991; Smith & Davis, 1992). Some geographic areas prefer Black over African American, and there is some difference in which term is more acceptable based on the age of the individual African American, with older individuals preferring Black, and younger individuals preferring African American. (Smith & Davis, 1992). Most of the recent diversity literature refers to African Americans when discussing race (Cross, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixon & Rousseau, 2006; Gary et al., 2004; Smith & Davis, 1992 ). Another area that this dissertation is exploring was gender.

## **Women's Ways of Knowing**

While there was a dearth of information concerning African American women at post-secondary Midwestern institutions, there was literature that examined how women in general experienced learning.

One of the first studies which examined how women learn is *Women's Ways of Knowing; Development of Self, Voice and Mind* (Belenky, Clinch, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986). The authors used semi-structured interviews of 135 women who were diverse in age, culture, class, education and race. The interviewers analyzed their results based on the commonalities of the women they interviewed using qualitative methodology. The authors were focusing on similarities and common themes of learning amongst all women. *Women's Way's of Knowing* used interviews to understand how "women define powerful learning experiences and go about gathering knowledge and making meaning" (Stanton, 1996, p. 27 ) *Women's Ways of Knowing* also identified different stages of knowing, which involved understanding beliefs and feelings, reported in *Knowledge, Difference and Power* (Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, & Belenky, 1996).

Use of their techniques to interview a different population provided interesting and useful results (Bing & Reid, 1996):

It remains important to deconstruct these ways of knowing by examining the differences that occur across racial and class lines and understanding how the different types of "knowing" may appear when placed in a culturally dissimilar context. If we consider the voices of women who have been systematically oppressed because of their race, for example, we can appreciate that these women have had to create different voices--ones that are contextually determined (p. 192).

Understanding more about cultural differences in knowing could give post-secondary institutions the knowledge to better understand African American women, give instructors tools for more effective teaching, and give learners more understanding and insight (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). If African American women are the largest minority on American campuses ( National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007; U.S. Census, 2009), then it would be logical to ensure multiculturally inclusive classes which address using texts, videos, and technology methodologies which included African American women (hooks, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 1994). Belenky, et al., (1986), believe that women in general learn differently from men. Instead of updating teaching methodologies that fit women's learning styles, many instructors, advisors, and faculty continue to teach, advise and administer to learners much the same way that they have always done when the majority of learners were white, male and middle class learners (hooks, 2003; Zamani, 2001).

Additional theoretical constructs are relevant to the study of adult African American women in higher education; to include the effect that adult roles and responsibilities had on the learning experience of adult Midwestern African American women learners at the post-secondary level. According to McClusky (1963), Mancuso (2001), and Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, (2006), while it was important to pursue feminist perspectives, there are a number of factors why women's participation waxed and waned in adult education.

### **Adult Roles and Responsibilities and McClusky's Theory of Margin**

Adult learners who attended college did so for many reasons. Adult learners commonly described their goals; to meet work requirements; for professional advancement; to achieve personal aims; and to gain knowledge necessary to their vision of the future (Boshier & Collins, 1985; Fujita-Starck, 1996; Wlodkowski, 2008).



Adult learners had multiple commitments in their lives; work, family, civic, provider and nurturer (Kasworm et al., 2002; Merriam et al., 2006). College was a challenge, a haven, and a stimulus; with dynamics that appealed to, tested and frustrated adult learners. Adult learners were diverse: they could be older than "traditional learners," married, a racial minority, female, disabled, attending part-time, caregivers for children or elderly family members, employed and usually had more claims on their time, energy, and resources than learners just out of high school (Kasworm, et al., 2002; Merriam et al., 2006). In order to make meaning of adult participation in education and understand patterns of participation, marginalization, barriers and support systems of learners and the dynamics which affect adult learners in adult education; adult roles and responsibilities and McClusky's Theory of margin was used (Kasworm, et al., 2002; McClusky, 1963; Merriam, et al., 2006).

The theory of margin stated that a learner had a certain amount of "load" which was comprised of internal and external responsibilities and obligations; these could be the demands the individual places upon herself (internal) and the external responsibilities of employment, nuclear family obligations, responsibilities to the extended family, and obligations to a church or other religious institutions. The above list of obligations and responsibilities took time away from study, homework, school projects and scheduled classes. The other factor, "power" was comprised of internal power; intelligence, social skills, health, fitness, and persistence and external power such as wealth, leisure time, family, employer, and community support and other factors which encouraged success in the learning environment (Kasworm, et al, 2002; McClusky, 1963; Merriam et al., 2006). "Margin" equaled load divided by power, and illustrated how successfully the learner coped with obligations and responsibilities with the resources available.

While McClusky's theory of margin might explain some of the ebb and flow of adult learner participation, other theorists examined racism in post-secondary education institutions. One such theory was Critical Race Theory (CRT).

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was introduced in the 1980s in the field of law as critical legal studies. Derrick Bell, professor at Harvard Law School, and the late Alan Freeman, professor of law, State University of New York at Buffalo were credited with the introduction of critical legal studies (Bell, 1987; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixon & Rousseau, 2006). By the mid 1990s critical law studies had been transformed from critical legal studies to critical race theory in sociology, psychology, and education (Dixon & Rousseau, 2006), and it continued to expand into other disciplines.

Many scholars in the field of education considered themselves critical race theorists, and used critical race theory to understand such issues as school discipline and hierarchy, curriculum and history, intelligence quotient and achievement testing. CRT had a transformative action aspect (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Tisdell, 2003 ). Not only did it try to describe American social conditions and how racial positions were viewed within society, (CRT) was used to transform racism into increased opportunities for minorities (Dixon & Rousseau, 2006; Ianiska, Wright, & Rocco, 20003).

Critical Race Theory in education had five basic tenets. 1) Racism was an ordinary part of our society, not an aberration. White privilege was difficult to address, as it was seen as the normal way of doing business. 2) Our system of interest convergence served important purposes, because racism advanced the interests of both elite whites (in material ways) and working class whites (psychically) (Delgado & Stafancic, 2001). 3) Social construction thesis states that race

was a product of social thought and relation; not objective fixed, or inherent, race corresponded to no genetic or biological standard (Dixon & Rousseau, 2006). 4) Differential racialization was the way that the dominant racial group designated different minorities at different times in reaction to shifting needs. Thus, if there was a lack of job opportunities, the dominant empowered race would attempt to give all available jobs to whites. Hispanics, African Americans, Native Americans, Asians, mixed race individuals, people of Mediterranean heritage and religious minorities could be classified as non-whites in certain circumstances (Perea, Delgado, Harris & Wildman, 2007). 5) The final tenet was that each minority had a unique voice. Minority status conferred the authority to speak competently concerning race due to a history and experience with oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

There were four themes generally accepted by critical race scholars: 1) Material Determinism was interpreted as policies and behavior directed at minorities which resulted in material benefit to elite whites and psychological benefit to working class whites (Dixon & Rousseau, 2006). 2) Revisionist interpretation of history replaced the comfortable majority interpretation with a more accurate minority interpretation of what occurred (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). 3) Critique of liberalism which avoided confrontation of racism, and encouraged a policy of color-blindness and underground racism made change almost impossible. Liberals emphasized "rights" following procedure, rather than making substantive changes. That way they could applaud the fact that minorities are afforded equality of opportunity, while they resisted any programs that ensured equality of results (Perea, et al., 2007). 4) Structural Determinism described how social structure (class, gender, race, sexual orientation, and age) affected individuals (Perea, et al., 2007).

## **Summary of Background**

In summary, these three theories could be defined as follows: Women's Ways of Knowing explored the powerful learning experiences that women have had, and the way those experiences shaped the way they regarded knowledge, expertise, and making meaning. Adult roles and responsibilities research literature and the theory of margin described the energy or "power" that an adult had in the form of health, energy, intellect, support systems and material wealth, with which to pursue education, and the "load" or commitments, responsibilities, and drains on the adult's ability to seek education (Kasworm, et al., 2002; Merriam, et al., 2006). Racism, according to critical race theory was institutionalized. It was deliberately used to serve a purpose; racism was used to distribute privilege and status; and racism affected all aspects of society, but especially educational institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Perea et al., 2007).

## **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study was that it looked at contemporary Midwestern African American adult women learners in order to define how they experienced learning, and how that experience shaped their attitudes toward knowledge and expertise. Additionally, it attempted to discover what challenges and barriers they faced in post secondary education and what support systems they used. In particular, the researcher was interested in how barriers that the Midwestern African American adult women faced affect their learning and attitudes toward learning and what inspired the learners to persist to completion of their education goals. A further goal was how they experienced learning at Midwestern postsecondary institutions and what could be done to better encourage and support adult Midwestern women African American learners. There had been very little research conducted in this area, and it was important to recognize the challenges and stumbling blocks as more and more African American women

attend institutions of higher learning (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008). The results of this qualitative study could assist in better advising, administration, support and understanding of women African American learners, and provide more tools with which faculty could better serve the needs of one of the fastest growing segments of minority learners.

### **Problem Statement**

There was limited research on adult African American women in Midwestern postsecondary educational institutions; but there were significant numbers of these women attending postsecondary institutions in the Midwest. Without research conducted with this specific group, faculty, student affairs and other members of higher education institutions would attempt to serve this population based on inadequate and non-representative research.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to provide insight into how adult Midwestern African American women experienced learning, how those experiences shaped their attitudes and how they dealt with barriers, challenges, responsibilities and support systems as they attended postsecondary schools.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do adult Midwestern African American women describe their learning experiences at the post-secondary level?
2. What effect do barriers and challenges have on the adult Midwestern African American women's postsecondary educational experiences?
3. What effect do responsibilities and support systems have on the adult Midwestern African American women's postsecondary educational experience?

## **Methodology**

### **Type of Methodology**

The methodology used in this study was phenomenological; which identified and described subjective experiences (Schwandt, 2001). When the purpose of research is to explore a phenomenon in a real life setting, phenomenology is appropriate (Schwandt, 2001). As shown in the background section, little research existed that investigated African American women in adult education. The literature or lack of literature showed that adult Midwestern African American women in higher education had not been adequately studied. It is therefore appropriate to use qualitative methods to investigate the topic (Creswell, 2006; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Merriam, 2002). The constant comparative method was used, adding data to shape probes used appropriately in subsequent interviews (Day, 1993). Analysis was done using NVivo8 computer program, which was widely used in social sciences qualitative research.

### **Population**

Midwestern adult African American women learners from an urban community college (CC1U) located in the metropolitan Kansas City area, with an enrollment of approximately 5,500; and a research university located in north central Kansas (RU1) with an enrollment of approximately 23,000 were the student population from which a sample was selected to be interviewed to see if there were differences in learning experiences and the roles, responsibilities, challenges, barriers and support systems at different types of postsecondary institutions.

### **Sample**

A purposeful sample of ten learners, five from each institution were selected (Merriam, 2002), based on recommendations of faculty, staff, administrators and from volunteer students in response to posters, letters, announcements and flyers. Every effort was made to obtain diverse

age groups, a balance of single, married, with and without dependents, working and unemployed in order to obtain depth and experience from a variety of individuals. The researcher realized that all criteria may not be met, but that adult roles when assumed by traditional aged learners could qualify them as adults (Kasworm et al., 2002; Merriam, et al., 2006).

## **Procedures**

Prior to actual research interviews taking place, a pilot study was conducted. A pilot study was useful in ensuring that research questions, phrasing of questions on instruments were clear and elicited the clearest subject responses, and facilitated a more systematic approach to data collection and analysis (Byrne, 2001; Sampson, 2004).

Individual interviews based a semi-structured format were held with each learner who agreed to participate in the research, up to five subjects from each of the institutions. The interviews were conducted in a conference room; at the location the subject felt most comfortable, and was a quiet venue. Each interview lasted a minimum of ninety minutes and was concluded within two hours, unless new material was being developed (Belenky. et al., 1986; Johnson, 1997). To minimize cross-cultural bias from the participants, an African American doctoral candidate conducted the interviews (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Merriam et al, 2001), with assistance in observing body language, and interactions from the researcher, who also acted as recorder. In addition, the researcher had a hearing disability that caused some difficulty in comprehending all answers when working on her own (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990).

Following completion and review of a brief biographical questionnaire, informed consent forms were signed, the interview took place. Probes were prepared and used appropriately to develop topics mentioned by previous participants in earlier interviews. Each interview was tape

recorded and transcribed. The data was analyzed and categorized using the constant comparative method and InVivo8 computer analysis program. Both the interviewer and the researcher/recorder analyzed and coded all interviews in order to find commonalities, patterns, differences and themes (Esterberg, 2001; Seidman, 2006). Common themes were recognized and emerging patterns were the goal of the analysis, and provided reliability. Interviews continued until thematic saturation was reached and ten learners were interviewed, whichever came first (Merriam, 2002). Full transcriptions were returned to the subjects for review for accuracy, which assisted in reliability and validity. Final interpretation of collected data and the implications of the results began once thematic saturation had been reached (Esterberg, 2001; Merriam, 2002; Seidman, 2006).

### **Limitations**

This study had the following limitations:

1. Natural bias was brought to any research by the investigator
2. Answers in this study were limited by the format and manner in which the Interviewer conducted the interviews.
3. Qualitative research was dependent on the relationship between the interviewer and the subject. Since such a relationship cannot be duplicated, each qualitative study necessarily had differences.
4. There was not the variation in age, experience and dependent status sought by the researcher at all institutions.

### **Assumptions**

The following assumptions were made for the purpose of this study.

1. Those learners being interviewed were truthful in describing their learning.
2. The participants had diverse levels of learning and learning tools.
3. The participants had diverse educational goals.



4. Institutional racism existed.
5. Adults had multiple roles and responsibilities outside their schooling.

## **Definitions**

1. **Adult**-People who are old enough to work, vote, fight, and marry and who have completed the cycle of continuous education (if any) commenced in childhood. An individual who undertakes the roles and responsibilities of an adult, acts in a mature manner, but has not reached the age of majority is legally a child, but could be considered an adult in this research. Adult roles can include parenthood, caretaker for a parent, employment, financial responsibility, able to vote, pursuing postsecondary education, a member of the armed forces, or married (Kasworm, et al., 2002; Merriam, et al., 2006).
2. **Barriers**- Institutional barriers, dispositional barriers, informational barriers, and situational barriers are the four main types of barriers that exist. Institutional barriers include individual or institutional acts, rules or laws which emphasize disparate treatment, subordination, discrimination, and oppression of individuals who are a minority race, religion, culture, or national origin. Dispositional barriers are internal barriers such as lack of confidence or a feeling of inferiority which prevent an individual from realizing educational goals. Informational barriers are barriers when an individual does not know what programs, assistance, or education is available, or there is an language barrier so the individual can't use it to his or her advantage. Situational barriers are barriers that may be temporary, such as having very young children, but lacking reliable child care, or living too far from the school, but not having transportation (Dixon & Rousseau, 2006; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Kasworm, et al., 2002).

3. **Critical Race Theory**-Critical Race Theory states that race is a socially constructed concept, outcomes are the result of the workings of power, and minority members oppose the continuation of subordination and oppression of minorities. The theory is based on critical legal studies, and encompasses several disciplines, including but not limited to law, psychology, sociology, ethnology, education, history, and minority studies (Bell, 1987; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixon & Rousseau, 2006).
4. **Kolb's Learning Style Inventory**- Four learning styles; Accommodators learn from hands on experience, lead, initiate, take risks, adaptation and practical; Assimilators put wide range of data into concise logical forms, plan, create models, define problems, develop theories, abstract ideas, patient; Convergers find practical uses for ideas and theories, solve problems, make decisions, reason deductively, logical; Divergers observe, view concrete situations from multiple viewpoints, are imaginative, recognize and understand problems, understand people and are open-minded (Kolb, 2007).
5. **Load**-Internal responsibilities; the goals and expectations that the individual places on herself; external responsibilities and obligations are those responsibilities to family, partner, employer, employees, friends, church or religious institution, civic commitments, extended family and other individuals or groups, formal or informal that compete for time and resources when pursuing education as described in McClusky's Theory of Margin (McClusky, 1963).
6. **Margin**-the result when load is divided by power; a cushion to handle load requirements, (McClusky, 1963).
7. **Marginalization**-exclusion from meaningful participation in society. This can take the form of severe material deprivation, exclusion from employment, schooling, medical

care, to extreme cases of extermination of an individual, group or communities in regions or globally (Goldberger, et al., 1996; Kasworm, et al., 2002).

8. **Power**-External power; the financial, social, family, employer, civic groups, and religious groups that provide encouragement, positive, creative support; Internal Power; the social skills, cognitive ability, personality, coping skills, and resiliency available to the adult who is attempting to accomplish a project, pursuing education, or undertaking some form of personal growth. (McClusky, 1963).
9. **Racial Identity**-Stage 1-Pre-encounter Stage; Non-Afrocentric identity. Stage 2-Encounter; an event or series of events that break through the individual's current identity and world view, similar to a disorienting dilemma. Stage 3-Immersion-Emersion; the old identity is demolished and the new identity is taking hold in a dramatic commitment to change. Immersion is to submerge into the African American culture, politics and issues, but the changes are not yet internalized. Emersion is transitional stage of stepping back, and looking at issues, role models and organizations with more logic and less emotion. The individual can remain at Stage 3, drop out, or move to Stage 4-Internalization; moving into a new world view, outlook, and more at ease with self. Stage 5-Internalization-Commitment; Not everyone moves to this stage, where the individual takes a sustained interest and makes a commitment to African American affairs (Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1991).
10. **Racism**-"Personal racism consists of racist acts, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors on the part of the individual person." "Institutional racism refers to racial inferiorizing or antipathy perpetrated by specific social institutions such as schools, corporations,

hospitals or the criminal justice system, as a totality." "Racism is race prejudice plus power" (Martinas & Ellinger, 1993; Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2010).

11. **Support Group**-members generally provide non-material, non-professional assistance for a common goal or shared burden; which may take the form of empathetic listening, sharing of personal experiences, provide social networking, advocacy for aims and goals, practical advice, mentoring and sharing of skills so that each member is able to reach his or her goals (Kasworm, et al., 2002; Gary. et al., 2004).
12. **Theory of Margin**-McClusky devised the theory which states that Margin is equal to the Load divided by Power.  $M=L/P$  (McClusky, 1963).
13. **Women's Ways of Knowing**-Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule conducted interviews with women to find if women learned differently from men. After conducting interviews with diverse women, they theorized that women do learn differently from men, and that they go through distinct stages while they are in the process of learning (Belenky, et al., 1986).

## **Summary**

This chapter provided the background for the inquiry into how Midwestern African American women in postsecondary institutions described their learning experiences, and what effect barriers such as racism, sexism, challenges from cultural differences, and the effects of their support systems have had on their learning experiences. Drawing from the concept of *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, et al., 1986), and looking at the world through the words of a Midwestern African American woman, to learn what shaped her world view, her responses and her learning experiences was the underlying basis for this study.

In order to find out the effect barriers, support groups, and responsibilities had on the learning and attitudes of Midwestern African American women who attended institutions of higher learning and to further knowledge in the practice of education, was the additional reason for this research. Adult roles and responsibilities and McClusky's theory of margin were seen as specifically relevant for learners, who were marginalized, had responsibilities, encountered barriers, and challenges, as well as support systems, so that there was power as well as load (McClusky, 1963; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2006).

Much of the research on women's responses to learning had been conducted on white, middle class women at higher institutions of learning. There are more and more African American women attending colleges and universities. The research conducted here could assist the field of education and the practitioners of education to gain more extensive knowledge of how African American women experienced learning, and how Critical Race Theory applied to Midwestern African American women at postsecondary institutions. The researcher's background was in higher education, and as an educator interested in women's ways of knowing and how the learning environment affected the perception of learning and construction of knowledge. This interest stimulated the research into Midwest African American women's challenges, barriers, and support systems and the effect these have had on learning experiences. Lastly, the literature of adult education would be supplemented as this research would enhance the literature for educating adult educators, as well as the literature for practitioners of adult education.

### **Protection of Human Rights**

This research was conducted in accordance with the Institutional Review Boards of Kansas State University. Permission to conduct this research was received (See Appendix F).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

The literature review included such topics as African American women learners, women's ways of knowing, adult roles and responsibilities, McClusky's theory of margin, and critical race theory. The initial literature review concentrated on African American women learners.

#### **African American Women Learners**

African American students comprised 17.9 per cent of undergraduates in 2006 and 17.1 per cent of undergraduates in 2005. Student population trends indicated that more women and more minority women had been attending higher education institutions for the past thirty years, and this trend was expected to continue (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007).

There are approximately 519, 870,000 Black women around the world. As Sharp (1993, p. 7 ) says, “There’s a Black woman on each of the seven continents,... Her presence is everywhere.” This quote introduces the 2004 New Directions for Student Services, and the editor, Mary Howard-Hamilton, goes on to praise the 1985 New Directions for Student Services for being a groundbreaking sourcebook, as it addressed one chapter on the special needs of minority students. Few writers focused on needs of women of color in higher education at that time. Howard-Hamilton, 2004, p 17, “I note, regretfully, that many of the recommendations at the end of that 1985 chapter (for example, adequate funding, career planning and counseling geared specifically to women of color, more women faculty and administrators of color on college campuses) are echoed in this sourcebook.”

African-American women in higher education were not interchangeable; they had different concerns, interests, talents and cultural heritages. One learner was not the equivalent of another learner (Howard-Hamilton, 2004). This observation was relevant in praxis. Many

learners and instructors who shared classes with minority learners depended on the minority learner to be representative of their race or culture. This placed enormous pressure and an overwhelming burden on the minority learner. Each learner should be freed to experience higher education without shouldering the burden of being the authority on their race and culture (Howard-Hamilton, 2004). Learners were most successful when they had role models with whom they could identify (Myers, 2002). Post-secondary education institutions were generally comprised of faculty that represent the dominant culture, and displayed both Eurocentric and androcentric bias (Goldberger, et al., 1996).

Women African-American faculty and administration were a recent phenomena, speaking historically. Hired first in the 1970s, and their numbers had not kept pace with enrollment of African American learners (Myers, 2002.) When there were few professors that look like their learners, and those professors were silenced or are ignored, it could be theorized that it sent a powerful message to African American learners (Myers, 2002).

Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, (2000) found that African-American college students at a predominantly white institution consistently reported more negative racial experiences—such as pressure to conform to negative stereotypes, inequitable treatment by members of the campus community, and faculty racism—compared with their non-African-American peers. A qualitative study on the adjustment experiences of African-American college students (Schweitzer, Griffin, Ancis & Thomas, 1999), revealed that their social adjustment could be outlined in terms of four key elements: a sense of underrepresentedness (that is feeling isolated, overlooked, or misunderstood in the social environment); direct perceptions of racism (that is, personal encounters with racially discriminatory situations, statements, and policies); hesitation, uncertainty or difficulty in initiating communications with faculty members; and feeling greater

comfort with faculty members who were more similar to them in terms of race, sex, department, or field of study.

Johnson-Bailey (2001, p 53):

“The lives of African-American women are complicated by a variety of factors that combine to make them *conspicuously invisible* in many contexts.” Their absence in representative numbers from the ranks of students, tenured faculty and administrators in the academy was taken for granted; commonly regarded as a fact of university life that had no foreseeable remedy (Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Schweitzer et al., 1999). Ironically, in those few academic situations where African-American women had significant presence, they were routinely ignored and unnoticed (Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Johnson-Bailey, 2001). Regardless of whether or not this paradox was an accident, statistical data was not a sufficient means of understanding the dilemma of African-American women in the academy, especially those older, “nontraditional” women who returned to college as adults (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Myers, 2002). A factor that could explain how women learn is Belenky et al (1986) *Women’s Ways of Knowing*.

### **Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule’s Women’s Ways of Knowing**

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule have been influential in studying women’s ways of knowing. In order to find out how women learn, and to determine if there are unique perspectives in how women approached learning, these researchers used interviews and qualitative methods to seek answers to those questions, and published the results in *Women’s Ways of Knowing: Development of Self, Voice and Mind* (Belenky, et al., 1986).

*Women’s Ways of Knowing*, the classic study in the area of how many women think about how they know, postulated the following stages of knowing:



Silence. Women who are silent felt that they had no access to knowledge. They had no voice and were dependent on outside authorities for any concrete knowledge that they might possess.

Received Knowledge. Received knowledge relied on words and listening, and was concrete, dualistic knowledge. The learner received and returned correct answers to outside authorities.

Subjective Knowing or Inner Voice. This stage relied on intuitive processes. There was a profound distrust of logic, analysis and abstraction, with rejection of science, math and technology a frequent characteristic of this stage.

Procedural Knowledge or Voice of Reason. This stage was a dichotomy of listening to the woman's inner voice, while she attempted to retain some trust in outside authority. There was the ability to evaluate the validity of lines of reasoning. There are two types; Separate Knowledge, which was traditional, rational, competitive academics, each individual attempted to invalidate the reasoning, logic and ideas of fellow learners. Learners who needed mastery of knowledge, such as lawyers, computer technicians, and math based scientists tended to use Separate Knowing. This type of knowledge was more likely to be utilized by male learners. There was also Connected Knowledge, gained by empathy, interviewing and actively listening to another person and working to understand the ideas presented as if they were your own. Connected Knowers tried to completely understand a theory, or research, or work. After they confirmed they knew the purpose of the research, or the theory, or the work, then they were able to give both the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology, content and presentation. This tended to be connected with female learners.

Constructed Knowledge. This final stage seemed it reached the pinnacle of knowledge. It contained the Voice and Self of the learner, learned through critical self-reflection and analysis, coherency, reasoning and sensitivity with the purpose of arriving at wisdom. The learner was the

authority, the expert and the maker of knowledge in the quest for depth and breadth of learning which resulted in wisdom.

In *Women as Learners*, Flannery & Hayes, (2002) state:

“The goal of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, et. al., 1986) was to develop a theory based on women’s experience and, in doing so, to establish women’s ways of knowing as legitimate and as valuable as those of men (p. 11).” In an update to *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, the authors edited a new book which addressed applied methodologies of women’s ways of knowing, encompassed connected and collaborative knowing, and included culture, diversity, and power which were not addressed in *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Goldberger, et al., 1996).

While study of women’s methodology of learning was important, it was also important to understand what diverse and complex roles adult women returning to college, or attending college at older ages experienced.

### **Adult Roles and Responsibilities**

Since the 1970s, women had been returning to college in record numbers. Typically, the incursion of these students had been studied with an objective surveillance which noted the homogeneity of the group as mostly female, making it a gendered phenomenon. By definition, these women interrupted their college educations for five or more years, delayed entering college directly after high school, or are over thirty five years old (Kasworm, et al., 2002; Lewis, 1988; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007).

Within this major academic groundswell were women of all races and ethnicities. However, if conclusions were drawn from the literature, it could be assumed that this group was composed of “generic learners,” (Hall, 2000; Ianiska et al., 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 1994), who were white, middle-aged, middle class and whose concerns and experiences were similar across

the group. As people age, the range of their differences becomes greater, not narrower (Neugarten, 1964). There were several disadvantages in viewing this group generically; foremost, it presented an inaccurate view of the group, and institutions of higher learning could be overlooking important learning characteristics if they disregarded learners' differences. In addition, such conclusions belied the large numbers of African- American females who were included in the catch-all category of reentry students (Bierema, 2001; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007).

“Non-traditional learners”, was an inexact term which to described learners who might be older, female, low income, married, disabled, ethnic minorities, attended college part-time, employed, responsible for care for children or dependent adult relatives and their nurturing. These learners came complete with multiple responsibilities; to their families, their employers, to civic organizations, religious institutions, to volunteer commitments; adult learners lead complex and busy lives. Education was usually not their primary focus and concern (King, Anderson & Corrigan, 2003; Merriam et al., 2006). Such learners had decided that they needed education for a variety of reasons; job promotion, change of career, to achieve personal goals, and because they received satisfaction from learning. Non-traditional adult learners faced several issues when returning to school. They provided the funds for their schooling and knew that they must remain financially solvent. They were motivated to meet all of their life responsibilities, which might mean that they were not able to attend all classes, or had difficulties in timely completion of class assignments. Non-traditional adult learners were also more likely to be first generation college attendees, had less college preparation classes, and had more variation in academic achievement prior to attending college. In spite of these challenges, non-traditional adult learners usually

performed at least as well as traditional college students (Kasworm et al., 2002; King et al., 2003; Merriam et al., 2006).

Adult learners pursued education for multiple reasons. A classic study which explained the cyclical nature of adult education was found in McClusky's Theory of Margin.

### **McClusky's Theory of Margin**

The formula developed by McClusky is expressed as **Power/Load = Margin**. Power referred to the internal and external resources that an adult learner brought with him or her to the learning environment. Internal power resource factors comprised of such factors as health, which included fitness and stamina; emotional/psychological factors which encompassed personality type, mental stability, persistence in pursuing goals, interpersonal and organizational skills; which included how well the adult non-traditional learner got along with other learners, administrators and faculty; cognitive skills which incorporated reasoning, thinking, problem-solving, and available talents and knowledge base with which the adult learner entered the learning arena. External power resource factors include socio-economic status in the community, amount of available prestige and influence, personal wealth, and support of family, friends and employers.

Load, as defined by McClusky, would include both internal load factors such as personal expectations, self-concept, self-assurance, self-reliance, resilience, confidence and personal goals. External load factors would embrace such things as the learner's roles and responsibilities to his or her family, his or her civic and religious commitments, and obligations and responsibilities to herself or her employer.

When power was divided by load, margin was the result. Margin was the time, energy and resources that an individual was able to apply to his or her learning at any given time and

retain her autonomy. Naturally due to the multiplicity of factors of both power and load, margin would vary.

The more roles that an individual had, the more load that individual usually carried (McClusky, 1963). For example, a “non-traditional” learner may have had a job, dependents, and the responsibilities that come along with employment and a family. This load took time away from study, homework, school projects, and scheduled classes that a more traditional student, without family obligations or financial obligations, did not have. The extra load could cause difficulties for the non-traditional student (Kasworm, et al., 2002; McClusky, 1963).

When adult learners were also African American women learners, they had all of the adult roles and responsibilities of their white counterparts, with the additional difficulties of racism at the learning institution; they were more apt to experience opposition to their attendance of college by family members than white women of a similar age. African American women experienced similar difficulties in working their classes and assignments into their working and family life that white women do, and they had more challenges in obtaining adequate funding with which to pay for their education, as they generally did not earn as much as their white counterparts (Gary, Kling & Dodd, 2004; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; King et al., 2003; Merriam et al., 2006). A greater understanding of race and how it impacts different aspects of education and society can be learned from critical race theory.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory was the theory that considered relationships among race, racism and power. Critical Race Theory (CRT) considered many of the same issues that civil rights and ethnic studies taught, but CRT used a broader perspective that included economics, sociology, history, psychology, legal studies, context, and group interests. CRT, unlike traditional civil

rights which accepted incrementalism or step by step progress, challenged the foundations of liberal order, such as equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, even neutral principles of constitutional law (Dixon & Rousseau, 2006).

CRT began in the field of law in the 1980s, but quickly spread to many other disciplines. When the advances made in civil rights of the 1960s began to erode, activists acknowledged that new theories and strategies would be necessary in order to continue to make progress in reaching for equality. Borrowing from critical legal studies and radical feminism, CRT built on the insights of both movements.

The founders of critical race theory were considered to be Derrick Bell, professor of Law at New York University, and the late Alan Freeman, professor of law at State University of New York at Buffalo (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

In the field of education, many critical race theorists used CRT ideas to understand issues of school discipline, hierarchy, controversies over curriculum development and history, measurement of intelligence and achievement testing. There were many more subjects that were important to CRT, and more emerged as changes occurred in the field of education (Dixon & Rousseau, 2006).

Critical Race Theory had six common themes, which were extrapolated from Critical Legal Studies. (Delgado & Stafancic, 2001). The first was that racism was a pervasive and permanent part of American society. The second was that CRT challenged white claims of objectivity, neutrality, colorblindness and merit. Thirdly, CRT required a contextual and historic analysis of the law. The fourth point of CRT was that it required recognition of the experiences of people of color when analyzing law and society. The fifth point is that CRT is interdisciplinary. The final point was that CRT works toward eliminating racial oppression as

part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado & Crenshaw, 1993).

The main ideas of CRT were that racism was not an aberration, but a normal part of American society. The very normality of racism made it difficult to address or change. White ascendancy over color served important purposes, both psychological and material. Material determinism, which provided material advantages to whites by advancing their interests, benefits large segments of the population, and discouraged change. Finally, race and racism was socially constructed. Race was not objective, inherent, or fixed, and race was not attached to any biological or genetic reality. Our society decided what categories and what status to assign to people based on convenience, and current requirements (Bell, 1987; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixon & Rousseau, 2006). An alternative perspective to CRT, is Africentrism, which appeared to believe racism was embedded, but held a more optimistic view for change (Sheared, Johnson-Bailey, Colin, Peterson, & Brookfield, 2010).

To sum up, critical race theory studied key issues of race and racism as it related to power, privilege and society, within the context of history, economic status, individual and group interests, and analyzed the basic foundations of society and the reasons why race, racism and privilege currently existed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixon & Rousseau, 2006; Knaus, 2006).

### **Summary**

There were studies, interviews, journal articles, books, and dissertations concerning African-American learners. Few of these studies specifically addressed African American women learners at postsecondary institutions. If ethnicity was addressed, it addresses both male and female learners (Cervero & Wilson, 2000). If age was emphasized, then ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic factors were ignored (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). When gender was addressed,

ethnicity, socioeconomic and age were ignored. It appeared that studies that involved more than one factor; age, ethnicity, gender, or class couldn't address any other factors (Cervero & Wilson, 2000; Dixon & Rousseau, 2006; Generett & Jeffries, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001).

While it was possible that the lack of large numbers of women of color at colleges and leading research universities limited the number of articles, studies, books and dissertations directed towards African American women learners and the issues that concerned them in higher education, increasing enrollment of African American women learners and issues of these learners could provide new areas of research (Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Johnson-Bailey, 2001).

As indicated in the literature review, African American women professors, administrators and advisors were not well represented at institutions of higher education, which lead to a dearth of mentors and role models, and sent a message to the minority women learners on campus (Myers, 2002). Minority women learners experienced a hostile environment at institutions of higher education, and while this had been noted, (Ancis et al., 2002) the results on their methods of learning and coping with such barriers were not addressed. In many cases, the numbers of returning women learners were lumped together into a homogeneous mass, which was a disservice to all returning women learners (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). It was important to know what experiences minority learners have had on campuses. It was important to acknowledge that African American women were underrepresented as instructors, administrators, and faculty members at universities and colleges. Logically, it was important to know how to remove as many barriers as possible for African American learners and to assist every learner to do their best, so they learned and achieved their educational goals (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Kasworm et al., 2002; Myers, 2002).



## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

This chapter contains a description of the research design utilized by this dissertation. In the following sections the rationale for selecting qualitative research, characteristics of qualitative research, researcher roles, qualitative indicators, data collection will be discussed as well as research questions, population, procedures for protection of human rights, instrumentation, and data analysis. This research explored how adult Midwestern African American women experienced learning, how this learning experience shaped their attitudes and perception of what knowledge was; what barriers the participants encountered, how the participants viewed their roles and responsibilities and the effect these responsibilities have had on their post-secondary education experiences. Finally, the researcher discussed support systems and how the support systems assisted the participants in achieving their academic goals at post secondary institutions. The data collection methods used by the researchers were semi-structured interviews, observation of the subjects' body language, and verbal responses to the research questions. The questions were worded and presented in order to allow subjects to express their viewpoint without manipulating or guiding the subjects' responses (Denzin, 1989; Huberman & Miles, 2002).

#### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do adult Midwestern African-American women describe their learning experiences at the post-secondary level?
2. What effect do barriers and challenges have on the adult Midwestern African-American women's post-secondary educational experiences?

3. What effect do responsibilities and support systems have on the adult Midwestern African-American women's post-secondary educational experiences?

### **Selection of Methodology: Rationale for Qualitative**

There are eight common qualitative research approaches (Merriam, 2002); basic interpretive, phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, ethnography, narrative, critical analysis, and postmodern/poststructural.

This study utilized the phenomenological approach in order to discover the underlying meaning of the experiences of participants (Creswell, 2006; Merriam, 2002). Phenomenological data analysis reduced a large volume of data into an orderly pattern of themes and meanings (Esterberg, 2001). The phenomenological approach derived from the field of sociology (Lancy, 1993). This approach avoided assumptions and the use of reactive instruments which might possibly taint the study. Instead, this method looked at the phenomenon with an open mind and interviews, observation, and recording were common data collection methods. The researcher was primarily interested in showing how complex meaning was built from experience (Merriam, 2002). These experiences were grouped, analyzed and compared to identify all aspects of the phenomenon (Esterberg, 2001; Merriam, 2002).

Qualitative research used several methods to facilitate open-ended learning to better ascertain both the meaning of and participant views within a study. (Merriam, 2002) endorsed this idea and provided several key points describing qualitative research design:

1. The researcher was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.
2. The researcher strived to understand the meaning people had constructed about their world and experiences.
3. The process was inductive in nature (explore to discover).

4. The product of qualitative research was richly descriptive. Words and pictures rather than numbers were used to convey what the researcher learned (p. 5).

“The original research behind Women’s Ways of Knowing was undertaken to bring attention to the missing voices of women in our theories of how people know and learn” (Goldberger, et al., 1996, p 3). This dissertation began as an extension of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* project, and evolved into a project encompassing *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, critical race theory, adult roles and responsibilities and McClusky’s Theory of Margin. All of these theoretical frameworks had traditionally used qualitative methodology in order to express the experiences of respondents in their own voice (Belenky, et al., 1986; Dixon & Rousseau, 2006; Generett & Jeffries, 2003).

Conducting research with minority women at two different higher education institutions required that the researchers gather data, think critically, reflect on the data gathered, and draw conclusions that assisted in understanding what challenges and barriers a woman minority student faced that other learners avoided because they were privileged. Privilege, "that is the unquestioned, below the surface identification of excellence with whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality and social class advantage" (Maher & Tetreault, 2009 p 3), disadvantaged learners who do not fit the characteristics of privilege.

It was essential, when conducting valid qualitative research, that the researchers assumed the ethical responsibility to ensure that there were minimal miscommunications or misunderstandings between the subjects and the researchers (Merriam, 2002; Seidman, 2006). More specifically, the researchers were interested in the perceptions of the minority women learners on how they learned, what coping mechanisms they used, what support systems they

employed, and how their learning experience could be improved (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Esterberg, 2001; Kasworm, et al., 2002; Merriam et al., 2006).

## **Population**

The subjects for research came from two institutional settings: CCU1, Urban Community College, Missouri; and RU1, Research University, Kansas. Only adult undergraduate learners enrolled on the main campuses of the Midwestern institutions of higher education were studied. Each institution attracted learners with different goals, backgrounds, levels of confidence, and academic preparedness (Bers, Calhoun 2002). It was important to obtain a wide cross-section with learners from different higher education institutions to see possible differences and similarities (Bers & Calhoun, 2002).

The community college, CCU1 was selected for diverse urban learners; the college was comprised of five campuses in a Missouri metro area with a population over 2 million, with enrollment of approximately 17,500 in seventy different programs of study. CCU1 had ethnically and culturally diverse faculty members. CCU1 had 276 Officers, Faculty, Staff, and Administrators. The ethnic representation of CCU1, Figure 1, at the campus at which the research was conducted is 4 Asians (1%), 85 African Americans (31%), 16 Hispanics (6%), and 171 Whites ( 62%). This differed slightly from the overall makeup of CCU1 employees, which had 2% Asian, 16% African American, 3% Hispanic, and 79% White. Student demographics, Figure 2, are 3% Asian, 4% Multiracial, 7% No Preference of ethnicity, 7% Hispanic, 29% African American, and 49% White.

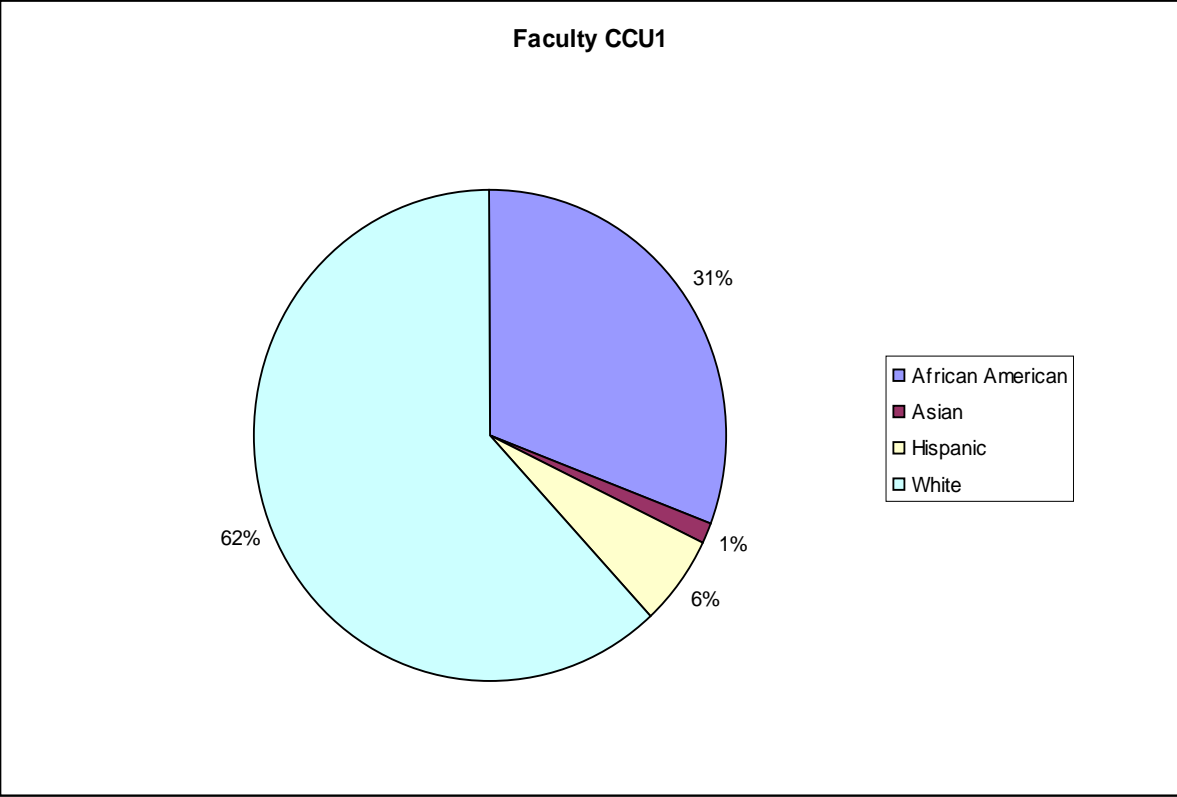


Figure 1 Urban Community College Faculty Demographics

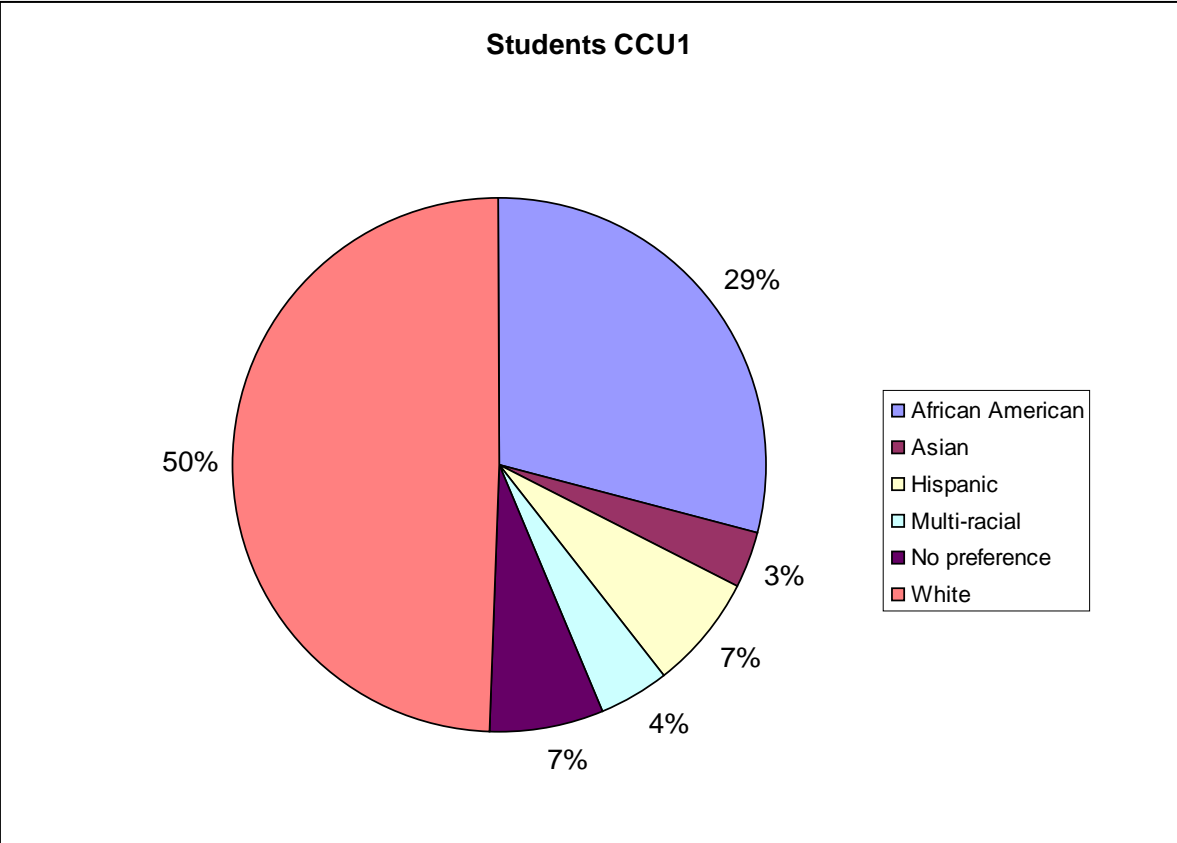


Figure 2 Urban Community College Student Demographics

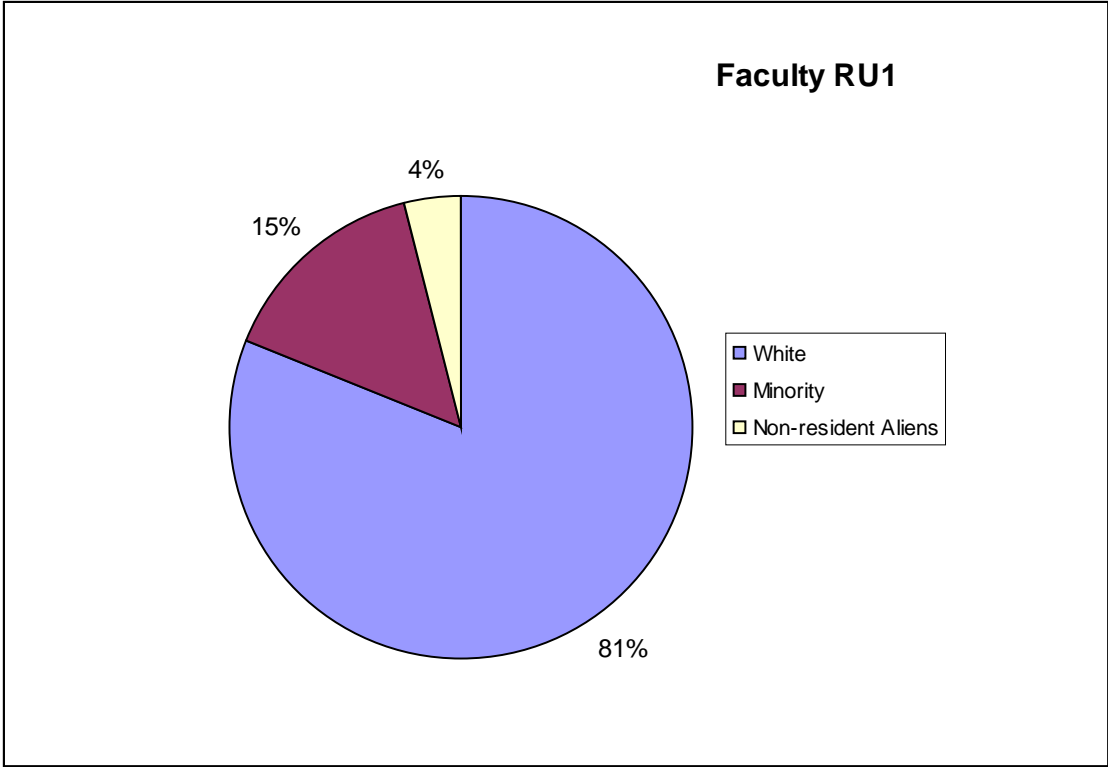


Figure 3 Research University Faculty Demographics

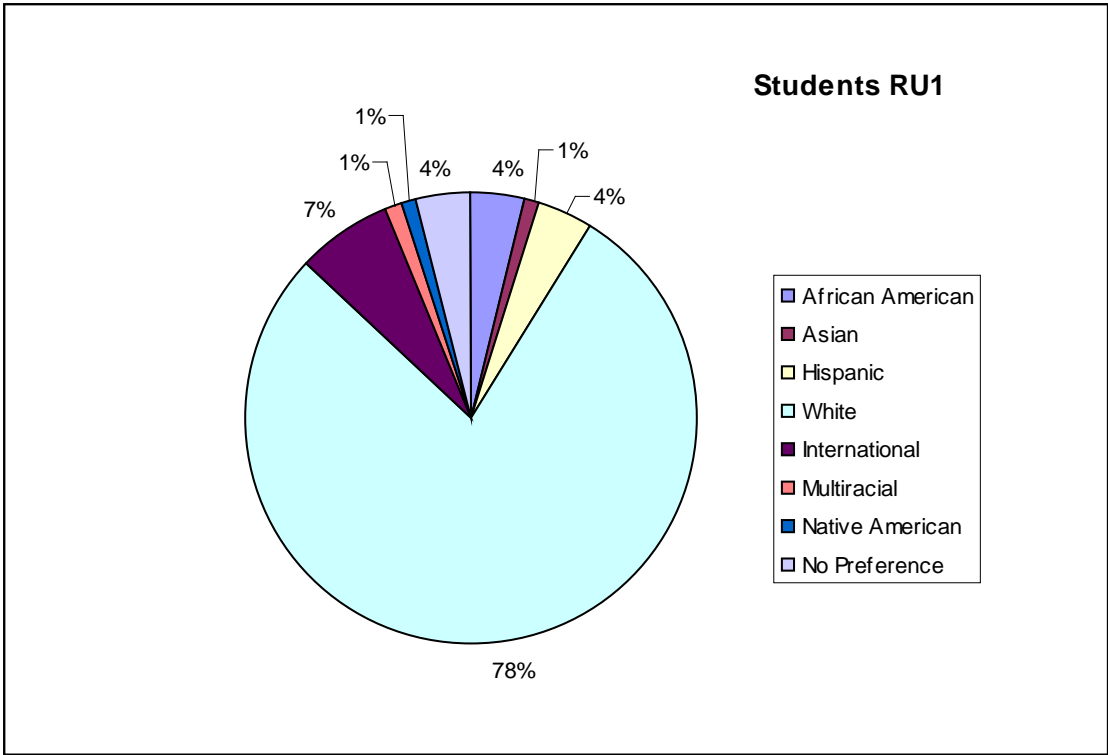


Figure 4 Research University Student Demographics

The research university was selected for its diverse student population, enrollment of over 23,000 students in 250 different majors, a diverse faculty and staff and a population base of over 50,000 in the local community. The research university designated faculty and staff differently than the CCU1 community college. The ethnicity breakdown, Figure 3, is 81% white, 15% minority, and 4% Non-resident aliens. The research university, RU1 student demographic, Figure 4, is 1% Native American, 1% Asian, 4% African American, 4% Hispanic, 78% White, 7% International Student, 1% multiracial, and 4% No Preference of ethnicity.

Subjects from the community college with sophomore standing were selected; from the research university junior and senior standing; these learners have had the most exposure to classroom instruction at the particular institution they attended, and gave relevant answers concerning their recent experiences.

### **Sample Selection**

The sample selection was calculated to insure that there would be a) a purposeful sampling to get as diverse sets of characteristics as possible; b) those characteristics attempted to include employed, unemployed, single parent, caretaker of parent, and different age groups; c) an adequate number of learners were sampled to optimize characteristics and themes. Five learners were selected at each of the two colleges. The selection of subjects was based on self-reported ethnicity, willingness to volunteer for the study, and placement as sophomores at the community colleges, or as juniors and seniors at the research university. Ten subjects allowed for analysis of patterns and saturation answers of research questions asked (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Frankel, 1999; Merriam, 2002).

The community college administration preferred that they contact the students, so they could ensure that no coercion, feeling of obligation, or pressure was felt by the participants.

At the research university, the researcher/recorder posted flyers in the Student Union, five separate academic colleges, and emailed two professors to elicit contacts, requested assistance from the Minority Student Union, and sought introductions and strategies from an African American professor, and worked with the adult education doctoral cohort. Both telephone numbers and email addresses were provided as a means for volunteers to communicate with the interviewer or the researcher/recorder.

One concern that was considered when interviewing African-American women for this study was that the sample was limited in size. Every attempt was made to interview women from a variety of backgrounds, ages, and from urban and rural settings. But every concern, reaction, and context of every African-American woman could not be addressed. While every effort was made to group similar responses made in the interviews, and to develop topics that emerged during the interviews, it is important to remember that qualitative research cannot be generalized the way that quantitative research can be (Berg, 2006; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Merriam, 2002).

## **Data Collection**

### **The Interview Procedure**

A semi-structured interview was the method recommended for phenomenological studies for qualitative research (Merriam, 2002). Five interviews which lasted from ninety minutes to two hours were conducted on each of the respective campuses. As described earlier, each participant volunteered to be interviewed and was purposefully selected. The research methodology used a team of interviewers, one white and one African-American to minimize cross-cultural bias (Marshall & Batten, 2004; Merriam et al, 2001).



When a respondent volunteered to be interviewed, an appointment was made for a time and date for their interview. Initially, the researcher planned to use demographic surveys to select volunteers, however, the selection process was slightly altered; as the community college administration obtained volunteers, and the research university volunteers emailed the researcher/recorder to coordinate interview times and dates.

The subjects were a mixture of ages, employment status, marital status, religion, occupation type, family education status and dependent status in order to secure as diverse a population sample as possible. A copy of the demographic questionnaire can be found in Appendix E. Although the demographic survey was originally developed by the researcher in order to make an informed decision on selection of volunteers, the survey was retained as it provided data on place and date of birth, employment status, religion, educational preparation, family education background, marital and dependent status essential to the research (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008; Seidman, 2006).

After a brief conversation and explanation of the research, participants signed an informed consent form. A copy of the informed consent form can be found in Appendix D.

The demographic survey was completed next, following the informed consent but before the actual interview. The demographic survey obtained important information, but also served as a means to relax the subjects and lead into the actual interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008).

The questions designed to answer the research questions were open-ended, allowing participants to focus on topics of importance to them. At the end of the interview, participants were asked to add anything relevant that had not been addressed in the interview.

After each interview, field notes were written by each interviewer and the observation protocol was completed with observations about non-verbal behavior, the emotional affect of the

participant, what the researchers thought about the interview, and other significant interpretations of the interview (Berg, 2006; Esterberg 2001).

Themes that emerged were addressed as probes in subsequent interviews, as is common in the constant comparative method, and more focused questions were used to validate the themes. Thematic saturation, the point at which themes repeated and no new data was obtained (Denzin, 1989) occurred by the 10th interview.

### **Analysis of Data**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews lasting from ninety minutes to two hours. The data were recorded, and field notes of the interviews included both researcher and interviewer's notes. The data was reviewed and after each subsequent interview new probes were added where appropriate which used the constant comparative method, until no new data was elicited and saturation was reached (Esterberg, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seidman, 2006).

### **Credibility of the Interview**

Krathwohl (1998) stated internal validity or credibility referred to whether or not the evidence of study supported the existence of a relationship between or among study variables. In essence, how truthful were the findings of the study? When strategies were used together, they offered triangulation, or checks that would not necessarily be found if only one strategy alone were used (Lancy, 1993).

The techniques used to ensure credibility in this research were:

Member Checks – Participants were emailed transcripts of their interview. They were asked to check their transcript and comment on the accuracy of the transcript, and to provide corrections and additional comments if necessary (Merriam, 2002).

Interviewer Checks – The interviewer and researcher/recorder discussed judgments, perceptions, observations, interpretation of nonverbal communication, and participant responses following each field interview (Creswell, 2006; Johnson, 1997).

Researcher's biases or reflexivity – The researcher/recorder and the interviewer acknowledged the biases and assumptions that they brought to the interview and research process and each transcribed interview was coded separately by both the researcher/recorder and the interviewer to minimize researcher bias (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Merriam, 2002; Seidman, 2006).

Referential adequacy - Referential adequacy was met by digitally recording all interviews. The researcher and interviewer cross-checked the digital recordings with the transcripts for informational accuracy. Additional notes were taken by the researcher/recorder during each interview.

### **Transferability**

External validity, often referred to as transferability by Krathwohl (1998), was described as results of one study being related to similar studies. In quantitative research, large, random samples are employed to reach results that are transferable, or more commonly referred to as generalizable. In qualitative research, researchers employ richly descriptive words, called thick descriptions, coupled with in-depth information concerning the research setting and variables to better facilitate replication of the study and enhance transferability of findings (Merriam, et al., 2002). Byrne (2001), described thick descriptions as richly described data that provided adequate data to judge themes, labels, categories and constructs of a research study. Also, thick descriptions provided enough data for reviewers to determine the appropriateness of applying the findings to similar studies. This project used thick descriptors of the volunteers' own words, along with the other methods described in this chapter to enhance transferability to similar

populations, provided a theoretical framework (Belenky, et al., 1986; Byrne, 2001; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixon & Rousseau, 2006; McClusky, 1963; Merriam, 2002; Merriam, et al., 2006).

### **Reliability**

Both interviewers separately coded transcribed interviews by theme using N-Vivo 8 software. Themes and meanings were discussed following data analysis until agreement was reached on the coding. Lastly, both researchers referred to their field notes, the observation instrument, participant responses and used field journals which provided a clear record of how the study was conducted.

### **Pilot Study**

Pilot studies are important for qualitative research (Sampson, 2004). Pilot studies refine research questions prior to the conduct of actual research, ensure that the procedure is as streamlined as possible, and corrects misunderstandings or misinterpretations due to ambiguous questions. In addition, pilot studies allow the researcher to practice interview techniques prior to the actual research. The pilot study interview was helpful in determining how to conduct the interviews during the study. First, a procedure was used to obtain information to fill out a demographic survey. Second, the interviewer refined and clarified how to explain the informed consent form. The volume for the recorder was determined, as the pilot study was missing a few portions, since neither the interviewer nor the researcher/recorder was familiar with the digital recorder. The researcher/recorder took notes during the interview on a laptop, which provided a second means of checking the accuracy of the interview. Finally, important clarification was received concerning the wording of several questions, and the volunteer was most helpful in providing insightful comments concerning her perceptions of the questions, the probes, and the

format of the interview. The revised interview protocol is located in Appendix C. An Interview Observational Checklist, located in Appendix E, was filled out by both the interviewer and the researcher/recorder after the volunteer left. That experience taught that field notes needed to be taken during the interview, and the form filled out immediately after the interview. The observation was helpful in determining the attitude, general emotional state, responsiveness, and reactions to interview questions. The pilot study was useful, in that it did illustrate the volunteer's learning experiences, which included several racially charged incidents, and also provided some insight to the barriers, challenges, responsibilities and support systems that the volunteer used in order to successfully complete her college education. The pilot study volunteer changed her major in her senior year, due to conflicts with faculty members in her chosen major.

### **Procedures**

This study was conducted in spring 2010. Creswell (2008) described data collection procedures for qualitative research as four basic types: observations, documents, interviews and visual images. For this study, the researcher employed observations and interviews.

### **Observations**

The observations took place during the interviews, and both the interviewer, and the researcher/recorder were able to observe the respondents during the interview, and note such items as the tone of voice, body language, and verbal response. These items were discussed immediately following each field interview, after the interviewer and researcher/recorder observed their observations on the Guba and Lincoln (1981) Observation Checklist (Appendix E).

## **Interviews**

The interviews were the central method of gaining data. Each individual who was interviewed was selected purposely from a group of volunteers for a range of ages, responsibilities, backgrounds, marital status, dependent status, employment status, and financial background. An equal number of learners were interviewed at each of the designated post-secondary institutions. A semi-structured interview was conducted (Merriam, 2002). The interview protocol is located in Appendix C. This protocol consisted of open-ended questions, and the questions were selected to elicit such information as the attitudes of the participants toward learning, learning goals, opportunities and barriers to education the subjects experienced; if the participants have experienced racism; how adult roles and responsibilities had affected the learners' education; and what support systems the learners used. Each interview lasted from ninety minutes to two hours, and took place at a quiet conference room, which was most comfortable to the volunteers (Esterberg, 2001; Seidman, 2006).

## **The Protection of Human Rights**

This research was conducted in accordance with the Institutional Review Boards of Kansas State University. Permission to conduct this research was received. (See Appendix F). Each volunteer had the informed consent document thoroughly and carefully explained, and understood that participation was voluntary, they could withdraw without any consequences at any time for any reason. Further each understood that their statements, transcriptions and demographic questionnaire would be safeguarded and their anonymity would be carefully protected, as qualitative interviews are not the benevolent, harmless article that they might appear on first glance. In a relaxed environment, volunteers might voice opinions, or relate events that they had not initially intended to share (Merriam, 2002). Therefore, the researcher

had the responsibility to ensure that each volunteer understood the purpose, nature, and format of the study and their rights as participants in human research. Each volunteer signed a copy of the informed consent document, and was provided with a copy. The signed forms have been retained at a secure location, and will be kept for the required time following the end of the study.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

This chapter's presentation of data was divided into three areas; the pilot study; the characteristics of the sample selection, and the themes that emerged during the analysis of the transcripts. The people in the study were quoted to give better understanding and richer meaning to the themes developed during the interviews, the analysis of the transcribed interviews, the observational checklist, and both the interviewer's and the researcher/recorder's field notes.

#### **Pilot Study**

In phenomenological research, the instrument used to gather data is the researcher (Groenwald, 2004). This research had two members; the individual who conducted the interviews, and the researcher/recorder. The reasons for two researchers was two-fold. Using an African-American interviewer reduced the possibility of cross-cultural bias, as mentioned in Chapter 1. The researcher/recorder operated the recorder, took field notes of the interview, and filled out an observational checklist on each subject. The researcher is deaf, and had concerns about understanding the people being interviewed. The researchers conducted a pilot study at the Research University using one student not included in the final research results. The interview conducted in a quiet conference room, lasted two hours. A recording device was utilized, and the researcher/recorder took notes. As a result of the pilot study, procedures were refined, questions were revised, and the necessity for immediate recording of impressions for field notes was experienced. The results of the pilot study provided a description of the subject's learning experiences at the post-secondary level. The subject also described situations, circumstances, actions and events that posed challenges or barriers, and described the effect that those barriers



had on her learning and educational experiences. The pilot study subject was single, African American, without dependents, 23 years of age, and a senior at a post secondary institution.

### **Sample Selection**

Volunteers were located at the urban community college through the efforts of the associate dean of students. The dean identified enrolled female African-American students, and contacted students who met the criteria to find out if they would agree to participating in a doctoral study. Seven women were interested and signed up to participate, but due to child care issues, two volunteers did not participate. A total of five adult African American women agreed to participate at the urban community college. All of the volunteers were in their second year at the community college. The interviews at the urban community college were conducted in February 2010.

At the research university, the researcher/recorder posted flyers at five college departments, emailed three faculty members for suggestions and possible recommendations, visited a multicultural organization with a flyer and gave a short presentation to members, and sought possible prospects from members of the adult education doctoral cohort. Eight volunteers agreed to participate in the research at the research university. Three volunteers failed to show up for their interviews, so a total of five volunteers were interviewed at the research university. All of the volunteers were in their junior or senior year at the institution. The interviews at the research university were conducted in April and May 2010.

At the beginning of each interview, both the interviewer and the researcher introduced themselves as co-researchers and each provided a brief biographical sketch, and an brief explanation of the purpose of the research. The informed consent forms were filled out, signed and witnessed. The demographic information of the volunteer was taken, and this period was

used to place the participant at ease. The volunteer was informed that the recorder planned to record the interview and asked for her permission to do so. Each volunteer agreed to allow the interview to be recorded. The interviews varied in length from one hour eight minutes to one hour and forty minutes. After the interview was complete, the recorder was turned off, and some casual conversation occurred between the interviewer, the researcher/recorder and the participant. Each participant agreed to read their transcribed interview and ensure it was accurate.

### **Characteristics of the Sample**

The sample first required all participants to be adult women, and African American. All five community college students were in their second year. At the research university, three volunteers were juniors and two were seniors. It was desirable that volunteers' age, marital status, education level, education level of parents, dependent status, and employment status be varied.

The volunteers that were selected differed. Ages ranged from 20 to 53 years of age. The community college volunteers were older, which is consistent with the demographics provided by that institution; 47% are traditional age students and 53% are non-traditional age students. The research university volunteers were between 20 and 24 years of age, which is an accurate representation, as 90% of undergraduate students at that institution are 24 years of age or younger. All names have been changed for privacy protection.

The following graphs display demographic characteristics for CCU1=Urban Community College. RU1=Research University, Age and Marital Status, Figures 5 and 6; Work Status/Hours per week, Figures 7 and 8; Age and Number of Children, Figure 9, Parent education level, Figures 10 and 11.

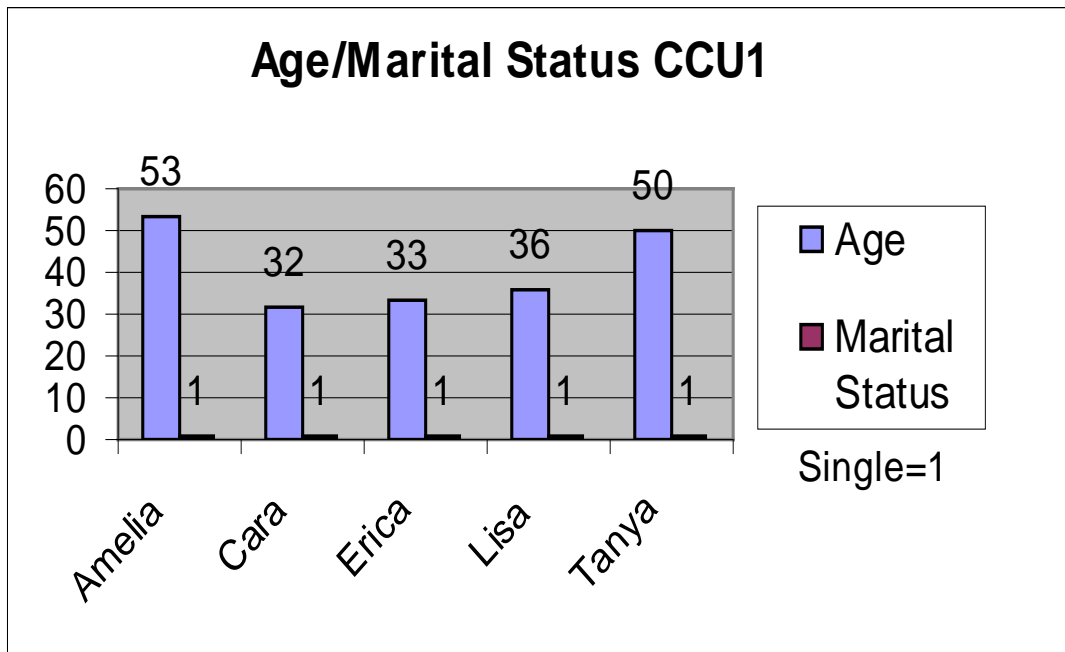


Figure 5 Urban Community College Age and Marital Status

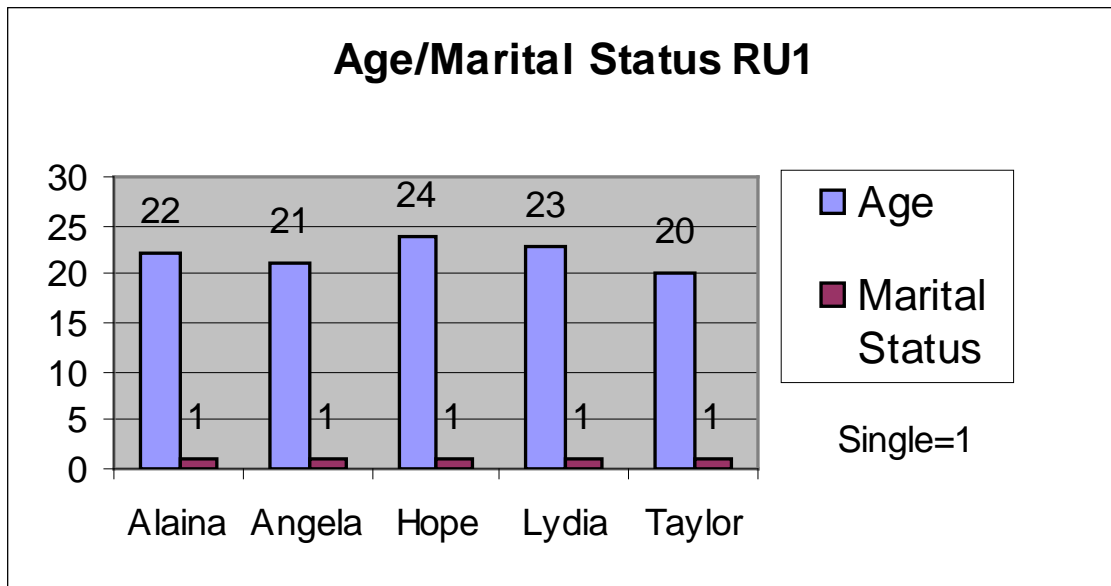


Figure 6 Research University Age and Marital Status

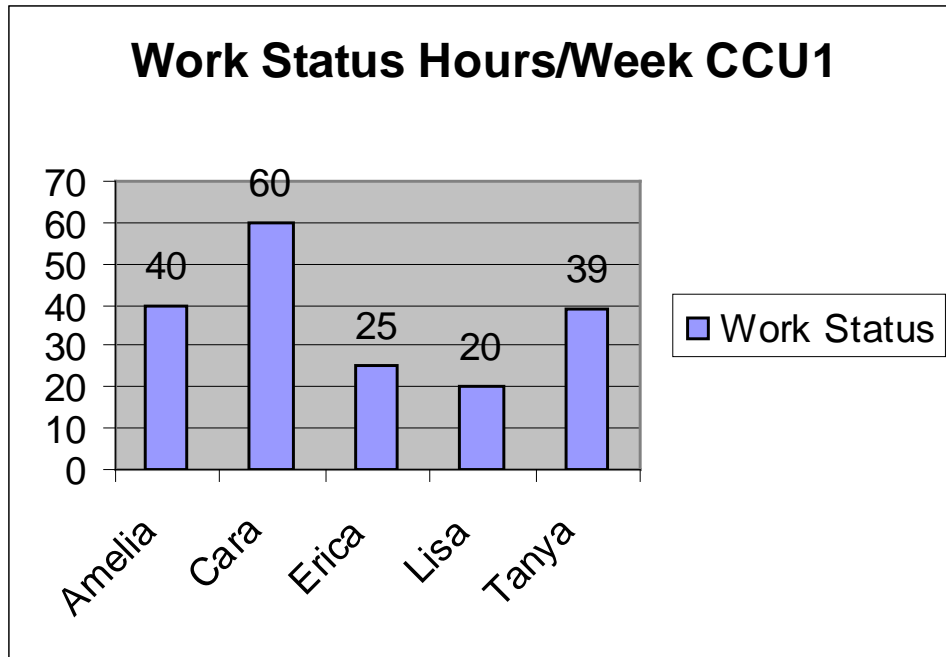


Figure 7 Urban Community College Work Status and Hours per Week worked

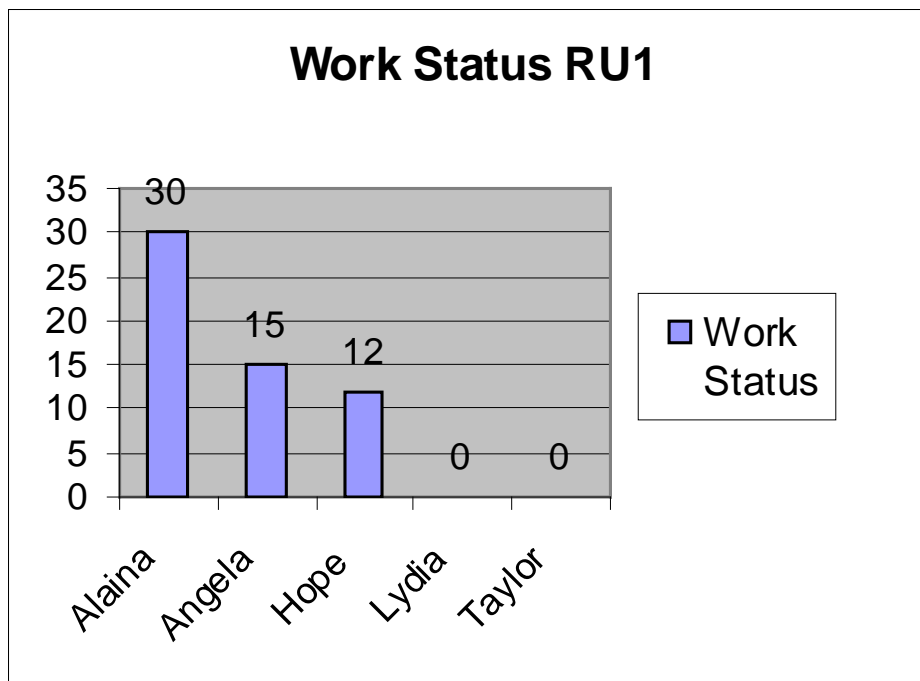


Figure 8 Research University Work Status and Hours per Week worked

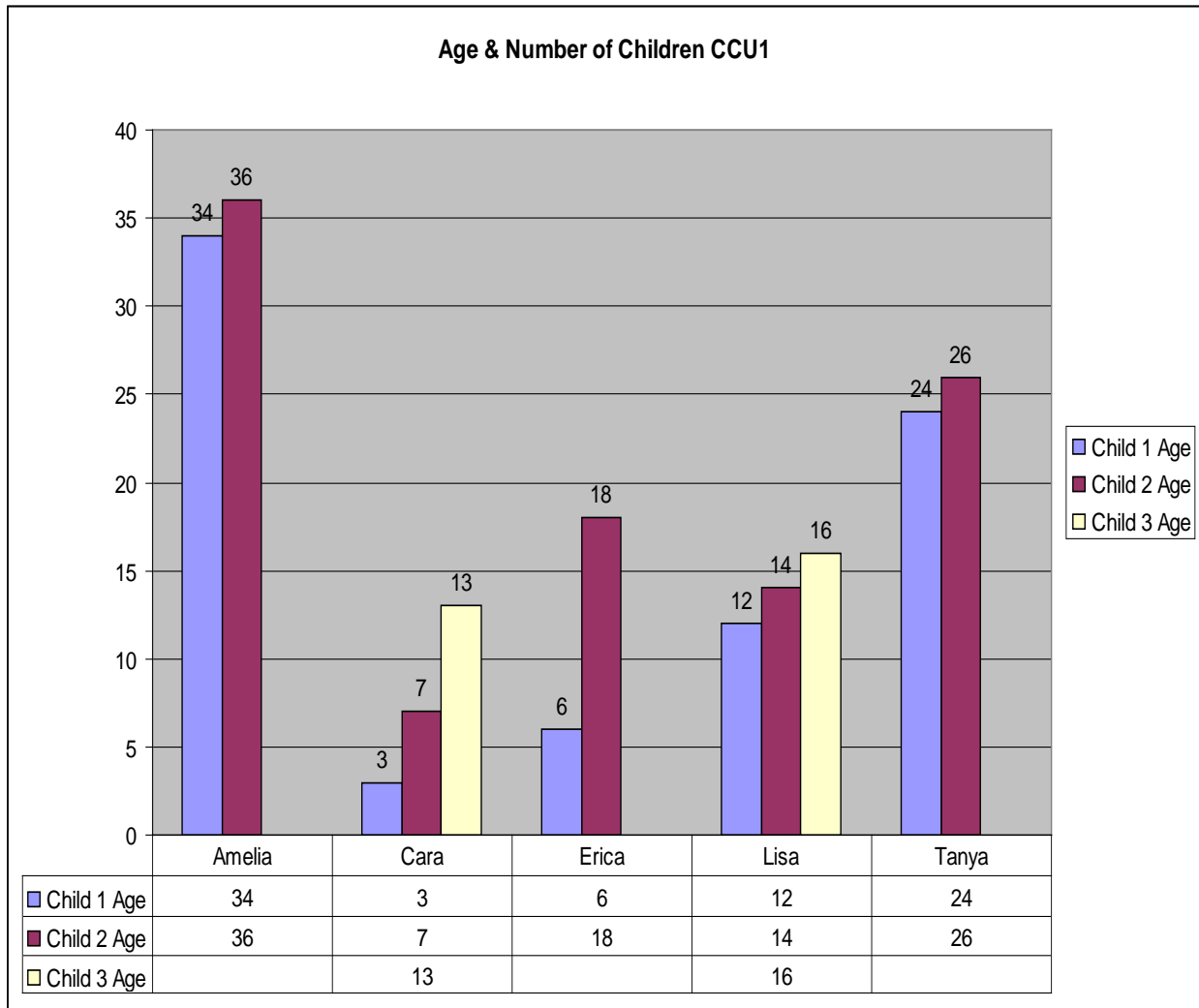


Figure 9 Urban Community College-Age and Number of Children

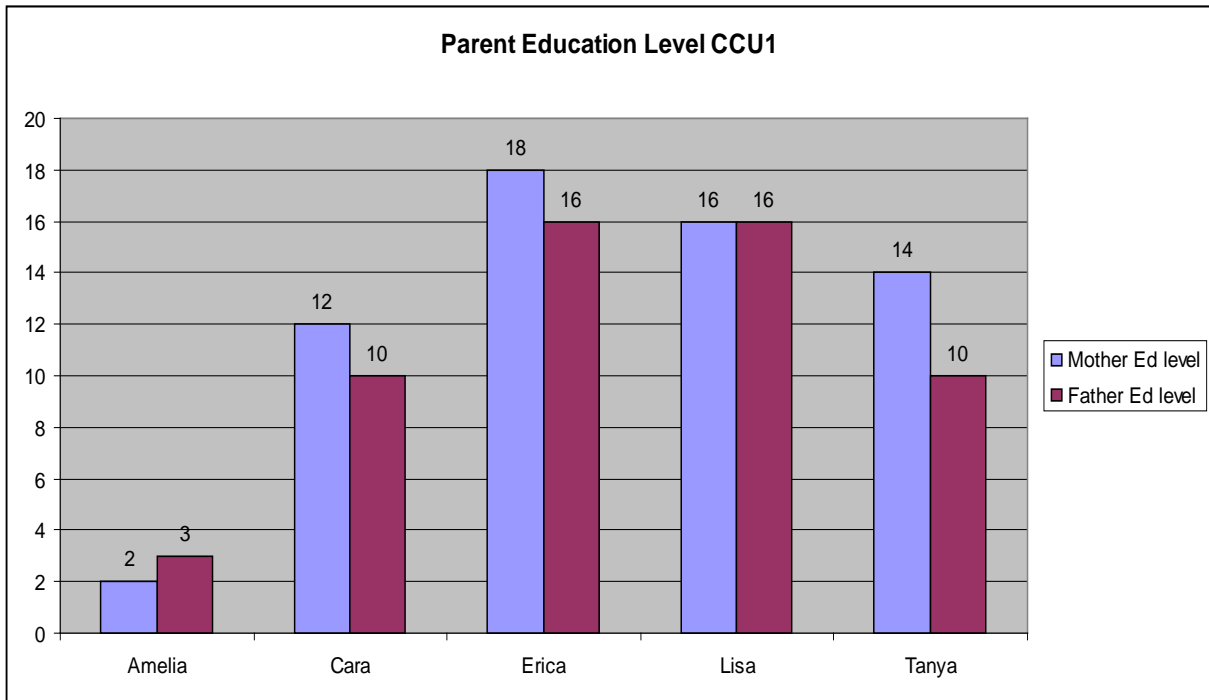


Figure 10 Urban Community College Parent Education Level

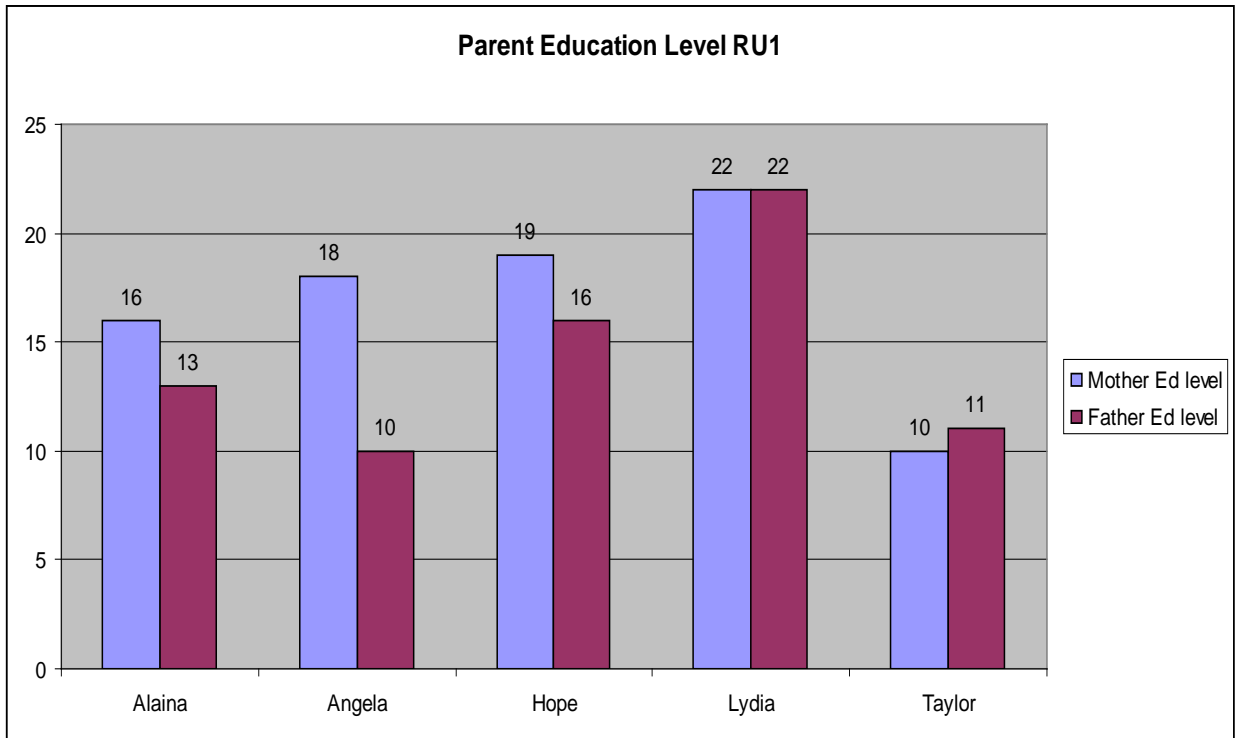


Figure 11 Research University Parent Education Level

## **Urban Community College Volunteers**

### **Amelia**

Amelia, a fifty-three year old, single woman with two adult children, ages thirty-four and thirty-six. Amelia worked while she attended high school, and worked full time as she attended school. Her deceased mother had a second grade education. Her deceased father had a third grade education. Education was strongly stressed by her parents as very important, and they made her study. The factors that slowed her education achievement were raising her children, working, lack of transportation, and two heart attacks. Amelia considered herself single, but mentioned during the interview that she was divorced. Amelia identified herself as a Baptist: the church was very important in her life, and was part of her support system.

### **Cara**

Cara, a thirty-two year old single woman with three children, ages three, seven, and thirteen, worked while attending high school, and worked sixty hours a week at two jobs while she attended college. Her mother completed high school, and her estranged father attended until 10<sup>th</sup> grade and went into the service. Education was stressed in the home, but Cara wanted to be a beautician, so she avoided attending college until 2 years ago.

### **Erica**

Erica, a thirty-three year old single woman with two children, ages six and eighteen, worked while in high school, and worked part-time while attending college. Her mother earned a master's degree, and the two had a very strained relationship. Erica's father had a college degree, and died a year ago. Education was very strongly stressed in the home. Factors that slowed her education were becoming a single parent at age 15, having to work to support her family, and culminated in losing her primary support system, her father.

## **Lisa**

Lisa, a thirty-six year old single woman with three children, ages twelve, fourteen and sixteen, worked while in high school, and was self-employed and worked part time. Her mother and father both had earned a bachelor's degree. Education was strongly stressed in the home. Lisa identified herself as a single woman, but mentioned during the interview that she is divorced. Lisa wears many hats; she was involved in local politics, a minister, a Christian counselor, the CEO of a non-profit organization, a mother, playwright/author, and student. Lisa identified herself as a strong Christian, which was a significant part of her support system.

## **Tanya**

Tanya, a fifty-year old single woman with two adult children, ages twenty-four and twenty-six, worked while she was in high school, and worked full time while attending college. Her deceased mother had two years of college. Her father had been deceased since she was eleven, and had a tenth grade education. Education was not emphasized in the home.

## **Research University Volunteers**

### **Alaina**

Alaina, a twenty-two year old single woman with no dependents, worked while attending high school, and worked thirty hours a week while in college. Alaina's mother had a bachelor's degree, and her father had two years of college. Education was strongly stressed in the home. A factor that had affected her education was financial, as her family earned just enough that she didn't qualify for financial aid.

### **Angela**

Angela, a twenty-one year old single woman with no dependents, worked while in high school, and worked fifteen hours a week while in college. Angela's mother had a Master's



degree, and her father had a tenth grade education. Education was emphasized in the home. Stress factors in relation to her education were residency issues, and her ACT scores. These were resolved when she was granted residency, and when she was accepted at the Research University after being rejected by a private university due to low ACT scores.

### **Hope**

Hope, a twenty-four year old single woman with no dependents, worked during high school, and worked twelve hours a week while in college. Hope's mother was working on her doctorate and had a Master's degree. Hope's father had a bachelor's degree. Education was strongly stressed in the home.

### **Lydia**

Lydia, a twenty-three year old single woman with no dependents, worked while in high school, but hadn't worked while in college. Lydia's mother had a doctorate, as did her father. Education was strongly stressed in the home.

### **Taylor**

Taylor, a twenty year old single woman with no dependents, did not work while in high school, and hadn't worked while in college. Taylor's mother had a 10<sup>th</sup> grade education, and her father had an 11<sup>th</sup> grade education. Education was not stressed in the home, and there had been some estrangement between Taylor and her parents after she started college. Taylor's older sister had experienced the same estrangement. Taylor's strongest support was her older sister.

## **Findings in regard to the Research Questions**

### **Research Question One**

How do adult Midwestern African American women describe their learning experiences at the post-secondary level?

## Active Learning

This research question was answered by information that emerged during the interviews. All of the subjects stated that they were active learners using learning strategies, and six of the subjects said that they made connections between new material with something that they already had experienced. The following facets of active learning were frequently heard. Learning is intense, the subjects had to use repetition in order to assimilate new material, new material was easiest to learn when it was connected to something that they already had experienced, most subjects knew their learning style and how they learned most effectively, and all of the subjects used multiple techniques in order to learn. Pratt's transmission teaching perspective believes that repetition is central to knowledge and skill acquisition (Pratt, 1998). Merriam, et al.; which in part observes that learning is embedded in context. Wlodkowski's belief is that adult students learn best when they actively participate in challenging ways (Merriam, et al., 2006; Wlodkowski, 2008).

Amelia:

I have to write it, I have to say it, I have to do it, so I can hold it and be able to process it.

I have been out of school for 20 something years, and (the professors) expect me to just get it. That's not something you are going to get from me.

Cara: "What works for me is to constantly write it and go over it and make the best connection with motion. Repetition and motion."

Erica:

I will do more and learn more if I can watch you do it once, then I repeat what you do.

Some of the material, I can learn it right then, but some of it, I have to go back and look at my notes.

Lisa:

I have to read (the material) and see it, hear it, and then I have to apply it to myself. I have to practice, but I have to apply the material to everyday life. You begin to associate things with things you have experienced and it makes learning and retaining of the knowledge a whole lot easier.

Alaina: "I can't just hear it; I have to sit down and work out the problem, and watch you show me and practice doing things."

Angela: "Lectures kill me. I have to have the material in front of me, and use highlighters and notes, and get my hands into the material."

Hope: "I need to be able to see and do when I work with math and science, but other subjects, I can just listen and take notes. I am a combination of visual and auditory learner."

Lydia: "I like challenging courses like math and science, with clear steps, and practice and connecting material to other material."

Taylor: "I have to study by myself. I have to do the work, and read the material and review my notes, and use repetition to learn."

Tanya:

I pay attention, I am there, I ask questions, I repeat what is being taught. I need an actual instructor, because you can't talk to a computer, and get out of a computer what you get out of an actual person." Tanya's learned that she does best in a physical class room with an instructor standing in front of the class. Most of the subjects felt that their relationship with their instructors was an important part of their learning experience.

## **Relationships with Faculty**

All ten subjects stated that they had good to great relationships with their professors and instructors, which made learning easier, and that they had little trouble asking questions in class, so that they could clarify their understanding of the material presented.

One of the most powerful and moving descriptions of a subject's learning experience with faculty follows;

Cara:

I think I am going to drop Biology class, because I just took my first test and I received a D. I aim really high, I am hard on myself. But coming in after 11 years of not having any school, going into Biology, and my first test is a D. I was like, wow; I can't do this. My instructor, a very passionate man, he took me into his office and said; why are you wanting to give up right now? This is just your first test. I am like; I am absolutely clueless about this. I know I had some of it (science) in high school, but they really didn't care about us. I didn't have homework. I didn't have textbooks I went home with. So I was very discouraged. He said; let me draw up a map for you. How many children do you have? What is your support system like? When do you eat?' So along with the map he was creating for me, I never mentioned one time eating. I didn't take care of myself very well, and I still don't to the point that I should. But he told me; you need to incorporate study, but first and foremost you need food, food, food. Your brain can't work without it. Second of all, you are here all day long before you get home to your babies, and when you get home to your babies, you are busy. You are a single mother. So he is making me understand exactly what I have in front of me and how to incorporate study. When he is done, I walked out of his office, crying. I was crying in his office. I felt

like this is the father that I needed. But since I didn't have it, this is my (father) figure that I need and I have it now. I need to do what he is telling me, and move forward with it. And the number one thing that I held on to in regards to studying that he told me with his little bit of advice; whenever you have a subject, especially science, do not go to class and not pick up the material for the rest of the day. You most definitely need to go to class. Pick it up after class, and give it a break. Even if you don't look at it until later in the evening, look at it and look at it again before you come to class. So when you come to class, it isn't in one ear, and out the other. So I started doing those things, and I got out of the class with a B. I was just so happy; so that really helped me. I never knew an instructor could be so passionate about teaching. To want to uplift a student in that manner. He asked me; what age is your child, your son? I am over the Alpha Phi Alpha and we do Boy Scouts and I know you don't have any support in regards to a husband or anything like that. Come by, and I can get him set up, I can waive the application fee, but your son needs to be involved in something. It took it to a whole other level outside of myself. He was concerned about my well being, and my family's well being and that mattered a lot to me. That was my first semester, and I shook off all of the nerves. I said I can do this.

Cara:

Coming in, I always make sure that I know who they are, and they know who I am. I most definitely greet, coming in and going. I will definitely meet with the teacher maybe once a week to make sure I am where I should be.

Taylor: "Yes, I do feel very comfortable or like my instructors always say, if you have any questions, come see me after class, and I always do. Yes, I do have a positive relationship with all of them (my professors)."

Amelia: "In most of my classes, I would say yes, the instructors are good."

Erica: "I have a good relationship with my instructors, and being a student ambassador helps."

Lisa: "I have no problem asking questions. Do I have a good relationship with my instructors? Actually, I do."

Only one subject reported a problem with a faculty member. This experience affected not only the subject, but the entire class.

Lisa:

I have one class where the professor either doesn't show up or he leaves and says he'll come back, but he doesn't come back. I was teaching the class, because everybody was like; can you explain this, show me this? I am proficient in the subject, but that has been one of the negative things."

### **Classroom Climate**

Teaching should take place in a classroom that has a climate of mutual respect. The instructor should respect the students, the students should respect the instructor, and the other students (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

Hope:

I think if the teacher has kind of established a community feel of the classroom where it's ok to ask questions, it's ok to not understand, then I do feel comfortable. Now my classes are smaller and more specialized, I do have that relationship.

Tanya:

If I don't understand something in class will I ask the teacher? Oh, yes, in a minute. I am not getting this. I will say that in a minute. It's just the way my personality is. OK, subject, we gonna get you. If you don't get something then you aren't going to get it if you don't speak up.

Alaina:

Definitely, because if I don't ask questions, I feel like I am lost as we go on through the semester. I have learned too, that I may have the same question that three other people may have in the class, and they just don't want to ask.

Angela: "I'm a little scared to speak up in front of a whole classroom setting, but in small classes or lectures, I am ok.

Lydia:

As I got older, I got more comfortable with myself and grew the mindset that I really don't care. At the end of the day, if I don't understand the material, it is my grade that's going to suffer, and no one else's.

Three subjects would ask for more information in order to better understand class material after class or through an email. Angela: "I emailed the teacher to ask if she can briefly explain in an email." Hope: "Sometimes I think it is easier to figure it out myself, or to see the teacher after class, or to send an email." Lydia: "If I do not send emails, then I go up to them after class-that way they know who I am and I'm not just a number."

## **Transformational Learning**

The subjects also shared some very positive transformative aspects of their educational experience from their post-secondary institutions. Some of the students experienced transformational learning experiences (Mezirow, Taylor & Associates, 2009).

Angela:

I am learning new things about myself and taking new courses which I've thought were kind of good for me to take. You learn a lot about yourself when you come to college. You are alone, you don't have your family or friends to put your mind frame; this is what you are taught, this is what you go by. Maybe it is a good thing for personal growth to be away, and it's good for the family, too. It's good for the family because Angela isn't home anymore, but it doesn't mean that she forgot about her family. Because I am alone, it is teaching my family that it's ok to go away to school. It isn't big things like expanding your religion or something like that; it's new views of everything.

Tanya:

Well, when I first started it was something that opened my eyes to a newer, broader world. I felt like this is the best thing I could have done for myself. When I came here, the people are so nice. My instructors are all willing to help, they have no problem with helping. They seem like a person like me. Everyday, down to earth.

Taylor:

I love learning new things, so to me, learning is a great experience. I've learned so many things! I've been able to learn things on my own, and I have to study by myself. I used the learning lab when I first came to college, and it helped me understand this whole new world of learning.



The subjects had positive and negative feelings about their learning experiences at the community college and the research university, and also experienced challenges and barriers.

### **Research Question Two**

What effect do barriers and challenges have on the adult Midwestern African American women's post-secondary educational experiences?

### **Racism**

One of the areas that the subjects experienced that a White adult learner does not experience was the barrier of racism. The subjects' responses generally supported Critical Race Theory "that racism is ordinary, not aberrational—the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country" (Delgado & Stancic, 2001, p. 7). When the subjects were excluded from classroom activities because of race, then there was blatant inequity in the educational opportunities available for minorities (Dixon and Rousseau, 2006; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000).

When asked if they had experienced racism in college, seven of the subjects stated that they had experienced racism in college, and three subjects said that they had not experienced racism in college. During the interviews, seven of the subjects described events, situations and actions that they thought were racist that they had experienced at their post-secondary institution. The seven subjects who experienced racism responded in the following statements.

Lydia:

No one wanted to work with me in group projects in my business classes. I would jump to the conclusion it was because I am African American; two of us weren't chosen and that was the only thing we had in common.

Erica:

They (the other students) copied off my paper, everybody just wrote down my answers- you all just copied down my paper, my exact paper, word for word. I got a D, you all got a B. I am sitting here, like; why did I get this D? You know it's like now after learning that, I fight for pretty much every grade I get. I want to know why. Why? Explain it to me. If you don't have time to explain it to me, then why did you put it in the computer?

Lisa:

It was subtle. I was told by an instructor that I would never pass this (class). I said I would succeed, and the instructor said 'I get one of you all the time.' I wanted to say 'One of you what?' but I didn't.

The next subject explained she felt that there was a cultural conflict, as her instructor and her graduate student are Asian, and the subject and her lab partner were treated the way that they were because they are both African American.

Alaina:

My lab partner and I went to talk to the instructor, but she wasn't there, but her helper was. I guess she is a grad student. So we were asking her how to do a problem, and she basically didn't want to help us. She told us that it's not that hard, and that really made me mad.

Angela: "Yes, we still get, me and my roommate, the stares and the looking over the shoulder, and the just the hostile stares, basically." Hope: "Not blatantly, no. I want them to just get that I am there, and be ok with the fact that I am sitting in this class, and not to have to continually deal with that (hostility)."

Lydia:

I have had a couple of experiences. It is mainly when people can be anonymous. There have been comments left on the college's newspaper website about Blacks and every time there is an article with Blacks mentioned in the article they would just start attacking the Black people here. It is usually out of straight ignorance. No one wants to be called racist even though they may have racist beliefs.

Racism was experienced by one subject, but she simply pushed past it as she didn't have the desire, time or resources to deal with it.

Cara "Umm, it's not dead, everybody knows that. However, I am so active, I don't have time to notice."

### **Race Representative**

Another drawback was the sense of isolation that the subjects had when they experienced a lack of cultural diversity in the classroom, such as when the subject is the only African American student in the class, and she was supposed to speak for the entire race; or when the subject's voice makes the other students uncomfortable when discussing race related subjects (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Knaus, 2006).

Alaina: "A negative is the lack of cultural diversity. The Caucasian students automatically look at me as if I have all the right answers when we talk about Black literature."

Angela:

Some classes have topics that you may feel uncomfortable talking about going to a predominantly white institution. I have been to several classes where they discussed race or white privilege. When I voice my opinion, I get stares and the response; maybe she doesn't like us, and this can be a negative thing. They (the other students) probably

wanted to hear my opinion about race or white privilege, but again, once I voiced it, the class didn't elaborate any more on it. Being the only African American in class you just know that they are looking at you like; I know you are going to have something to say about this topic, or we know Angela will say something, because I don't know.

Hope: "I am obviously always the minority in my classes. There are no other Black students in any of my classes right now, which is a small downside."

### **No Racism**

Amelia and Tanya stated that they hadn't experienced racism. Both are in their fifties, and have lived in Southern states at a time when segregation was still being practiced. They have lived in Kansas City, Missouri since their middle school years, in the early 1960's. According to Critical Race Theory, it was doubtful that they had not experienced racism, as it is embedded in society, and social constructs, such as universities, colleges, and other educational institutions (Better, 2008; Dixon & Rousseau, 2006). It was possible that they had not developed an Afrocentric Identity, and were in a state of denial. It was also possible that they did not feel comfortable speaking of such a sensitive issue with virtual strangers.

The third subject, described it this way, when asked if she had experienced racism. Taylor: "I have not. Some of my friends have. It hasn't got me yet." Taylor stated that she hadn't directly experienced racism, but realized that it was present in the school environment, that peers have experienced it, and it would probably be a matter of time before she was directly affected.

### **Blaming**

Blame was when an external act, event or pattern was held culpable for a detrimental response which preserved the status quo. By refusing accountability, no action needed to be taken.

Lisa:

I think one of the barriers, I will say to some women, but I will say African American women, we get so attached to the 'help me' syndrome and we don't realize there is enough in us that can help us do it (education). A lot of what we deal with, barrier wise is self imposed. Talk to the women about their self-imposed barriers. Because a lot of people don't want to talk about them. They want to talk about that 'he was mean and this teacher was this way.' What did you do? You know, what did you place in front of your own self?

Lydia:

I just think it's important for all of us to not use our race, or sex, or anything as a crutch. Sometimes I do feel like that from my peers. You know, every other second they are complaining because of this or because of that and I know this country has a long way to go. We all know that. But I am also a more proactive person. I like what you guys are doing. Because you see a problem and you are going to try and do something about it, instead of sitting there and just keep complaining about the same thing. So I just wanted to kind of leave it with that. I just hope that people start becoming more proactive instead of complaining. If you don't like something, then fix it. If you can't fix it, then change the way you feel about it.

The excerpts from interviews illustrated some of the negative situations that the subjects experienced. Those who experienced racism claimed that had made learning harder, made them uncomfortable, or and it diminished their learning experience. Two subjects stated that they have observed other African American students who blamed their performance or failures on lack of opportunity, or racism, when they thought the outcomes were the result of a lack of effort or poor

study skills (Ford, 2008). In addition to the issue of racism, there were additional barriers to learning.

### **Barriers to Adult Education**

There were barriers that most adult learners experienced. These could be situational barriers; such as lack of transportation, lack of money for school, unaffordable or nonexistent child care, lack of time, conflicts with employment, family obligations, or community activities (McClusky, 1963; Cross, 1981; Merriam, et al., 2006). Institutional barriers occurred as a result of organizational and administrative practices which negatively impacted adult participation (Kasworm, et al., 2002). Informational barriers were a lack of information or access to information concerning enrollment, class schedules, or financial assistance (Cross, 1981).

Dispositional barriers were those barriers that prevented an adult from seeking education due to a belief that they were too old, a lack of self esteem, a belief that they would not be successful, or other similar attitudes (Cross, 1981; McClusky, 1963).

Erica:

Transportation is an issue; many students don't have cars and buses don't run when you need them. I just think that barriers for single mothers, people who need the extra help. If the college would, understanding that money is scarce as far as daycare. The college doesn't offer daycare, and the women don't have a place to bring their children so they can go to school. I think that is a big, big issue. They have no daycare. They have to jump through all these hoops to go through the state to get some daycare to do this when they should have something set up at the college where you can bring your child here and go to school. You have all these people getting into childhood education. They can watch the children. That's hands on experience. Why send them out to another daycare to get some

experience when you can actually provide it free here? Transportation, and daycare and no money is the three reasons that women leave school.

Erica:

My class starts at 12:00, and you get out at 11:50. I will stand right here and we'll be tossing the kids to each other, and now I got to run. Huh? Are you serious? I seen that and I was like 'You all are seriously exchanging babies in the hallway?' I can't understand that when we have all these empty spaces that you can just make into something and give these people to bring their kids so they can come to school. Because who will take their child to school and sit them right inside the room and say; don't move. I've taken my daughter to school, and I have sat her right outside the classroom before with a book and I leave the door open. Sit, I have class and I will be right out, and I will sit close to the door because I have no other choice. In this college, our spring break starts on the first week of April. My daughter's school district spring break begins the week after mine is over. So what am I supposed to do for a week for daycare? You see what I am saying? They could have just put the vacations at the same time.

Tanya:

I'm taking history and speech. I don't even need them because I have finished my prerequisites. I found out that some of those classes that I needed are not offered here at X campus or at Y campus. I said that we are going to have to figure something out, because it's going to get cold and I don't want to be traveling a long ways. If the courses that I need was on this campus, then there wouldn't be a barrier. If people can't get to these other campuses, then a barrier would be transportation for the person here who needs to go there. Because a lot of people don't drive.

Amelia:

The hours for student services, such as tutoring services are not always convenient for everybody. This is so funny; because now I am in the position where I work in the career center. The students will come in for help and every one of them has went through what we went through when we came in to enroll and apply for financial aid; it is so frustrating. You know, you think; I'm just going to quit. And I think about how my sister and I came up here and you had to go to this place and you had to go to that place and you didn't get enough information, and you could have done it all in one place. It was so frustrating! If we didn't want this bad enough we would have stopped right there. That is the same speech I give to the new people that's coming in. Don't let this bother you. It will pass. You will do the same thing next year and the year after. Let's keep moving forward.

Cara:

As a non-traditional student, I had to learn to study again, and struggle getting study time wrapped into my schedule. I felt very unprepared so it was a struggle coming to school, being discouraged due to lack of preparedness. You have all of these outside life forces as a non-traditional student so it gives you more reasons or you come up with more reasons that make it easier to leave (school). I was briefly tempted to quit college due to finances.

Taylor: "Listening to my friends, instead of listening to myself. If my friend says; I already studied, so you don't have to, I will say, all right, I won't study it, then. So that is a negative." The different barriers had a negative effect on the subjects, but uncertainty had a stronger effect on their progress in college.



## **Career Goal Uncertainty**

One theme that emerged during the interviews wasn't expected. Many of the subjects stated that they began a job or began a course of study only to find that they didn't like it, or it wasn't what they expected. The research questions and the probes didn't ask questions concerning advising, or how their major course of study was selected. The majority of students lack the knowledge and experience necessary to make an informed decision concerning their choice of a major and career. Many students don't understand that an academic major and an occupational career are intertwined; one tends to lead to the other. Career uncertainty is apt to be linked to attrition, poor academic adjustment and performance, increased anxiety and confusion concerning identity (Astin, Kom, & Riggs, 1993; Nutt, 2003, Orndorff & Herr, 1996). Pertinent sections of the interviews follow.

Amelia:

I changed my major. I was going to do paralegal, and I'm like, I have that business persona. I am older, and I need to be passionate about what I do for the next 50 years. So you know I need to just really think about it, and I love to cook. I think that whatever education or background I get, it has to be something that I am going to love. So my friend says; you need to be a chef. Ok, but you can't make any money being a chef. I still have to eat; but I really do love cooking.

Cara:

I came into X expecting to be a nursing student. Last semester I changed my major to education. I have more of a passion for education because of the lack of preparedness I had. I went to high school, I am going to hair school, my life will be a piece of cake. But

after I got into the real world, I said; I don't like working jobs like this. Being a cosmetologist doesn't guarantee anything.

Lisa:

I actually had an instructor tell me; you don't need to stop there, you need to go here, and I was like, I didn't want to go to school. Because I told them, I was faltering between a nurse anesthetist and an actual medical doctor. You know, so I would have to ask God; oh, just don't stop at being a nurse, go beyond.

Tanya:

I am taking history and speech. Those are just, I don't even need them because I have finished my pre-requisites. That is when I found out that the courses I need are not offered at X campus or Y campus. I said we are going to have to figure something out, because it's going to get cold, and I don't want to be traveling a long ways.

Angela:

I know that I want to major in journalism, but you have to have like 15 hours outside of it. So I just didn't know what to do. Ok, try business, I didn't like business, ok. Ok, do writing, well I was a secondary education major and advising and I didn't like that either. Well, see if you do English; ok, bingo, there it is.

There were a variety of barriers and challenges; some imposed from the institution, some imposed by the individual, and some resulted from the situation that the learner found herself in (Cross, 1981; Kasworm et al., 2002; McClusky, 1963; Merriam et al., 2006).

### **Research Question Three**

What effect do responsibilities and support systems have on the adult Midwestern African American women's post-secondary educational experiences?

## **Responsibilities**

The final research question was partially addressed by understanding the roles and responsibilities of an adult which could include but are not limited to an individual who had completed the primary school education cycle, pursued a secondary-level education, was employed, had dependents, was a member in the Armed Forces, was able to vote, and was willing to undertake the roles and responsibilities of an adult (Kasworm, et al., 2002; Merriam et al., 2006). All of the subjects, under Kasworm's (2002) definition, were adults. All ten subjects were enrolled in college full time, and were living on their own, responsible for managing their finances, were able to vote, and had assumed the roles and responsibilities of an adult. The majority of the subjects were employed. Half of the subjects had dependents. The effect that those responsibilities had on the subjects' post-secondary educational experiences could be inferred from statements, attitudes, and actions that were shared in the interviews. In barriers and challenges, the subjects explained some of the barriers in relation to the responsibilities in their lives. The primary responsibility for the subjects with children was balancing work, school, and parenting. Many of these issues were expressed in the section on barriers and challenges. The subjects felt a responsibility for getting credentials and earning a good living, to give back to their families, and the community (Bui, 2002; McAdoo, 2001).

So while all the subjects indicated that they had responsibilities, they differed slightly in what they perceived as responsibilities, how they met their responsibilities, and what they viewed as successful or unsuccessful accomplishment of their responsibilities. This constituted part of what McClusky's Theory of Margin called load. The subjects' load is, in part, composed of their responsibilities as an employee, a family member, a student, and other roles and activities, such

as membership in student organizations, civic organizations and religious institutions (McClusky, 1963).

### **Role Models for Children**

All of the subjects with children saw part of their responsibility as setting a positive example for their children, and serving as a role model, and enhancing their ability to take care of their families financially. Both African American students and first generation college students were typically concerned with these issues (Bui, 2002; McAdoo, 2001).

Cara:

What got me into college and kept me in college is the whole reason I came. I was hurting financially, but to leave college to work a minimum wage \$10-\$12 an hour wasn't going to meet the needs of me and my family. Not to mention that I am trying to teach my kids a different pathway. It is more than just going to college and getting a degree and getting a career that I want to support my family. It is also teaching my children that this is the only way. This is what is necessary to be successful, this is necessary for individual growth. For me, my children are keeping me here.

Erica:

I keep everything I've done in college so if anybody needs my notes, I can pay it forward. I told my son I was keeping it for him. 'You will have to do this stuff. You don't have to copy mine, but you will know how to write the sentence that they ask you to write. You will know the difference between a short story and an essay. You know, these are things I had to learn.

Lisa:

Being in school means I can't hang out with my friends tonight, I got to do my homework. It means going to the learning center when you really just want to leave school and go home and get some rest. I can't sit on the phone, I have to go over my school studies. I tell my kids, 'We are shutting down.' Shut down means not just the kids, but mom needs to shut down, too. TV's, music, we go to shut down, because I have work to do and because of that, my children and I know where we need to be. They are achieving beyond where they are required to be because of that sacrifice. I would definitely say that education and the things I do with my children enriches our relationship and makes them want to do more. I have principal's honor roll students and National Junior Honor Society. So I'm excited.

Tanya:

Education is actually teaching me to talk to my youngest son. He has a real stuttering problem. I told him; what you need to do is get you a reading class, and take speech; they work hand in hand. It's giving me more patience, how I need to talk to him. I'm glad I talked him into going to school.

### **Responsibility for Learning**

Alaina: "I need at least my bachelor's degree to begin to teach because my major is secondary education, and I have been thinking about going and getting my masters so that I can be a college professor."

Angela:

It was a good thing for personal growth for me to go away to college. It was good for my family; they could see it was ok to go away to school. I learned I could live on my own,

and it's just personal growth. (Before I came to college) I would be so scared to live by myself, but now I don't need my sister to live with me anymore. See, I have so many sisters so it's like if I were to go home they would ask me where am I going to live? I am going to live by myself. Oh, why? You have us. Well, I don't want to live with you all.

Hope:

Learning is very important in my life. I feel like it is necessary to have as many credentials as I can going into the workforce just because the economy isn't the greatest at this time, and I don't have a lot of connections that other people have. I am not going to get a job because my Dad works there, or my family owns the company. So I feel like I need to come in with what I can with a degree, with certifications.

Lydia:

I am the out-going President of my chapter of (sorority). I have been the vice president of (large student organization). I've been on multicultural student honor roll, and many different organizations, and I've tried to take on leadership positions in those organizations and have actually run projects and supervised people. I have learned a lot about delegating, what my weaknesses and strengths are, and how to work with people.

Taylor:

My major is vocal performance. I want to be a vocal teacher; to teach kids music. I really want to teach that. Because you know, they are trying to get music out of the schools and I really want to teach that.

Amelia:

Just something that any man or woman that comes up against the barriers, just know who you are, and what it is that you have to offer some other person that is coming behind you and keep moving it forward.

Serving as a role model for children was a responsibility, so it added to the adult's load according to McClusky. This served as a strong motivator to the adult, so it also served as power under McClusky's definitions (McClusky, 1963). An area that conferred power to adult learners was support systems.

### **Support Systems**

The effect that support systems had on the subjects post secondary educational experiences generated responses from the subjects that were profound. Nine subjects stated that they were supported by their families, but most subjects also said that their instructors and fellow students provided support.

In three cases, family members were also in school; Amelia had two sisters attending school and they acted as their own support group. Hope's mother was attending school, and working on her doctorate. Seeing her mother in school, working full time, and taking care of her family provided the impetus for the subject to reassess her educational goals, and value the process as preparation for the future, her career, and her knowledge base that she intended to build on with further education. Taylor had a sister in school at the same institution she was attending. They supported each other, but Taylor found that her sister mentored her, provided advice, and shared her education experiences.

Amelia:

You know I would say all of that, family, other students, instructors. Actually two of my sisters go to school here with me. They are both older than I am. We usually meet up and talk about class and everything. This past semester I had a class with my oldest sister, and it was wonderful. I had someone to study with.

Cara:

My mom, my family, co-workers because I do work on campus so that includes faculty. I am part of a couple of organizations and so I do have great support there as well. Having that family feel on campus it is a great, big help. When you are an extrovert, if you are one, it's a wonderful thing. Because everyone there is able to help and willing to help because you aren't so quiet. You are reaching out for help. Even if you aren't needing help, they will come to you. I have this thing, this idea for you. I think it would be good for you, would you like to do it? Whether it is volunteer work, or work to make money, because they know I am struggling, or whatnot, they definitely come through.

Sometimes I can come and I have this look that I don't know that I am wearing. My supervisor will say; are you ok? She is like a mother to me. I will tell her I am ok. I have a geology test coming up and a Spanish test on the same day. She will tell me; oh, baby, you will be fine. For whatever reason, my spirit will change and I will end up doing better than I expected, usually anyway. Those moments I have a home away from home.

A mother away from my real mom.

Erica:

Other students and my family support my education. My father was my biggest supporter of my education. I was tempted to quit school after he died. He died in the middle of



finals week, a year ago March 10<sup>th</sup>. What form does the support take? It is pretty much everything. It's well rounded. In my family, if one can't take care of a kid, we all just pitch in and babysit that day. Pick them up from school. Stop what you are doing and go and get them. You know I have four or five nephews, so you know I pick them up, they pick me up. They come over, we help. That's what we do. My father was my biggest supporter, and my daughter's grandmother is extremely supportive. She watches my daughter, she picks her up. So without her I would probably be up a creek or paying for daycare. So she does a lot, yeah.

Lisa:

I would say all of the above; family, other students, and instructors provide support. I actually had an instructor tell me; you don't need to stop there, you need to go here, and I was like I didn't want to go to school, because I was faltering between nurse anesthetist and an actual medical doctor. You know, so I would have to ask God; oh, just don't stop at being a nurse, go beyond. My spiritual parents are my pastors and I have my biological parents who are Christians, too, with my Dad being a pastor. I may have one friend or associate who has some form of college, or graduated. The people I associate with are either in college at this time, or have already graduated and are working in their fields. So pretty much everybody pushes me.

Tanya:

Who supports my education goals? Me, and some of the people here at X. At one point I was on the honor roll. One of the staff showed me. I am like; you got to be kidding me. Then she showed me and I am like; no, you have to print that off. When I start bragging

about it, and nobody believes me, I can whip that paper out on them. I was so proud of myself. I said; you go, girl. I still got it.

Alaina:

I would say that family, other students and instructors support my education goals.

Basically I will be, when I do graduate, the first one in our family to graduate in a while, probably like ten years or so. My Mom had me when she was older, like 35. So I didn't grow up with a whole bunch of cousins my age. Everyone is excited and looking forward to me graduating. Especially my aunt, she is a nurse. Of course, she knows how important education is, so I would say definitely all of the above (family, other students and instructors).

Angela:

It's family and friends. I know a lot of professors but I haven't built no relationship like that with them. But family and friends give me encouragement, especially my Mom. It's hard; she went to school as a non-traditional student. She had it harder than what I have now. I don't have any children or anyone depending on me. I'm still depending on her for encouragement and talking about it (college). My Mom knows the system. She worked in financial aid before she was a teacher, so I'm asking her money questions. I know that I want to do journalism, but you have to have 15 hours outside of it. So I just didn't know what to do. Ok, try business. I didn't like business. Ok, then do writing. Well, I was a secondary education major and advising and I didn't like that either. Well, see if you do like English. Ok, bingo, there it is. She knows how school is. Her interests were that she's into the whole education part, and that's why she's a teacher. It's not for me. I have a whole family background of teachers, so I didn't follow in those footsteps. I just can't

keep up with the kids. It wasn't for her to just be like; well do this and do that. Do what you want to do. She didn't even want me to come out here. She wanted me to stay home and go to X, but it's what I wanted to do.

Hope:

Definitely my parents and my sister as well is very supportive of my goals. Several of my instructors that I have had in the past year have been very supportive and have continued to be in touch with me, even after the classes have been over, giving advice and resources along the way. A few classmates that I have I feel are supportive of my goals. But, sadly, I feel like the majority of them are just trying to get a degree and finish and they don't have the same passion for it that I do. And so you know, when we are doing different assignments I am looking at it as more a preparation for the future and they are looking at it as a worthless assignment that's just in their way. So I don't have as much support from different classmates, but I do have (the support of) different instructors and my parents are supportive.

Lydia:

I would say yes, family, other students and instructors support my educational goals. I have had a lot of mentors and people that I have looked up to while I have been here. But as far as education, I would definitely say my family. More recently, my boyfriend has been really supportive, too. He just graduated last year so he has been on me. He's been on me because he wants me to do well.

Taylor: "My sister, Karen. She supports everything I do. She supports everything I do as long as it's a good thing and that I love what I do."

The subjects also reported that having family support was essential when they encountered barriers, challenges, or events that tempted them to drop out. The family support was the reason six of the subjects decided to remain in school rather than dropping out. An example of the subjects' statements follows.

Amelia:

I think about how my sisters and I when we came up here (to college), and you had to go to this place and you had to go to that place and you didn't get enough information and you could have done it all in one place. If we didn't want this bad enough we would have stopped right there.

Erica: "I was tempted to quit after my father died. He died during finals week. I only had a year left, and I came back, knowing how strongly he felt about education."

Alaina:

I most definitely have been tempted to quit. I would say like my second actual year of college. I basically went off to university and partied and didn't pass the classes I needed to. So I had to come back home and they made me re-evaluate my situation. My Dad was like; I don't want to see you like me. Because he basically worked 12 hours a day and they didn't want that for me and they weren't going to let me give up.

Hope:

I came back (to college) because of the support of my parents and seeing that my Mom is going back and getting her doctorate when she has a full time job, and a life and husband, and kids and I know the sacrifices they made to be able to give me this experience.

Five subjects received support from fellow students. They indicated that their peers could understand many of the stresses, frustrations, and problems that they encountered in their classes.

Cara:

I realized I am not in this alone. And as I went on, I am seeing other students in Spanish and she has to be 73 years old and I am looking at her like this is my grandma in my class. This is just an awesome feeling. I know I don't look like a non-traditional student but I feel like it mentally. When I see another non-traditional student, I am like; cool. It is so great to have older or aged people in the classroom with me. We help each other.

Erica:

If I know someone who took the class, then we need to sit down and talk. You know, do you have some notes that maybe I missed something? Maybe you wrote something down that I didn't. I get within the community. I do it like that.

Lisa:

The people that I associate with are either in college at this time, or have already graduated and are working in their fields. So, pretty much, everybody pushes me. I am a go-getter, anyway. But if I am like; hey, you guys, what do you think? Then I know people that will help me.

In contrast, several did not feel that they were supported by fellow students.

Lisa:

There are a lot of students who won't reach out for assistance, for one reason or another. There are programs for students who don't have a college graduate in the home. People are afraid to lean on one another and ask one another for help.

Hope:

Sadly, I feel the majority of them (my classmates) are just trying to get a degree, and finish and they don't seem to have the same passion for it that I do. They see classes and

assignments as worthless and something that is in their way, so I don't have much support from classmates.

Lydia:

I think it is important for all of us not to use our race or our sex or anything as a crutch.

Sometimes I feel that my peers use those issues. They are complaining because of this or that. If you don't like something, then start becoming more proactive instead of complaining. If you don't like something, then fix it.

Two students felt that the best support that they received was from organizations. One identified her support as coming from a student organization. The other identified her support as coming from her church, her spiritual advisors, and her religion. All the subjects mentioned that their religion was part of their support system, and several subjects mentioned that their church was an important part of their support system.

Amelia:

I think the church, in itself is wonderful. The church is inside of me. It is my hope and desire to be a better person, to help those who is coming behind me. Yes, I would have to say the church is my belief that God has everything in control. You know, I just need to do my part. Yes, it is a big help.

Lisa:

When I get put down, I tell God. And this is me and God, we talk. You didn't make no junk. I am not junk. You make sure I retain this knowledge. I have to do my part, I can't just say: hey, God, make sure I get an A. I have to study, I have to get the work, I have to spend the nights up. I even go to my kids sometimes because they are doing stuff like math, and I will ask; do you know this? You know, we even study together.

Finally, one student felt that the best and most positive supporter that she had was herself.

Tanya:

Well, I get discouraged about some of the things going on in my life, but I'm not letting anything stop me. I don't care what is standing in my way. I want so much more for myself before I get too old to enjoy anything. At one time I was on the honor roll, I was so proud of myself. I said; you go, girl. Right now is my time.

The support systems employed by all of the subjects have been a valuable resource that has encouraged perseverance in attending college and reaching their educational goals. In McClusky's terms, the support systems the subjects used were part of their power which helped balance their load so that they could continue (McClusky, 1963).

While the majority of the subjects had family support, one subject experienced alienation from her parents; the other subject retained custody of her child at her family's insistence.

### **Unsupportive Family Actions**

One subject found that her relationship with her father was negatively affected by her decision to go to college. Another subject delayed attending school, due to a pregnancy when she was 14. This was not the norm for the remainder of the subjects.

Taylor:

My Dad seems like he changed when me and my sister, Tara, we went off to college. My older sister, Nadine, on my father's side, she didn't go off to college, and they talk all the time. So its like it's just me, and my sister Karen, and my sister Tara, and he talks to us just like every blue moon that he talks to us.

Erica:

I was 14 when I found out I was pregnant. I was scared to tell my family. I talked to this placement place about giving my baby up for adoption. When I told my family what I planned, they came down hard on me. We don't ever give up our babies, they told me. We raise our babies. So after I finished high school, I had to work to support my baby, and that kept me from going to college right away.

### **Summary**

Common themes emerged from the analysis concerning the subjects; they were cognitively active learners, were aware of their learning styles and optimized their learning styles and used context to learn new material. The subjects almost universally had positive relationships with their professors, and a good level of comfort in the classroom, which indicated an environment that enhanced the students ability to learn. During the interviews both positive and negative aspects of their college experience emerged, such as the racism that they experienced, and the situational barriers of lack of childcare, lack of transportation, lack of money for tuition and college expenses, and other barriers were touched on. The importance of education to the life/career goals was another universal, all subjects emphasized the importance of gaining education, but each subject provided their personal reasons. While many of the subjects detailed adult roles and responsibilities, many of the responsibilities were discussed when the subjects were queried about barriers and challenges. All subjects acknowledged the importance of support systems, and each subject discussed the composition of their personal support system. Subject quotations were used to provide more accuracy, and a framework for elaboration and meaning making.



## Chapter 5

### **Analysis and Discussion**

#### **Overview**

The final chapter of this research on adult Midwestern African American women at post-secondary institutions includes a restatement of the problem, and a discussion of findings and conclusions. Included in this chapter are implications of the study, recommendations for follow up studies, and a brief discussion of changes that might have made the dissertation research process more efficient and effective.

#### **Restatement of the Problem**

There has been limited research conducted on African American women at Midwestern post-secondary institutions, but significant numbers of these women attended post-secondary institutions in the Midwest with enrollment expected to increase (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). This research specifically identified and interviewed adult African American women attending two Midwest post-secondary institutions and asked them to describe their learning experiences, the importance education held in their lives, what their learning goals were, the challenges and barriers they experienced while they matriculated at their institution, what responsibilities they had and what support systems they used.

#### **Discussion of Findings and Conclusions**

The research based on interviews that elicited and described the adult African American women subjects' learning experiences at their post-secondary institutions, reported responses both positive and negative influences on their learning.

## **Research Question One**

Research Question One: How do adult Midwestern African-American women describe their learning experiences at the post-secondary level?

### **Actively Engaged Learners**

All ten subjects' described themselves as active learners who used learning strategies with an awareness of how they learned best, which helped them to successfully master their college courses. They were strongly motivated, goal oriented, and used different learning strategies, such as repetition, note taking, reviewing material, using flash cards, labeling all household items in the language they were learning, forming study groups, and completing school work at set locations where there were few distractions. Most of the subjects described being confident in the classroom and asked questions to increase their base knowledge.

The majority of the subjects appeared to conform to either Belenky, et al.'s received knowledge perspective which accepted concrete dualistic knowledge from an external authority or subjective knowing perspective which relied on intuition and distrusted external authorities (Belenky, et al., 1986). Two subjects appeared to have progressed to the connected knowing perspective and used active listening, empathy, and attempted to understand the experience that created the knowledge (Belenky, et al., 1986). While nothing contradicted Belenky, et al., (1986), it wasn't central to how the women described their learning. The literature that supported the data that was shared during the interviews came from adult education and Kolb's Learning styles (Fishback, 1997).

Several subjects described their learning process as having to see, having to say, having to read, having to hold the material in their hands in order to process the information. A lengthy procedure; they could not simply hear the lecture, then understand and remember the information it contained. Learning comprised of sensory elements is referred to as perceptual learning style. The seven elements include print, hearing, interactive (verbalization), visual, haptic (sense of touch), and kinesthetic (Galbraith, 1987). All of the subjects appeared to use multiple elements of this style, as they read, listened, verbalized, used visual cues, and danced when learning.

The majority of the subjects' stated that they preferred hands on learning, learning new and challenging subjects and depended on others for knowledge and tended to trust their "gut reactions" to new information. While no learning inventories were conducted, this type of response and preference is typical of an accommodator, according to Kolb's learning style inventory. Accommodators began learning endeavors by initiating actions which allowed them to include other students, make decisions, and get things done (Kolb, 2007). Not all were accommodators as some subjects described different learning preferences (Kolb, 2007).

Patricia Cross (1991) remarked that: "learning is not so much an additive process, with new learning simply piling up on top of existing knowledge, as it is an active, dynamic process in which the connections are constantly changing and the structure reformatted (p. 9)." During the interviews, the learners tended to respond that they had discovered that when they could relate new material to their life experiences, it generally allowed them to better retain the material, and they were more likely to stay motivated. This is in accordance with much of the adult education literature. Malcolm Knowles emphasized that adults' experience forms the basis for learning activities, that they were most interested in learning material that had relevance to

their work or personal lives, and that they tended to respond more favorably to internal motivators rather than external motivators (Knowles, 1984). "The importance and centrality of experience as a foundation for adult education practice is widely accepted" (Tennant and Pogson, 1995, p.149). Research and experience had recognized that learners made meaning of new material in terms of their prior learning and experience. Successful teachers often illustrated their material by linking new information with references to learners prior experiences (Tennant and Pogson, 1995). Progressive adult education's roots grounded in the progressive movement in politics, social change, and education emphasized experience-centered education (Elias & Merriam, 1995).

According to Wlodkowski, (2008):

Being motivated means being purposeful. We use attention, concentration, imagination, passion, and other processes to pursue goals, such as learning a particular subject or completing a degree...how processes such as our passion for a subject take shape are, to some extent, culturally bound to what we have learned in our families and communities ( p. 3).

All of the subjects appeared to be actively engaged, were using multiple learning techniques seemed to be highly motivated, needed to tie new classroom material to their experiences and strove to succeed. In addition, the relationships that the subjects had with instructors were very important in the learning process.

### **Relationships with Faculty**

All ten subjects reported that they had good to great relationships with their instructors, and several described their instructors as mentors. Four urban community college subjects were impressed by the resources available to assist them if they were unprepared for a subject area, or

to help if they had trouble with a course. Community colleges are comprised of a larger proportion of non-traditional learners than universities, and community college students generally were less academically prepared for college. The nurturing perspective was a good fit for marginally prepared learners, as the teaching methodology was one which empowered the learner (Pratt, 1998).

Four subjects from the research university had experienced the nurturing perspective in at least one class, but most classes from their descriptions, hadn't implemented the nurturing teaching perspective.

Nurturing beliefs and commitments could be taught to faculty; so nurturing education could take place virtually at any institution, and in any subject area. While nurturing education tends to benefit all learners who are exposed to it, it was especially effective for students without a good learning foundation, who had previously been academically unsuccessful, or doubted their ability to succeed in school.

Pratt, (1998) remarks:

This belief, that the learner has an internalized drive toward self-realization, allows freeing of the educators focus from strict attention to content and permits attention to turn toward the relationships established with an 'educational triangle' of learner, content and teacher. The establishment of a fluid and potent dynamic in these relationships will determine whether or not a nurturing learning encounter is ultimately successful (p. 162).

### **Classroom Climate**

One indication of how comfortable students were in the classroom, was how willing they were to ask questions and how much they contributed to discussions. All of the subjects claimed to be willing to request clarification of class material if they didn't understand it. Seven subjects

were comfortable asking their questions in class; three asked questions after class, or emailed a question to the instructor. The subjects stated they were most comfortable asking questions in classes in which the instructor set a climate of respect and acceptance; this accorded with adult education literature in establishing a safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environment which respected diverse perspectives (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

Emotions were part of the learning environment. When leading classroom activities it was as essential to observe negative emotions, such as anger, as it was to note positive emotions, such as joy or excitement. Acknowledgement of emotional responses to learning was healthy and made the classroom more inclusive (hooks, 1994; Brookfield, 1990). When all learners felt free and expressed their opinions, and their responses were received in an safe, accepting, respectful manner, a positive classroom climate was established. It was essential this climate was established from the first class, and reinforced periodically to maintain a reciprocal respectful and safe environment (Pratt, 1998; Wlodkowski, 2008).

### **Transformational Learning**

While transformational learning could begin with a disorienting dilemma or significant problem, transformational learning could be the natural result of exposure to many different and novel experiences and subjects at once, which was the norm at post-secondary institutions (Mezirow, et al., 2009). Three of the subjects had transformational learning experiences which had the effect of making the learners aware that a larger world was accessible to the learners. The subjects began to understand that they were capable of making meaning, and started to view themselves as learners.

## **Research Question Two**

Research Question Two: What effect do barriers and challenges have on the adult Midwestern African-American women's post-secondary educational experiences?

### **Racism**

One of the barriers that the subjects experienced that they had little control over was the barrier of racism. African American adult learners experienced many of the same barriers and challenges that White adult learners encountered, but in addition faced racism (Better, 2008; Knaus, 2006; Merriam, et al., 2006; Tisdell, 1995). Racism was embedded in social institutions; not always caused by intolerant racists, it has been constructed to retain white privilege (Johnson, 2006).

The majority of the subjects experienced some form of racism during their attendance at post-secondary institutions which corresponded to the literature on Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixon & Rousseau, 2006; Knaus, 2006). All societies have social institutions; social institutions have the power to reward or penalize their members. An example of a type of social institution is education institutions. The educational system determines who makes knowledge, what knowledge is worth knowing, who in society is going to be rewarded with a good education, and who will be punished with a substandard or marginal education (Better, 2008; Bush, 2004; Tisdell, 1995). Further, the education system mirrors the labor force hierarchy, and people are sorted into groups and taught the skill sets, values and norms for relating at their level in the hierarchy. Placement in the hierarchy was dominated by groups who were privileged by their gender, class or race. Privileged groups were taught knowledge and skills that allowed group members to maintain their privileged positions. When the powerful in society influence the education system's policies, practices, and procedures to maintain power

disparities based on class, gender and race and some members of society are penalized because of their socio-economic status, their sex or their race, then the result is institutional classism, sexism or racism (Better, 2008; Bush, 2004; Tisdell, 1995).

### **Race Representative**

A number of subjects at the research university mentioned that during discussions in class, their opinion was sought. Peers were waiting to hear the African American viewpoint from an expert as if she could speak for the entire race as the only African American in class. When asked to respond to how this caused them to feel, the answer generally given; quite pressured. Juanita Johnson-Bailey described this phenomenon: "When a specific racial group is discussed, it is presented monolithically (Johnson-Bailey, 1999, p 666)."

Silence in a classroom was generally thought to be imposed on members of oppressed factions based on race, ethnicity, disability, or sexuality. Tisdell, (2001, p. 152) gives an explanation that seemed accurate:

I had not thought of silence necessarily as a way of maintaining power and privilege in a classroom. Further, I had not initially noticed that it was the most marginalized (namely the people of color and the person with a disability) and the white folks most willing to be vulnerable who spoke in the first round of the circle....On a conscious level, I thought my own initial silence was about not wanting to disrupt the process. But my African American teaching partner spoke. Perhaps on a less conscious level, I too, along with the other white folks who said nothing, did not want to be vulnerable. In what way does our positionality shape our willingness to be vulnerable in classes focusing on systems of privilege and oppression?



## **No Racism**

Two subjects stated that they did not experience racism. One possible explanation might be that they had a non-Afrocentric identity; their racial identity and knowledge concerned with the African American experience and history had little to do with their apparent sense of self. Another possible explanation could be that both women were uncomfortable sharing examples of racism with virtual strangers, and chose not to do so.

## **Blaming**

Two of the subjects spoke of self-imposed barriers, but from different perspectives. A subject from the urban community college spoke of African American women who doubted their strength and ability, and wanted them to stop imposing limits on themselves. She viewed the African American women as strong, capable and she felt they needed to recognize their own strengths. The other subject, from the research university came from an affluent, well-educated background and had not lacked opportunities or resources. Her perspective was that people used their race, sex or class as a crutch, and complained that they were not being treated fairly. She thought that others were not being proactive when faced with discrimination. There were many ways to view these comments. One possible viewpoint was that of individualistic thought. We live in a society that appeared to revolve around the individual, and people were socialized or taught their roles, as we interacted with people in society. We learned a view of the world, our place in it, and in relation to other people. We learned who was privileged and who was not, and how our identity positioned us, and what kind and how much power we were granted. Individualistic thinking made us all blind to privilege because privilege referred to the social categories in which we were placed. Individualistic thought assumed everything had to do with

individuals, and so was blinded to even consider privilege and the ills that go along with it; oppression, discrimination, and entitlement (Johnson, 2006).

### **Situational Barriers**

Another type of barrier experienced by this group of women were situational barriers. This was not unexpected, and many adult learners experienced this type of barrier. The situational type of barrier could be the most frustrating, as the individual could feel helpless, impotent, powerless, and at a disadvantage (Cross, 1981; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Kasworm et al., 2002; McClusky, 1963; Merriam, et al., 2006). Situational barriers were real life situations experienced by the learner, which would limit participation in adult education. The most common types are lack of money, lack of transportation, lack of child care, lack of time, household responsibilities, job responsibilities, no study location, and family opposition (Cross, 1981; Kasworm, et al., 2002).

Several subjects were having financial difficulties. They did not have the job skills, credentials or education to obtain a well paying job, and won't until they have more education and experience. Instead of quitting school, and trying to find employment, they had elected to remain in school, finish the degree program that they were enrolled in, and then attempt to find employment in their field of expertise, with the expectation that they will be earning more money (Price, 2003). Tuition costs continue to rise. Economic conditions appeared to fluctuate with waves of unemployment, inflation, decreased housing values, and increased energy costs. In this economic environment, it was not unexpected that some students had to reflect about returning to school, when there might be less financial aid, grants, or scholarships to defray college costs, and the student still had to meet her financial responsibilities.

African Americans disproportionately fill lower socio-economic levels in society. Twenty-four and one-half per cent of African Americans live in poverty (U.S. Census, 2008). The per cent of African American households which earned under \$50,000 per year was 66.9% . The median income in an African American household of four was \$30,000 or 1/3 less than a similar White family (U.S. Census, 2008). African American children that lived in a household headed by a single mother was 48% (Fields, 2003). The working poor and poor had more difficulty in their pursuit of an education; they lacked money, were more likely to lack affordable childcare, had less access to transportation, and frequently had no college preparatory courses. A larger percentage of African Americans are in the lower socioeconomic classes, and there are more African American single mother households (Fields, 2003; Rothenberg, 1998).

Another situational barrier that several subjects mentioned was transportation difficulties. Mass transit was inadequate to the students' needs and didn't coordinate well with class schedules. Personal transportation was expensive and unreliable.

Half of the subjects at the community college cited affordable child care as a barrier to education. Some relied on family members to pick children up from school, and family members supervised children until the student returned from classes. Some used a combination of paid child care and free family child care so they could attend classes. Several mentioned the vacation scheduling problems that they faced, as the primary-secondary schools have different spring breaks than the college. It was notable that two of the scheduled community college interviews were cancelled because of child care issues. The two women had signed up, were enthusiastic about participating, and were unable to attend because their child care provider was unavailable.

All of the subjects who had children at home mentioned that they missed classes when their child was ill, unable to go to the daycare provider, or was out of school.

## **Institutional Barriers**

Institutional barriers were barriers to learners that were related to typical administrative, organizational and educational practices. Such items as the quality and complexity of admissions, registration for classes, and financial aid procedures; the timing, scheduling and sequencing of learning opportunities; attitudes and behavior of administrative staff and instructors toward adult learners; the availability of administrative services at times suitable to the adult learner, and difficult bureaucratic requirements. Other traits that could be included under institutional barriers were institutions' attitudes toward adult learner's age, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, national origin, veteran status, and disability status (Cross, 1981; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Kasworm, et al., 2002).

The urban community college subjects mentioned several of the institutional barriers in the course of the interviews; several stated that they found the admissions, registration and financial aid procedures time consuming, cumbersome and frustrating. The problem was so prevalent that they made a point of warning incoming students they mentored. The incoming students faced complex procedures, and lengthy delays in enrolling and obtaining financial aid and were so advised, so they don't quit in frustration before they've even started. Other community college subjects reported that they have faced hostility from instructors who did not believe that they could succeed based on their age and ethnicity. A single community college subject noted that the available student services hours were not convenient for adult learners who work full time, and attended school in the evening hours. After researching the hours that the center operated, the number of days of the week, and the number of subjects that were addressed at the center, it seemed on the surface, that the complaint was groundless. The center was open four days a week, and the core assistance was math, reading and writing. The hours were 8 a.m.

to 7:30 p.m. On reflection, it was very likely that a student who worked full-time, and attended classes in the evenings would find the tutoring service hours incompatible with her schedule, which would form a barrier. The research university students commented that they did not have supportive academic organizations comprised of African Americans, they lacked much involvement and support from the Black community, and that there were not places where African American students fit in outside of their classes.

### **Dispositional Barriers**

Whether the student was traditional aged, and studying at the research university, or an adult student, studying at the urban community college, there were elements that caused the subjects to doubt whether they were going to succeed in their studies. The adult learners at the urban community college dealt with being unprepared academically; their study skills were rusty, they had been out of school for many years, they were much older with more responsibilities, were unsure of their major and career direction and doubted if they were going to succeed at their studies (Corrigan, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Kasworm, et al.; McClusky, 1963; Merriam, 2006). The traditional- aged students at the research university had issues ranging from feeling overwhelmed and unable to manage their time and prioritize tasks, feeling that they were unprepared academically, feeling frustrated with the education process, to dealing with education burnout. Finding what constituted barriers and challenges for learners was contextual; what might have been feasible and convenient for one learner, might prove to have been challenging or impossible for another learner (Kasworm, et al.; Margery, et al., 2009; McClusky, 1963). Claude Steele (1997) described stereotype barriers a woman or African American individual's actions might stereotype them in their academic endeavors, and that these threats seriously threaten the performance of the student on tests and in coursework, undermining

the student's sense of self-efficacy. An example of this; a woman was told that a math test was very difficult and women didn't perform as well on the test as men (gender differences), she would underperform men, even if she was a student who generally did well at math, and math was an integral part of her identity. When the same woman was given a second test that was just as difficult as the first, but was told that there were no gender differences on the second test, the woman would perform equally well as men on the exam (Steele, 1997). Stereotype barriers were so strong, that they affected student performance in college, and have caused students to change career plans. Other factors can also change the direction of a student's career.

### **Career Goal Uncertainty**

A barrier that could be of some concern to both the urban community college and the research university was that the majority of the subjects did not appear to have had adequate advice concerning their academic major and career options. Half of the subjects from both the urban community college and the research university changed their course of study. The reasons given included that subjects didn't know what to expect, and when faced with the courses, internships, or actually working in a field they found it wasn't what they expected, and they sought an alternative career field. This was not an area that was addressed in the interview protocol, and additional literature was reviewed to attempt to understand this area. In general, college advisors attempt to work with students so that the student had insight on how her skills, interests, talents, and abilities related to an academic major. Then resources from many sources are recommended, and the student could research career fields related to the academic major. Unfortunately, in many academic institutions, advisors were overwhelmed with a large number of advisees, guidelines for effective advising, supervisor and student assessments were not always well-designed or were under-utilized. Career Centers were responsible for assessing

students with surveys, or inventories which might give strong indicators for possible career field matching a student's interests and abilities. Students might have been unaware of the services that career centers can provide, or were unable to see the utility in using those services. Some colleges and universities emphasized their advising programs by using professional advisors initially, and handing the students off to a faculty member when an academic major was selected. Academic advisors and career counselors both offer complementary services that frequently have not been coordinated to best serve the students.

Most post-secondary institutions don't have advisors of the same race or ethnicity as the students they advised. Cross cultural advising could be challenging. For example, many African American students have made decisions concerning their schedules, and academic majors in conjunction with their families, so the wishes of the family must be considered, as well as the wishes of the student. If the academic advisor was to successfully advise multicultural students, then the advisor should holistically advise the student, understand the student's family background, refer the learner to a mentoring program or a mentor, and develop multicultural competencies (Gordon, Habley, Grites, & Associates, 2008). After reading the literature, the interview results were less of a revelation, but should still be viewed with concern. Changing a course of study, especially for marginalized students frequently results in attrition, so this was an area that merited further research (Gordon, et al., 2008; Nutt, 2003; Orndorff & Herr, 1996).

### **Research Question Three**

Research Question Three: What effect do responsibilities and support systems have on the adult Midwestern African American women's post-secondary educational experiences?

## **Responsibilities**

Every subject had responsibilities; the majority of the subjects from the urban community college were older, had children, were employed, were active in student, religious and civic organizations and were students. The urban community college women tended to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds, whose parents were less well educated, and the majority of subjects were first generation college students. Each responsibility that a student had took energy, resources, and time. First generation college students had more difficulties, as they lack firsthand experience of the college experience, they did not have older relatives who had attended college who could advise them, and they had to figure out the college system from choosing an area of study, to enrollment, financial aid, time management, tutors or academic study resources, to learning strategies on their own. Many subjects at the urban community college said that they had many responsibilities, and they didn't feel that they were doing justice to any of them. The women were struggling in many ways; they had to work, they had less time to spend with their families, they had to make financial sacrifices to attend school, and they had less time for socializing and leisure activities. Sometimes the subjects put their schooling first; other times, they put their jobs, or their families first. One of the subjects, talking after the interview was formally over, gave an excellent example. Erica: "When you have a sick child, and a test in algebra the next day, you take care of your sick child. The test will have to take care of itself."

In contrast, the subjects from the research university were traditional-aged, generally employed part-time, active in college clubs, associations, or student government, and were full-time students. A different set of responsibilities appeared in the research university subjects because they were younger, with less life experience, single, no dependents, they tended to come



from a better educated and higher socio-economic background, and they were generally not first generation college students.

All ten subjects viewed learning for the achievement of their life goals and career goals of paramount importance, and recognized that the only way to achieve their goals was to stay in college. The reasons for attending college varied from serving as a role model for their children, siblings and other family members, to improving their opportunities for remunerative employment, to engaging in a career field that they viewed with passion (Bui, 2002; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; McAdoo, 2001; Merriam, et al., 2006). All subjects had to manage their time, resources and energy in order to accomplish all of the roles that they were juggling (Cross, 1981; Kasworm, et al.; McClusky, 1963; Merriam, et al., 2006). While time management skills can be helpful in managing assignments, study and other academic requirements, time management was really not the issue. Elizabeth Hayes comments:

Women, more so than men, are expected to be constantly available to meet their families' physical and emotional needs. Higher education demands a similar devotion of mental and physical energy, along with the ability to separate oneself from the concerns of daily living for concentrated periods of intellectual activity. To meet the demands of both institutions simultaneously would seem to be impossible, and yet that is the position that many adult women find themselves in (Hayes, Flannery, Brooks, Tisdell & Hugo, 2002, p. 47).

Student responsibilities; traveling to school, studying, reading, writing, working with study groups, researching online or in the library, attending classes were activities that a college student was required to do to succeed. Many students felt that they had not performed as well as they could, or had to fit their school roles in between responsibilities to employers, family,

community and other responsibilities. Some responsibilities, such as student role responsibilities, gave rise to the impostor syndrome, where students feel inadequate in their role as students (Brookfield, 1990).

Community responsibilities of adult students were usually not supported by the college, and frequently were the first area to be reduced or eliminated (Kasworm, et al., 2002). This area could combine an academic course with a service connection in the community for service learning. The outcome would enhance the value of the academic course by placing it in an authentic setting (Gordon, et al., 2008; Wlodkowski, 2008). Community responsibilities encompassed such activities as volunteer work for a charity, political campaign volunteer, animal shelter volunteer, and singing in the church choir. Many times community responsibilities were activities that the students felt were important, fulfilling and reflected their beliefs. This area could be viewed as both load, due to the responsibilities, and power, due to fulfillment and positive self-concept.

The subjects accepted their responsibilities and almost all the students interviewed stated that without the support systems that they relied upon, and in the case of the urban community college students, the determination to set a good example for their children, they would not have been able to remain in college. The response of the subjects was reflected in the literature of McClusky, and his theory of margin.

### **McClusky's Theory of Margin**

McClusky's theory of margin theorized that as adults aged, they had increased demands placed on them. McClusky states:

Margin is a function of the relationship of load to power. By load we mean the self and social demands required by a person to maintain a minimal level of autonomy. By power

we mean the resources, i.e., abilities, possessions, position, allies, etc., which a person can command in coping with load (McClusky, 1970, p. 27).

As adults undertook more roles, had increased responsibilities at work, required more of themselves, acquired intimate relationships, became more active in civic, religious and professional organizations, they acquired load. The responsibilities and roles that were imposed internally or externally were called load. The external load included career demands, parenting responsibilities, economic status, and civic and religious responsibilities. The internal load was comprised of self-concept, personal expectations, and goals. To balance their load, adults needed resources; health, stamina, physical fitness, intelligence; economic, money, position and influence; abilities; social skills, job skills; position: at work, church, organizations; allies; supportive co-workers, family members, and friends, which was called power. When load was divided by power, it equaled margin. If there was more power than load, then a safety zone had been created that coped with unexpected demands on the adult. Margin was increased by increasing power (resources) or decreasing load (responsibilities). McClusky's theory of margin tied barriers and responsibilities together, as part of an adult's load (McClusky, 1963).

An area that was a responsibility and added to their load and also fulfilled and was part of their power was the urban community college subjects determination to serve as role models for their children.

### **Role Models for Children**

The five subjects from the urban community college took the responsibility of being a role model for their children very seriously. In their interviews, they indicated that they needed to set a positive example for their children, to show them that education was a necessary part of being successful, and this was a strong motivating factor. Nearly all of the subjects wanted their

children to pursue a higher level of education than was the norm in their family, so they, too, could have a better life. Another reason that the subjects gave was that education enhanced their ability to provide for their children financially. Another student stated that she had been helped, and it was her turn to help those coming behind, starting with her children. Subjects with adult children stated that they were able to help their adult children with personal problems, and it helped them to give their children a new direction to acquire job skills (Hubbard, 1999; Williams, 2002). Students were motivated to set a strong example for their children, but stated that without their support systems they would have dropped out of college.

### **Support Systems**

Support systems were described and fell into the following categories; family support, peer support, instructor support, and organizational support (Brookfield, 1990; Pratt, 1998; Wlodkowski, 2008).

### **Family Support Systems**

The area of support that all subjects overwhelmingly spoke of as the most important was family support. When they spoke of family support, it wasn't just the nuclear family of the mother and her children, or the woman and her siblings, and parents. It was the extended family; nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and cousins. This tended to be more universal at the urban community college, but even at the research university, the support of extended family was acknowledged and used.

When family support was discussed, it encompassed the emotional component; the family approved of further education, took pride in the student's accomplishments, hoped for a better future, recognized their efforts, and gave encouragement for them to successfully complete their studies and graduate. When the family provided guidance, it was another form of emotional

support. At the urban community college, Amelia was intimidated by returning to school after a twenty year absence. Her sisters decided to enroll in classes in order to support her. At the research university, Angela reached out to her mother, a college graduate and teacher for advice. While Angela had decided on her major, she had electives to take, and after some discussion, they determined a course of study in which she would enroll.

At the research university, if the subjects were at a loss on how to cope with a problem at school, or faced difficulties in determining their schedule of study, how to obtain financial aid, or some other difficulty, they could ask their parents who would be able to give them guidance, as they had previously been through the process themselves. Even if their parents weren't familiar with the current way to deal with some situation, they could tell their child where to look for assistance on campus in order to solve their problem. This provided both emotional and practical support, and emphasized the differences between the learners at the two different institutions.

Families offered practical support; they assisted with childcare, picked children up from school, shared transportation, gave advice on courses to take, provided financial assistance, discussed student goals and setbacks, and made suggestions to improve study habits. One example at the urban community college stood out; Erica said that family members sometimes picked up her children, and helped out with food preparation on the nights she attended classes.

The family support systems that the subjects had gave them power, allowed the subjects to maintain autonomy with external resources (McClusky, 1963). The importance of family support was consistent with the literature which described the cohesion, support and attachment of African American college students to their parents, their extended families and their communities (Love, 2008; Taylor, Jackson & Chatters, 1997).

## **Other Support Systems**

While many of the subjects mentioned that they had peer support, support from their instructors, support of different institutions, and support from their church or relationship with God, they generally did not go into much detail about these support systems. In a few cases, they emphasized how important the support of their instructors were, but this was an area that had varied reactions. (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Tisdell, 2003).

## **Summary**

The subjects interviewed had many commonalities that they shared with all adult learners. They brought their life experience and mature outlook with them to the classroom. Adult learners tended to be more strongly motivated, better organized at managing their time and resources and less tolerant of classes or requirements that they viewed as unimportant or a waste of their time.

The subjects had one major difference from the white adult students. Both African American adult women returning to school, and traditional-aged students commonly experienced racism, which set them apart from white women adult learners (Better, 2008; Delgado & Stafancic, 2001; Dixon & Rousseau, 2006, Merriam, et al., 2006).

At the same time, it also became obvious that all African American women did not speak with a unitary voice. They were impacted by their age, social class, location, education, education level of their parents, their marital status, if they had children, their economic status, and what sort of cultural capital they held (Better, 2008; Bing & Reid, 1996; Cervero & Wilson, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Merriam, et al., 2006; Tisdell, 2001).

Generally, the women interviewed at the urban community college were older, from lower economic and social levels, normally had parents with less education, and their goal was to

move into more meaningful and better paying employment. The women were struggling with multiple responsibilities of employment, parenting, and learner. They had less time to spend with their families, socializing or in leisure activities. That was seen as a temporary condition that would change when they graduated.

The women interviewed at the research university were traditional aged students, usually from higher economic and social class, with the associated increased material resources, so that they were not compelled to work in order to survive. In general, they came from families that were better educated. The research university students did not have the responsibility of parenting; a role that demanded time, money and resources. The financial resources that the urban community college women shared with their children, in contrast, could be used directly by the research university learners, and the research university learners had more time to spend studying, working, being involved in school activities, or socializing.

### **Additional Themes**

There were several unanticipated themes that emerged during analysis of the interviews.

1) The first theme appeared to indicate that the learners at both the urban community college and the research university did not have adequate advice, information and knowledge to select a career field and academic major (Gary, Kling & Dodd, 2004; Nutt, 2003; Orndorff & Herr, 1996).

2) Several students at the research university and most of the students at the urban community college stated that they had received inadequate preparation at their secondary schools in order to succeed at college. At least four of the women interviewed said that they had to take remedial coursework. The literature showed that remedial work was more common for learners who were first generation college students, multicultural students, from lower

socioeconomic groups, and women (Zachry & Schneider, 2008). Women tended to be enrolled in remedial math coursework. First generation students and multicultural students were usually enrolled in remedial English reading and writing courses, as well as remedial math courses (Gordon, et al., 2008). This was a growing trend, and many terms were associated with it; developmental courses, basic courses, remedial courses, academic transition programs, bridging courses; virtually all community college students (60% ) and the majority of four year university students (19% ) have taken some remedial version of reading, writing, and mathematics courses (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008; Zachry & Schneider, 2008).

Instructors that set high standards, and helped their learners reach them through established priorities, who showed techniques on how to study, how to organize both learners' academic issues and their adult roles and responsibilities were viewed with respect and admiration. Nurturing teaching, although not labeled as such, made a very large impact on several students at both the urban community college and the research university who encountered it (Merriam, et al, 2006; Pratt, 1998; Tisdell, 1998). Several students who had strong mentoring and support from their instructors stated that it lessened their anxiety, and convinced them that they could learn, so they persisted in their college coursework.

These two themes addressed academic advising and college preparation for adult African American women. The issue of advising should generate some concern, and possible changes so that African American women were better served, and did not waste time, resources, and money on coursework that would not move them closer to their goals.

### **Implications of Research**

1) Student services and faculty at both the urban community college and the research university needed to understand that the adult African American learners faced many of the same



issues as demographically similar whites; some were first generation college students, some were single parents, some came from lower socio-economic levels. However, based on demographics, more African Americans tended to fall into these categories than whites (U.S. Census, 2006-2008). As more African American students in lower economic levels and first generation college students enroll in college, better support must be in place for these populations. Faculty support of students assisted adult learners to achieve self-efficacy, lessened anxiety, and improved confidence levels. Faculty members had a very positive effect on their learners when they provided support, feedback, advice and mentoring (Wisker, Exley, Antoniou, & Ridley, 2008). Student services and faculty could be improved through enhanced advising programs, expanded mentoring programs, and appropriate faculty development (Gordon, et al., 2008; Pratt, 1998; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

2) Both urban community college subjects and research university student subjects encountered racism. Racism impacted the students as it discouraged the learners, added to their sense of isolation, impacted their self-confidence and motivation. While some racism was deliberate, other acts appeared to be due to ignorance. The literature described unintentional racism, which usually stemmed from insensitive, unknowing behavior, or ignorance of multicultural issues (Johnson, 2006; Tisdell, 2001). Community colleges tended to use more adjunct faculty members than research universities. Some adjuncts had an education background; they were taught to teach. Many adjunct faculty members were experts in business, computer technology, medicine, mechanical engineering, construction science and many other areas, were employed full time outside of the college setting. While some instructors were described as being excellent teachers, others could benefit from a program developing the instructor and the tools

that he or she used to be a more effective teacher in the classroom (Moore, 2009; Wallin, 2004). Better education of faculty members, especially around the issue of tokenism would be helpful.

3) When an African American was the only member of their race in a classroom, the tendency was to expect them to speak for all African Americans. African Americans do not speak with one voice; they have different backgrounds, interests, life experiences, academic and social skills, and cultural capital. Peers expected expertise without knowing or understanding the learner's background. Such expectations, if unchecked by the instructor, pressured the African American learner and decreased the rigor and critical reflection required of the rest of the class. The instructor was responsible for ensuring that the class understood there were multiple African American perspectives. Faculty members needed to be sensitive to terms, issues and curriculum design that disparaged, maligned or minimized African Americans and other minorities (Better, 2008; Cervero & Wilson, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Merriam, et al., 2006; Tisdell, 2001).

4) Many of the research university subjects spoke of wanting academic organizations, communities, or connections where they could be included and not feel different, separate, and isolated. If organizations and activities exist, then ways could be devised to improve the methods used to inform students of their existence. If such organizations and activities aren't active, then they could be encouraged to reach out to newly enrolled students. The subjects also spoke of a desire for connection to other minority men and women, to hear their experiences, learn their point of view, which is very similar to the nurturing and connectedness described by Gilligan (Gilligan, 1982).

5) The urban community college students would benefit if there were some programs or activities which included their children. It would help take the mystery out of college, and make

it part of their lives. This could help the children and the college in the future, when the children reach college age, and could be looking for an accessible post-secondary institution.

6) Community colleges have tended to be more supportive of students, more accessible, had fewer students per class, had more personalized attention and used a student-centered policy with the intent of providing intellectual, social and personal development (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Community colleges provided the basic coursework that most students needed during the first two years of college, and offered developmental courses for less prepared learners. In addition, community colleges tended to be less expensive per credit hour, which was a benefit for low income and non-traditional students. The average cost per credit hour in Kansas community colleges was \$62.00, with a range of \$25-\$170. In contrast, private universities average \$482.00 per credit hour, with a range of \$200-681. State-run universities average \$199.58 per credit hour, with a range of \$131.40-262.50 (Colleges, Community Colleges & Universities in Kansas, 2010). There are many accessible community colleges in Kansas, which was important in providing services for adult students.

7) The subjects at the urban community college were tied to their location. They did not have the financial means to pack up and leave. Their support systems, which were vital to their success, were located in the same neighborhood. In order for an academic program to be available to the community college learners, it should be offered at the campus where they are located. Some were not able to pursue their area of interest, as the programs were only offered at distant locations, and the learners did not have a means of transportation to travel to the distant campuses.

## **Recommendations**

1) When speaking with the subjects, it appeared many were undecided on their careers and academic majors. Students who had not been exposed to multiple academic majors and career fields, and were unsure what career to pursue could benefit from career days held early in their academic enrollment. The students could see material which described the career field, and discuss the field with people who worked in a particular career field. They could learn the career requirements, positive traits of the field, and any drawbacks which concerned the work, so they were better informed when they made a career choice. Students could be encouraged to conduct informational interviews or job shadow in several career fields so the student is informed and familiar with the requirements of the occupation. This issue could be addressed from another direction by conducting faculty and advisor training on advising multicultural students. Student services advisors and faculty could be trained in multicultural advising, and mentoring programs. Formal peer counseling programs could be established or expanded to help reduce the problem. Testing, such as COMPASS (Computer Adaptive Placement Assessment and Support System) testing will help place community college students in the appropriate math, writing and reading classes.

2) Many community colleges and universities have not been actively linked with high schools in order to ensure that high school students are academically prepared, knowledgeable about college programs, and understand what to expect when they arrive at college. Many post-secondary institutions have instituted coherent, well-organized, well administered programs, to ensure that teaching and advising are student-centered. The results, to date, have been increased student graduation rates (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010). Community colleges need to work with the students and the university, in order to ensure that community college coursework that

students had taken would transfer to the university (Kirst & Venezia, 2001). University students need to be introduced to all the available assets; tutoring, peer mentoring, remedial classes, study labs, and so forth, and reminded periodically of the resources available, especially if they find that they are having difficulties in their courses.

3) Mandatory faculty development at the urban community college was needed, so faculty were aware of the implications and importance of adult students past experience, learning styles and strategies, inclusive teaching which set the classroom climate, and racism. Both the urban community college and the research university needed to be aware of what signals they sent students, especially minority, non-traditional, disabled, or any learner outside the mainstream. It was thoughtless comments and negative attitudes directed at some of these learners which caused them to doubt their place in college, or their ability to succeed in college courses. Students learned in spite of instructors, but they learned more and were less stressed if instructors added positive teaching methods, demonstrated they respected their learners, and made the classroom a safe place to express their perceptions, viewpoints, ideas and reactions. It would be difficult to mandate faculty development at the research university, as faculty face many of the same barriers as their learners; lack of time, teaching at multiple campuses, competing priorities of reading, teaching, grading, and professional development. Strong encouragement to participate in faculty development workshops and presentations especially in the area of inclusive teaching and setting a positive classroom climate should be available in multiple media formats; online, digital video disks, wikis, and interactive workshops that reach multiple locations. Adding inclusive teaching and classroom climate to faculty evaluations done by both students and faculty supervisors could provide incentive for improvement.

In addition to addressing racism, classroom climate and inclusive teaching, instructors need to realize that adult learners bring their experience into the classroom with them. Faculty members need to better understand the importance of their adult learners past experience, and use a variety of teaching methods to better address all student learning styles and strategies.

4) Tokenism, especially at the research university was described in the interviews as a problem. Expecting one African American student to speak for all African Americans, with one voice and perspective is astonishing, especially at an institution of higher learning which publicly endorsed the policy of valuing human diversity and rejecting all prejudice and discrimination. This issue affects students and faculty, and could be addressed by faculty development training to understand the multiple African American perspectives and to make their students aware; possibly through student orientation, periodic emails, statements on syllabi, and links on the college website.

5) Mentoring was described by many of the urban community college students and a few of the research university students as being of great value to them. Three learners were formally mentored; two at the urban community college and one at the research university. Other learners were informally mentored by an instructor or a peer. Research online revealed fifteen mentoring programs at the research university, and seven mentoring programs at the urban community college. While it was easy to find the programs at the urban community college, the hours are set to assist more traditionally aged students. The programs at the research university were much harder to discover, were more specialized, and usually gave a telephone number to call, without revealing a great deal about the program. This could have intimidated students who were not self-confident or experiencing academic difficulties. Inclusion in student orientation, which occurred at both post-secondary institutions, or the open house that each hosted each year could

have assisted the students in locating useful resources. Many students used the websites of their particular school. Including links to mentoring organizations could have provided access to resources which the students were currently unaware. In addition to mentoring, academic organizations which provided inclusion, support and connection for African American students could be instituted, expanded or information could be promulgated, so the students who would most benefit from the services would be aware of the services existence.

6) When an adult returned to college, the spouse or significant other, children, parents, and other family members frequently felt slighted, less significant, excluded, and resentful. If post-secondary institutions had family campus orientation, family movie nights, family activities, involvement with college or university sports teams, family open houses, bring your family to class days, or other means of including the family in a positive way, perhaps there would be less resistance to a family member returning to school. Familiarizing the family, especially the children of students with the campus was important. The student's children became less intimidated by college, saw the place where their parent pursued learning, and could visualize their own attendance at college.

7) Policy makers, administrators, and student services needed to be aware of the types of barriers that the learners faced at the urban community college, and the research university. Some situational barriers, such as the financial problems that the learners faced, being tied to their location, the lack of transportation, availability and cost of childcare, and lack of time due to multiple roles and responsibilities were outside the scope of the colleges to remedy. When students encountered institutional barriers, such as the inability to access resources, programs of study only offered at one location, and complicated enrollment procedures, unclear application for student aid, and other procedures which frustrated the students, the post-secondary

institutions could have considered changes in how information was promulgated, considered more than one location for popular programs of study, and reflected on possible changes to procedures so students comprehended the requirements for required actions, such as enrollment, application for financial aid, required documents, required testing, and other procedural matters.

Both the urban community college and the research university should be aware about informational barriers; where the information was not accessible to learners, the information was not reaching the learner or potential learner, or the learner did not know where to look to find the information. For example, if a learner wished to know something about a community college, but did not own a computer, then she would either have to go to where she had computer access, such as a public library, or find another method to find the information. What if the learner doesn't know how to use a computer? That was still a possibility for older people who lived in poverty. Reaching out to people through the community might be of real benefit to the urban community college. The research university reached out to a different population and was able to reach potential students through the website, high school counselors, and alumni. Dispositional barriers such as student uncertainty if they can succeed in college, having been told that people of their race, sex, age, or with their disability couldn't succeed in college and students who lacked confidence in their scholastic preparation were examples of dispositional barriers. Such barriers could be diminished by encouraging the student, providing a mentor, and placing supportive programs in place.

### **Reflections**

After the interviews were analyzed, using the NVivo 8 computer program, the transcripts and field notes were re-read, and re-analyzed. Further elaborations of themes and some themes that had initially been overlooked due to informational overload were discovered. Computer



programs analyzed large amounts of data; but the program was only as good as the operator using it. In total, the transcripts and field notes were read, reviewed and analyzed multiple times before the researcher felt that no further themes would be found.

This area of research proved to be interesting, challenging, and informative. There were many positives in working with a cohort peer; there were two sets of ears and two perspectives to hear, reflect upon and analyze the material gathered in the interviews. There was someone with whom to discuss ideas, reactions, reservations, and results. While understanding the importance of minimizing cross cultural bias, several potential difficulties arose when the researcher was not doing the interviews directly.

1) The first difficulty was discovered during the pilot study. The interviewer asked the questions on the interview schedule, and some of the questions were slightly re-worded for the actual interviews. Probes were discussed by the interviewer and the researcher. However, until the actual interview is underway, it was difficult to know how the subject was going to react, or what lines of questioning needed to be pursued. There were few ways to try to guide the interview once it started, for if the researcher/recorder were to ask a question, it could negatively influence the outcome of the interview. In some cases, some information that might have been developed was not pursued, as it wasn't on the schedule, or included in the probes. This would have been less of a concern had the researcher/recorder been working alone.

2) There were limited numbers of transcriptionists in the area, as it was a specialized skill. While every effort was made to ensure that the interviewer belonged to the same race, culture, ethnicity, religion, and gender, to minimize cross-cultural bias, there was no such requirement for the transcriptionist. Yet, the rhythms, accents, colloquialisms, sentence structure, and word choices could vary greatly, and using a transcriptionist with a identity similar to the

subjects might ensure a more accurate record of the recorded interview. Field notes of the interviews, taken by the researcher/recorder proved to be invaluable, and they were a significant factor in clarifying the interview results.

3) The subjects at the urban community college were non-traditional students, and provided rich, descriptive narratives in response to the interview schedule. The subjects at the research university were traditional aged learners, and provided a very different viewpoint in response to the interview schedule. Both gave valuable answers to the questions. After careful reflection, if the research were to be designed now, limiting the research to one type of post-secondary institution, but broadening the numbers of subjects, holding more than one interview with the subjects, and conducting the research with the same subjects in different semesters would be considered. The benefits anticipated would be a more in-depth look at learners at a specific type of post-secondary institution, and richer data. Alternatively, research could be conducted at several community colleges; such as an urban community college, a suburban community college and a rural community college, to find if the same types of responses to experience of education, barriers, challenges and support systems were similar at community colleges in different settings. A similar change could be made in inquiries set at research universities. The research could include rural, suburban, and urban research universities settings in the Midwest. It would be interesting to see if the interview protocol garnered similar responses in different settings.

Finally, one of the changes that would be made would be to change the order of a few of the questions. The racism question was number six of eleven questions. Since the question could be considered one of the more sensitive questions in the interview protocol, it might have been answered differently if it was placed in position nine or ten. There would have been more time

to establish trust and rapport prior to the question being asked. When the subjects were asked question eleven; if they had anything to add that had not been covered in the previous questions on how the subjects view learning, what their attitudes were to learning, and what barriers and challenges they had experienced, and support systems they had used; most spoke of issues that were of importance to them. Some amplified answers that they had already given, some brought out issues that had not been discussed, but it was clear that the subjects were much more receptive, trustful, and outspoken at this point in the interview. Once the interview was officially over, the tape recorder was turned off, when the subjects talked to the interviewer and the researcher/recorder, some added important insights, comments and concerns that were recorded in the field notes of the researcher/recorder.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Recommended areas of research :

- 1) The first area of research would be multicultural academic advising and career advising, and how each type of advising affects the other at community colleges and universities, and the consequences when career advising or academic advising or both are not rigorous.
- 2) Faculty development on inclusive teaching and setting classroom climate at both the community college setting and the university setting, what benefits inclusive teaching and a positive classroom climate have on learning, and how to develop inclusive teaching in adjuncts.
- 3) Faculty practices at the community college and faculty awareness of learning styles, and how such practices affect the learning environment and performance of the students, and how the use of adjuncts impacts faculty awareness and practices.
- 4) Faculty attitudes toward racism, tokenism, and institutional racism at community colleges and universities and consequences on learners.

5) Non-traditional minority students had issues of isolation, a sense of being overwhelmed by their responsibilities and a lack of confidence in their ability to return to the classroom after a long absence and perform adequately. Orientation to campus academics and activities was often aimed at traditionally aged students who did not have the plethora of roles that adult learners incorporated into their lives. Research that would best suit adult learners on types of student orientation; academic support systems; or introductory courses for returning students would be another area that could be investigated.

6) The community college group and the research university group of subjects looked very different. It would be interesting to conduct research to find out why there were differences: if the differences were because of the institutional type, because of the learners who elected to attend the different types of institutions, the age of the learners, the socioeconomic class of the learners, first generation college student status, or other reasons.

### **In Closing**

Some of the anticipated educational experiences, barriers, challenges and support systems materialized during the course of the research, and were in accordance with adult education literature on motivation, critical race theory, learning theory, responsibilities, barriers, and challenges. Some of the responses of subjects were unexpected, gave new insight to the learning experiences of adult Midwest African American women, and expanded the literature on one of the least studied, but fastest growing sectors of learners at community colleges and universities. More research needs to be done to better understand and support this growing student population (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

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## Appendix A

23 February 2009

### Letter of Inquiry to Urban Community College

Dr. Bernard Franklin  
President, Penn Valley  
Metropolitan Community College  
3201 S.W. Trafficway  
Kansas City, MO 64111

Ms. Laura C. Peck  
2402 Marion Avenue  
Manhattan, KS 66502-1847

Dear Dr. Franklin:

Ms. Cheryl Grice and I are Ph.D. candidates at Kansas State University. We are seeking minority women learners in their second semester of their first year or any term of their second year willing to volunteer for our dissertation research. We are attempting to balance our research by interviewing five learners from a predominantly rural community college, five learners from an urban community college and five learners from a research university. We are especially interested in African American women who are non-traditional learners, with life experiences behind them. We are hoping that you would allow us to interview five volunteer learners from an urban perspective. Our major professor, Dr. Jane Fishback and our primary advisor, Dr. BeEtta Stoney recommended that we communicate with you with our request.

I would be willing to come to Penn Valley College to speak to any student or group of students who may be interested in volunteering. The research would involve an interview of one and one half to two hours, soliciting information on attitudes to learning, support systems, barriers, challenges and techniques for overcoming difficulties to reach educational goals.

I am hard of hearing, so the best way to communicate with me is through email; [lckansas@hotmail.com](mailto:lckansas@hotmail.com), or letter. I appreciate your time and look forward to visiting with you in the near future.

Sincerely,

Laura Peck

Encl: Copy of Interview Schedule and Demographic Questionnaire

Appendix B

Demographics Survey

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Coded # \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_ Place of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

Race/Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Religion: \_\_\_\_\_

Did you have a job while you were attending high school? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No If yes, how many hours/week did you work? \_\_\_\_ Did or do you work while attending college? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No If yes, how many hours/week? \_\_\_\_\_

What kind of work did you do while attending high school?

What kind of work did/do you do while attending college?

Attended School: (City, State, School Name)

Highest Grade Completed: \_\_\_\_\_

Did you encounter problems that prevented you from getting an education? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No If you did, could you describe what those problems were?

Highest Grade Mother Completed/Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Highest Grade Father Completed/Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Your Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Were you able to obtain the education you wanted in order to pursue your chosen occupation? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No If not, why not? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_Married \_\_\_Divorced \_\_\_Widowed \_\_\_Separated \_\_\_Single

Number of Children \_\_\_\_\_ Please give their ages. \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix C

### Dissertation Instrument: Learning Experiences of African American Women

1. Tell me a little about your experience here as a learner. What are the positive aspects? What are the negative aspects?
2. How do you learn?
3. If you don't understand what your instructor is talking about, how do you react? Do you feel comfortable asking questions? Why or why not?
4. Do you have a positive relationship with your instructors? Why or why not?
5. When you are in school, does the curriculum and ways to do things that you learn conflict with your culture, customs or beliefs?
6. Did you (or have you ever) experienced racism in college?
7. How important is learning in your life? Do you need education and learning in order to achieve your career goals or other life goals?
8. Do you have more education than your spouse/parents? If you do, did or does this affect your relationship with them? If yes, please explain.
9. Who supports your educational goals? Family? Friends? Other students? Instructors? What form does this support take?
10. Have you ever been tempted to quit college? If you have, how did you cope and what kept you in college?
11. Are there any questions that haven't been asked that you believe are important to understand how you view learning, what your attitudes are toward learning, and what barriers and challenges you've experienced and support systems you use?

Appendix D

Kansas State University Informed Consent

PROJECT TITLE: Adult Midwest African American women’s attitudes to learning, and what support systems, challenges and barriers they encounter at post-secondary schools.

APPROVAL DATE OF PROJECT: \_\_\_\_\_ EXPIRATION DATE OF PROJECT: \_\_\_\_\_

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Dr. Sarah Jane Fishback

CONTACT AND PHONE FOR ANY PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: 785-532-5554

IRB CHAIR CONTACT/PHONE INFORMATION: (785) 532-3224

SPONSOR OF PROJECT: N/A

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: To learn what adult Midwest African American women’s attitudes to learning are, and what support systems, challenges and barriers they encounter at post-secondary schools.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED: Semi-structured interviews of 11/2-2 hours

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO SUBJECT: N/A

LENGTH OF STUDY: 6 months

RISKS ANTICIPATED: None

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: The information provided in the interviews could help faculty and administrators better serve African American women learners.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: The participants will be given a code, and all material with the name of a participant will be held at the home safe of the researcher/recorder.

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS: N/A

PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS: N/A

TERMS OF PARTICIPATION: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled. I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form. (Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness to Signature: (project staff) \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

### Interview Observation Checklist

Interviewing Observation, Non-verbal Cue Interpretation  
 (Guba & Lincoln, 1981 Effective Evaluation: Improving the  
 Usefulness of Evaluation Results Through Responsive and  
 Naturalistic Approaches)

Body Movements		
Move Toward Interviewer	Arms open	Legs open
Move away from interviewer	Arms crossed	Legs crossed
Eye Contact	Avoided stared	Narrowed Normal
Hand gestures	Calm Nervous	Wring Twist
	Clasped Tented	Click nails
Touching	Touches Interviewer	Avoids Interviewer
Aerial Gestures	Small Large	Frequent Seldom
Head Inclination	Up Down	Toward Away
Facial Expression	Frown Smile	Deadpan Other
Eyebrows	Raised Lowered	Smooth Together
Teeth	Gritted Relaxed	Smiling Neutral
Physiological Signs	Sweating Clammy Finger tapping	Tics Jiggles Face Foot Leg
Timing	Kept interviewer waiting Cut short interview	Long pauses Inappropriate Smiles
Reaction Pacing	Interrupts Quick answers	Long pauses Stumbles over words of others
Speech Patterns	Tone Calm Low Errors Sarcastic	Agitated High Ironic Humor
Relaxed State	Tense Relaxed	Sleepy Alert
Other Notes:		

Appendix F

Rights of Human Subjects



University Research  
Compliance Office  
203 Fairchild Hall  
Lower Mezzanine  
Manhattan, KS 66506-1103  
785-532-3224  
Fax: 785-532-3278  
[www.k-state.edu/research/comply](http://www.k-state.edu/research/comply)

TO: Sarah Jane Fishback  
Educational Leadership  
Bluemont Hall

Protocol Number: 4987.0

FROM: Rick Scheidt, Chair   
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: March 29, 2010

RE: Approval of Your Proposal Entitled, "Learning Experiences of Adult African-American Women at Selected Midwest Post Secondary Institutions.."

Federal regulations stipulate that human subjects protocols can be approved by IRB's for only one year, and require "continuing review" and approval to continue past the expiration date.

On the basis of the IRB "continuing review," your project is classified as follows:

**Active.** The activity is pending or in progress, and there have been no changes that have occurred or are contemplated that would affect the status of human subjects.

**EXPIRATION DATE: 4/24/2011**

If the activity persists, it will be eligible for continuing review several months prior to the new expiration date.