

In their own voices: A study of former African American male athletes' perceptions of their  
academic experiences at Michigan community colleges

by

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B.S., Lincoln University, 2005

M.S., Wayne State University, 2010

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of African American male former community college student-athletes who succeeded on their educational pathway. The study also sought to identify the supportive services African American male former student-athletes reported as contributing to their academic success. For the purpose of this study, educational pathway success meant the student earned either a certificate, an associate degree, or transferred to a four-year educational institution. Tinto's theory of retention served as the study's theoretical framework. A qualitative methodological approach was used involving a set of 11 interview questions with 16 African American male student-athletes, all of whom graduated from Michigan community colleges. Community colleges were chosen because the literature review showed high percentages of African American male student-athletes enrolled in community colleges are a vastly understudied population. Nine themes emerged from the analysis of the data. The data revealed the academic barriers participants endured while enrolled in community college, and the influence of family, teammates, coaches, faculty, and staff on their academic success. It is believed that, by understanding those factors that most influence an African American male student-athletes success in community college, both administrators and others who have a stake in this population's understand the persistence that leads to the participants' completion. Future research might include interviews with both student-athletes, coaches, and academic advisors. Further, a study that employs a mixed-methods approach may be conducted to provide more additional information pertaining to factors of success and perceptions of belonging within this important and unique population.

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Approved by:

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Christine Johnson McPhail, EdD

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## **Chapter 1 – INTRODUCTION**

Collegiate athletics have the potential to engage students in unique educational opportunities, providing life lessons students may not learn in a classroom or on a field or court. Participation in intercollegiate athletics should teach students the value of hard work, persistence, commitment, and responsibility while teaching students how to win and lose. Athletics teaches students fundamental lessons – that hard work pays off, that students may attain goals they never thought they could achieve (Edwards, 2018; Harper, 2006).

Today, the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA, 2019) serves as the primary governing body for community college sports nationwide, annually overseeing as many as 60,000 student-athletes from 525 member colleges across 28 different sports. NJCAA is second only to the largest governing body for college-level athletics, the National College Athletic Association (NCAA; NJCAA, 2019).

Each year, community colleges represent an ideal starting block for countless thousands of student-athletes (Harper, 2009). Community college gives student athletes another avenue to compete athletically – and to complete academically. The open enrollment mission of community colleges appeals to athletes whose academic abilities or scores on national entrance exams prevent them from enrolling in four-year institutions. In this way, athletic play at the community college level presents a chance to be recognized for transfer to a four-year institution via scholarship. Rules requiring minimum grade point averages (GPAs) for athletic participation ensure the community college student-athlete is as serious about academics as s/he is about athletics. For the community college student-athlete who receives a certificate or associate degree or who transfers to a four-year institution, the result is win-win.

As community colleges seek the best talent to win games, they often recruit a large population of student-athletes. However, student-athletes' academic abilities may fall short of the institution's overall expectations and cause student-athletes to be at high risk for academic failure. Many of the students who fall into these high-risk categories are young Black men who are academically underprepared (Jones & Watson, 1990). Either intercollegiate athletic programs provide college opportunities to young Black men and take them off the streets, or such programs take advantage of students without care for their success – they cannot both be right (Harper et al., 2013).

Harper (2009) contended that African American male student-athletes enrolled in community colleges are a vastly understudied population. Statistics indicate that the number of these athletes who earn an associate degree and transfer to a four-year higher educational institution is low. Furthermore, researchers assert that many Black male student-athletes in community colleges eventually drop out at rates higher than their Black male non-athlete counterparts (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

African American male athletes are recruited to community colleges to perform athletically; however, there is very little focus on these athletes becoming great students. Far too many underperform academically or drop out, resulting in low college completion rates. At the community-college-level, only 2 in 10 full-time students who pursue an associate degree receive one within 3 years (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems & Jobs for the Future, 2007).

### **Problem Statement**

African American male student-athletes are among the most visible at-risk college populations in the United States. According to Yearwood and Jones (2012), more than 50% of

African American students do not complete high school or college. The K-12 educational system has not prepared student-athletes for higher learning institutions, leaving many without the skills to compete academically in college (Dilley-Knoles et al., 2010). The numerous challenges African American male students encounter in high school are documented as placement or tracking into low classes, over-representation in special education courses, disproportionate disciplinary actions, and under-representation in advanced placement courses (Greene et al., 2008).

Bush and Bush (2010) described several barriers that explain why African-American males underachieve academically in college. Factors such as social, cultural, and academic institutional characteristics all contribute to the high attrition rate of African-American males attending predominately White institutions.

Michigan community colleges are open-admission institutions that offer affordable education and provide a vehicle for African American males who might not otherwise pursue a college education. However, community colleges appear to be failing African American males in general and African American male student-athletes in particular. Huge educational gaps exist in transfer rates for this population at community colleges across the nation (Harper, 2009).

African American male student-athletes not only encounter the barriers of being Black within a post-secondary institution, but also the barriers associated with being a student-athlete within a post-secondary institution. The potential for African American male student-athletes to overcome these barriers often leads to success, allowing degree attainment to occur. While just more than 50% of the African American male student-athletes have the wherewithal to overcome barriers associated with obtaining a post-secondary degree, the growth in degree attainment within this population must continue (Gill & Farrington, 2014; Harper, 2016; Lapchick, 2000).

According to Harper (2016), African American male student-athletes within the Power 5 conferences (Atlantic Coastal Conference, Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, Pac-12 Conference, and Southeastern Conference) are 4% less likely to graduate within 6 years than the general Black male undergraduate population and nearly 22% less likely to graduate within 6 years compared to the general undergraduate population (Harper, 2016). This scenario is important because 179,200 athletes transferred to Division I institutions from community colleges in 2019 (NJCAA, 2019).

Additionally, an increase in the degree completion percentage would not only benefit African American male student-athletes by raising their chances for a smooth transition from their respective sports, but also benefit society by providing a new narrative of how the Black man is perceived. The image of the African American man in America should no longer be the stereotype of a criminal behind bars, an entertainer, or an uneducated jock. Changing the narrative of the stereotypical Black male athlete will not be an overnight process, however, the groundwork can be established by continuing to advance the rate of degree completion among African American males in post-secondary institutions. Research has been conducted on African American student-athletes in Division I sports, as well as African American athletes who participate in predominantly White institutions. However, little information has been conducted on African American student-athletes in community colleges. This study contributes to the overall research of community colleges, specifically those institutions interested in the academic success of African American male student-athletes.

This study used qualitative research methods to explore the perceptions of the educational experiences of former successful African American male community college student-athletes in Michigan. Through their voices, participants revealed the factors they believe led to their

academic success and provided insights regarding their lived experiences of educational goal attainment while attending a community college.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of African American male former student-athletes who succeeded on their educational pathway and to identify the supportive services African American male former student-athletes reported as contributing to their academic success. It is essential to understand that the overall academic achievement of African American male student-athletes should not just fall upon the individual student-athlete. The responsibility must also be assumed by the institution and the community to promote, support, encourage, and create academic success that is sustainable and consistent for African American male student-athletes.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions used to guide this qualitative study were as follows:

- How do African American male former student-athletes who played sports at Michigan community colleges describe their academic experiences?
- How do African American male former student-athletes describe the events leading to their becoming athletes in community college?
- How do African American male former student-athletes describe the influence of internal and external support systems on their academic success?
- How do African American male former student-athletes describe the influence that participation in collegiate sports had on their academic success?

## **Research Design and Theoretical Framework**

A qualitative research design was employed to conduct the study. Qualitative research, like all scientific research, consists of comparing ideas with observations. In proper research, the ideas are thereby changed, strengthened, weakened, qualified, or elaborated. Criteria for evaluating qualitative research focus both on the process and on the product – that is, on the research methods that are used and on the changed ideas themselves (Stiles, 1999). The research was conducted primarily through one-to-three-hour, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with African American men who were former Michigan community college student-athletes.

The theoretical framework that guided this study was Tinto's (1975) Theory of Student Retention model to understand those factors perceived to contribute to the success of African American male community college student-athletes. According to Tinto (2016), student retention became a topic of higher educational inquiry more than 50 years ago as perceived through the lens of psychology. According to Tinto, students who did not remain at a college or university were historically viewed as deficient – it was the student's fault he or she failed, not the fault of the institution. Researchers and higher education institutions alike considered these students to be less able, less motivated, and willing to defer the benefits a college degree presented. In the 1970s, the concept of student retention expanded beyond student attributes, skills, and motivation to focus on the relationship between students and the higher education environment. Tinto (1975) developed a model based on the premise that students' pre-college traits, including their high school grades and standardized test scores, along with their interaction with their academic and social environment, correlated positively with the goal of college completion. Tinto proposed that positive academic and social interaction enhance motivation and the commitment to persist and that decisions to withdraw or remain in college until completion stem

from students' social and educational integration. A detailed description of the theoretical framework is be provided in Chapter 2.

This research approach is appropriate for this study because it involves collecting and analyzing data from sources such as participants. Conducting rich interviews capture the perceptions of African American male former student-athletes' academic experiences at Michigan community colleges. “Gathering rich data that is detailed, focused, and fully yielded is solid material for building a significant analysis” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 14).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to the overall research of community colleges, specifically those institutions interested in the academic success of African American male student-athletes. This research is also significant to those engaged in athletics at four-year institutions. In 2019, 492,000 community college student-athletes transferred to four-year institutions (NJCAA, 2019). Knowing those influences that guided athletes in their community college success may inform personnel at four-year institutions so as to further ensure student-athlete persistence. Staff and faculty from both four-year and two-year institutions—including athletic directors, coaches, and athletic advisors—will benefit from this study as it may reveal those aspects of the student-athlete experience that encourage academic success. For athletes considering a community college as a first step on their higher education pathway, this study may provide greater insight as to what they may encounter and endure during their time as a student-athlete. Parents may be able to read this study and make a more reliable decision regarding their son’s enrollment in a community college. Coaches may benefit from an improved understanding of the needs of student-athletes off the field or court. Michigan community colleges and the state-wide community college system may benefit from a better understanding of the experiences and

successes of former African American male community college student-athletes while learning more about the academic and social needs of African American male student-athletes.

Additionally, administrators throughout the Michigan community college system could benefit from understanding the positive, lived experiences of a group of students that persevered and reached their academic goals.

Exploring specific aspects of the African American male student-athlete's academic journey expands this study from individual responsibility to collective responsibility. By extension, the successful academic journey of an African American male student-athlete is not just the responsibility of the individual, but also the responsibility of the institution and community agents that interact with the African American male athlete throughout his post-secondary academic journey.

### **Limitations**

The limitation of this qualitative study is the researcher is considered the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing data (Holmes, 2020). The positionality of the researcher could potentially manifest bias during the interviewing and analysis processes. As a former collegiate student-athlete at a four-year institution and current staff member at a Michigan community college, the researcher for this study has a sincere personal and professional connection to the topic. Another limitation of the study is the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to concerns for the health of the researcher and participants, all interviews were conducted either via phone or the audio/video apps of Zoom, What'sApp, or Facetime.

Chapter 3 discusses ways in which the researcher addressed issues of bias and positionality in the study.

### **Delimitations**

To capture the meaning and narrow the focus of this study of African American male former community college student-athletes, the researcher selected 16 student-athletes to participate in this study, all of whom attended Michigan community colleges and only participated in the sport of basketball. Only African American male former student-athletes who attended a community college within the past 10 years were invited to participate. In choosing to study former student-athletes attending public community colleges in the State of Michigan to add to the scholarship exploring community college student-athletes academic success, I intentionally did not include four-year universities, private/independent institutions, or vocational schools. Therefore, study results may not apply to students attending four-year institutions or vocational schools.

### **Assumptions**

It is the assumption that participants who volunteered were able to inform the study to the best of their ability. I assumed that the student-athletes would (a) respond to the interview questions honestly, (b) be comfortable enough to give detailed answers, (c) be able to identify factors that contributed to their academic success, and (d) view transferring to a four-year institution and completion as measures of success.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

What follows is a list of key terms used throughout this study and their corresponding definitions.

*Academic success* – Academic success is the fulfillment of a student's academic, professional goals, or outcomes, which include completion, transfer, and persistence (York et al., 2015).

*African American male former student-athletes* – Former students of African American descent who participated in a community college athletic program while pursuing academic goals.

*Community college* – A two-year, postsecondary public institution of higher learning. The terms "community college," "two-year college," and "junior college" are used interchangeably throughout the study.

*Degree completion* – Degree completion is obtaining any credential from an institution of higher learning. Credentials include a certificate, associate, bachelor's degree, or higher. Degree completion is a representation of real learning for developing thinking and reasoning abilities, content knowledge, and the high-level skills needed for 21st-century jobs and citizenship (CCCSE, 2010).

*Division I institutions* – is the highest level of intercollegiate athletics sanctioned by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Four-year institutions that sponsor intercollegiate athletics through the NCAA. There are more than 350 Division I membership institutions in the NCAA. Collectively, Division I institutions often have the largest student body populations, manage the most significant athletics budgets, and offer the most generous athletic scholarships (NJCAA, 2019).

*Intercollegiate athletics* – Sports programs that are sponsored and funded by a college or university. These programs follow the rules and regulations of their respective athletic associations.

*Michigan community college student-athletes* – Community college students who were codified as active student-athletes by their institution and the MCCAA. Former student-athletes participated in two or more seasons of athletic play.

*Michigan Community College Athletic Association (MCCAA)* – The primary governing body of Michigan community college intercollegiate athletics. The Michigan state legislature provides the MCCAA the opportunity and authority to establish rules and regulations to administer all community college student-athletes' athletic activities (MCCAA, 2019).

*National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA)* – The governing association of community college, state college, and junior college athletics throughout the United States. Founded in 1938, the NJCAA is the second-largest national intercollegiate athletic organization in the United States with more than 500 member schools in 44 states. Each year, more than 3,400 teams compete in 28 different sports across multiple divisions in the NJCAA (NJCAA, 2019).

*National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)* – The primary national governing body overseeing intercollegiate athletics at four-year institutions. It is a voluntary association of more than 1,200 institutions (NJCAA, 2019).

*Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)* – A disorder in which a person has difficulty recovering after experiencing or witnessing a terrifying event.

*Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS)* – A condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today (DeGruy, 2005).

*Retention* – In the context of this study, retention refers to a higher education student's ability to remain enrolled with the expectation of certificate- or degree-completion (Tinto, 1975).

*School-to-prison pipeline system* – This system allows the excessive movement of minors and young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds to become incarcerated because of increasingly harsh school and municipal policies. Many experts have cited factors such as school disturbance laws, zero-tolerance policies and practices, and an increase in police in schools to

explain the creation of the pipeline, which is also known as the school-to-prison pipeline or the schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track (ACLU, 2019).

*Student-athlete* – A student who is a member of an intercollegiate athletic team at a community college or a four-year college.

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 explored the problem statement and the purpose of this qualitative study, exploring the experiences of African American student-athletes at the community college level. The four research questions that guided this study were introduced as well as the theoretical framework that guided this study. The significance of the study also was explored along with the study's limitations, delimitations, and assumptions. The chapter concluded with a definition of key terms.

In Chapter 2, topics covered in the literature review include Tinto's theory of retention, factors impacting the higher education journey of African American males, K-12 miseducation, school to prison pipeline, status of African American Males in community colleges, status of African American male athletes in community college, best practices for academic success, and Institutional and External Support Strategies. The chapter concludes with a literature review related to the qualitative grounded methodology for this study.

Chapter 3 begins with a description of the research methodology as it correlates with the problem statement. The remainder of the chapter covers the study's research design and rationale, context and setting, population and sample, confidentiality of participants, data collection procedures, instrumentation, data analysis procedures, and the researcher's positionality.

Chapter 4 presents the study's findings, beginning with a profile of participants and, using participant responses to each interview question, a presentation of both findings and emerging themes by each research question.

The study concludes with Chapter 5, which offers a broader discussion of the findings and emerging themes from Chapter 4, offers implications for higher education practice and future research. The researcher's reflections on the study concludes the chapter and this study.

## **Chapter 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter provides an overview of research into the experiences of African American male student-athletes in community colleges, including the existing literature on the unique academic and social experiences that promote or deter African American male student-athletes' completion or transfer to a four-year institution, as well as the support or encouragement needed to reach college completion. Key societal and structural events or systems that have helped shape the current situation for the African American male community in the United States and Michigan were reviewed, specifically in relation to college student-athletes.

The chapter begins with an overview of the literature search and the academic success theories considered for this study, concluding with a discussion of Tinto's Theory of Student Retention, which guided this study. The chapter then reviews factors impacting the journey of African American males, including the school-to-prison pipeline and its impact on African American males in Michigan. The researcher then examines Michigan's K–12 miseducation system and its implications on educationally underprepared African American males, then turns to an examination of the experiences of African American males in community colleges. Finally, the researcher scrutinizes the contemporary plight of African American male student-athletes in higher education.

### **The Literature Search**

The literature review involved several sources, including journals, articles, books, reports, and personal communications. A search of the SAGE Full-Text Collection used the following keywords: *African American college athletes, African American educational statistics, college athlete graduation rates, African American success, African American graduation rates, athletes, community college, Michigan Community College Athletic Association, Michigan K-12*

*graduation rates, National Junior College Athletic Association, National College Athletic Association, prison to pipeline system, reduced graduation rates, history of African American education, and history of sports.* It was believed these terms encompassed the most relevant terms, phrases, and themes from the study's four research questions. From these searches, a range of theoretical and research studies from which the researcher selected those most relevant to this study.

### **Racism and African American Males**

The legacy of slavery continues to resonate for many Americans. According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted between late January and early February of 2019, 63% of Americans believe that in contemporary American society, the lasting impact of slavery affects the position of Black people a significant or fair amount (Horowitz, 2019). Slavery helped to ensure the exclusion of Africans from any possible benefits of a capitalist economy. This economic exclusion was fueled by “the fear of competition and the desire both to protect the poor-White class...and to prevent it from sinking any lower” (Fanon, 1967, p. 88). Thus, a permanent underclass population defined by race was established early on in the United States (Glasgow, 1982).

Gordon (2005), an American television journalist, explained that, more than any other group in this country, young Black men face a higher rate of imprisonment, a greater chance of being killed, and a higher chance of being unemployed. For many young Black men, life holds no opportunity, and the future holds no promise. The fact is, many live day to day with very little expectation that life will get better and that the limited conditions they know today are the conditions they will live with for the rest of their lives.

Welsing (1992) argued that racism is a social structure built on the concept of White supremacy and is promoted worldwide in response to the global numerical minority status of Whites. Wilson (1992) elaborated upon the structure of Black adolescent violence, which explained the need by Whites to maintain the highly positive self-perception that compels them to deny, distort, and rationalize their past criminal and immoral behavior toward African Americans. Wilson also explored the White population's current complicity in condoning conditions of stifling subordination for the vast majority of African Americans. Importantly, Wilson indicated how this subordination projects onto Blacks stereotypical images of being innately inferior in intellect, character, and morals, and onto young Black males' stereotypical images of being innately crime-prone (Wilson, 1992).

Glasgow (as cited in Colen, 1981) contended that racism is at the core of social problems encountered by Black males in America. He viewed racism as a structural problem that results in unemployment or underemployment for many young Black males. Many of these young *brothers* spend time on the streets frustrated and alienated from the resources of American society or *the good life*. Unemployment rates for Black men continue to be much higher than for White men, and Black men's rates of incarceration have increased dramatically since 1980. In the early 2000s, more than one-third of young Black men who had not attended college were incarcerated. Nearly twice as many Black men under age 40 had a prison record than a bachelor's degree, and research has suggested that Black men are seven times more likely to be incarcerated than White men (Pettit & Western, 2004). Racism is a major underlying cause of criminality and violence in African American communities (Wilson, 1992).

The effects of slavery and racism over time, beginning with Reconstruction through today, have included heightened rates of oppression, depression, poverty, and criminalization for

young African American males. According to the Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health (Giorgianni, 2019), African Americans are 20% more likely to experience serious mental health problems than the general population. African American youth, particularly young men exposed to violence, are at higher risk of developing PTSD by more than 25%. African Americans are also more likely to be exposed to discrimination, social isolation, homelessness, and violence, increasing the risk of developing a mental health condition. In the African American community, people often misunderstand what defines a mental health condition and, thus, rarely discuss the subject. This lack of understanding has led many in the African American community to believe that mental health conditions are a personal weakness or a form of punishment. As a result, boys and men do not discuss their emotional issues or seek medical help.

In addition to being at risk of developing PTSD, African American males have a high probability of experiencing another type of trauma – post traumatic slave syndrome (PTSS) (DeGruy, 2005). DeGruy examined this trauma, where she described PTSS as a cluster of distinct behaviors observed in African Americans that result from the "trans-generational adaptations of behavior...associated with past traumas of slavery and ongoing oppression" (p. 104). An individual with PTSS experiences a combination of "multigenerational trauma together with continued oppression; absence of opportunity to heal or access the benefits available in the society" (p. 105). The transgenerational effects of PTSS may influence African American male student-athletes before they arrive on a college campus and while attending college or university.

DeGruy (2005) conducted 12 years of research to inform her PTSS theory. Despite the time spent developing the approach, at least one scholar questioned the validity of her methods. Kendi (2016) argued that PTSS theorists rely on anecdotal evidence

They generalize the anecdotal negativities of individual Blacks to establish the problem of negative Black behaviors. PTSS theorists have not proven these negative behaviors are a Black problem; that Black people behave more negatively than other groups, let alone that these negative Black behaviors largely stem from a heritage of trauma. (p. 1)

Although Kendi (2016) proposed the evidence of DeGruy's PTSS theory is unreliable, PTSS remains a possible influencing factor regarding education for African American males.

In terms of financial differences, the average African American household in 2016 had a net worth of \$138,200, compared with \$933,700 for the average White family (Dettling et al., 2017). This disparity, explained by a sharp difference in rates of home ownership, is a pivotal pathway to secure long-term financial stability. In 2016, 42% of Black Americans owned homes, which was down from a high of 48% in 2004, whereas 73% of White Americans owned homes in 2004. Besides, Blacks tend to own houses of less value: on average, their homes are worth \$94,400 versus \$215,800 for Whites. If these trends continue, the median income of Black households will fall from \$1,700 in 2013 to \$0 by 2053. For Whites, median wealth would climb from \$116,000 to \$137,000 (Adejumo, 2019).

Slavery and racism have played and continue to play a significant role in negatively impacting the lives of African American males (Horowitz, 2019). Slavery and racism are the root problem, but additional challenges arise from the root. These problems cause African American males to fall behind males from other ethnic backgrounds. Such disparities are most prominent in post-secondary attainment, business and enterprise development, divorce rates, single-parent households, and health (Horowitz, 2019).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the 2017 college enrollment rate was White (41%), Black (36%). Between 2000 and 2017, the annual college enrollment

rates for White young adults were higher than that of Black young adults (Hussar, 2020). The percentage of employed Blacks who are entrepreneurs is approximately one third that of Whites. Measures of success, such as net income, number of employees, and the form of organization, also indicate significant differences in business and enterprise development between Blacks and Whites (Meyer, 1990).

The absence of fathers in the home is another structural factor that young African American males face as 57.6% of Black children live in the absence of their biological fathers (Vespa et al., 2013). Walter E. Williams (2017), a columnist for *The Daily Signal* and an economics professor at George Mason University, noted that children from fatherless homes are more likely to drop out of high school, die by suicide, have behavioral disorders, join gangs, commit crimes, and end up in prison. They also are more likely to live in poverty.

Despite the historical and contemporary obstacles African Americans have faced and continue to experience, many African American males have survived and progressed in today's society. Nevertheless, this literature review draws attention to the unlevel playing field that many African American males continue to experience. For African American males to realize the *American Promise* or *American Dream*, America's political, economic, social, and educational institutions must first acknowledge that obstacles exist. Then, they must seek to understand such problems as part of a committed process to correct the foundational ills of slavery and racism. Importantly, they must also realize that African American male citizens deserve fair and equal access to the opportunities afforded to other American citizens.

Against this canvas of racism, injustice, the economic disparity of the races, and the residual impact of slavery, consider the African American male of college age. The literature review, prompted by such key search terms as *African American educational statistics* and

*African American graduation rates*, identified several barriers to education for African American male. Aspects of two such barriers will be explored in turn, K-12 miseducation and the school-to-prison pipeline.

### **K–12 Miseducation**

Carter G. Woodson (1993) was an African American author, historian, and journalist active in the 1930s. Woodson observed that education was much more than the transferal of knowledge from teacher to student. He found that proper training for students should engage students in ontological and epistemological thought and questions that challenge them to think about systems that influence their lives and their very purpose in life. Woodson believed a real education should not only teach students to believe and recite information, it should engage students in the study of how they know the things they know. He thought students should participate in the study of how they perceive the things we know and in the study of natural beings.

Woodson (1933) argued that Blacks, however, were being culturally indoctrinated—not educated—in American schools:

Negroes thus mis-educated are of no service to themselves and none to the White man. The White man does not need the Negroes' professional, commercial or industrial assistance, and as a result of the multiplication of mechanical appliances, he no longer needs them in drudgery or menial service. The 'highly educated' Negroes, moreover, do not need the Negro professional or commercial classes because Negroes have been taught that Whites can serve them more efficiently in these spheres. Reduced, then, to teaching and preaching, the Negroes will have no outlet but to go down a blind alley, if the sort of education they are now receiving is to enable them to find the way out of their present difficulties. (p. 12)

El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, known as Malcolm X, was an African American leader in the '50s and '60s who never obtained a formal education. Malcolm's given name was Malcolm Little and, according to his autobiography, a turning point came when his middle school English teacher asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. Malcolm X answered that he wanted to be a lawyer. His teacher responded, "One of life's first needs is for us to be realistic...you need to think of something you can be...why don't you plan on carpentry?" (X & Haley, 1965) He dropped out of school at age 15, spent time in jail, but later became an articulate, passionate, and gifted orator who recognized the importance of education. El-Shabazz noted in a speech for the Organization of Afro-American Unity founding forum at the Audubon Ballroom.

Education is an essential element in the struggle for human rights. It is the means to help our children and our people rediscover their identity and thereby increase their self-respect. Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs only to the people who prepare for it today. (June 28, 1964)

The importance of education has long been recognized in Michigan, even in the years before the granting of statehood. The Northwest Ordinance, passed by Congress in 1787, created a contract between the original states and the Northwest Territory, including Michigan, to uphold that “schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged” (Britannica, 2021). Michigan’s first constitution, adopted in 1835—two years before it achieved statehood—encouraged education and intellectual and scientific pursuits, allocating funding for these pursuits at the K–12 and university levels (U.S. Const. article X, 1835)

Although the state of Michigan has continuously encouraged education in principle, its ability to provide the support needed for quality education is questionable. Data compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2017) for the *Race for Results Policy Report* revealed that Michigan

fares the worst among all states in terms of opportunities and growth available to African American children. The report indicated that African American fourth-graders in Michigan had the lowest level of reading proficiency among all fourth graders in the country. Moreover, the math proficiency rate for African American eighth-graders tied with Alabama for the most reduced ability of eighth-graders in the country.

Data compiled by the *Detroit News/Associated Press* suggested that the percentage of Michigan's Black students who attend highly segregated schools is the second-highest in the nation. The analysis found that 40% of the state's Black students are in public schools whose student bodies are 90% Black. Students of color often attend schools with fewer resources – schools with 90% or more students of color spend \$733 less per student per year than schools with 90% or more White students (Spatig-Amerikaner, 2012).

African American students are less likely to have access to college-ready courses than White students (Bryant, 2015). Fifty-seven percent of Black students had access to the full range of math and science courses necessary for college readiness compared to 81% of Asian American students and 71% of White students (U.S. Department of Education [DoEd], 2018). Besides, when a Black teacher and a White teacher evaluate the same Black student, the White teacher is 30% less likely to predict the student will complete a four-year college degree. White teachers are approximately 40% less likely to expect their Black students to graduate high school (Rosen, 2016). Such systemic bias and low teacher expectations are additional obstacles for African American male students.

Michigan's former governor Rick Snyder, in an executive summary prepared for him by the 21st Century Education Commission (2017), "The Best Education System for Michigan Success," expressed an urgency to improve academic performance for Michigan children. The

executive summary explained that, in an economy where a superior education is the most reliable ticket to a bright future, where our children create and compete for the best jobs in the world, and where the next generation does better than the one before it, young people in most other American states and developed nations are being better prepared than young people in Michigan. Although such an acknowledgment may be a harsh judgment, the executive summary emphasized that it is an unavoidable one based on achievement data:

Until we are honest about current performance in our state, we cannot demand the changes our education system needs to support today's kindergarteners and tomorrow's college students more effectively. It is hard to imagine higher stakes for our state and its families. (21st Century Education Commission, 2017, p. 15)

African American males who enter Michigan's community colleges are among the most affected by a lack of support from the state's educational system. As evidence, consider the life-long impact of what has come to be referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline.

### **School-to-Prison Pipeline**

The school-to-prison pipeline pushes students out of schools and into prisons. In other words, it is a process that criminalizes youth by upholding disciplinary policies and practices within schools and thereby places them in contact with law enforcement. Once these youth have a connection with law enforcement for disciplinary reasons, many are pushed out of their educational environment and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Cole, 2019). If they are branded as felons before the age of 21, as many are, they are subject to legalized discrimination in their adult lives (Alexander, 2012). These young African American men who are criminalized before the age of 21 could potentially miss out on a college experience or have their future altered in the direction that does not lead to education or positivity.

At the national level, Black children represent 18% of preschool enrollment, but 48% of preschool children receive more than one out-of-school suspension. In comparison, White children represent 43% of preschool enrollment, but 26% of preschool children receive more than one out-of-school suspension. More specifically, boys represent 79% of preschool children suspended once, and 82% of preschool children suspended multiple times, even though they only represent 54% of preschool enrollment (the US, 2014). In most Michigan school districts, students of African descent are suspended and expelled at disproportionately high rates relative to their representation in the school population. On the other hand, White students are disciplined at rates that are proportionate to their numbers or disproportionately less than their representation in the school population. Many suspended students drop out of school altogether (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU] Work Group, 2009).

Michelle Alexander (2012), a civil rights lawyer and advocate, legal scholar, professor, and writer maintained, “Our nation declared war on people trapped in racially segregated ghettos just at the moment their economies had collapsed rather than providing community investment, quality education, and job training when work disappeared.... Of course, those communities are suffering from severe crime and dysfunction today (p. 217).”

Students of color experience disproportionately high suspension and expulsion rates, such that Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students. On average, 5% of White students are suspended, and 16% of Black students are suspended. American Indian and Native Alaskan students are also suspended and expelled at disproportionate rates; although they represent less than 1% of the student population, they account for 2% of out-of-school suspensions and 3% of expulsions (U.S. DoEd, 2014). Notably, girls of color experience high suspension rates. While boys receive more than two out of three

suspensions, Black girls are suspended at higher rates (12%) than girls of any other race or ethnicity and higher rates than most boys. American Indian and Native Alaskan girls (7%) are also suspended at higher rates than White boys (6%) or girls (2%) (U.S. DoEd, 2014).

When school administrators rely on law enforcement agencies for student discipline matters, there is a consequent criminalization of many students whose offenses would otherwise have been dealt with entirely by school officials (ACLU Work Group, 2009). The process for readmission to school after expulsion is complex and presents significant obstacles to low-income families who lack the wherewithal to prepare and submit the required petitions on a timely basis.

### **The Suspension Gap**

In 2000, African-American students constituted 17% of the student population nationwide (ACLU Work Group, 2009). Still, they accounted for 34% of students who were suspended, such that students of African descent were 2.6 times more likely to be suspended than White students. In the Michigan school districts examined in this project, the most consistent problem related to equity has been the disproportionate discipline of students of African descent. In many districts, suspension rates for White students are in proportion to their representation in the student body, or their suspension rates are lower than what would be expected for a population of their size. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as *the suspension gap* (ACLU Work Group, 2009). A study authored by Morris and Perry concluded that school suspensions account for roughly one-fifth of the White-Black achievement gap (Wong, 2016). Another study by Perry and Morris, published in the peer-reviewed *American Sociological Review*, involved 17 middle schools and high schools in a Kentucky school district. According to that study, the higher the number of suspensions during a semester, the lower the non-suspended

students' scores on end-of-semester reading and math evaluations. The study concluded that out-of-school suspensions have adverse effects on suspended and non-suspended students.

The literature review has thus far explored the academic and social influences of African American males prior to any higher education involvement. The next section explores the current status of African American males in community colleges with an emphasis on African American male student athletes in community college. The section then presents a discussion of best practices to improve the success rates of African American male community college students.

### **Status of African American Males in Community Colleges**

In recent years, given the achievement gap between Black males and their counterparts, Black males have received increasing attention regarding access to and academic achievement in higher education (Harris & Wood, 2013; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Scholars have conducted studies to examine the factors that have proven beneficial to African American male achievement as well as the challenges and obstacles with which they are confronted. Bush and Bush (2010) found that contact with faculty members and peers has a positive influence on achievement measures for African American males, including GPA, four-year transfer rate, and degree or certificate attainment.

Using data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), Wood and Palmer (2013) investigated whether students who participated in extracurricular activities and who had exposure to diversity self-reported they were likely to transfer. The CCSSE research highlighted the challenges faced by African American males in higher education in general and in community colleges more specifically. Among African American males who enter higher education, most leave college before reaching their intended goals (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014; Wood & Williams, 2013).

Given the general climate of inconsistent presence in the college classroom for African American males, interaction with higher education institutions is marked by a variety of issues, including low self-esteem (Dickens, 2012). The traditional college climate that African American males encounter does not promote positive self-esteem due to the trend that started much earlier in the educational system – the one that placed more African American males in special education classes (Allen, 2010; Finkel, 2010; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Herrera, 1998; Losen, 2011).

It is extremely important that African American males are given the chance to succeed academically. When African American males enter college classrooms, they are disproportionately placed in remedial classes (Lewis, 2010; Palmer et al., 2009). The low expectations that teachers have of their abilities do not instill the self-esteem students require to overcome the obstacles that college presents (Harper, 2009; Yates et al., 2008). Some teachers may not demand or expect from African American males the caliber of work required for college success. When a student encounters multiple instructors who expect less, their self-esteem is negatively influenced. African American males struggle with this lesser expectation in their pursuit of higher education. Moreover, this ongoing reality becomes the socialization of the African American male college experience.

A long-recognized function of education is socialization (Gruman & Saks, 2011; Padgett et al., 2010; Woodland, 2005). This ongoing socializing continues in the college environment in which African American males find themselves disproportionately represented in remedial classes and sparingly represented in the engineering, math, science, and honors classrooms that tend to be identified as *hard* classes within higher education (Dickens, 2012). Continued overrepresentation in remedial classes and underrepresentation in hard courses creates a negative

stereotype of underrepresented groups of African American males lacking the capacity to learn at the same rates as their counterparts in other races. Given that this trend has continued, the existing theories of learning and instruction must be questioned as they have not helped to improve the academic performance of the African American male population. African American males have not experienced improved academic performance but instead have faced stereotypes that depict them as slow learners or as uninclined to participate in hard college courses.

### **Overview of African American Male Athletes in Community Colleges**

Community colleges have provided an opportunity to access higher education for minority students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Horton, 2009). Horton noted that intercollegiate athletic programs are a comparable expansion of community colleges' open-access mission as they promote academic and athletic proficiency, encourage social integration through sports membership, and increase personal regulation through academic and athletic participation. Due to their lower tuition rates and easier accessibility, community colleges are a practical choice for students who need further academic preparation for college-level courses. Also, African American males are attracted to the intimacy of small class sizes at community colleges. Benton, senior research officer for The IDEA Center, a nonprofit organization that serves colleges and universities committed to improving learning, teaching, and leadership performance, explained, "Small classes...better student preparation, student enthusiasm, and effort than those in large and huge classes...the smaller the class, the higher students' achievement and overall impressions of the course" (Benton, 2012, p. 1).

Small classrooms should be considered as institutions that service underrepresented populations such as African American students. Enrollment trends indicate that African American students are more likely to begin their academic careers in community colleges, and

African American men view community college as a pathway toward economic and social mobility (James, 2013). However, collectively, African American students have disparate outcomes in every conceivable marker of success, whether it is persistence, achievement, transfer, or completion. While many African Americans have accessed higher education through community colleges, they continue to be underrepresented in academic achievement and graduation (Lewis & Middleton, 2003).

The disproportionate numbers and high visibility of Black athletes in sports, as well as the prestige, wealth, and status they receive as a result of their proficiency, could be taken by observers as evidence that African Americans are advancing in terms of equality of opportunity (Edwards, 1973). Although athletic and academic experiences vary for African American males entering community college, research demonstrated that African American males often are academically unprepared, drop out at high rates, and face multiple types of systemic racism before they reach the college campus. For example, the United Negro College Fund and the American College Testing Program released their report, *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2014: African American Students*, which concluded that African American high school graduates are less prepared for a college-level curriculum than students from any other major racial or ethnic group. The report noted that only 10% of Black high school graduates met the college-readiness benchmarks in 3 of 4 subject areas (United Negro College Fund & ACT, 2015).

The NCAA, the United States DoEd, and the United States Department of Justice constructed a portrait of Black male community college students based upon data that represents problematic behavioral patterns, which are often viewed in a negative way (Harper & Harris,

2012). Their research described Black male students as disengaged and low-performing (Harper & Harris, 2012).

In 2008, 47% of Black male students graduated on time from U.S. high schools, whereas 78% of White male students graduated on time (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). Black male students are often comparatively less prepared than others for the rigors of college-level academic work (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Loury, 2004; Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011; Palmer et al., 2009). In 2002, Black men comprised 4.3% of students enrolled at institutions of higher education – the same percentage as in 1976 (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010).

However, Black men are overrepresented on revenue-generating intercollegiate sports teams. In 2009, they accounted for 3.6% of undergraduate students but 55.3% of football and basketball players at public NCAA Division I institutions (Harper & Harris, 2012). Black male college completion rates are lowest among both sexes and all racial or ethnic groups in U.S. higher education institutions (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). According to Harper and Harris (2012), the six-year graduation rate for Black male students attending public colleges and universities is 3.3%, compared with 48.1% for students overall. Black men's degree attainment across all levels of post-secondary education is alarmingly low, especially in comparison with Black women.

The recruitment of athletes and transfers to and from other programs has implications for rationing educational opportunities in competition for places in colleges and universities (Brooks & Althouse, 2013). The NJCAA awards full and partial scholarships, or grant-in-aid awards, to talented athletes at its 525 member colleges (NJCAA, 2019). The general requirements for prospective NJCAA student-athletes are that students must have graduated from high school, received a high school equivalency diploma, or been certified as passing a national test such as

the General Education Development test (GED). Non-high school graduates can establish eligibility by completing one term of college work and passing 12 credits with a 1.75 GPA or higher. Students are allowed two seasons of competition in any sport at an NJCAA college and must be enrolled full-time while playing those sports.

There is no such thing as a *free ride*. A Black athlete pays for the questionable right to represent a school on the athletic field with blood, sweat, tears, and, ultimately, some portion of his manhood (Edwards, 2018). The pressure faced by a student-athlete is much stronger than that faced by a traditional student. Athletic specialization has increased in importance, and intercollegiate programs demand more of those who can perform or, in other words, are already trained, thereby placing heavy demands on student-athletes (Brooks & Althouse, 2013).

Community colleges and athletic programs should not maintain reduced expectations for student-athletes, which creates the illusion that student-athletes are successful in academics and societal preparedness. Instead, they should set high expectations to challenge and enable African American males to become the best possible students, athletes, and citizens. Institutions must find ways to transcend the negative perceptions and stereotypes that confront their student-athletes daily (Horton, 2011).

The lived experiences of academically successful community college student-athletes reveal vital factors that can assist African American males in their journeys toward academic success (Byrd, 2017). For many prospective students, athletics is a deciding factor between attending a community college or not attending college. Furthermore, the literature suggested that community colleges provide a path to college athletics for students who desire to continue their athletic participation after high school (Horton, 2015). As Horton observed, "athletic programs often serve as the primary motivation for many individuals to pursue higher education,

especially prospective students from low income and ethnic minority backgrounds" (p. 202). In 2012, more than 80,000 community college students participated in varsity athletics across the United States. Even still, institutions must continue to work toward ensuring that Black male student-athletes are prepared to cross the proverbial finish line (Horton, 2015).

### **Best Practices for Improving Academic Success for African American Males**

The following section of the literature review provides an overview of best practices. Before implementing any initiative to serve African American males, it is crucial that institutions research the best way to go about getting it done. Hence, establishing a best-practice culture in all areas of an institution is an integral part of making everything work smoothly and efficiently. It is important to include best practices in this literature review because additional research can help institutions improve academic success for African Americans.

### **City of New York Black Male Initiative (CUNY BMI)**

CUNY BMI is a university-wide student development initiative of more than 30 projects focused on increasing enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of underrepresented students, particularly men of color. CUNY BMI is one expression of CUNY's commitment to access and diversity. CUNY BMI projects are open to all academically eligible students, faculty, and staff without regard for race, gender, or national origin (CUNY, 2019).

After hearings before the Higher Education Committee of the New York City Council chaired by the Honorable Charles Barron, the University was awarded funding from the New York City Council and began to implement 15 demonstration projects designed to improve the enrollment and graduation rates of students from underrepresented groups, particularly Black males. Funding was also allocated: to increase opportunities for individuals without a high school diploma; to enroll in GED courses oriented toward college preparation; to provide support

for formerly incarcerated individuals to enroll in college; and, to survey workforce development opportunities in New York City's construction industry (CUNY, 2019).

The mission, vision, and goals of CUNY BMI are:

**Mission.** As a CUNY-wide initiative, CUNY BMI's mission is to increase, encourage, and support the inclusion and educational success of students from groups that are severely underrepresented in higher education, in particular African, African American/Black, the Caribbean, and Latino/Hispanic males.

**Vision.** CUNY BMI's vision is to create model projects throughout the university that are intended to provide additional layers of academic and social support for students from populations that are severely underrepresented in higher education, mainly African, African American/Black, Caribbean, and Latino/Hispanic males.

**Goals.** The goals of the initiative are:

- Increase the enrollment and matriculation of underrepresented students.
- Increase retention of underrepresented students.
- Improve the overall GPA of underrepresented students.
- Increase the graduation rate of underrepresented students. (CUNY, 2019)

According to BMI statistics captured from 2010-2015, African American males consistently had a better first-year retention rate of 7.6% on average, higher GPAs of 0.19 points on average, and more semester credits by 1.2 credits on average (Ingram & Coaxum, 2018).

### **Volunteer State Community College (VSCC) Shoot for Success Program**

During the 2013-2014 academic school year, Gallatin, Tennessee's VSCC was challenged by the Tennessee board of regents to create and develop initiatives to close the access and academic success gaps for student subpopulations. The area of focus for VSCC was the

men's basketball team because of its low academic performance (Ingram & Coaxum, 2018). The men's basketball team happens to be made up of 85% African Americans, and student-athletes needed to close their success gaps.

In the Shoot for Success Program, all 14 players on the basketball team started an academic coaching session during the first week of class. In the second week, student-athletes met in the Learning Commons where they participated in peer mentoring, along with the help of academic tutors.

The Shoot for Success Program was developed to improve the retention and graduation rates among members of the VSCC men's basketball team. The program focused on a viable solution to the low-GPAs of student-athletes (Ingram & Coaxum, 2018). Participants were required to spend at least eight hours a week engaging in academic coaching or support. As a result of the high expectations placed upon student-athletes, students missed the requisite eight-hours of academic support on only two occasions. The student-athletes were asked to meet the following requirements:

- Eight hours of weekly academic support
- Weekly progress reports
- Weekly mentor/mentee meetings
- Biweekly group progress meetings
- Accountability to each other or the team

Student-athletes attributed their success in this program to the intensive academic support provided but commented on the strength of the mentor relationship as an essential component. A family, welcoming environment, and support is what this team needed to close the gaps in success.

The best practices that were offered provided an insight of what institutions could implement to help African American males succeed at the community college level. Institutions have to be innovative and show a true interest in helping the African American male population.

### **Institutional Support Strategies**

When students begin their education at community colleges, they are more likely to face obstacles in obtaining their college education than students who start in four-year institutions. The research revealed that academic and student services provide essential support for student-athletes, that community college student-athletes are often at academic risk, and that the absence of support programs in local community colleges is a significant problem (Demas, 2017). The poor academic performance of student-athletes is partly attributed to their inability to cope with the challenges encountered due to being students and athletes (Leach, 1995). The first two years of college are complicated, and African American males would especially benefit from positive faculty and staff interaction to support this transition. Mentoring—and constellation mentoring, more specifically—has the potential to facilitate this transition and to ensure student success. As with other organizational transition management tools, mentoring helps people navigate a transition into a new setting. Constellation mentoring, however, is broad in terms of the range of needs addressed while also being tailored to individual needs (Kelly & Dixon, 2014).

African American male students must establish a set of personal, academic, and career goals to guide their educational journeys in community colleges. These long- and short-term goals will ensure their commitment to obtaining a degree and will motivate them to persist and succeed in their academic endeavors (Jones, 2001).

African American male students frequently enter college unaware of the expectations of academic culture (Jones, 2001). Often, they are academically underprepared and lack the skills

necessary to handle the pressures that arise from the personal, social, cultural, and educational dimensions of their lives. African American male students may encounter cultural norms and values with which they are unfamiliar, such as the "conventional behavioral expectations of college classes (assertion, competition, and individualism)" (Jones, 2001, p. 9). In turn, they may begin to doubt themselves, self-isolate, and experience isolation by others, which further increases their sense of alienation. Contemporary research observed that African American males with lower incomes, less confidence, and more inferior academic records are increasingly unlikely to be present on college campuses (Griffin et al., 2010). Furthermore, research regularly proposed that a lack of confidence increases the chance of attrition and hinders the potential for academic success in African American males (Jones, 2001).

Fernandez et al. (2017) maintained that "Academic advising is an integral component of student success." The authors noted that the shared advising model has a marked impact on student success and is an effective way to achieve success for all students, including those from marginalized groups. The number of students placed on academic warning and academic probation has decreased by 36.4% between the 2015–16 and 2016–17 academic years (Fernandez et al., 2017). Academic advisors and student services staff play a significant role in supporting African American male student-athletes in their pursuit of academic success.

From admissions to academic counseling, support services, and life-skills development programs must be integrated to help African American male athletes balance the demands of their academic responsibilities and athletic participation. Also, student support services at community colleges must be aware of athlete compliance and the history of athletics, including, for example, the numerous four-year transfer issues that affect student-athletes' athletic eligibility. Student services must focus on the retention of student-athletes as well as the

recruitment of athletes by four-year institutions (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). Tinto (1997) found that collaborative learning promotes persistence in college, regardless of a student's gender, race, or ethnicity (Cabrera et al., 2002). Therefore, adequately implemented collaborative learning techniques provide effective classroom strategies that are beneficial for all students, including African American males in community colleges.

### **External Support Strategies**

Institutional support in community colleges offers a variety of services on campus for students. However, what happens when a student is not on campus? Students would need access to external support. Institutions such as Wayne County Community College District (WCCCD) in Michigan offer online academic services for students titled Financial Aid TV and Smart Thinking (WCCCD, 2019).

Financial Aid TV is an online service for students who have general questions regarding their financial aid. According to WCCCD, students can access the site at any time of day and obtain information about financial aid payments.

Under the Smart Thinking online tutoring service, students can:

- Access a live, personal session with a Smart Thinking tutor in Drop-In Tutoring.
- Schedule a personal session with a tutor of choice in Scheduled Tutoring – including voice options for mathematics, writing, reading, and Spanish.
- Submit written assignments for any class to the WCCCD Writing Center.
- Send a question to a Smart Thinking tutor (WCCCD, 2019).

WCCCD also provides virtual mentoring – mentors who work with students from a distance, communicating via telephone, internet, e-mail, and Facebook. Virtual mentoring shares

the goal of face-to-face mentoring – establish a trusting, nurturing, positive relationship between the mentor and student.

Virtual mentoring can also be called e-mentoring. E-mentoring programs often have similar program goals to that of traditional in-person mentoring (e.g., to improve academic outcomes). More commonly, e-mentoring programs often target specific circumstances and outcomes that are not quickly addressed through traditional in-person mentoring formats. E-mentoring also creates the opportunity for the availability and accessibility of mentors who fill specific characteristics, such as sharing a similar skill, interest, or characteristic with a mentee. When specific characteristics are not common in the general population, distance is not an issue for the mentor and mentee (Garringer et al., 2019).

Many changes are taking place in our culture that influence the mental and emotional well-being of today's student-athletes. The pressure associated with student-athletes' daily routine can create intense emotional responses (Stull, n.d.). Athletes are known for having a packed schedule: practice for hours a day, a full college class course load, a part-time job, and maybe a social life (Hansen, n.d.). The time, energy, and effort put into developing skills in a given sport can result in imbalances in other areas of life. Developmental and environmental influences shape the emotional, motor, and social aspects of the brain. Eating patterns, impulse control, and interpersonal relationships are also affected (Stull, n.d.). Those African American male student-athletes who must function daily with a disorder may not reach their full academic potential. Students must take advantage of external support services to refocus on academic success.

According to Stull (n.d.), the most common psychiatric disorders in student-athletes are represented in the following categories:

- Anxiety disorders
- Mood disorders
- Personality disorders
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
- Eating disorders
- Body dysmorphic disorder
- Adjustment disorders
- Substance use disorders
- Impulse control disorders
- Psychosomatic illnesses

The report *Too Distressed to Learn* found that community college students are more likely than students of four-year colleges to experience risk factors associated with mental health concerns, such as food and housing insecurity (Eisenberg et al., 2016). Fifty-percent of community college students have a current or recent mental health condition, such as anxiety or depression, which can harm academic performance and graduation. Community college students of color experience additional challenges to their mental health associated with racial discrimination, xenophobia, and hate crimes, which have become more prevalent in a polarized national environment (Eisenberg et al., 2016).

Community colleges are facing a challenge in the disconnect between the need for mental health services among students and the limited services on most campuses. Counselor-to-student ratios at community colleges (1:3000) are nearly half that of four-year colleges (1:1600). As a result, 10% or fewer community college students use on-campus mental health services compared to 50% of four-year college students (Primm, 2019).

Unmet mental health needs can harm overall health, relationships, economic status, and human potential. Community colleges such as WCCCD have external partnerships with health centers across Wayne County, Michigan, providing students with a booklet of external resources and support for students (WCCCD, 2019). Understanding that the mental health of community college students is so important, nonprofits organizations such as the Steve Fund are currently piloting programs to help with the mental health of community college students across the country (Primm, 2019).

Community college students are still in need of strong external support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Without warning, the Coronavirus shut America down for several months. The entire student body had to communicate remotely while trying to register for classes or seek advisement. To accommodate students, community college instructors should be flexible with assignments and deadlines. This may include offering multiple options for completing an assignment and loose due dates. Community colleges also should structure classes so coursework can be done asynchronously. Assignments that require real-time streaming or other high-bandwidth activities should be avoided altogether so that students without high-speed internet are not left out (LoBue, 2020).

The remainder of this literature review explores the theoretical frameworks considered for this study along with the theory ultimately chosen, Tinto's Theory of Student Retention.

### **Overview of Relevant Theories**

#### **Glaser and Strauss' Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory was a theory I considered but did not use because of the flexibility the theory allows. Grounded theory methods emerged from the successful collaboration of sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967) during their studies of hospital deaths. In the early 1960s,

hospital staff seldom discussed or even acknowledged dying and death with seriously ill patients. Glaser and Strauss's research team observed how death occurred in a variety of hospital settings, including how and when professionals and their terminal patients learned they were dying and how they handled the news. Glaser and Strauss gave their data specific analytic treatment and produced theoretical analyses of the social organization and temporal order of dying. They explored analytic ideas in long conversations and exchanged preliminary notes that analyzed observations in the field.

As they constructed their analysis of dying, they developed systematic, methodological strategies that social scientists could adopt for studying many other topics. Glaser and Strauss (1967) first articulated these strategies and advocated developing theories from research grounded in data rather than deducing testable hypotheses from existing methods. The researchers provided a convincing argument that legitimized qualitative research as a credible methodological approach in its own right rather than merely as a precursor for developing quantitative instruments. Glaser and Strauss challenged these constructs:

- Beliefs that qualitative methods were impressionistic and unsystematic;
- Separation of data collection and analysis phases of research;
- Prevailing views of qualitative research as a precursor to more “rigorous” quantitative methods;
- The arbitrary division between theory and research; and,
- Assumptions that qualitative research could not generate approach.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) built on earlier qualitative researchers' implicit analytic procedures and research strategies and made them explicit. During the first half of the 20th century, qualitative researchers had taught generations of students through mentoring and

lengthy immersion in field research (Rock, 1979). Previous guides for conducting field research dealt primarily with data collection methods and researchers' membership roles in field settings. Authors told their readers little about how to tackle analyzing the piles of collected data. Glaser and Strauss's written guidelines for conducting qualitative research changed the oral tradition and made analytic guidelines accessible (Charmaz, 2006).

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the interrelated jobs of theory in sociology are (a) to enable prediction and explanation of behavior; (b) to be useful in theoretical advance in sociology; (c) to be usable in practical applications – prediction and explanation should be able to give the practitioner understanding and some control of situations; (d) to provide a perspective on behavior – a stance to be taken toward data; and, (e) to guide and provide a style for research on particular areas of practice (Glaser & Strauss, 2009).

According to Glaser and Strauss (2009), the practical application of grounded sociological theory, whether substantive or formal, requires developing an approach with at least four highly interrelated properties. The first requisite property is that the method must tightly fit the functional area in which it will be used. Second, it must be readily understandable by non-specialists concerned with this area. Third, it must be sufficiently general to apply to a multitude of diverse daily situations within the substantive area, not just to a specific type of situation. Fourth, it must allow the user partial control over the structure and process of daily circumstances as they change through time.

Glaser and Strauss (2009) also mentioned that a grounded theory faithful to the everyday realities of a substantive area had been carefully induced from diverse data, as we have described the process. Only in this way will the theory be closely related to the daily realities (what is going on) of substantive areas, and so be highly applicable to dealing with them.

Glaser and Strauss' (2009) findings are in contrast to (Zetterberg, 2012) whose social theory involved rendering his data directly with a formal approach. Glaser and Strauss first developed a substantive theory from the data; it then became a bridge to any formal procedures that may be helpful. According to Glaser and Strauss, a grounded functional theory that corresponds closely to the realities of an area will make sense and be understandable to the people working in the substantive area. This understanding can be crucial since it is these people who will wish either to apply the theory themselves or to employ a sociologist to apply it. Their knowledge of the method tends to engender a readiness to use it, for it sharpens their sensitivity to the problems they face and gives them an image of how they can potentially make matters better, through either their efforts or those of a sociologist.

Glaser and Strauss are in contrast with Gouldner as well, the latter of whom implied by their direct use of a formal theory that the practical application of sociological theory is the monopoly of the sociologist. Glaser and Strauss both believe that the formal methods set out by Zetterberg and Gouldner are challenging enough for sociologists to understand.

Grounded theory methods will help you get started, stay involved, and finish your project. The research process will bring surprises, spark ideas, and hone your analytic skills. Grounded theory methods foster seeing your data in fresh ways and exploring your views about the data through early analytic writing. By adopting grounded theory methods, you can direct, manage, and streamline your data collection and construct an original analysis of your data. "What is grounded theory methods? Stated simply, grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves" (Charmaz, 2006).

Grounded theory allows the researcher to take the quality time that is required to do the discovery process. Rushing or forcing the research process will shut down the researcher's creativity and conceptual abilities, exhausting energy and leaving the study empty and the theory incomplete (Holton, 2008).

According to Creswell (2012), research is "a process of steps used to collect and analyze information to increase our understanding of a topic or issue" (p. 3). This study used a qualitative research design to collect and explore the perceptions of African American male student-athletes regarding their academic experiences at Michigan community colleges. Using the grounded theory method and Tinto's theory of retention, this study intends to identify elements, key factors, and support strategies that African American male community college student-athletes perceived as contributing to their academic experiences.

The research is designed according to a semi-structured, in-depth interview model. "In-depth, semi-structured interviews are verbal interchanges where one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information from another person by asking questions" (Longhurst, 2009). The researcher prepares a list of predetermined questions to offer participants the chance to address the fundamental issues. In qualitative research, the researcher collects data to learn from the study (Creswell, 2012). Using a qualitative method, the researcher seeks to capture what participants have to say in their own words. Qualitative measures allow for in-depth descriptions of individual experiences. Qualitative measures permit the evaluation researcher to record and understand people in their terms (Patton, 1980).

The task for the qualitative methodologist is to provide a framework within which people can respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their points of view about the world or that part of the world about which they are talking (Patton, 1980). According to Patton

(2001), "methodologically, carefully, and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon. How they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, and talk about it to others, must undertake in-depth interviews" (p. 104). For this study, the researcher asked a series of predetermined open-ended questions.

Open-ended questions are constructed to provoke open-ended responses. Creswell (2012) suggested that asking open-ended questions during qualitative research allows the interviewee to express themselves, "unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings" (p. 218). The questions are open-ended to allow the researcher to find out what people's lives, experiences, and interactions mean to them in their terms and their natural settings (Patton, 1980). Follow-up questions are also asked of participants to clarify statements or elicit more information. The qualitative research design is most appropriate for this research study because of the limited amount of academic literature on the perceptions of African American male student-athletes concerning their academic experiences in community college and on African American students in community college more generally. The qualitative research design allows the researcher to broadly explore a particular problem and develop a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012).

### **Self-Determination Theory**

Self-determination theory suggests that humans have an inherent motivational drive to master their social environment through self-determined actions (Harrison et al., 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Self-determination theory was also another theory I considered but did not use. This theory did not focus on retention as it did motivation. Even though African American males must be motivated to reach success, this theory did not fit my study.

However, the segment of the African American male athlete population that has been able to obtain success throughout their academic journey has been able to tap into this motivational drive, allowing them to master the environment of post-secondary institutions through high levels of self-determination. Previous research has associated high levels of self-determination with positive educational outcomes such as academic motivation and effort toward achievement (Cokley, 2003; Harrison et al., 2015; Ryan & Connell, 1989).

The high levels of self-determination that could be displayed by African American male student-athletes achieving academic success within these institutions of higher learning spark the motivation and effort needed to overcome barriers that appear along the pathway toward degree attainment. The theory of self-determination is rooted in the existence of three tenets: competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Researchers argue that these are the basic psychological needs necessary to serve as the primary basis for self-motivation (Harrison et al., 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2001). The tenet of competence refers to the feeling of effectiveness one has within a “social environment while expressing and exercising one’s capacities” (Harrison et al., 2015, p. 81). Thus, individuals in need of competence “seek out and master challenges in their environment while attempting to maintain and enhance their capacities” (Harrison et al., 2015, p. 81; Ryan & Deci, 2001). For African American male student-athletes that had or are currently having a successful academic journey, there is a need to obtain competence. Hence, this segment of the African American male athlete population is willing to seek out and take on the challenges associated with taking control of their academic journey.

The tenet of autonomy speaks to “an individual acting in accord with his or her interests and values” (Harrison et al., 2015, p. 81). Consequently, African American male student-athletes

achieving a successful academic journey are often adopting autonomous practices. Unlike their underachieving counterparts, African American male student-athletes understand the value of engaging beyond the athletic realm and dedicating time to participate in productive events and joining organizations that develop them academically, socially, and occupationally. Such autonomous practices simultaneously infuse the tenet of relatedness.

Relatedness speaks to “the sense of individual and communal belonging, as well as caring for and being cared for by others” (Harrison et al., 2015, p. 81; Ryan & Deci, 2001). The extension into the academic realm of their institutions could allow for African American male student-athletes to position themselves among individuals who genuinely care about their success academically without the influence of athletic implications, thus creating a sense of belonging and acceptance within the scholastic landscape of post-secondary institutions.

Tinto’s Theory of Student Retention serves as the theoretical framework guiding this investigation. This theory is very useful to this study for the reason that the theory explains and outlines that the more students integrate into the life of the college, the more successful they will be. Therefore, those future students would be more likely to remain in school until graduation. This theory served as the best theory for this study because institutions can use this model to help study athletic and academic completion. Student athletes do not have to go outside their team to fulfill Tinto’s components of external engagement, staff and faculty engagement, peer group interaction, or extracurricular activities. Student athletes are already apart of social networking peer group, which makes Tinto’s theory valuable to this study.

In Tinto's Theory of Student Retention, academic and social integration are complimentary but independent processes in a student's life. Academic and social integration leads to more significant institutional commitment and graduation rates (Bean, 1983). Tinto first

introduced his concept of retention in 1975. His model theorized that students who socially integrate into the campus community increase their commitment to the institution and are more likely to graduate (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto's institutional departure model, which was drafted in 1975 and finalized in 1993, builds on William G. Spady's undergraduate dropout process model. Spady believed institutions had a significant role in student persistence and that, rather than just one, there were two variables or systems that could affect whether a student would stay at the institution: one academic and one social. Moreover, Spady noted there were at least two factors in each of those systems that influence a student. Where institutional factors were concerned, Spady delineated them into grades and intellectual development; as for factors to support the social network, he identified friendship and normative congruence. For Tinto, the social aspect of persistence demarcated the student's ability to interact with the institution's social and academic systems.

Tinto realized that students bring associations and expectations with them in their first year. He mapped out a process that began with the student's prior associations and allowed those associations to be weakened or strengthened based on how they assimilated into the institutional community. Successful incorporation might find existing goals changed by the time the student has shed connections to old communities in favor of their new community. Students may find themselves at a higher risk of dropping out when they have associations and expectations that are less adaptable.

In many respects, the three primary principles of Tinto's (1975) original model described processes whereby higher education institutions committed to the students they serve. Colleges were committed to the education of all, not just some, of their students. Thirdly, colleges were

committed to the development of supportive social and educational communities in which all students are integrated as competent members (Connolly, 2016).

Tinto (1993) identified three primary sources of student departure: academic difficulties; the inability of individuals to reach their educational and occupational goals; and, the failure of individuals to become or remain incorporated in the institution's intellectual and social life. Tinto's model of institutional departure stated that, to persist, students need integration into formal and informal academic systems and formal and informal social systems. For example, academic performance represents a formal educational system, while faculty and staff interactions represent friendly academic systems. Extracurricular activities represent a formal social system, while peer group interactions represent an informal social system.

The first segment in Tinto's 1993 model, similar to his initial model, is pre-entry attributes and includes elements related to family background, skills, abilities, and prior schooling. Although to a certain extent one cannot underestimate the significance of post-entry educational experiences, it is mostly the pre-entry attributes associated with students that provide insight into understanding how they ultimately respond to their educational environment and persist. While universities need to understand students' perceptions and their impact on the persistence of all students, universities must understand how these perceptions apply for students who have been historically underrepresented in tertiary education, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

The second part of Tinto's model—goals/commitments—shows the contribution of student intentions and external obligations to the student's dropout decision. As a student enters an institution, plans and external commitments have a significant bearing on the overall goal and institutional obligations. These first two segments of the model can be said to represent

characteristics the student possesses at the time of entry and a student's disposition in terms of intentions and motivational factors. These characteristics and factors prepare the student to respond to experiences he or she may encounter at an institution.

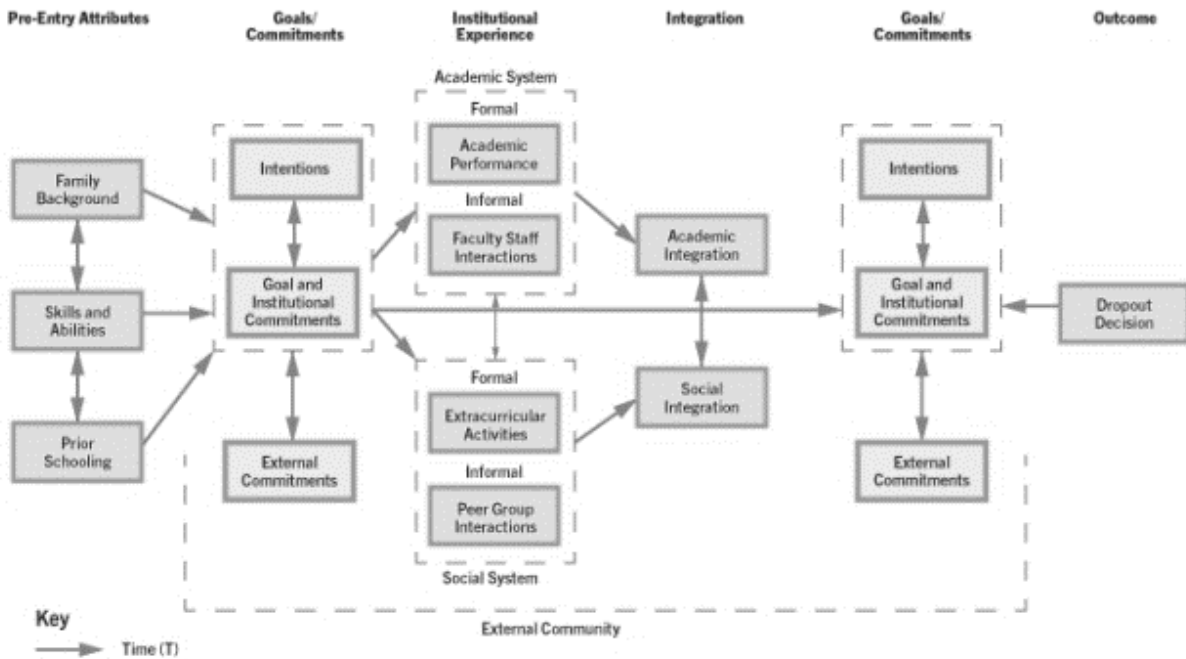
The third element of Tinto's model included the formal and informal aspects of institutional experiences and the interaction and effect of the educational and social systems. Academic and non-academic staff both have the ability to influence the departure decision. Again, the external community, made up of individuals or entities with which the student interacts, continues to be a factor over time (Tinto, 1993).

In summary, Tinto's 1993 model (see Figure 1), argued that individual departure from institutions could be viewed as arising out of a longitudinal process of interactions of an individual with specific attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational experiences, dispositions (intentions and commitments), and integration with other members of the academic and social systems within the institution. Students' entry commitment affects the extent of their social and academic interaction within an educational institution and their integration, which in turn has an impact on their goals and institutional commitment (Connolly, 2016).

When encountering difficulties in their pursuit of a university degree, students may respond in ways that, while understandable from their point of view, may unintentionally undermine their success – seeking to understand why this is the case matters because those responses shape the impact of any institutional practice. Perhaps this is why some institutional policies to promote greater success among low-income and underserved students have had a limited effect (Tinto, 2016).

**Figure 1**

*Tinto's (1993) Retention Model*



External and circumstantial factors play a critical role in a student's decision to stay in school or depart from school, especially for African American males. Despite Tinto's work on his student departure model, researchers have critiqued his work. According to Bean and Metzner (1985), Tinto's original model of persistence and student departure lacks such factors as income, employment, level of family support, and family obligations and responsibilities. Accordingly, Cabrera et al. (1992) also identified shortcomings in Tinto's model concerning external factors, contending that factors such as parental involvement, finances, and peer supports all have the potential to affect persistence behavior (Metz, 2004). Tierney (1992) criticized Tinto's model of persistence for improperly incorporating van Gennep's notion of rites of passage. Rites of passage include three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. These stages serve as a process of moving people from adolescence to adulthood. Van Gennep (1961)

viewed people as dealing with life's challenges as they moved through the ages, and Tinto used this concept within student departure. Tierney (1992) argued that van Gennep's rites of passage could not be applied to the movement of an individual from one culture to another. Because rituals are culture-specific, Braxton et al. (1997) concluded that Tinto's model lacked empirical external consistency and that the theory was exclusive in specific settings. Despite this revelation, the authors agreed that Tinto's model deserved further examination.

All of Tinto's theory helped interpret the findings in this study. The Pre-Entry Attributes of Tinto's theory (family, background, skills, abilities, and prior schooling) are important to the experiences of the student athletes. It is important to learn and understand what obstacles the student may have encountered prior to arriving into community college. Understand the pre-entry component, can help an institution better serve the student. The Goals and Commitment (Intentions, Goals and Institutional Commitments, and External Commitments) components of the Tinto's theory, also allow the researcher to understand why the student is attending the college and discover their goals. In addition, this component provides the insight on what type of commitment the student has toward their completion. Tinto's Institutional Experience (academic performance, faculty and staff interaction, extracurricular activities, and peer group interaction) is a major component of this theory and useful to this study. This component will be able to provide insight into the student athlete outside of their sport and off campus. As well as, what the student athlete is outside of the community college that tie into their goals and commitments. Lastly Tinto's integration (Academic, Social integration) component is a component that will provide insight on how immersed the student athlete is in their social and academic life. What do they see as priorities?

## Summary

In this chapter, the problem identified a gap in the literature regarding African American male student-athletes who are among the most visible at-risk college populations in the United States. Specifically, the question asked about support academically of African American male athletes, while encountering several barriers leading to their academic underachievement in college. The factors forming the context of the problem include numerous challenges African American male students face in high school, placement or tracking into easy classes, overrepresentation in special education courses, disproportionate disciplinary actions, and underrepresentation in advanced placement courses (Greene et al., 2008). Other factors include social, cultural, and academic institutional characteristics for the African American male student-athletes (Greene et al., 2008). The research identified qualitative grounded methodology as the research design for the study, which is to a) describe and explore the experiences of African American male former student-athletes; b) explore the support services that African American former student-athletes identify as contributing to their academic success; and 3) propose practices and interventions that community college practitioners may use to improve academic success for African American male student-athletes.

This literature review displayed a wide range of discussion of the experiences that contribute to community college students persisting and reaching academic success. More specifically, a population of students that have been repeatedly overlooked regarding success factors is community college student-athletes. Research suggests that student-athletes of color may obtain their academic goals at higher rates than their peers of color who do not participate in athletics. If this is the case, understanding specifically the perceived factors that contribute to academic success for African American community college student-athletes can not only support

more student-athletes in their quest for degree attainment and transfer to a four-year institution, it may also give faculty, staff, and administrators ideas as to what factors they can transfer from athletes to non-athletes when developing retention models.

A significant amount of literature was available on NCAA Division I athletes; however, in-depth NJCAA athletic information was not available. The Michigan Community College Athletic Association (MCCAA) did not have any information available about African American male student-athletes, graduation rates, or transfer rates.

This literature review discussed the factors contributing to the journey of higher education and the miseducation African American student's face while being marginalized. Institutional and external support strategies should embrace African American male athletes and help them to overcome their academic failures and to experience academic growth and success that will lead to academic success. To build upon the strength-based conversations about the academic journey of African American male student-athletes, in Chapter 3, we discuss the crux of this study – open-ended interviews with 16 African American male student-athletes who persevered and achieved their community college goal.

## **Chapter 3 – METHODOLOGY**

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of African American male former student-athletes who succeeded on their educational pathway and to identify the supportive services African American former student-athletes reported as contributing to their academic success. For the purpose of this study, educational pathway success meant the student earned either a certificate or associate degree, or transferred to a four-year educational institution. The discussion in this chapter covers the study's research design and rationale, context and setting, population and sample, confidentiality of participants, data collection procedures, instrumentation, data analysis procedures, and the researcher's positionality.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research design for this study was qualitative. Qualitative research is naturalistic in that the research takes place in real-world settings and the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon (Patton, 2001). Qualitative research allows the researcher to broadly explore a particular problem and to develop a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). The qualitative research design was considered most appropriate for this study because of the limited amount of academic literature on the perceptions of African American male student-athletes concerning their academic experiences in community college and on African American students in community college more generally.

The research was designed according to a semi-structured, in-depth interview model. "In-depth, semi-structured interviews are verbal interchanges where one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information from another person by asking questions" (Longhurst, 2009). The researcher prepares a list of predetermined questions to offer participants a chance to address the

fundamental issues. In qualitative research, the researcher collects data to learn from the study (Creswell, 2012).

In qualitative research, Patton (1980) stated the researcher's task is to provide a framework within which participants may respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their points of view about the world or that part of the world about which they are talking, "methodologically, carefully, and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon. How they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, and talk about it to others" (Patton, 2001, p. 104).

For this study, the researcher conducted interviews, asking the same series of predetermined, open-ended questions of all study participants (Appendix C). Creswell (2012) suggested that asking open-ended questions during qualitative research not only provokes open-ended responses, it allows interviewees to express themselves "unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings" (p. 218).

### **Instrumentation**

The instruments used in this study was a demographic questionnaire and interview questions. Interview questions (Appendix C) were developed using Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory of retention. Tinto (1975, 1993) theorized that a student's decision to leave an institution is grounded in one of two realms: academic or social. In the academic or educational system, a student must have a certain level of commitment to personal goals, such as achieving high grades or graduation, to continue to be motivated and persist. At the same time, a student must demonstrate a certain level of social commitment to the institution, typically evidenced through a social network and school pride. The combination of personal goals and social commitment to

the institution ultimately leads to a student's decision to remain in school, hence, the theory of retention (Burke, 2019).

### **Research Context and Setting**

All participants in this study had participated in athletic competition at a Michigan-based community college. Michigan has 28 public community colleges with an average student age of 25.7 (MCCA, 2020). As for age ranges: 56.1 % are students aged 18-24; 19.73% are aged 25-34; and, 35 and older students represent slightly under 15% of the total Michigan public community college population. As for other demographic data: 56.16% of students are women while 43.84% are men; 64.55% of students identify as White; 17.05% of students are African American; 4.1% of students are Hispanic American; and, 2.2 % of students are Asian American.

Michigan community colleges provide a range of programs to meet the ever-increasing need of the local community for post-secondary educational opportunities. By statute, a Michigan community college may offer only course work leading to less than a baccalaureate degree. The programs offered tend to fall into the following categories: liberal arts and professional programs; vocational-technical programs; and, apprenticeship instruction programs (MPCC, n.d.). The settings for this study are public community college campuses located in the Midwest region of the United States, specifically in the state of Michigan.

### **Population Sample and Selection**

The population of participants in this study were African American male former student-athletes from community colleges who succeeded on their educational pathway. For this study, succeeding on an educational pathway meant either college completion or transfer to a four-year college. Sixteen in-depth interviews were conducted with African American men who were former community college student-athletes.

The researcher used two methods to identify and select participants for this study, purposeful sampling and chain sampling. According to Patton (2002), purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources and to ensure the participation of individuals who are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest. In addition to knowledge and experience, the researcher focused on each participant's availability, willingness to participate, and ability to communicate his experiences in a reflective manner, which Creswell (2002) noted is very important.

The chain sampling technique, also known as the snowball technique, takes place once the study has already commenced. In chain sampling, the researcher asked participants to recommend other individuals for study participation (Creswell, 2012). The researcher contacted current Michigan community college athletic staff, including athletic directors, administrators, coaches, and other staff, and asked them to identify participants who met the following criteria:

1. Must be an African American male and have attended a Michigan community college within the last 10 years.
2. Must have completed a certificate or associate degree or successfully transferred to a four-year institution.
3. Must have been an eligible student-athlete for at least two seasons in his respective sport.

Once several initial participants were identified, the researcher asked study participants to identify other African American male former Michigan community college student-athletes who fit the criteria and might consider participation in the study.

### **Confidentiality of Participants**

Each participant was treated anonymously. The participant's initials and a series of four numbers were assigned in place of each participant's real name and other markers that could identify the student were removed.

To further ensure confidentiality, electronic recordings and documents, including interview transcripts and demographic surveys, were saved to a USB drive. Paper copies of transcripts and surveys were placed in a folder, and both the USB and folder will remain in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home office.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher employed two data collection methods, a demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. An explanation of each method follows.

#### **Demographic Questionnaire**

Initial contact was made with each participant through either phone call, text message, or Facebook Messenger during which time the researcher gauged the participant's interest in being a part of the study and, if so, asking participants to complete an online demographic survey (Appendix A). The demographic survey form included the participant's consent to participate along with general information and questions about their educational and athletic history, family of origin, and parents' level of education. To encourage participation, each participant was offered a gas card in exchange for their involvement in the study.

Once the survey was completed and returned, the researcher contacted participants to schedule interviews.

## **Semi-structured Interviews**

The interviews were semi-structured where the researcher sets the outline for the topics covered, but the interviewee's responses determine the way, in which the interview is directed (Longhurst, 2003). The interviews allowed participants the freedom to answer the question their way, while the researcher probes the participant to continuously elaborate on their response. Once scheduled, participants were provided a list of interview questions for their perusal. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and concerns for the health of the researcher and participants, all interviews were conducted either via phone or the audio/video apps of Zoom, What'sApp, or Facetime.

Before each interview, the researcher explained the purpose and voluntary nature of the interview and asked whether he had any questions regarding the interview questions. Participants also were advised to treat the session more like a conversation than an interview. During the interview, the research took copious notes. As data for a qualitative analysis typically derives from fieldwork, these notes included firsthand observations of interactions, sometimes as a participant-observer (Patton, 2001). The term fieldwork refers to all of the activities one does when at the physical site of a cultural group, such as listening, observing, conversing, recording, interpreting, and dealing with logistical, ethical, and political issues (Wolcott, 1995). Using a qualitative method, the researcher sought to capture what participants have to say in their own words. Qualitative measures allow for in-depth descriptions of individual experiences and permit the researcher to record and understand people in their terms (Patton, 1980).

The researcher electronically recorded the conversation using a digital voice recorder. Before turning on the recorder, the researcher reminded participants the interview would be recorded so as to accurately capture comments. Participants also were informed they could stop

the interview or strike comments from the official transcript at any time. The same interview procedure was used for each participant in that the same questions were asked in order. This allowed for clarifying questions and open-ended dialogue to fully gather participants' perceptions of their experiences while attending a Michigan community college as a student-athlete.

The researcher designed each interview to begin with open-ended, exploratory questions so as to help the participant self-reflect on his time as an athlete, to build rapport with each participant, and to facilitate an in-depth interview model. This research design allows the researcher and the participant to interact comfortably and. According to Patton, "Direct quotations are a basic source of raw data in qualitative measurement, revealing respondents' level of emotion, how they have organized their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions" (Patton, 1980, p. 28). The advantages of open-ended questions include the possibility of eliciting spontaneous responses from participants, thereby avoiding any bias that may result from suggesting responses to participants through close-ended questions (Reja et al., 2003). Open-ended questions allow the researcher to find out what people's lives, experiences, and interactions mean to them in their terms and their natural settings (Patton, 1980). Follow-up questions were also asked to clarify statements or elicit more information.

At the conclusion of the interview, participants were reminded they could contact the researcher at any time and ask that their comments be excluded from the study. Also at this time, a professional transcriber was enlisted to transcribe the entire interview session, and the researcher converted his interview notes into an electronic format. Finally, all transcripts and interview notes were uploaded to Nvivo, a qualitative research analysis software tool for data analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

The researcher used the Nvivo program to analyze data collected from participant interviews (Saldaña, 2013). This program is appropriate for this study because it includes a variety of tools that analyze and review qualitative data. One of its most important tools is its text analyzer, which can find common keywords and phrases throughout different text documents. The researcher can upload survey responses and use the text analyzer to identify recurring themes. Nvivo also provides a word cloud tool that reviews all uploaded text data, identifies words that are frequently used, and groups them together into a cluster to visualize emerging themes.

Yin's (2011) five-step approach to data analysis was used to analyze the textual data. Yin's process included the following steps: (1) compiling the data; (2) disassembling the data; (3) reassembling the data; (4) interpreting the meaning of the data; and, (5) concluding the data. In step one, I compiled the data from interviews, transcribing voice to text.

For step two of Yin's (2011) data analysis approach, I disassembled the data to reduce and eliminate non-common themes through coding. This process helped to give meaning to all data collected. To accomplish this step, the researcher created four categories with which to organize information: (a) academic and athletic experiences, (b) forms of support, (c) journey to community college, and (d) K-12 miseducation. These four categories were informed by the four research questions, which are intended to explore the perceptions of African American male former athletes concerning the support and encouragement they received while in pursuit of an associate degree at Michigan community colleges.

Once these four categories were identified, digital folders were created for each, and the researcher read through the interview transcripts and selected quotes and stories that best

explained each's participant's perception of each of the four categories. The researcher found the digital folders necessary as they allowed the researcher to file statements from different participants into one location. Once quotes were filed in their appropriate folders, the researcher could see which participants mentioned any given topic within one of the four categories.

In step three, I reassembled the data, developing groupings, clusters, and core themes so as to begin to develop a deeper insight into the meaning of the data. To ensure accuracy at this step, I reviewed interviews by continuously listening to recordings and reading transcripts while highlighting key words and terms. This step of the data analysis process consisted of dividing each of the broader four categories into smaller subsections. If six or more participants expressed identical concepts, a subcategory was created. Lastly, the researcher reviewed each of the subcategories for duplicate thoughts or ideas.

For step four, *interpreting the meaning of the data*, I checked patterns against the interview transcripts and used member checking to thoroughly validate the data. Also at the stage, I again reviewed the study's research questions and theoretical framework, Tinto's theory of retention. These measures prepared me for the final step in which I summarized the data into nine themes. These five methods of data analysis used ensured the accuracy and authenticity of the study.

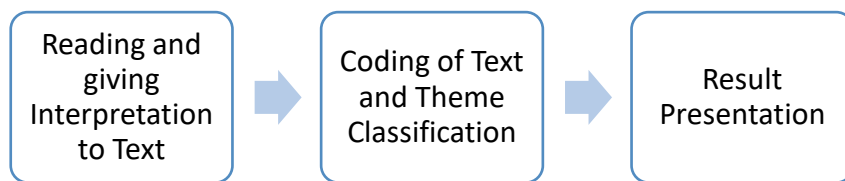
### *Coding Process*

The coding process is used to identify the main ideas from the transcripts so as to provide concrete answers to the research questions (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Overarching themes and categories do not always come directly from the literature, but rather develop from the words and phrases of participants (Strauss & Corbin 1990). The coding process was aided by NVivo, a

qualitative analysis software program, and was conducted in three phases. Figure 2 shows the three phases. A discussion of each phase follows in turn.

**Figure 2**

*The Three Phases of Coding*



**Reading and Interpretation of Text**

This phase involves reading the data several times to fully grasp what participants describe. A word-cloud diagram (Figure 3), generated by Nvivo, sorts the frequency of words found in the data by font size with words in larger font sizes appearing more frequently than words in smaller font. The word-cloud diagram was helpful in comparing how and whether words in the data matched with words from the study's literature review. This was done to assess if the most used words are in agreement with the study keywords. The diagram revealed that *schools*, *academics*, *college*, *basketball*, and *education*, among other key words from the data, aligned with key research terms.

### Analysis Stage Word-Cloud Diagram



## Presentation of Findings

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### **Researcher's Positionality**

The researcher, Yusuf Sabree, was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, the principal city of Wayne County. He was raised in a middle-class, two-parent household with a younger brother and younger sister, both of whom acquired their Juris Doctorates from Michigan State College of Law. Both parents also earned higher education degrees, his father an undergraduate degree from Michigan State University and a Juris Doctorate from Detroit College of Law/Michigan State College of Law, his mother a Bachelor of Arts degree from Lincoln University (Pennsylvania) and a master's degree from Marygrove College (Michigan). His father is currently an elected official, serving as Wayne County Treasurer, and his mother is a retired Detroit Public School District administrator and State of Michigan consultant.

Athletics has been a significant part of the researcher's life since he was young. Noticing the researcher's passion for sports, his parents invested in his sports training and development. As a result, the researcher earned a basketball scholarship to Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, ahead of his younger sister and brother, who also received full basketball scholarships. Upon graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Lincoln University, the researcher returned to Detroit and began teaching at Highland Park Career Academy, an alternative high school in Highland Park, Michigan. During his two years at the Highland Park Career Academy, he provided for overall leadership and coordination of the men's basketball program, coached the team, and worked with school staff to ensure student-athletes remained academically eligible.

The researcher then accepted an offer to teach at Detroit's Covenant House, also an alternative high school. While at Covenant House, the researcher earned a master's in sports administration from Wayne State University's College of Education. Soon after, the researcher

was promoted to assistant administrator at Covenant House academy, implementing programs and processes focused on student retention and positive social behavior and participating in the development of policies and regulations that affected student development, student achievement, and conditions for success. The researcher also worked with other staff as part of a team to increase parental and community involvement so as to help students reach their educational goals. While working as an educator and administrator in alternative high schools, the researcher continued his participation in basketball, mostly as a coach.

The researcher spent 10 years as a basketball coach, the last 4 of which as a successful head varsity basketball coach, which he believes was time well spent. In four years, the researcher helped a Detroit-based charter school make history by reaching the Detroit Charter League Conference Championship three times and winning the championship twice, a school first. Along with the school's success, the researcher helped 17 student-athletes to receive basketball scholarships to 2- or 4-year or two-year college or university basketball programs. Unfortunately, many of the scholarship athletes did not remain enrolled for various reasons and returned home to attend local schools or to obtain employment. It was this experience that inspired the researcher to undertake this study to explore the experiences of African American male student-athletes who succeeded in their educational pathway so as to contribute to the critical research of retention within this specific group of African American male athletes in colleges and universities.

Currently, the researcher is District Dean of Student Services in Wayne County Community College District. As an employee of Wayne County Community College and a lifelong Wayne County resident, the researcher feels obligated to help and uplift students in his community. As a Student Services staff member, the researcher has interactive relationships with

students and student-athletes on campus and across the district. Athletic compliance is yet another of his responsibilities as the researcher serves as liaison between athletics and central administration, ensuring the athletic department complies with NJCAA regulations and that athletic department needs are met.

The researcher fully acknowledges his role as a researcher and understands his career, life experiences, and passion for collegiate athletics and African American well-being are interwoven in the study. The researcher's connection to the research topic as an African American man and former collegiate student-athlete is not one he disregards but embraces. The researcher's goal is to present the data as it exists – not as he perceives it to exist, but truthfully through the eyes and voices of the participants (Patton, 2001). The researcher used rigorous data collection, transcription, and analysis techniques along with theoretical guidance to illuminate the findings and to reduce biases or preconceptions that might influence interpretation of the data.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness combines the aspects of reliability and validity. For instance, the criterion of dependability in integrity entails a process in which a study can provide evidence of how qualitative conclusions were reached and whether under similar circumstances another researcher might follow the same procedures to obtain similar results (Melnik & Fineout-Overholt, 2010). While there are different ways to establish trustworthiness, this study incorporated Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four tenets of trustworthiness—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—to parallel the conventional quantitative assessment criteria of validity and reliability. As for credibility, Lincoln and Guba claimed the credibility of a study is determined when co-researchers or readers recognize an experience when confronted by it. Transferability, Lincoln and Guba's second tenet of trustworthiness, refers to

the generalizability of inquiry. In qualitative research, this concerns only to case-to-case transfer (Tobin & Begley, 2004). As such, the researcher is responsible for providing thick descriptions such that those who seek to transfer the findings to their own site can judge transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve dependability, the researcher must ensure the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented such that when readers examine the research process, they are better able to judge the dependability of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Finally, confirmability is concerned with establishing that the researcher's interpretations and findings are clearly derived from the data, requiring the researcher to demonstrate how conclusions and interpretations have been reached (Tobin & Begley, 2004). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), confirmability is established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all achieved.

This study used a combination of analysis techniques to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the research. These techniques include member checking and the use of the theory of connoisseurship. A discussion of each technique and its role in the data analysis process follows.

### *Member Checking*

The researcher adds credibility by using member checking, which provided the researcher the opportunity to understand and assess what the participants intended to do through his actions. Using member checking after each interview will allow the interview subject to check for the validity, accuracy, and completeness of the interviews while ensuring the participant's words are correctly captured and verifying the participant's information, feedback, validation, and appropriateness of the participant interviews (Morse et al., 2002). During interviews, the researcher restated or summarized the information for the participant and check the validity of

statements for accuracy through questioning. Participants will then either agree or disagree that the summary provided reflects their views, feelings, and experiences, and if accuracy and completeness are affirmed, the study is then said to have credibility (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checks involve sharing all findings with all participants, allowing them to critically analyze and comment on the findings (Creswell, 2013). Once interviews were conducted, the researcher conducts his interviews, he then asked the participants if what they said was correct and the recordings are accurate. The researcher went through each question and response with the participant and ask the participant if what they said was truly what they wanted to say and if any language is unclear, the researcher asked the participant to repeat what they meant to ensure clarity of each interview. Once the transcript is created for each interview, the researcher again asked the participant to read over the transcript to ensure authenticity and accuracy of their words.

### *Theory of Connoisseurship*

The theory of connoisseurship can be used to validate data. As with the art of an image, connoisseurship uses the arts to paint a picture of a story. Connoisseurship allows the experiences of the researcher to yield insights not immediately accessible to others not similarly positioned because of his background. The researcher can look, see, and understand the complexities, challenges, and successes expressed through participants with a wealth of experience to the leadership knowledge-base. Connoisseurship theory can be displayed in any realm in which the character, import, or value of objects, situations, and performances is distributed and variable, including educational practice (Eisner, 1998).

Connoisseurship marks the quality of the relationship between the connoisseur and his or her area of expertise. The word *connoisseurship* comes from the Latin *conserve to know* (Eisner,

1998). It involves the ability to see, not merely to look. To accomplish this, the researcher must develop the ability to name and appreciate the different dimensions of situations and experiences and the ways in which they relate one to another (Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014). Eisner (1998) defines connoisseurship as the ability to make fine-grained discriminations among complex and subtle qualities.

According to Uhrmacher, McConnell, and Flinders (2016), one can be a connoisseur of any subject or topic about which people care deeply and for which they develop an abiding interest. In this study, the researcher provides more than an interest in athletic and community college. The researcher lived the experience of a student athlete and has a strong understanding of the function of community college given his seven years of experience in community college administration.

The researcher's experience as a former African American college athlete and an administrator in a Michigan community college makes him a connoisseur in this study. The researcher's experience alone uniquely qualifies him to conduct this study, interpret its findings, and offer advice as to the study's application. The previous section on Researcher's positionality provided a detailed discussion of skills and competencies in higher education.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 included a detailed description of the methodology used to conduct this qualitative study, along with details of the components of data collection and analysis. This study used qualitative research methodology to explore the perceptions of factors of academic and athletic success for former successful African American community college student-athletes. Through their own voices, participants revealed the factors they believed led to their academic and athletic success and provided valuable insights regarding their lived experiences.

## **Chapter 4 – FINDINGS**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of African American male former student-athletes who succeeded on their educational pathway and to identify the supportive services African American former student-athletes reported as contributing to their academic success. For the purpose of this study, educational pathway success meant the student earned either a certificate, an associate degree, or transferred to a four-year educational institution. Specifically, this study (a) explored the perceptions of successful African American community college student-athletes and their sense of campus culture (i.e., environment/belonging) as it pertains to academic success, (b) explored the successful African American community college student-athletes' perspective of support services that influenced completion of their academic goal, and (c) provided additional insight as to how and why these African American male community college athletes were able to navigate the community college system.

The first three chapters of this dissertation: described African American male student-athletes as being among the most at-risk college populations in the United States; reviewed the literature surrounding the unique academic and social experiences that promote or deter African American student-athletes' college completion or transfer to a four-year college, as well as the support or encouragement needed to reach college completion; and, described the methodological design used in this study. This chapter presents the findings and the nine themes that emerged following analysis of data collected during interviews with the study's 16 participants and as aligned with the study's four research questions.

The chapter begins with the profiles of the 16 participants as derived from the demographic questionnaire each participant completed. Following a presentation of participant

profiles, the chapter continues with a presentation of the findings an alignment of interview questions with each research question and the nine themes that emerged from analysis of participant interviews. To ensure accuracy, the researcher reviewed interviews by continuously listening to recordings and reading transcripts while highlighting key words and terms.

### **Participant Profiles**

Sixteen men participated in this study, each of whom self-identified as African American former community college student-athletes. All participants played basketball at a Michigan community college in Southeast Michigan. At the time of the interview, each participant had completed one of the following self-identified goals: a certification, an associate degree, and/or a transfer to a four-year college or university.

Prior to each interview, participants received a demographic questionnaire via email. The questionnaire gathered statistical information to help gain a better understanding of each participant's educational aspirations and achievements and to learn more about their family's educational background. Table 1 shows a compilation of data from this questionnaire.

Table 1 represents the number of participants who share the same demographic characteristics. Column one labels the demographic characteristic and column two labels the percentage and the number of participants who fall into the same demographic characteristic category.

### **Presentation of Findings by Research Question**

This section of the study reveals the *voices* of the participants. The section is divided into two parts. The first part provides a selection of participant responses to each interview question. Interview questions are grouped with the research question to which they are aligned. This

section also provides a brief summary of all participant answers by research question. The second part of this section includes the nine themes that emerged from the data analysis process.

**Table 1**

***Participants' Demographic Characteristics***

Demographic Characteristic	Percent (Number of Participants)
Percent of participants who were first-generation college students.	44 (7)
Percent of participants academically qualified to attend a four-year institution following high school but who instead chose to attend a Michigan community college.	75 (12)
Percent of participants who spent two years at a community college before earning a certificate or associate degree or transferring to a four-year institution.	100 (16)
Percent of participants who stated that, upon enrolling in a community college, their goals were to play basketball and to earn an associate degree.	12.5 (2)
Percent of participants who stated that, upon enrolling in a community college, their goals were to play basketball and to transfer to a 4-year college or university.	88 (14)
Percent of participants who completed their academic goal in one year.	12.5 (2)
Percent of participants who completed their academic goal within two years.	75 (12)
Percent of participants who completed their academic goal within three years.	12.5 (2)
Percent of participants whose parents obtained either a high school diploma or GED.	63 (10)
Percent of participants who reported that at least one parent completed some college.	56 (9)
Percent of participants raised by grandparents.	19 (3)
Number of participants who reported a parent had dropped out of middle school.	6 (1)
Percent of participants who had no knowledge of their father's level of education.	25 (4)

## Alignment of Research Questions and Interview Questions

Table 2 shows the alignment of research questions with the corresponding interview question(s). Representative answers to each interview question follow in turn.

**Table 2**

### *Alignment of Research Questions with Interview Questions*

Research Questions	Corresponding Interview Questions
#1 – How do African American male former student-athletes who played sports at Michigan community colleges describe their academic experiences?	<p>#2 – Explain some of the obstacles you faced in your educational and athletic journey before arriving at community college.</p> <p>#5 – Tell me about your academic performance during your year(s) in community college.</p> <p>#7 – Tell me about the most prevalent academic challenges you faced as a community college student-athlete</p> <p>#10 – If you could give incoming community college student-athletes some advice about becoming a student-athlete, what would it be?</p> <p>#11 – Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about your success/lack of success in navigating the community college system?</p>
#2 – How do African American male former student-athletes describe the events leading to their becoming athletes in community college?	<p>#1 – Tell me how your family upbringing contributed to you attending community college?</p> <p>#2 – Explain some of the obstacles you faced in your educational and athletic journey before arriving at community college.</p>
#3 – How do African American male former student-athletes describe the influence of internal and external support systems on their academic success?	<p>#6 – Tell me about your relationship with faculty and staff. How did they or didn't they help contribute to student athletic experience?</p> <p>#9 – Tell me about your relationship with your teammates. Did they help contribute to your athletic experience? Academic experience? Why?</p>
#4 – How do African American male former student-athletes describe the influence that participation in collegiate	#3 – Tell me about the role of athletics played in your life leading up to your participation in intercollegiate athletics at the community college level.

sports had on their academic success?	#11 – Is there anything else you’d like to share with me about your success/lack of success in navigating the community college system?
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In the next section, the researcher displays the research questions, the interview questions, and, in bold type and based on the theoretical framework and literature review, the researcher’s perception of the influences former African American male athlete’s experience at Michigan Community Colleges.

***Research question one – How do African American male former student-athletes who played sports at Michigan community colleges describe their academic experiences?***

In answer to interview question two—*Explain some of the obstacles you faced in your educational and athletic journey before arriving at community college*—one participant stated:

When you say obstacles, what do you mean? Of course, you know, I went to the City High School in Detroit, but after my junior year, after we won the states, I had a little... I don’t know how you want to put it, I just stopped going to—in the middle of my 12th-grade year—I stopped going to school period. **(Prior Schooling)**

Another participant said:

So, in terms of my education, I just never liked school at all. So, it was kind of hard for me to like, because I was always sports, sports, sports, sports (But I knew that you needed school, so, I mean, that’s really part of the reason why I even ended up at a JUCO [junior college] because of my grades, weren’t that great. **(Prior Schooling; Skills and Abilities)** So that was really hard for me to, like, you know, balance that out because I just never really was interested in school

In response to interview question five—*Tell me about your academic performance during your year(s) in community college*—one participant stated:

It was pretty good. I stayed on our Dean's list because I kind of cut myself short in high school by falling by the wayside. Like I said, I only took the ACT once, my grades weren't as good as they should have been, from just applying myself, focusing too much on the court, and not as much in the classroom (**Prior Schooling**). I had a chip on my shoulder going into college, you know. I wanted to fix that, I want to correct that. So, I was on the Dean's list, pretty much the entire time I was in community college. I think I graduated with a 3.5 GPA. (**Academic Performance; Academic Integration**)

Another participant said:

Well, started off good, and then took a dip because I put basketball first before I put education first. And at the time, I didn't understand it, and Coach T (just told me, 'Get out,' because he figured, 'You are putting sports before your education, and that's not what we do.' And he always had been like that. So, he told me don't come back until I get my grades straight. (**Faculty and Staff Interactions**) And it hurt me because I couldn't see my friends, I couldn't do without, you know, just kick it with them and to...you miss the little stuff. But he made me see the bigger picture of everything, which was my education. Here, my friends are doing well in class, they are doing this, they are doing that. It turned me on. It made me, like I said, see the bigger picture of education is more important than bouncing this basketball. (**Peer Group Interactions; Intentions**) Because they can take this basketball away from me, but they can't take this education away from me. So, right then and there, I got my grades back on, and I did what I was supposed to do. (**Academic Integration; Academic Performance**)

In response to interview question seven—*Tell me about the most prevalent academic challenges you faced as a community college student-athlete*—one participant stated:

So, it's hard, like balancing all that because, in college, you know, you got the school part of it, and you got to get up for workouts and stuff like that, so it's just school and basketball. And then you got people wanting to hang out with you at school, and it was hard, you know, juggling that every single day, because it's not like a couple of days process – it is every single day process. **(Goals and Institutional Commitments; Academic Performance)** You got to focus on school, where you got homework every single day, and like, four or five different classes, and then you got to also focus on basketball, which is really what I really want to focus on, but then I got to do schoolwork before I even get to do this basketball stuff. **(Academic Integration)** It was hard, man. I say, like, juggling both at the same time, and I can only imagine that at the university would have been even harder. But it was hard, for sure.

Another participant stated:

No, not really, because when I put my mind to it, all I had to do was to do it. So, it takes for me to focus on taking care of my business in the classroom to get on the court and get it done, so not really. **(Goals and Institutional Commitments; Academic Performance; Academic Integration)** There wasn't really too many challenges, as far as that goes.

In answering interview question 10—*If you could give incoming community college student-athletes some advice about becoming a student-athlete, what would it be?*—one participant stated:

You've got to stay organized, and you've got to lock in because it's different from a JUCO and the university, because at the university, most of the time, you are at the place where you want to be, like at a JUCO, you are working, going to go to a higher level.

Most of the time, most people are working to go to a different school. So, you got to really lock-in, you got to really focus on what's important. Like, all that other stuff? Those distractions? Like, you don't even need to worry about that. **(Intentions; Goals and Institutional Commitments)**

Another participant stated:

I would tell him that if your grades are up, that's the biggest thing. Like, if you have good grades and you can play, the coach can't deny you. Like, there is no reason because some coaches actually look out for people to have good grades on the team, they kind of show them leniency because they know they're going to be there, they're not going to be ineligible. So, I just tell them, like, keep your grades up, work hard. That's it, really.

**(External Commitments; Academic Performance; Goals and Institutional Commitments)**

In response to interview question 11—*Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about your success/lack of success in navigating the community college system?*—one participant stated:

You know, make sure you have a goal set of where you want to be in two years – if it's one year, two years, however long you want to do, you know, your process. You don't want to be there longer than three years, but idealistically, just two years. Get it done.

**(Goals and Institutional Commitments)** Take the extra classes in the summer if you have to, to make sure you graduate on time. **(External Commitments; Academic Integration)** So that would be my suggestion, is to have an idea, and then go and strive for it.

Another participant stated:

If I could go back and know what I know now, I would probably be a 4.0 student because I will go in there and just do all my work and just mind my business and I will be perfectly fine. So, that's it really, just doing the work.

A third participant mentioned:

Oh, the same thing, man. Like I said, it's the family, dude – it's more than just basketball. When it becomes personal, I think that, as a student-athlete or athlete alone, you need to realize that you're building relationships for life, it's not just why you're here for your two years, you know? **(Peer Group Interactions; Social Integration)** You just come across people who genuinely care, and that's not something that you ideally see here in the city at all.

Participants' academic challenges at the community college level varied between the lack of support in high school to having no motivation to attend classes. Some participants had no problem with classes while others had to learn how to study and how to become organized. In their advice to future students, some participants gave their recipe for community college success, including goal setting and organization in life and in school while others mentioned there is no grey area – that student-athletes have to study hard and complete the work.

For research question 1, the following themes emerged through interview questions 2, 7, 5, 10, and 11 – Theme 1.1: Academic Challenges at the Community College Level; Theme 1.2: Academic Performance in Community College; and, Theme 1.3: Recipe for Success in Sports and Academics.

***Research question two – How do African American male former student-athletes describe the events leading to their becoming athletes in community college?***

In response to interview question one—*Tell me how your family upbringing contributed to you attending community college?*—one participant stated:

My dad would always push for me to have something better than what he had. So, he would always tell me that, you know, he's working hard for us to have a better life.

**(Family Background)** So, when he saw that I was interested in basketball and stuff, he just tried to push me.

Another participant stated:

I will say, as far as my mom being the boss, my mom, she made a lot of sacrifices, for sure, which is me being able to go to school in general, again, back and forth to school.

**(Family Background)** So, there were a lot of sacrifices made for me to get to where I am now, and for me to even be able to make it [to] JUCO and make it out of high school. So, she made a lot of sacrifices, sure that.

Another participant mentioned his family upbringings, stating:

My upbringing – they helped a lot, they contributed a lot. Just staying on me, making sure that I put education first and get good grades and all that. They prioritized education in my life, and just making sure—no matter if it's community college or university—that I was going to go to college. **(Family Background; Prior Schooling)** They already did put that in my head, so prioritize that. I just chose to go to community college on my own. They were just happy I was in college, regardless.

In answer to interview question two—*Explain some of the obstacles you faced in your educational and athletic journey before arriving at community college*—one participant said, “Just steer clear away from the drug dealers, just outside people that are just doing things that I don't have no business doing. I knew them, but I knew to steer clear from them.”( Obstacles)

In response to interview question #2, another participant stated:

Well, coming out of Detroit Public Schools, one of the obstacles was, unfortunately, I found out that I really didn't know how to study. **(Prior Schooling)** And that was a big thing for me, because, when I got to college, you know, through high school, as an athlete, I could wing it, I was pretty intelligent. And sometimes, that could work against you, when you don't apply yourself as much in the classroom.

Family influence is important for a young African American male. A few participants mentioned a father, mother, or someone in their immediate family, pushing them and giving them the support they needed to get to and stay in college. For some participants, family was the only reason they were introduced to community college in the first place. With this family support, some participants still faced challenges prior to attending community college – challenges such as having to continue to make good choices and to avoid troubled areas and bad influences that might otherwise interfere with educational attainment. Yet another challenge mentioned more than once was the lack of educational support participants received prior to attending community college. Some participants felt educationally unequipped and lacked the tools to succeed at the college level.

For research question two, two themes were arrived at through interview questions one and two – Theme 2.1: Family Influence and Theme 2.2: Pre-College Challenges.

***Research question three – How do African American male former student-athletes describe the influence of internal and external support systems on their academic success?***

In answer to interview question six—*Tell me about your relationship with faculty and staff. How did they or didn't they help contribute to student athletic experience?*—one participant stated:

I had a couple of teachers who were pretty hands-on with me, you know? – definitely were trying to make sure I use my brain to succeed and couple of them would come to the games as well to support. I would say probably maybe three teachers that were supportive.**(Faculty Staff Interaction)**

Another participant said:

Some faculty help a lot at community college, they actually care about their student. But some other faculty there, if you need help or something, they just tell you to try to get a tutor or something, they don't really open up their office and stuff. But some faculty are actually there to help, but there are some that don't.**(Faculty Staff Interaction)** They just want to get paid and go home.

One participant shared a different perspective, stating:

Our head coach is like our staff and faculty – he ain't playing. Back then, we didn't know that I always have my whole life. I've had coaches that yell. **(Faculty Staff Interactions; External Commitments)** And you could tell in the practice what athletes weren't used to being yelled at, or they just didn't have the coach that yell. So, we had a head coach who said, 'You do something wrong, you get yelled at. Your grades is not up, you get yelled at.'

In answer to interview question nine—*So, what was your relationship like with your teammates? Did they help?*—one participant stated:

In college, I would say definitely more athletically than opposed to academically.

Everyone was in different majors and additional programs, so a lot of us didn't relate because we were in different majors and different programs. So, I would say no, academically. Basketball-wise, of course – you're going to war with these guys every

day. So, I will definitely say on the basketball court, yes. **(Peer Group Interactions; Social Integration)**

Another participant stated:

Oh, we all brothers right till this day. Actually, anybody that has been to Wayne County under the leadership of Mr. H and Coach T are all my brothers **(Faculty and Staff Interaction)**. That speaks to the togetherness all by itself on how that Wayne County was a big factor in my life for us, getting out of the streets and being able to think outside of the court. **(Peer Group Interactions; Social Integration; Extracurricular Activities)** Right now, today, anybody that played under Coach T or Mr. H, we all still look at each other as brothers. We all communicate, help each other out as we can right now as we speak.

Participants referred to teammates as their brothers, as family. Teammates have been helpful and motivational as well as life-savers to their fellow teammates with regards to helping them to stay eligible and to stay focused on goals. Faculty and staff play a major role in the academic pursuits of African American male student-athletes. Some participants said professors cared a great deal about them and provided help and support with assignments while other faculty made it hard for participants, for whatever reasons, and seemed motivated more so by a paycheck than by helping participants achieve. Each participant referred to his relationship with the head coach. The head coach meant the most in the participant's journey because the head coach determined each participant's athletic future. As such, the actions and words of the coach meant the most to participants.

For research question three, three themes were arrived at through interview questions six and nine – Theme 3.1: Teammates’ Influences; Theme 3.2: Coach’s Influence; and, Theme 3.3: Faculty and Staff Influence.

***Research question four – How do African American male former student-athletes describe the influence that participation in collegiate sports had on their academic success?***

In answer to interview question three—*Tell me about the role of athletics played in your life leading up to your participation in intercollegiate athletics at the community college level*—one participant stated:

So, I originally started out playing in Macomb, and I got into some trouble. **(Prior Schooling)** I was removed from the team, and I ended up getting my grades in order, and I met with Coach C, and he gave me an opportunity to move past my mistakes, and I got a chance to improve as a student and also just take the game that I love a whole lot more serious than just playing basketball. **(Faculty and Staff Interactions; Intentions; Academic Performance; Goals and Institutional Commitments)** If you want to be a college athlete, you have to not only, you know, take care of your body as an athlete and show up to practices every day, but you also have to show the class and add those extras just as much as you were part of practice. **(Extracurricular Activities)** Three or four hours of practice for basketball, you have to give three or four hours to academics, you have to give four or five hours to academics, because that may not be your strong suit.

Another participant stated:

Well, to be honest with you, you know, I was on the north end, and basically, I fell in love with basketball. So, I knew in order to play, I had to stay eligible. **(Prior Schooling)** So what it did, it gave me enough discipline to know that in order to play, I had to

maintain a 2-point up. And so, most of the time, I got a 2.3, a 2.7, but most of the time, I was in that realm. And so I worked hard, I did terribly, I could have did better, but basically, like I said, at that time in high school, I didn't know how to balance myself academically, and with regular things that's going on in life. (**Academic Integration; Academic Performance**)

In response to interview question 11—*Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about your success/lack of success in navigating the community college system?*—one participant gave the following advice:

I guess my advice that I do, even with my kids, is stay focused and get your routine, stay on your schedule, you know, be true to your schedule. I think a lot of people go to college, and you get so much more freedom, even with playing ball, you know. We play ball in high school, we usually practice from 3:30 to 8 o'clock at night. (**Intentions; Extra Curricular Activity; External Commitments**) When you are in college, it is like two hours. You really had a lot of free time, and if you weren't prepared, you can roll off to anything, you know? So, I think that's the biggest thing with sports is having time. Make sure you got a good schedule set up for your schoolwork and all that, and then you can still enjoy college. But you just got to make sure you take care of your business first. (**Goals and Institutional Commitments**)

Another participant stated:

For me, I was pretty successful, but if I would share anything, like I said, I would just preach the importance of taking real classes and knowing what you're taking. And taking academics more seriously, take it as serious or almost as serious as you are going to take playing out there or for practice because it's going to matter. (**Academic Integration;**

**Academic Performance)** The chances of you going pro are very, very slim, so you're going to need this education. And you have to be in the classes anyway, to get the grades to be able to play, so you might as well take it seriously while you are here. That's what I will say: I will focus all my attention on education. And I hope that community college will have more mentorship programs that have somebody like us to speak to people like us to help them understand it better.

To play a sport, each participant understood he must register for the correct class and to maintain a GPA that makes him eligible to play. The importance of achieving a GPA good enough to transfer to a four-year institution was additional incentive. The threat of not being able to play a sport because of academics motivated participants to get better grades. For some participants, this was easy. For others, it took effort to create new productive habits.

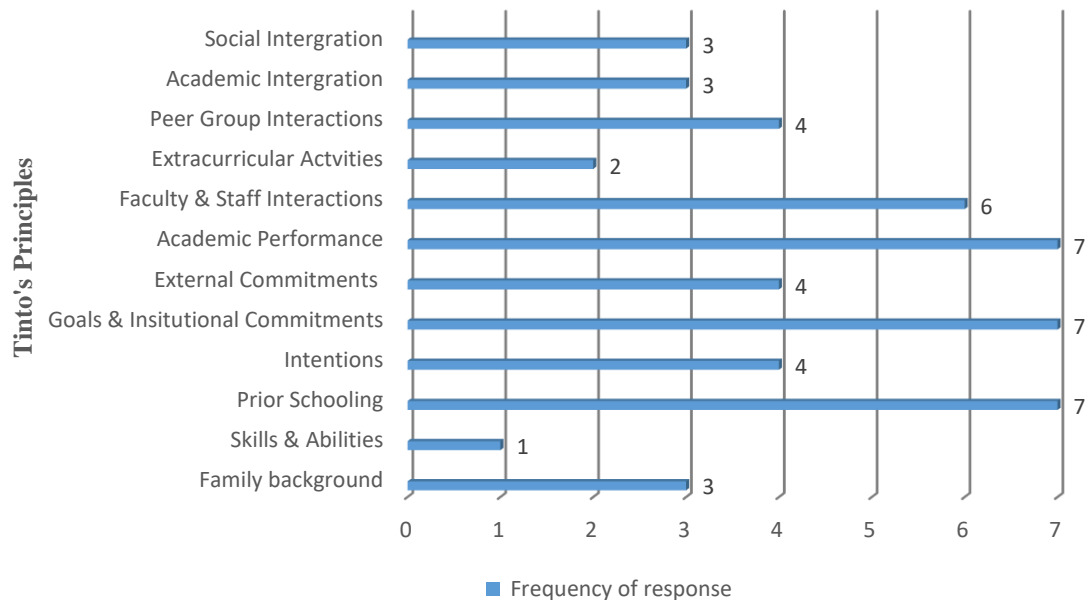
For research question four, one theme was arrived at through analysis of interview questions 3 and 11 – Theme 4.1: Influence of Athletic Participation on Academic Success.

Figure 4 shows the frequency of Tinto's principles as identified in participant responses to the interview questions. These principles were highlighted in the discussion of findings. Analyzing the findings of the study, participant's statements aligned with Tinto's principles of retention theory. The most dominant of Tinto's principles were Academic Performance, Goals and Institutional Commitments, and Prior Schooling. Statements from participants highlighted the importance of being academically prepared entering the community college as well as maintaining good grades in order to stay eligible to play and to reach completion. The second dominant factors were Faculty and Staff Interactions. A majority of the participants found their coach and caring professors to be a major influence in their lives. The help of coaches and professors motivated and challenged the participants academically, emotionally, and physically

to reach completion. Peer Group Interactions, External Commitments, and Intentions developed as the third most dominant principles in the findings. These principles were discussed often in participant statements and were discussed as important to participants. Being a part of a team created positive intentions for the participants, and participants relied on their teammates for support. Family Background, Academic and Social Integration were some of the least dominate principles. I believe participants relied heavily on their family background and influence; however, only a few participants discussed immediate family in this study. Most participants viewed their respective teammates as family. Academic and Social Integration became a part of the student athlete's life once they arrived on campus. Once the participant began to find their way, academic and social integration began. The least dominate principles were Skills and Abilities and Extracurricular Activities. Participants arrived at the community college knowing how to play a sport first and became a student second. Very few participants arrived academically equipped to successfully complete at the collegiate level. Not many of the participants discussed any skill outside of their athletic ability. Extracurricular Activities received the least amount of hits as a dominate principle because the participants sport was the extracurricular activity. Participants did not have the time to participate in anything outside of their sport team. The participants had goals to complete and transfer to a four-year institution, and in order to reach their goal, outside (non-athletic) activities were non-existent.

**Figure 4**

*Frequency of Principles Relative to Tinto's Theory of Student Retention*



## Emerging Themes

After a detailed examination of the interview transcripts, the researcher developed a word cloud of key words, word repetitions, and native terms used throughout the interviews. Words and terms were gathered, and data was coded and categorized. Consequently, each of the response categories revealed one or more associated themes that provided a deeper meaning to the data. A total of 102 topics emerged from the interviews from which the researcher disaggregated and collapsed the topics to arrive at nine major themes. The researcher then assigned each theme to its corresponding research question. Some participant responses provided enough information to cover more than one theme in this study. Questions 10 and 11 gave participants freedom to discuss information or to provide additional information not otherwise shared. Table 3 shows the study's four research questions as aligned with the nine themes that emerged through data analysis.

**Table 3**

*Themes by Research Question—*

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Research question #1 – How do African American male former student-athletes who played for Michigan community colleges describe their academic experiences?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Theme 1.1: Academic Challenges at the Community College Level</li><li>• Theme 1.2: Academic Performance in Community College</li><li>• Theme 1.3: Recipe for Success in Sports and Academics</li></ul>
Research question #2 – How do African American male former student-athletes describe the events leading to their becoming athletes in community colleges?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Theme 2.1: Family Influence</li><li>• Theme 2.2: Pre-college Challenges</li></ul>
Research question #3 – How do African American male former student-athletes describe the influences of internal and external support systems on their academic success?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Theme 3.1: Teammates' Influences</li><li>• Theme 3.2: Coach's Influence</li><li>• Theme 3.3: Faculty and Staff Influence</li></ul>
Research question #4 – How do African American male former student-athlete describe the influence that collegiate sports had on their academic success?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Theme 4.1: Influence of Athletic Participation on Academic Success</li></ul>

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***Research question one – How do African American male former student-athletes who played sports at Michigan community colleges describe their academic experiences?***

Three themes emerged that provided extensive information about the academic experiences of the participants: Theme 1.1: Academic Challenges at the Community College Level; Theme 1.2: Academic Performance in College; and Theme 1.3: Recipe for Success in Sports and Academics. These themes provided information on the academic experiences of this study's participants and were developed from a thorough examination of the interviews and research questions.

**Theme 1.1: Academic Challenges at the Community College Level.** Participants described transitioning from a high school lifestyle to college as one of their greatest challenges.

They expressed they did little or no studying before college and were less accountable for their actions. Those who had tutors were less strict on assignments before attending community college and less emphasis was placed on their academics. For many, the transition from high school to community college came with lots of pressure and major adjustments to personal routines. One participant described how 8:30 a.m. lectures required that he wake up early for the hours long journey to the lecture hall. He stated,

I had an 8:30 a.m. class that didn't end until 11:20 a.m., and we couldn't miss four classes. So, getting up every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and going in that class, and driving all the way out there, and going into that class, sitting there for three hours and knowing I can't miss it, that's probably one of my biggest challenges. We had to write multiple papers in there, and we had to write a couple of papers in class like, get there at 8:30, you got to type a paper in class at 9:30. That was a tough class. That class really opened my eyes to, like, this is a college.

Students expressed they were under pressure to maintain a considerable level of academic excellence to remain eligible for athletic participation and scholarship. Consequently, they needed to develop study habits, which proved challenging for most. One participant stated, "So, that first year, as I said, it wasn't that it was intimidating, it was just a lot of pressure because, guess what? Who wants to flunk out their first year? You don't want to flunk out your first."

Participants pointed out that they struggled to remain consistent and focused solely on academics and sports while in college because of the freedom that came with a college education. This was the first time in their lives that no parent watched them or gave them orders as to what to do on a regular basis. Maintaining focus was a significant challenge faced by many participants, including SD, who stated,

So that was one of my flaws, to stay focused. I had a problem. I was here and there... So, I had to make sure I keep myself focused on the grades and the basketball, that's all I had to do, and pay a few bills here and there, which was rent.

Some participants mentioned they struggled with time management while in college. They learned that maintaining a balance between sports and academics required exercising excellent time management. Unfortunately, most participants struggled with time management. Managing classroom activities with the demands of the sport was a big challenge for most participants, as one described:

I will say, preparing myself, actually, for, because you don't know what to expect, and giving myself time. We think we have a lot of time, and we don't, we don't have a lot of time. So, preparing myself, and I will say time, you know, because we think we have a lot of time, but we don't.

**Theme 1.2: Academic Performance in Community College.** While some participants performed well in academics, others struggled to adjust. Said one participant:

I had my bad grades in high school. So again, I sat myself down. I always thought to myself—always just ponder in my brain when I'm laying down, sitting down—that once I get to this restart, I'm starting from ground zero with a 4.0 starting off, that's how it's going to be. So now, like I said, I got to make sure I go to class, I got to make sure I study, I got to make sure I perform academically, and once I applied myself and motivated myself and continued to motivate myself, I continued to hold myself accountable, which, for a lot of people, I think, that's the biggest thing – people don't hold themselves accountable. A lot of people live in denial.

All participants pulled through, at varying GPAs. Participants expressed their desire to make their teammates and coaches proud and the desire to remain eligible were key factors that led to their academic success. Another participant described an experience:

My first year, it wasn't that good. Well, my first semester was good, but after that, I started slacking because I just wanted to play basketball. But when I got to OCC—after I took a year off from basketball, when I got to OCC—I realized I had to maintain a certain GPA to be eligible. So, after that, I wasn't ineligible, ever. I began doing all my work and keeping my grades up. I had to keep my grades up to be able to play.

Some participants benefited from smaller class sizes and in-person relationships with their community college professors. Others engaged in self-reflection of how important academics were and how both athletics and academics went hand-in-hand. Participant MH said:

I did really well in community college, because, like I said, it was a smaller setting than being at a university where you got, like, 500 kids in one class. It was more of, like, a classroom setting. So, it was a good step to go from high school to community college because it's more hands-on, and it's a smaller class. So, if you actually do need help, the professor can help you and probably know your name on a first-name basis versus being in a university class.

**Theme 1.3: Recipe for Success in Sports and Academics.** From their experiences in community college, participants believe newly admitted college athletes should develop the following attributes to experience success in the institution:

1. Discipline and a great deal of maturity

Most participants expressed that college athletes should avoid activities that may distract them from their objectives in the institution and further. Newly admitted student-athletes need a

great deal of discipline in order not to abuse the freedom that comes with a college education.

Said one participant:

So, I would tell them to always stay focused because, in college, it is easy to lose focus.

You are new, you become an adult, so you may get introduced to another level of freedom that you may not be used to. So, I would say learn to mature – mature quickly.

## 2. Relationship building

Participants understood that relationship building is a key ingredient of the recipe of success. As one participant stated:

It's more than just basketball. When it becomes personal, I think that, as a student-athlete or athlete alone, you need to realize that you're building relationships for life, it's not just why you're here for your two years, you know? You just come across people who genuinely care, and that's not something that you ideally see here in the city at all.

## 3. Take classes that matter and that will transfer to a four-year institution

Participant DI stated:

I would just preach the importance of taking real classes and knowing what you're taking. And taking academics more seriously, take it as serious or almost as serious as you are going to take playing out there or for practice because it's going to matter. The chances of you going pro are very, very slim, so you're going to need this education. And you have to be in the classes anyway, to get the grades to be able to play, so you might as well take it seriously while you are here.

## 4. Smaller class sizes and controlled environments

One participant believed that smaller class sizes and a controlled environment helped him to navigate community college and better adjust to college life. One participant commented,

Go to community college where it is a little bit smaller, a little bit more controlled, a little bit less traffic in and out. You still get the commute, if you want to, if you don't have to actually stay in dorms. And that probably, to me, will help some people who are worried about adjusting to college life because the college life – sometimes, people want the education, but they just don't want to deal with all that extra stuff because you're not used to it. It's overwhelming to some people.

#### 5. Time management

Participants expressed that excellent time-management skills were required for both the academic demands and the demands of the college athlete. Participants also pointed out that new student-athletes should give academics a higher priority over the sport. This is mainly because academics determine their eligibility on the team, and student-athletes stand the chance of losing their scholarship if they do not meet the minimum academic criteria.

#### 6. Seek out supportive services

Participants stated that athletes must be willing to seek help from professors, staff, coaches, and teammates when in need. All participants described their community colleges as institutions with well-developed systems that provided access to support and help whenever needed. One student emphatically stated that the system cannot be used if the need for help is not communicated. Participant DW stated:

And if you need help, the resource is there, but it's up to you to help yourself to it, you know? Like, communicate, and let them know that you need some help, and stuff like that. So really, just, if you need help, it's okay, just reach out to them, that's what they're there for, just prioritize the school and the sport. That's probably my best advice.

#### 7. Recognize the opportunity

Finally, participants implored new athletes to not play down the opportunity that comes with a community college education. They advised student-athletes to take full advantage of the opportunity to obtain a college degree. Participant MS stated:

Get everything out of it that you can. It seems like a long time, but it passes by quickly.

And while you're there, get everything out of it that you can, meet people, keep your standards high, and make the best out of it, because those years are vital, and they're crucial, and they will follow you.

***Research question two – How do African American male former student-athletes describe the events leading to their becoming athletes in community college?***

Two themes emerged that provided insight into events and circumstances that led participants to enroll in a community college: Theme 2.1: Family Influence and Theme 2.2: Pre-College Challenges. These themes were developed from a thorough examination of the interviews and research questions. A discussion of each theme follows.

**Theme 2.1: Family Influence.** Participants expressed that their family—especially their parents—played a pivotal role in their journey to become student-athletes in community college as most parents valued and emphasized a college education. One participant stated:

They [his parents] prioritized education in my life, and just making sure—no matter if it's community college or university—that I was going to go to college. They already did put that in my head, so prioritize that. I just chose to go to community college on my own.

They were just happy I was in college, regardless.

Another participant described his experience:

And my parents came up here, in the year '71, my Pops got a job at Chrysler, my mom got a job at Chrysler. She ended up being a teacher, so she ended up going back to

school, getting a high school diploma, actually going to a junior college school. She ended up going to Highland Park Community College, graduated, and everything. And my parents, from day one, from my brother to myself, my sister, is education, education, and hard work to this day. I'm proud of my dad, with a third-grade education, he got this far, you know? So, it's a blessing that my parents took lemons and made lemonade out of it.

Many parents encouraged their student-athletes to maintain a certain level of academic excellence, accountability, and hard work. Most all participants' parents provided support for their children in sports. Some participants attended community college because their family members attended community college, some because of lack of finances, and all because of love for the sport and the opportunity to participate in college athletics. Another participant stated:

My upbringing – they helped a lot, they contributed a lot. Just staying on me, making sure that I put education first and get good grades and all that. They prioritized education in my life, and just making sure—no matter if it's community college or university—that I was going to go to college. They already did put that in my head.

A third participant had another experience:

My mother attended Wayne County Community College, so I recall, like, being a kid at about four or five years old, being up at Eastern campus with her, and she brought me up there to complete her nursing – she was part of the nursing program. So, I was up at the campus a lot, and she kind of like instilled in me the community-college route, if that makes sense.

**Theme 2.2: Pre-College Challenges.** The culmination of challenges faced before community college had a major impact in many of the participants' journeys to community

college. Some participants highlighted that they had a general lack of interest in academics, and because the academic requirements of pre-college education to play sports was low to non-existent, they found it entirely easy to shut down the academic part of their lives. Some participants expressed having had negative influences of peers while in high school, and many had poor study habits. For some, it was close to the end of their high school education that they realized they needed to meet certain academic requirements to proceed to college. Some struggled with passing the ACT examination, limiting their college opportunities and leaving them with community college as their only option. Said one participant:

Hey, you've got to leave the house. So, one of the obstacles I would probably say being easily influenced, you know, as a younger kid, you're easily influenced to do stupid stuff because of your peers. So that was one of my downfalls.

Another participant described his experience:

Well, coming out of Detroit Public Schools, one of the obstacles was, unfortunately, I found out that I really didn't know how to study. And that was a big thing for me, because, when I got to college, you know, through high school, as an athlete, I could wing it, I was pretty intelligent. And sometimes, that could work against you, when you don't apply yourself as much in the classroom because, you're just going off of, just your intellect and things of that nature. So, when I got to college, I couldn't memorize everything.

Another participant stated:

I made a terrible decision early on in life, and I got into some trouble, which prevented me from competing for any other offers from any other school, so I ended up attending Wayne County and making a huge change for my future.

Some participants could only afford a community college education due to financial constraints and family responsibility. One participant shared, “And then taking care of my mother was bad, and then having to get jobs and pay bills, just some stuff that I didn’t understand. Those were some of the toughest obstacles I faced outside of high school.”

Another participant highlighted that an injury exposed him to the reality that should participation in a sport be taken away in an instant, only education will remain. This generated his interest in education. This participant said:

I tore my knee up in my freshman year, so, I kind of learned a little something in that experience, you know? As soon as that injury kind of come around and the reality comes, you know? So, that changed a lot of stuff too, and my pains and, you know, just the whole process. So, that changed me a little bit. I had to focus on my academics and come to realization basketball may not last forever.

***Research question three – How do African American male former student-athletes describe the influence of internal and external support systems on their academic success?***

Three themes emerged as participants considered the influences of internal and external support systems on their academic success. The themes that emerged were the influences of teammates; coaches; and faculty and staff. A discussion of each theme follows.

**Theme 3.1: Teammates’ Influences.** Study participants did not belong to other groups or fraternities within the college they attended. Participants expressed that their teammates played a pivotal role in making them better versions of themselves. They expressed some initial hostilities due to their different economic and cultural backgrounds, but this quickly changed. One student expressed,

It was rough at the beginning. Like I said, probably half suburb, half inner-city kids. So, it took us a minute to kind of get that part right. But then after that, everything was pretty good. We had a pretty good team. It worked out pretty good.

The high level of competitiveness within the team generally provoked improvement in both academics and sports. Participants pointed out that teammates offered support and help sparingly in academics. They sometimes organized tutorials among themselves and assisted one another with assignments. This level of cooperation increased accountability among participants; they did not want to let the team down by failing to meet the minimum academic requirements. One participant stated:

I actually still talk to everybody on the team to this day. And it's still the same mentality of making each other better, being there for each other. Some of our guys are not in basketball or not even, you know, remotely close to dealing with basketball anymore, and it's our life lessons and our kids or whatever that may be. And we continue to just be a close-knit group, and now, that's one of the things about my community college experience that I enjoyed.

Teammates provided motivation and support to one another whenever they saw arising problems such as missing classes or failing to submit requirements. They reported having rallied around other teammates to get them back on track with academics. Many remain close friends with their teammates to date. Another participant described an experience:

When I came up ineligible that first year, they made sure that next year, I was eligible. They pushed me to class, got me up, made sure I was in class, they called me while I'm in class and everything like that to make sure that I got my education, and I love them for that, till this day. We are friends to this day.

**Theme 3.2: Coach's Influence.** Most participants expressed that their coaches positively influenced and supported their academic and athletic journey. Most coaches provided cultures of accountability. Most were involved in the athlete's academic progression. Some acted as parents/guardians to students on and off the court. One participant stated, "I'm sure a lot of other schools had it, but those mandatory study halls, the coaches just being on you, as far as helping you out with whatever you need, when it comes to excelling in the classroom."

Another participant described his experience:

I learned this from Coach Turner – always make sure that you are a student first, and an athlete second. So, grades and going to class and not missing class and taking those, all that stuff becomes priority one because as soon as that starts to fall, everything else starts to fall, meaning like, you know, once the grades start to slip, then, of course, you can't be on the team anymore. So, we were always taught that, you know, you are a student first, you are an athlete second.

Another participant, however, felt that his coach was not fully supportive of academics, which academics came second to athletics and any student taking a tough class load was seen as hurting the team. Participant MS stated:

Me and my coach butted heads, and he was kind of questioning me with my class loads and stuff like that. I guess I took it personally and kind of just to let him know, I don't need sports to do what I got to do. You know, my first priority is my books, so that's how that went.

**Theme 3.3: Faculty and Staff Influence.** Participants emphasized that faculty and staff were helpful, and professors were usually always willing to help when approached. The researcher was able to glean attributes about faculty and staff from participants' statements as to

how faculty and staff contributed to the student athletic experience. A list of these attributes follows, demonstrating the significant positive role faculty and staff play in the success of student-athletes:

- Contributed to academic performance
- Were cooperative and supportive
- Paid special attention to student-athletes
- Worked hard to help students remain eligible to participate in sports
- Offered support in sports
- Provided help whenever they were approached
- Rendered assistance
- Offered academic mentorship
- Helped achieve career objectives
- Helped set the right priority (academics over sports)

One participant stated:

They were definitely resourceful, for sure. But it was just up to you to use the resources. They'll let you know that they're there to help you. They'll give you the time or the office hours, or the tutoring hours and stuff like that. But it was just up to you to just communicate and let them know if you need help with something, they would be there. It was just up to you. If you wanted help, they were there, for sure.

Another participant described his experience:

The teacher that actually failed me, she failed me because she said, 'You put basketball in front of your education.' I never forgot Miss Smith. She was my speech teacher, and she failed me. She could have passed me, but she was like, 'I wouldn't be doing you justice. I

wouldn't be the teacher that I say I am if I just pass you.' And I understood, at the time I didn't understand, but you...when I took that class over again, I understood what she was saying, and she pushed me, she pushed me, all my teachers pushed me. So, I really respect them for that, and I love them for that, because it took me off to my four-year school, which they did the same thing, and I knew then I can't be playing around.

A third participant stated:

The professors, like I said, they were really good. I think the staff really, really was amazing, and I don't mean the professors, I mean, like, maybe having to go over districts and get stuff handled or going into the bookstore, finding books, financial aid, like, those people don't get enough credit for what they do.

A fourth participant stated:

I can say the coach wasn't all thrilled with my class load. My math teacher used to try to almost schedule my quizzes and the tests to when we took road trips and stuff like that, you know. He will always tell me, 'You need to make a decision, are you here for education or sports?' Am like, 'Damn, what's the matter with you?' I had to go talk to the AD and everything, to have them talk to him like, 'Hey, man, every time we get an away game, he tells me, 'Well, hey, sorry to hear,' you know what I'm saying? 'Good luck.' It was different, it was something I had not expected, but I had to deal with it in order to get what I wanted.

The fifth participant said:

They knew where we all, like, the basketball team, and a lot of those people were more so pressed on seeing, I will say young Black men advanced in life. So, I mean, you had people from—who was the security guys that would look out for us?—like, 'Hey, yo, get

out of the hallway, go.’ I had teachers that would actually call my coach if they’re seeing that I was slipping in class and stuff like that. If anything went on, like they... It was kind of like a jailed type of community, man.

***Research question four – How do African American male former student-athletes describe the influence that participation in collegiate sports had on their academic success?***

The impact of participation in sports on academic success emerged as the major theme related to research question four. A discussion of this theme follows.

**Theme 4.1: Influence of Athletic Participation on Academic Success.** Participants believed that their athletic abilities were solely responsible for their education, that their participation in sports kept social vices at bay and allowed them to focus on academics. They were admitted to community colleges because of their athleticism, thus, sports provided them with a pathway to a college education.

One participant stated:

Well, that’s what played the whole part, because if I hadn’t had athletics, if I wasn’t a person that was in sports, or I didn’t like sports, I wouldn’t have gone to college. I tell you that right now, I would not have gone to college. But because I was getting a free education, I didn’t have to worry about being in debt. I don’t have to worry about my parents helping me pay for college.

Another participant shared his experience:

Actually, that’s what saved my life, to be honest. Knowing that I had to give to be able to play sports was the thing that was able to keep me away from certain things that were going on in my life away from sports. Without sports, I can’t tell where I’d be right now today, as we speak.

Furthermore, participants highlighted that athletics taught them composure and stick-to-itiveness in the face of adversity and the spirit of teamwork. This is applicable to their everyday life, including academics. Participants expressed that they became better students because they wished to remain eligible for participation in sports.

### **Summary**

This chapter detailed the findings from this study. Following a review of the literature into the experiences of African American male student-athletes at community colleges, the researcher identified a theoretical framework—Tinto’s theory of retention—and developed four research questions. Sixteen male participants, all of whom had participated as student-athletes at Michigan-based community colleges, were then interviewed using a set of 11 interview questions. These 16 interviews were analyzed for major themes, of which nine were identified. This chapter explained those themes by research question, sharing interview excerpts that best exemplified these themes.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of African American male former student-athletes who succeeded on their educational pathway and to identify the supportive services contributing to their academic success. For the purpose of this study, educational pathway success meant the student earned either a certificate, an associate degree, or transferred to a four-year educational institution.

This study’s final chapter begins with an overview of the study and includes the major themes identified by research questions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the research implications both for practice and future research.

## **Chapter 5 – DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **Overview of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of African American male former student-athletes who succeeded on their educational pathway and to identify the supportive services African American male former student-athletes reported as contributing to their academic success. For the purpose of this study, educational pathway success meant the student earned either a certificate, an associate degree, or transferred to a four-year educational institution. The intent of this study was to identify elements, key factors, support systems, and factors that African American male community college student-athletes perceived to aid in their persistence and eventual academic and athletic success at a Michigan community college.

The study used a qualitative research approach to explore perceptions of academic and athletic success among former successful African American male community college student-athletes. Through their own voices, participants revealed factors they believed led to their academic and athletic success and provided valuable insights regarding their lived experiences.

A qualitative study design allowed the researcher to broadly explore participants' perceptions and to develop a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). To enlist participants for this study, the researcher contacted current Michigan community college administrators, coaches, and faculty who work closely with community college student-athletes. Sixteen participants were chosen for the study with each participant agreeing to complete a consent to participate form and demographic survey (Appendix A) and to participate in a recorded, semi-structured interview (Appendix B).

Following interviews, recordings were transcribed and exported into Quirkos, a software program, so as to organize, code, and manipulate the text data. To ensure accuracy, I reviewed

interviews by continuously listening to recordings while reading transcripts and highlighting key words and terms.

Next, I analyzed text data using Yin's (2011) five-step data analysis process. Yin's five steps involve: (1) compiling the data; (2) disassembling the data; (3) reassembling the data; (4) interpreting the meaning of the data; and (5) concluding the data. In step one, I compiled the data into groupings and clusters. Data then was disassembled to reduce and eliminate non-common themes. In step three, data was reassembled into clusters so as to identify core themes. In step four, I checked patterns against the interview transcripts to interpret the meaning of the data. In the final step, I correlated themes identified in the literature review and from the study's framework with the data clusters, revealing nine themes across the study's four research questions. The methods of data analysis used ensured the accuracy and authenticity of the study.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Findings by Research Question**

#### ***Research question one – How do African American male former student-athletes who played sports at Michigan community colleges describe their academic experiences?***

Participants described a variety of factors that influenced their academic experiences in community colleges. The discussion of findings is organized and discussed by the major themes as identified in Chapter 4:

**Theme 1.1 Academic Challenges at the Community College Level.** Participants described the lifestyle transition from high school to college as one of their greatest challenges while in community colleges. They expressed having done little or no studying before attending college and, as a result, were less accountable for their actions. One participant stated:

Yeah, it was really big. Academics in high school was really like my downfall because it was like, early in the year like, ninth, tenth grade, didn't too much really, you know, take the educational series. It was all about just basketball. So now I'm falling back. Now in my senior year, I got to take night school, plus the day school, plus practice, plus game. So, academics was really the biggest obstacle, for real.

Student-athletes who had tutors while in high school reported that tutors were less strict on submitting assignments and that less emphasis was placed on their academics overall. For many participants, the transition from high school to community college came with additional pressure and major adjustments to personal routines. This study's findings reflect a majority of the elements of Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Retention.

However, Tinto did not include a retention strategy for African American student-athletes. Nor did he consider the variety of challenges African Americans face prior to attending community college.

**Theme 1.2: Academic Performance in Community College.** Some comments made by participants were more reflected of Perrakis (2008) work on sense of belonging than Tinto's principles. Perrakis suggested a sense of belonging is important for community college students. Participants in this study expressed the key factors that led to their academic success was a desire to make their teammates and coaches proud—contributing to a sense of belonging—and to remain eligible for athletics. In this study, while some participants performed well in their academics, others struggled to adjust to the academic demands of college, at least initially. All participants pulled through, however, at varying GPAs. Said one participant:

My team, the relationship with my teammates was great because it was bigger than basketball with us. It was like more of a brother, like, 'This is my brother,' and we took

on that role. Like, if we need to help with anything—with school, with academics—if one of us...because we all took the same class, so none of us really couldn't be like, 'Oh, we fail,' because we had each other. My friends, we had each other, so it was always, you know, somebody in our class with our teammates, you know? So, it's bigger, like we didn't... it was bigger than basketball, it was actually like brotherhood, like my family.

Some participants benefited from the smaller class sizes and in-person relationships with their professors. Others engaged in self-reflection as to the importance of academics and how athletics and academics went hand-in-hand. Another participant stated, "I did really well in community college, because, like I said, it was a smaller setting than being at a university where you got, like, 500 kids in one class. It was more of, like, a classroom setting."

**Theme 1.3: Recipe for Success in Sports and Academics.** From their community college experiences, participants believed that newly admitted college athletes should develop the following attributes to experience success in the institution:

1. Discipline and a great deal of maturity
2. Relationship building
3. Taking classes that matter and that will transfer to a four-year institution
4. Smaller class sizes and controlled environments
5. Time management
6. Seek out support services
7. Recognize the opportunity

There was a strong sense of motivation among participants to reach their ultimate goal – an athletic scholarship to a four-year institution. The driving motivation for each participant was this ultimate goal. One participant stated, "One thing I actually achieved is actually knowing the

system, like, knowing the system on that academic level and on the sports-wise. It's like, 'Don't work harder, work smarter.'" Therefore, each participant viewed their time at the community college as a stepping-stone on their journey, aware that their time at the community college was limited. Knowing their academic and athletic performance was the criteria by which they would be judged in receiving a scholarship to a four-year institution, each participant found a way to *make it work* in the classroom and on the court of play to realize their goal. Though limited in scope, previous research that focused on African American males enrolled in a community college suggested that psychological factors, such as utility, goal commitment, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and locus of control, are important indicators of academic success (Wood & Palmer, 2014). All participants felt that what they went through athletically, academically, and personally was worth the effort.

Role conflict was a significant issue for study participants. Role conflict occurs when the demands of one role make it difficult to meet the demands of another role (Comeaux et al., 2011). Like their four-year student-athlete counterparts, community college student-athletes are challenged with succeeding in the roles of both student and athlete. Synder (1985) identified four types of student-athletes based on their relative commitment to each role: (a) scholar athletes; (b) pure scholars; (c) pure athletes; and, (d) non-scholars/non-athletes. In the current study, participants reported time management as a notable factor in their success. Unlike Synder (1985) and Comeaux et al.'s (2011) dualistic approach to role conflict, participants shared that they had to find time to study and to manage their time appropriately as participants reported there was not enough time in the day to do everything. Said one participant:

Prioritize school and sport, as you want to make that a priority. Like I said, time management is going to be the most difficult thing, in my opinion. Like I said, both is

really time-consuming, so just prioritize that. And if you need help, the resource is there, but it's up to you to help yourself to it, you know? Like, communicate, and let them know that you need some help, and stuff like that. So really, just, if you need help, it's okay, just reach out to them, that's what they're there for, just prioritize the school and the sport. That's probably my best advice.

Therefore, sacrifices needed to be made if they wanted to achieve their ultimate goal of transferring to a four-year institution with an athletic scholarship. Some participants sacrificed their social identity at the beginning of their community college career in order to focus solely on athletics and academics. For other participants, the majority of their time was focused on athletics and social engagement, but they adeptly made the switch and focused on academics and athletics when they learned they were unable to transfer.

***Research question two – How do African American male former student-athletes describe the events leading to their becoming athletes in community colleges?***

Participants in this study identified a variety of events that led to their becoming athletes in community colleges:

**Theme 2.1: Family Influence.** In this study, when participants referenced support from their family, the term *family* consisted of parents, stepparents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Family support materialized in several different ways for participants. One participant said:

I was an inner-city kid. I lived downtown, and literally, like, my whole family went to Wayne County Community College – my auntie, my mama, older sisters. So, it was just like, basically, you know, family tradition. You know, when you're in a bigger school, you know, your family alumni there, so that's what really fed on me.

Financial, emotional, and academic support were all areas in which many participants received support from their family networks. Financially, parents might have paid for tuition, provided room and board (either in the home or paid for a living situation near the college), and/or given the participant money while attending the community college. This support seemed like a crucial factor of success for many participants. With this type of support, students did not need to work and could focus their attention on reaching their athletic and academic goals. Lessening financial challenges is a topic of debate among retention scholars. Research shows that students who feel secure financially are able to better concentrate on their academics.

One participant who did not have family support while attending the community college cited finances as one of the biggest obstacles on his journey. He was under considerable stress to secure housing and meals. He mentioned that, had his financial situation been better, he would have done much better in the classroom and would have enjoyed his community college experience much more. He said,

Man, it was really tough growing up. I was forced to be the man of the house at an early age, but a few obstacles that were tough for me, had to be, first and foremost, when my mom got sick. She got sick when I was in high school, so I dropped out to take care of her in ninth grade. That made me lose out on a lot of educational stuff that I would have learned, you know what I'm saying?, at high school and throughout high school, that I wasn't able to as far as like writing a complete essay, or even forming a complete sentence where they made sense, you know? And then taking care of my mother was really bad, and then having to get jobs and pay bills, just some stuff that I really didn't understand.

Finances were not the only way in which study participants received support from their family. Participants recounted experiences where they relied on family for academic advice and emotional and athletic support. One participant credited his mother for instilling within him valuable time-management skills and the will to persist through tough times. When realizing his study habits were not going to earn him the college grades he wanted, one participant asked his college-educated father for advice about successful study skills. Yet another participant's cousin had been a student-athlete at a community college and was able to offer advice and perspective. It is clear participants used their family networks to succeed in the community college as student-athletes.

**Theme 2.2: Pre-College Challenges.** The culmination of the challenges faced before community college played pivotal roles in many participants' journeys to community college. Some participants lacked interest in academics, and because pre-college academic requirements to play sports was low to non-existent, they found it entirely easy to shut down the academic part of their lives. One participant said:

So, in terms of my education, I just never liked school at all. So, it was kind of hard for me to like, because I was always sports, sports, sports, sports. But I knew that you needed school, so, I mean, that's really part of the reason why I even ended up at a JUCO because of my grades, weren't that great. So that was really hard for me to, like, you know, balance that out because I just never really was interested in school.

Some participants expressed having had negative influences of peers while in high school, and many had poor study habits. For some, it was close to the end of their high school career that they realized they needed to meet certain academic requirements to proceed to college. Some struggled with passing the ACT examination, limiting their college opportunities

and leaving them with community college enrollment as their only option. As one participant stated:

I feel like the first true obstacle I met was taking the ACT in my sophomore year in high school, and it was like seeing that test, and also seeing the materials that we had in high school, it just didn't quite fit, you know, so I ended up.... Once I came out of high school, I know I wasn't quite prepared to take the offer I had.

A student-athlete is regularly integrated in activities outside of classroom in a social setting due to their membership on an athletic team and having access to student-athlete specific resources. Therefore, it is possible a student-athlete may have a harder time integrating into the academic system of the college due to academic under-preparedness, extended time spent devoted to sport, or lack of understanding as to how to integrate into the academic fold of the college.

***Research question three – How do African American male former student-athletes describe the influences of internal and external support systems on their academic success?***

There was no single set of internal or external influences when participants explained internal and external support systems:

**Theme 3.1: Teammates' Influences.** In this study, participants often shared that they forged lasting relationships with several of their teammates. Terms such as brotherhood and family were often used to describe the type of bond the participants fostered with certain teammates. One participant stated:

Yes, my teammates were great. I mean, we were around each other every day, like, those were *the* people.... Because we, at Jackson, we had dorms, so I was staying with my roommates, like, we see each other every day, we used to play all the time, it was fun, it

was definitely fun. We used to eat together, all type of stuff, so they definitely helped me with the experience, being around the team and being around the family.

It was clear that each participant shared a common athletic goal with their teammates – to transfer to a Division I institution with an athletic scholarship. However, commitments to their academic, athletic, or social identity varied among their teammates. Participants in this study seemed to dedicate more time and energy to those teammates who reflected their own identity and commitments. Participants shared they gave little attention to developing friendships with teammates who did not share their same values.

**Theme 3.2: Coach's Influence.** College coaches play an integral role in the life of a community college student-athlete. Even though community college coaches do not have the same budgets, resources, and media attention as their Division I counterparts, they demand the same commitment from their student-athletes. To excel in their chosen sport, student-athletes have significant day-to-day demands, such as practice, travel for competitions, games, team meetings, study hall, rehabilitation for injuries, team bonding obligations, and mental fatigue.

Student-athletes can devote up to 40 hours per week to their sport (Wolverton, 2008). The person who often coordinates this demanding schedule is the head coach. Coaches have near complete power and control over the lives of student-athletes and, as a result, play a significant role in a student-athlete's successful integration into the academic and social systems of a college (Comeaux et al., 2011). Wielding so much power in a student-athlete's collegiate experience, it was evident a theme regarding a participant's connection to his coach would emerge. One participant stated:

Yeah, my coaches played a big part, my community college coaches. They weren't just coaches on the court, they made sure you were good off the court, too, try to make sure

you stay focused and was always on the right track. They were involved in my work classes that I was taking. They were really involved in helping me out, helped me schedule my meeting with the counselors. They helped out with my success a lot because I was able to have transferable credits, you know, so I wouldn't have to retake classes at the school I'm at now or stuff like that. I want to thank my coaches and stuff like that.

Multiple participants shared that a motivating factor to participate in this study was in part due to their positive relationship with their former coach. As such, each study participant had a strong sense of connection to a coach at some point in the community college athletic journey. For some, a coach was a confidant, life coach, and facilitator of athletic dreams. For others, a disconnect with a coach prompted them to leave one institution for another in search of a more conducive relationship with a coach or coaching staff. It is not feasible to suggest that all community college student-athletes who are academically successful have a positive connection to their athletic coach. However, it is important to highlight the different positive roles the coaches who interacted with the participants had on their journey. Participants recounted instances where a coach treated them as family, helped them solve life challenges, helped them improve as an athlete, challenged them to be better men, and acted as a hub of academic and campus information. It seemed many participants identified their coach as someone committed to helping them reach their goals. As one participant stated,

Oh yes, our head coach – he ain't playing. Back then, we didn't know that I always have my whole life. I've had coaches that yell. And you could tell in the practice what athletes weren't used to being yelled at, or they just didn't have the coach that yell. So, we had a head coach who said, 'You do something wrong, you get yelled at. Your grades is not up, you get yelled at.' So that's why I said when our coaches shout, you get people who

come from high school basketball, then they come to college, they used to be babied in high school because most of us came from high school where we were the man. So now, you come to college where, guess what? Someone will be better than others, and some of them don't know how to take that, and then when they caught up by the coach, or if somebody bust my ass and coach calls out, 'Look, he is killing your ass, play some goddamn defense Some people are not going to take that because they weren't used to that. But I came from that, so that was an easy adjustment for me, like I said. But no one is used to getting their ass busted because now they had a different level where you got people with the same or better and different abilities. And the coaches, they stayed on our butts with practice, and playing hard and practice, and they also stay on us about academics. Our head coach, that's what he did. When people are failing or not going to class, and he will find out and go and check and see did they go to class. I don't know how but, I never missed class, I always went to class.

**Theme 3.3: Faculty and Staff Influence.** Community colleges offer supportive services to help the general population of students reach their academic goals. However, participants in this study did not report participating in support services beyond those tailored to their needs as student-athletes.

Community colleges offer academic counseling to all students. Among the participants in this study, it seemed to be a common practice for athletic departments at the community college to designate an academic advisor/counselor specifically committed to student-athletes. This seems to be a reasonable practice as community college student-athletes must adhere to transfer policies set forth by the community college, the four-year institution, the MCCA, NJCAA, and the NCAA. Many participants reported that the transfer process was intricate, and they relied on

the athletic academic advisor/counselor to steer them in the right direction. Additionally, the participants all had a positive association to the work of the academic athletic counselor.

A majority of the participants noted the helpful support they received from the designated academic advisor/counselor and faculty. One participant stated,

I had a relationship with my Business 150 professor. He was just great. It was a personal level. He was human. He wasn't like, 'Well, yeah, you got to do this.' He understood everybody's situation – everybody go through something. He just made it fair with everybody. And I feel like that's what you want as a student-athlete. Like, 'Oh, I understand you got practice and stuff, so we're going to find a way so you can handle both.'

Another participant stated,

They were definitely resourceful, for sure. But it was just up to you to use the resources. They'll let you know that they're there to help you. They'll give you the time or the office hours, or the tutoring hours and stuff like that. But it was just up to you to just communicate and let them know if you need help with something, they would be there. It was just up to you. If you wanted help, they were there, for sure.

***Research question four – How do African American male former student-athletes describe the influence that collegiate sports had on their academic success?***

Participants in this study provided rich and robust descriptions about how athletics influenced their academic success as a college student. Some of the comments aligned with previous research and some of the comments provided different perspectives for viewing the experience of students and athletics.

**Theme 4.1: Influence of Athletic Participation on Academic Success.** Participants believed they were solely responsible for their education, that their participation in sports kept social vices at bay and allowed them to focus on academics alone. They were admitted to the community college because of their athleticism, and sports provided them with a pathway to a college education. One participant stated that basketball saved his life – that if it wasn't for basketball, the streets would have taken him under:

Actually, that's what saved my life, to be honest. Knowing that I had to give to be able to play sports was the thing that was able to keep me away from certain things that were going on in my life away from sports.

Another participant state he was only focused because of basketball. He stated, Still to this day, that's really a lot of my focus – just playing sports and, like, perfecting my craft like that. So, I mean, the college decision that I went to was basically going to be based upon sports, you know? As long as I felt like my style of play and I felt comfortable with the coaches, that was going to be the school that I was going to pick. But I was raised in like a sports family, so that was always really important to me. Like all my brothers played sports, my sisters played sports, my dad played sports, you know? They were really invested in me. They invested a lot of time into me playing sports, and I always loved it, so it was big for me growing up.

These participants, like the others, were motivated by the game of basketball to achieve academic success.

## **Conclusions**

The researcher identified four broad conclusions from this analysis: academic experiences; events prior to becoming athletes; influence of external and internal support systems; and, collegiate sports and academic success.

As for academic experiences, participant challenges at the community college level varied between a lack of support in high school to having no motivation to attend classes. Some participants had no problem with classes while others had to learn how to study and how to become organized. As advice for future student-athletes, some participants shared their recipe for community college success, including goal setting and organization in life and in school while others mentioned there is no grey area – which student-athletes have to study hard and complete the work.

Events prior to becoming athletes varied among participants. Some participants still faced the same challenges they faced before attending community college – challenges such as constantly avoiding troubled areas and bad influences. One challenge mentioned more than once was the lack of educational support participants received prior to attending community college. Some participants felt educationally unequipped and lacked the tools to succeed at the college level.

The influence of external and internal support systems can be significant. Family influence is important for a young African American male in school. A few participants mentioned a father, mother, or someone in their immediate family who pushed them and give them the support needed to enroll in college. For some participants, it was the reason they were introduced to community college. Participants referred to teammates as their brothers, as family. Teammates were referred to as helpful and motivational, as life-savers to their fellow teammates,

helping them to stay eligible and to stay focused on their goals. Faculty and staff also play a major role in the academic pursuits of African American male student-athletes. Some participants said professors cared a lot and helped them with their classes. Others mentioned that faculty made it hard for them or seemed only interested in earning a paycheck. The head coach was clearly identified as having the most influence on a participant's academic journey. Head coaches determine each participant's athletic future and, as such, the actions and words of a head coach meant the most to participants.

Finally, participants expressed a clear link between participation in collegiate sports and academic success. Participants stressed that sports taught them composure, stick-to-itiveness in the face of adversity, the spirit of teamwork. Lessons such as these had application in their everyday lives, including their academic lives as community college students. Participants expressed they became better students because they wished to remain eligible for participation in sports.

### **Comparing Tinto's Theory of Student Retention with the Study Findings**

The researcher used Tinto's (1993) theory of retention for higher education students as the conceptual framework. The theory of retention identifies two very distinct systems on each college campus – the academic system and the social system. The level to which a student is integrated in either system and a student's experiences in each system separately may lead to a student's retention—or departure—from the institution.

Tinto (1993) asserted that students enter an institution with certain background characteristics (i.e., family background, skills, abilities, prior schooling) that shape their level of commitment toward completing their degrees. As stated earlier, each student-athlete in this study remained at the community college long enough to be academically successful. According to

Tinto's theory of student departure, the social aspect of persistence is defined by a student's ability to interact with the social and academic systems at the institution.

Tinto realized students bring associations and expectations with them in their first year. He mapped out a process that begins with the student's prior associations, but allows for those to be weakened or strengthened based on the way the student integrates and interacts within the institutional community. Successful incorporation might find those goals changed by the time the student has shed his/her connections to old communities in lieu of the new community.

Research studies suggest that social integration (or student involvement) promotes degree attainment. According to Tinto (1993), higher levels of social integration are indicative of increased student persistence. Student social integration is usually sustained through faculty and peer interactions, and their involvement in intellectual and social activities (Stage & Hossler, 2000). Social integration holds more relevance to degree completion among men than it does for women (Astin & Oseguera, 2005). Under this circumstance, gender is more weighted when social integration is "measured by peer group relations, residency, and hours spent engaged in social activities and intercollegiate athletics" (Astin & Oseguera, 2005, p. 247). For African American men, early engagement into the fabric of campus life is significant to their persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For these students, "campus involvements and social networks provide the social and cultural capital necessary to succeed on a predominantly White or historically Black campus" (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 80). Therefore, sustained levels of involvement and networking can stimulate African American men to successfully negotiate their higher education environments and persist toward a college degree.

Tiemey (1992) critiqued Tinto's (1975) theory, suggesting it fails to explain persistence and dropout decisions for culturally diverse students, students at commuter schools, non-

traditional students, and community college students, among others (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005).

A line of reasoning is also made that the theory does not "acknowledge the influences of financial resources, connection with an external community (such as family or work), and classroom experiences on a student's decision to persist" (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005, p. 68). In response to these criticisms, Tinto's work has been refined and clarified to account for explaining student attrition and persistence for diverse student populations in higher education (students of color, academically at-risk students, adult students, and transfer students), and for different institutional types (nonresidential colleges, two-year colleges, urban colleges, and large public universities) (Tinto, 1993).

The nine major themes to emerge from this research were: Theme 1.1: Academic Challenges at the Community College Level; Theme 1.2: Academic Performance in Community College; Theme 1.3: Recipe for Success in Sports and Academics; Theme 2.1: Family Influence; Theme 2.2: Pre-College Challenges; Theme 3.1: Teammates' Influences; Theme 3.2: Coach's Influence; Theme 3.3: Faculty and Staff Influence; and, Theme 4.1: Influence of Athletic Participation on Academic Success. These themes are in alignment with Tinto's theory of retention.

Tinto's (1993) model of institutional departure states that, to persist, students need integration into formal (academic performance) and informal (faculty and staff interactions) academic systems and formal (extracurricular activities) and informal (peer group interactions) social systems.

Tinto (1993) mentioned if students enter college with pre-conceived conditions and are met with a good academic support along with outside support, the student will reach completion. The findings from this study show that participants had issues prior to attending community

college. Some participants dealt with family issues, academic issues, academic support issue, issues with the law, and other circumstances. Tinto mentioned that, with both academic and external support, a student will have a better chance to succeed. Based on the findings from this study, each participant successfully transferred to a four-year institution or completed community college with an associate degree. Mentioned in the findings, the student-athletes who had academic issues prior to arriving at the community college depend on staff, faculty, and their head coach. The difference between Tinto's retention components and this study's findings lies in the extra-curricular activities Tinto described, that participants spent more time on campus because of their athletic obligation, which resulted in additional athletic and academic support.

In this study, participants reported that the academic and social integration all happened on campus and between the classroom and athletic activities. Only two participants mentioned being part of a peer group outside their athletic team. One participant stated,

Oh, back then, besides my church, no. I mean, we had, like, a youth talk, if you will, at my church where we'll get and talk to some of the youth in the church about it. The youth minister was the pastor's son, so we would just get together and kind of, like, converse here and there, but it wasn't nothing. I wasn't involved with Big Brothers and Big Sisters and nothing like that. I wish I would have been.

Another participant stated, "I mean, I did after-work for my church, I did things like that, fed the homeless, things like that, clothes drive for my church, as far as being with the organization."

All participants in this study were community college student-athletes in the state of Michigan, each having arrived at the community college at different stages in their athletic, academic, and personal lives. However, once at the community college, all participants viewed

their time there as a stepping-stone to their ultimate goal – transfer to a four-year institution on an athletic scholarship. The majority of participants felt their time at a Michigan community college was formative and a positive stop on their athletic and academic journey. Table 4 compares the study's theoretical framework with its key findings.

While conducting interviews with former community college student-athletes, I found that Tinto's theory a good model to improve student persistence and retention in community colleges for African American students. This theory stands true especially for African American student-athletes. The most important factors of Tinto's framework, in regard to African American student and student-athletes, are Self -Efficacy and Sense of Belonging.

In regard to African American student-athletes, it cannot be assumed that students enter college with a strong sense of self-efficacy. Although many students may begin college confident in their ability to succeed, some do not, especially those students whose past experience, educational or otherwise, led them to question their ability to succeed academically. In regard to African Americans, Tinto's theory did not stress reshaping the belief of the students in their ability to succeed.

Low self-efficacy can also be the result of negative stereotypes others hold of individuals or the groups to which they belong, as is sometimes the case for students from underrepresented groups (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Even brief reminders of those stereotypes can undermine goal attainment (Steele, 1999).

**Table 4**

*Comparing Study Findings with Tinto's Theory of Student Retention*

<b>Tinto's Theory of Retention</b>	<b>Study Findings</b>
<b>Pre-entry Attributes:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family Background</li> <li>• Skills and Abilities</li> <li>• Prior Schooling</li> </ul>	<b>Pre-entry Attributes:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family Influence</li> <li>• Prior Schooling</li> <li>• Bad Decisions</li> <li>• Basketball</li> <li>• Better chance at getting recruited</li> </ul>
<b>Goals and Commitments:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intentions</li> <li>• Goals and Institutional Commitments</li> <li>• External Commitments</li> </ul>	<b>Goals and Commitments:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completion</li> <li>• Successful transfer to a four-year institution</li> <li>• Sports and academics (grades) were the only commitments</li> </ul>
<b>Institutional Experience:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic Performance</li> <li>• Faculty and Staff Interactions</li> <li>• Extracurricular Activities</li> <li>• Peer Group Interactions</li> </ul>	<b>Institutional Experience:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintained grades to stay eligible</li> <li>• Improved academics because of basketball, faculty, and staff</li> <li>• Sports team as a family outside immediate family</li> <li>• Because of time and athletic commitments basketball team became internal and external per groups</li> </ul>
<b>Integration:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic Integration</li> <li>• Social Integration</li> </ul>	<b>Integration:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning how to study</li> <li>• Understanding seriousness of college</li> <li>• Faculty, coach, staff, teammates helped with academic and social integration</li> </ul>
<b>Goals and Commitments:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intentions</li> <li>• Goals and Institutional Commitments</li> <li>• External Commitments</li> </ul>	<b>Goals and Commitments:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completion</li> <li>• Successful transfer to a four-year institution</li> <li>• Sports and academics (grades) were the only commitments</li> </ul>
<b>Outcomes:</b>	<b>Outcomes:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completion</li> <li>• Successful transfer to a four-year institution.</li> </ul>

In this study, African American male former athletes mentioned their sense of belonging in community college, of being accepted, of the school as family, and of being in a space where they felt comfortable. From the results of this study, I found African American student-athletes who perceive themselves as belonging are more likely to continue their education because it leads not only to enhanced motivation, but to a willingness to engage others in ways that help them to persist. In contrast, a student's sense of not belonging, of being out of place, leads to withdrawal from contact that further undermines motivation and persistence (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Tinto's theory should discuss the importance of belonging in an institution for underrepresented students; as well as, the factors that may contribute to their need to belong.

The study participants' sense of belonging reflects Strayhorn's (2010) idea of belonging as a perceived social support – feeling connected, cared about, accepted, and valued by others. Participants in this study also described the importance of social support (peers, friends, and mentors) and of being accepted by their friends as part of their experience of belonging. When discussing acceptance and belonging while being interviewed, most participants mentioned their leadership and the importance of leadership within their athletic teams. Therefore, one can safely gather that this involvement was the channel for their positive feelings of acceptance.

### **Implications for Practice**

In researching the ways institutions can close the achievement gap in higher education, Bensimon (2005) suggested individual *actors* within institutions must acknowledge how they as individuals perpetuate or resist the problem of unequal outcomes in achievement in higher education. Instead of a new program or technique that has been validated as a best practice, institutions must accept that the ways in which they teach, think, connect with students, and the

assumptions they make about student learning and students based on their race or ethnicity can create the problem of unequal outcomes

In this study, coaches, faculty, and staff that connected to participants when they were student-athletes at the community college seemed to understand the influence they had on their success. Participants indirectly and clearly recounted they were able to connect with coaches, staff, faculty, advisors, and counselors because they understood their situation without judgment. Coaches and staff who have been successful in building mutually respectful relationships with African American male student-athletes should be placed in roles where they are able to educate their peers. Those staff members and coaches can educate their peers on how they as individuals have grown to view African American male student-athletes as young men capable of succeeding academically and athletically.

### **Implications for Further Research**

This study was limited to the perceptions of 16 African American male student-athletes who were academically successful at one Michigan community college. A more extensive study involving interviews with academically successful student-athletes immediately following their departure from several community colleges across the state might provide more accurate information pertaining to factors of success and perceptions of belonging. Additionally, a study that surveys information from successful community college student-athletes, coaches, and academic advisors would add valuable insights from these key stakeholders in the academic success of student-athletes. Finally, a mixed-methods study based at one community college consisting of all student-athletes who have completed their athletic eligibility at a community college may be another avenue to explore.

With the majority of African American men starting their higher education journey at the community college, and the majority of those same men not reaching their academic goals, it is imperative that community college administrators understand how the few who do succeed manage to navigate the community college system.

It is self-evident that future research specifically focused on the success factors of various groups of African American men who attend community colleges is imperative. Education is regarded by many, including African American men, as the great equalizer in our society. However, the educational system is failing men who have placed so much hope in the very same system. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on enrollment as the number of Black male students enrolled in public two-year institutions has plunged 21.5% (Wiseman, 2021).

With the decreasing number of African American men attending Michigan community colleges, those same men who dropped out for whatever reason should have their academic dreams and aspirations realized. The burden of unrealized dreams should not be placed solely on the shoulders of community college students. Instead, researchers, administrators, faculty, and practitioners should seek to understand the challenges—and most importantly the triumphs—of African American male student-athletes who attend community college.

The African American male student-athletes in this study had many similarities and differences in terms of their journey into, through, and out of a Michigan community college system. It is the space between their similarities and differences that researchers must spend concentrated energy. Moving away from a deficit model, research that focuses on the successful academic outcomes of disproportionately impacted community college students will be in a better position to inform all community college students regarding best practices. Validating the lived experiences of successful African American male community college student-athletes

provides insights into how higher education can evolve to be more inclusive of the most underrepresented groups of students who are in most in need of education as a societal equalizer. Therefore, faculty, staff, and administrators who work with student-athletes must seek out specialized training regarding the unique needs and realities of male community college student-athletes who identify as African American (Bensimon, 2005).

### **Conclusion**

There was a strong understanding from each participant that to be both academically and athletically successful, African American male student-athletes in Michigan community colleges needed to make a personal commitment to do whatever it took to reach their goal. Oftentimes, that meant paying close attention to how they managed time, relied on family for support, and asked for help from coaches, teammates, faculty, staff, and academic advisors.

Michigan community colleges are open access institutions. Students attend a community college for a variety of reasons, including earning a certificate, transferring to a four-year institution, career development, continuing education, and to earn a GED, to name a few. Therefore, there are a number of academic, personal, and career support services in place to assist students in their journey.

Like their non-athletic peers, student-athletes have access to all the services on a community college campus. However, participants in this study shared that they arrived at many different levels educationally, making it sometimes hard to adjust. While some participants adjusted well, those who struggled academically entering community college relied on support services of the academic advisor/counselor, faculty members, family, coaches, and teammates. Student-athletes met with the academic advisor/counselor and head coach to help them navigate the intricate process of transferring to a four-year institution as a student-athlete. Additionally,

many faculty supported participants in extra academic support and tutelage because such support was necessary for some participants to succeed, as one participant described,

So, like, the professors kind of understood where I was struggling. That's when they really, like, helped me and attended to me more, because of me, knowing that I'm really trying and really putting in an effort to pass the class and not just push it, you know?

Regarding campus culture and environment, the culture of intercollegiate athletics at the community college level is such that a majority of student-athletes want to continue to play the sport they are passionate about at the *next level*. Therefore, there was a general understanding that their time at the community college was limited due to their ultimate goal of a transfer to play intercollegiate athletics at a four-year institution. The community college was a steppingstone or connection to a more prestigious goal. Participants did report feeling a strong sense of belonging and connection to their coaches and teammates. One participant stated,

So, I mean, you had people from—who was the security guys that would look out for us?—like, 'Hey, yo, get out of the hallway, go.' I had teachers that would actually call my coach if they're seeing that I was slipping in class and stuff like that. If anything went on, like they... It was kind of like a jailed type of community, man.

It is not surprising all participants in this study had a strong connection to their coaches due to the open-ended questions employed by the researcher. However, it is important to note that the intercollegiate coach plays a large role in the overall satisfaction and sense of connection a student-athlete has to a college campus. In relation to the connection to coaches, each participant additionally had a strong connection to some of their teammates. They used familial terms like *brother* and *family* when referring to teammates to which they had the greatest connection. One participant stated, "My team, the relationship with my teammates was great

because it was bigger than basketball with us. It was like more of a brother, like, ‘This is my brother,’ and we took on that role.”

These findings represent the multiple ways African American male community college student-athletes perceived their academic success at a Michigan community college. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of African American male former student-athletes who succeeded on their educational pathway and to identify the supportive services African American former student-athletes reported as contributing to their academic success.

It is vital that the Michigan community college system and two-year colleges across the country continue to focus resources and efforts to understanding the community college student. More specifically, there must be a concerted effort by researchers and practitioners to understand underserved populations of community college students, such as African American men and African American male student-athletes.

This research study was designed to examine the experiences of African American male student-athletes who persisted and were successful in a Michigan community college. In order for real change to occur in higher education, the academic community must value their journey towards academic success as legitimate knowledge. Understanding the support systems African American male student-athletes feel most comfortable using, how they relate to each other, how they interact with the collegiate environment as a whole, as well as their mindset in terms of success, is vital to unlocking the academic gates of higher education that keep students from reaching their full potential.

### **Researcher's Reflections**

In conducting this research, it occurred to me that community college student-athletes have the same demands placed upon on them athletically and academically as student-athletes at four-year institutions, especially the demands of staying academically eligible and participating at a high level in college athletics. Participants in this study all used community college as a spring board to their next phase in life, either to earn a degree or to continue their athletic and academic career at a four-year institution. All participants benefited from community college in some way.

While conducting this research, I learned the community college journey is unique to each student-athlete. Some participants lacked support from family, placing an additional financial burden on an already burdensome and difficult experience. Other participants relied strictly on the coach, staff, and teammates to reach completion.

While conducting this research, I also learned that community college athletics can be viewed and used by student-athletes in a few different ways. Student-athletes may attend community college because they did not reach their potential athletically in high school. Other attend a community college because they had poor grades and did not meet a four-year institution's ACT or SAT minimum score requirement to attend. Some student-athletes attended community college for the chance to be recruited by four-year institutions. These athletes may have had scholarship offers, but they wanted something better. Some student-athletes attend community college because no one advocated for them in high school, no one guided them in the direction to attend college. Some student-athletes attend community college because they have been removed from high school due to expulsion or trouble with the law.

The finding that was most revealing was the fact that all student-athlete participants had a strong relationship with their coach. It seems as if the coach is a major catalyst for student-athlete's transition to completion or transfer to a four-year institution. The coach played a father, uncle, mentor figure in the lives of the student-athletes. The role of the coach is vital because the coach can steer the student in the right direction toward completion or just as easily in the wrong direction. As a staff member, coaches also have access to staff and additional resources to ensure the student-athlete's persistence and success.

As a former student-athlete, I found that participants shared many of the same experiences I had as a college athlete. I found that the value of athletics were the same for me as it was for them. As it had for me, athletics provided discipline and allowed participants to experience teamwork, leadership, failure, success, and a sense of family. Athletics also was the reason all participants attended community college and the reason all participants either reached completion or successfully transferred to a four-year institution.

The voices of the participants told me that there is a need for community college and athletic programs. Listening to the voices of participants made me feel that each wanted better for themselves, each wanted to succeed. The students attended community college unsure about their future and left their respective institutions with confidence, wisdom, and knowledge. Participants also explained how proud they were to have attended a community college, and each pledged to always advocate for community colleges.

While I gathered a lot of information from participants, were I to start over, I would ask more questions and probe for more detailed answers. Some participants were more long winded than others. While participants answered all questions, I came away from interviews feeling they had more to share. Community colleges across the country can help create positive change for

African American males. In a personal conversation with Dr. Harry Edwards, he mentioned to me,

We can no longer simply complain or demand redress from the exploitive forces and interests opposing us (NCAA, pro teams, mainstream media, and White fan base). We must proactively intervene to awaken, educate, prepare, and ultimately repair our aspiring and achieving athletes—males and females. And that process must start with teaching all of our children to dream with their eyes open. (H. Edwards, personal communication)

There were no surprises from this study and its conclusions, although the study did open my eyes to the power and significance team sports play in the lives of African American males. Team sports taught participants in this study life lessons that will stay with them for the remainder of their lives.

This study also has changed the way I view community college students, specifically student athletes. As a community college administrator, I find this study to be a tool to understand the total student, both academically and athletically, as I change my approach in assisting that population and help my co-workers better understand that specific population.

I still believe that this study contributes to the overall research of community colleges, specifically those institutions interested in the academic success of African American male student-athletes. Staff and faculty from both four-year and two-year institutions—including athletic directors, coaches, and athletic advisors—will benefit from this study as it reveals aspects of the student-athlete experience that encourage academic success. This study is significant for athletes considering a community college as a first step on their higher education pathway, this study will provide greater insight as to what they may potentially encounter and endure during their time as a student-athlete. Parents will be able to read this study and make a

more reliable decision regarding their son's enrollment in a community college. Coaches will benefit from an improved understanding of the needs of African American student-athletes off the field or court. Michigan community colleges and the state-wide community college system will benefit from a better understanding of the experiences and successes of former African American male community college student-athletes while learning more about the academic and social needs of African American male student-athletes.

Additionally, administrators throughout the Michigan community college system could benefit from understanding the positive, lived experiences of a group of students that persevered and reached their academic goals. The successful academic journey of an African American male student-athlete is not just the responsibility of the individual, but also the responsibility of the institution and community agents that interact with the African American male athlete throughout his post-secondary academic journey.

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## Appendix A – Participant Consent and Initial Electronic Demographic Survey

<b>Yusuf Sabree</b>
<i><b>In Their Own Voices: A Study of Former African American Male Athletes' Perceptions of Their Academic Experiences at Michigan Community Colleges</b></i>

**Please read and complete this form carefully. If you are willing to participate in this study, circle the appropriate responses and sign and date the declaration at the end. If you do not understand anything and would like more information, please ask.**

- I have had the research satisfactorily explained to me in verbal and written form by the researcher. **YES / NO**
- The format of the interview will be a discussion or perhaps a group discussion. I expect that the interview will take no longer than 1 hour. With your permission, I will audiotape the interview solely to transcribe the conversation accurately. **YES / NO**
- I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time without having to explain without any prejudice. **YES / NO**
- I understand that all information about me will be treated in strict confidence and that I will not be named in any written work arising from this study. **YES / NO**
- I understand that any audiotape material of me will be used solely for research purposes and will be destroyed on the completion of your research. **YES / NO**
- I understand that you will be discussing the progress of your research with others at Kansas State University. **YES / NO**

I freely give my consent to participate in this research study and have been given a copy of this form for my information.

Signature: .....

Date: .....

# In Their Own Voices: A Study of Former African American Male Athletes' Perceptions of Their Academic Experiences at Michigan Community Colleges

Demographic Questionnaire

 sabreeathletics@gmail.com (not shared) [Switch account](#)



Name

Your answer

Email

Your answer

Phone Number

Your answer

Age ( Date Of Birth)

Date

mm/dd/yyyy

Gender

☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ Prefer not to say

☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity

Choose



## College Information

How many Community Colleges were you an active student athlete?

Choose ▼

Name all of the sports you played as a Community College student athlete. (i.e. Baseball , Football)

Choose ▼

When was your first semester of Community College? (i.e. Fall 2017)

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

When was your last semester of Community College? (i.e. Fall 2017)

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

What was the highest level of Community College you completed?

- ☐ Certificate
- ☐ Associates Degree
- ☐ Less than 60 credits, non transfer eligible.
- ☐ 60 credits or more, with grade point average eligible to transfer to 4 year institution.
- ☐ Transfer to 4 year institution.

What is the highest level of education by your father?

- ☐ Some High School
- ☐ High School Diploma / GED
- ☐ Some College
- ☐ Associates Degree
- ☐ Bachelors Degree
- ☐ Masters Degree or Higher

What is the highest level of education by your mother?

- ☐ Some High School
- ☐ High School Diploma/ GED
- ☐ Some College
- ☐ Associates Degree
- ☐ Bachelors Degree
- ☐ Masters Degree or Higher

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## Appendix B – Kansas State University Institutional Review Board Approval



### Institutional Review Board (IRB) Informed Consent Template Form

Yusuf Sabree  
ysabree@ksu.edu

If you are performing research involving human subjects, it is your responsibility to address the issue of informed consent. This template is intended to provide guidance for crafting an informed consent document. The Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (IRB) strongly recommends that you model your consent form on this template. However, if you choose a different approach, it must contain at a minimum the same elements as this standard version. Language and terminology used in the consent form must be written at no more than the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level, so that the potential participant can clearly understand the project, how it is going to be conducted, and all issues that may affect his or her participation. In addition, please write the consent form in a manner that addresses your subjects directly instead of writing it in a manner that addresses the University Research Compliance Office directly. *Information on the important issue of informed consent can be found in 45 CFR 46 at <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.html#46.116>.*  
**Federal law mandates that all signed and dated informed consent forms be retained by the P.I. for at least three years following completion of the study.**

**WAIVER OF INFORMED CONSENT:** *There are limited instances where the requirement for a formal informed consent document may be waived or altered by the IRB.*

45 CFR 46 states that "An IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects if it

- finds either:*
- 1) *That the only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document and the principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality. Each subject will be asked whether the subject wants documentation linking the subject with the research, and the subject's wishes will govern; or*
  - 2) *That the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context."*

If a study employs only questionnaires and surveys as the source of their data, it may generally be assumed that to answer and return the questionnaire is an appropriate and sufficient expression of free consent. However, there are circumstances that might call this assumption into question - e.g., teacher-student relationship between the investigator and the subject, etc. However, a statement should be included on the questionnaire or survey form indicating that participation of the subject is strictly voluntary, the length of time reasonably expected to complete the questionnaire or survey form, and that questions that make the participant uncomfortable may be skipped.

#### Form Content

**PROJECT TITLE:** Full title of project. If possible, the title should be identical to that used in any funding/contract proposal.

**PROJECT APPROVAL DATE/ EXPIRATION DATE:** provided in the approval letter, must be in place before distributing to subjects.

**LENGTH OF STUDY:** Estimate the length of time the subject will be expected to participate.

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):** Must be a regular member of the faculty.

**CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:** Name, phone number and/or email address of the P.I.

**IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:** *For the subject should he/she have questions or wish to discuss on any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB. These are:* Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Cheryl Doerr, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

**PROJECT SPONSOR:** Funding/contract entity.

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:** Explain in lay terms that this is a research project, and why the research is being done.

**PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:** Explain in lay terms and in language understandable at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level how the study is going to be conducted and what will be expected of participants. Tell participants if they will be audio or videotaped, if they will be paid, etc.

**ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO SUBJECT:**

Explain any alternative procedures or treatments if applicable.

**RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:** Describe any foreseeable risks or discomforts from the study. If there are no known risks, make a statement to that effect.

**BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:** Describe any reasonably expected benefits from the research to the participant or others from the research.

**EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:** Explain how you plan to protect confidentiality.

**IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS:** *In cases where more than minimal risk is involved.*

**PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS:** If minors or those who require the approval of a parent or guardian are participants, you should include a space for their consenting signature.

**PARTICIPANT NAME/SIGNATURE:** Name of research participant and signature.

**WITNESS TO SIGNATURE (PROJECT STAFF):** Staff signature.

**If any of the following content sections do not apply to your research, feel free to delete from the consent form.**

**PROJECT TITLE:**

In Their Own Voices: A Study of Former African American Male Athletes' Perceptions of Their Academic Experiences at Michigan Community Colleges

**PROJECT APPROVAL  
DATE:**

**PROJECT EXPIRATION  
DATE:**

1 year

**LENGTH OF  
STUDY:**

1 year

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:**

Dr. Christine Johnson McPhail

**CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):**

N/A

**CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:**

785-532-5525 / cjmcp@mail@ksu.edu

**IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:**

Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on  
Research Involving Human Subjects,  
203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University,  
Manhattan, KS 66506  
785-532-3224

**PROJECT SPONSOR:**

N/A

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:**

The purpose of this qualitative study is threefold: a) describe and explore the experiences of African American male former student-athletes; b) explore the support services that African American former student-athletes identify as contributing to their academic success, and 3) propose practices and interventions that community college practitioners may use to improve academic success for African American male student-athletes.

**PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:**

The semi-structured interviews will be conducted using the snowballing technique for all participants. Interviews are expected to last 30-60 minutes. The interview session will be audio and video recorded. Participants will also have the opportunity to review their recordings after transcription.

**RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:**

No risk anticipated.

**BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:**

The findings from this study can be used to inform student-athletes, parents, coaches, athletic directors and community members of the support services African American student-athletes receive while attending community college.

**EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Each participant will be treated anonymously: a series of four numbers will be assigned in place of each participant's real name, and other markers that could identify the student will be removed.

Data storage is kept in a secure location on a local private and secure hard drive which is password protected. Document retention guidelines require data to be kept for 3-5 years. Afterward, all data will be deleted, shredded, and destroyed.

Participants will also review their recordings after transcription. Only the researcher and the P.I. will have access to the data.

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. the length of time reasonably expected to complete the questionnaire or survey form will take approximately an hour. If questions are being asked to make you uncomfortable, those questions may be skipped.

**Terms of participation:** I understand this project is research, and that my participation is 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 C – Interview Questions**

1. Tell me how your family upbringing contributed to you attending community college?
2. Explain some of the obstacles you faced in your educational and athletic journey before arriving at community college.
3. Tell me about the role of athletics played in your life leading up to your participation in intercollegiate athletics at the community college level.
4. What were your career goals? Outside goals?
5. Tell me about your academic performance during your year(s) in community college.
6. Tell me about your relationship with faculty and staff. How did they or didn't they help contribute to student athletic experience?
7. Tell me about the most prevalent academic challenges you faced as a community college student-athlete
8. Outside of your sports team, did you belong to any peer group? If so, how did they contribute or hurt your student athletic experience?
9. Tell me about your relationship with your teammates. Did they help contribute to your athletic experience? Academic experience? Why?
10. If you could give incoming community college student-athletes some advice about becoming a student-athlete, what would it be?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about your success/lack of success in navigating the community college system?