



AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

John Glavan for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education presented on October 16, 2009.

Title: The Meaning of Persistence for African American Females Attending Urban Community Colleges

Abstract approved:

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Darlene Russ-Eft

The purposes of this study were to examine the experiences of African American female students attending urban community colleges, to gain further understanding of how they interpret the meaning of persistence, and to identify the factors that affect their persistence. African American women attending community college in Los Angeles were interviewed on their educational experiences and the meaning of persistence to them. The results of this study will offer researchers and community college leaders a broader and more in-depth perspective into the essence of persistence for African American female students. By focusing on individual students rather than groups of students, the study examines how persistence works in the day-to-day lives of these students. The study expresses these women's concerns and may help make colleges more aware of their needs and issues.

The significance of this study is threefold. The first is to help a minority group of students who currently are trying to benefit from a community college education to find a voice so that they can describe their college experiences. The second is to describe, based both on the specific perceptions of the students interviewed as well as insights gained from the study of the relevant literature, the specific impact that urban community colleges have on the persistence of African American female students. The third is to add to the currently limited scholarly literature regarding the persistence of African American female students attending urban community colleges.

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The Meaning of Persistence for African American Females  
Attending Urban Community Colleges

by  
John Glavan

A DISSERTATION

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APPROVED:

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Major professor, representing Education.

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Dean of the College of Education

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Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

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John Glavan, Author

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To my wife Patricia for your love, support, challenges, and encouragement. For helping me to always remain a progressive thinker. To my children Clara and Evan, who remind me what the future holds. And to my mother and father Mary and Ive for giving me life and a foundation to be independent and self-sufficient.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction and Background**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of African American female students attending urban community colleges and to gain further understanding of why they go to college and of how they interpret persistence. A significantly higher percentage of African American women successfully persist in college, at all levels, than do African American men, and this percentage is increasing (Evans, 2007a, 2007b; Hackett, 2002; Lester, 2008a, 2008b; National Center for Education Statistics, 2005; Nora, 2002; Schwartz & Washington, 2000; Townsend, 2008; Zamani, 2003). The practical aim of this study was to focus on the educational experiences of African American women in order to lead to greater understanding of these women and of the factors affecting their persistence and assist educators in nurturing their success.

### **Focus of This Study**

African American women at community colleges represent an intersection of race, gender, and class that is historically unique in American culture. Examining the lives of these women offered an opportunity to shed light on some neglected but core aspects of American life and education, in particular the way that general oppression and social problems may affect the ability of specific individuals to succeed.

This study also benefited African American women themselves by helping them find and express their own “voice,” one that has historically been denied in the United States and one that they have long struggled to express (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000). The voice of African American women has not only been denied, but also denied doubly, due to their status both as African Americans and as women. This double blow has made African American women students a severely and systematically oppressed,

disadvantaged, and excluded group; in fact, they have been *the* most oppressed, disadvantaged and excluded group in the United States, having long had the lowest levels of education and the greatest levels of poverty, with all of the social problems that accompany these conditions (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000). While there have been remarkable changes and advances in recent decades, the historical legacy of racism and sexism has had, and continues to have, devastating effects on their lives and fortunes, a fact that makes their persistence all the more remarkable and worthy of study.

### **Research Questions and Rationale**

Two major questions will be examined in the current study: (a) the meaning of persistence to African American women attending urban community colleges, and (b) the factors and issues affecting the persistence of these women. The second question will be approached from two perspectives, one addressing the personal factors that affect all individual community college students, and the other focusing on race, gender, and class issues, and the impact that being a member of a minority or disadvantaged population or culture has on a student's persistence.

The three research questions asked in the current study were:

1. What is the meaning of persistence to African American female students who attend urban community colleges?
2. What are the personal factors and issues that affect the persistence of these community college students?
3. What racial, gender, and class issues affected the persistence of these African American female students? To what extent do these factors come to affect the persistence of each woman, and how do they affect them?

The attempt to gain insight into the meaning of persistence among specific African American females may begin the process of helping them hear their own voice. Learning what they and others of their group feel and think gives context and meaning to their experiences and provides essential information about how their education progresses in the real world. Facilitating the expression of these women's experiences can provide important insights for them and for those who may be interested or for those who may be in positions to improve urban colleges in this regard.

That was the goal of this study: to focus on the individual stories of some successful African American women and to document their situations and needs. Gathering the individual stories was intended to bring these students' specific needs into sharper focus. Facilitating the expression of these women's views and experiences can provide important insights to these women and to those who may be interested in the persistence of community college students.

### **Persistence, Departure, and Retention**

To understand why African American females persist, it is first necessary to define the concept of persistence. In a general way, persistence is simply sticking to one's plan and achieving one's goals. More specifically, the National Center for Education Statistics (2004) defined academic persistence in post-secondary institutions as pertaining to a student's completion of a program of study. For the purpose of *this* study, persistence was defined as being able to complete a two-year program at a community college, the normal program of study. The women interviewed for the study were simply required to be currently enrolled in classes at the college.

It is important for the purposes of this study to distinguish between retention or departure and persistence. Both terms relate to students remaining in college for one reason or another, but the terms reflect different perspectives. Retention is evaluated from the point of view of the college, which primarily views students as a group, and which thus focuses on general problems that most students share, rather than on the struggles of individuals. Statistics and academic theories that discuss what college personnel call the “departure puzzle” view the problem from an institutional perspective (Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 1993). Persistence, on the other hand, is understood from the point of view of the student.

Consequently, the implications of departure theory for the focus of this particular study are limited, since the focus here was on why some students are able to persist despite many difficulties. Studies have investigated why students *leave* school (Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 1993), but few have explored why some students are able to *stay* in school. Persistence, however, was what this study attempted to examine.

An additional problem arises from the fact that most of the work on retention-related issues primarily focuses on students at four-year colleges and gives limited attention to community colleges. In contrast, the focus of this study was on community college students. Specifically, this study described how institutional practices, social conditions, and personal history can combine to create a successful educational experience for at least some African American women attending community colleges. It placed the emphasis on what can go right, not so much on what can go wrong.

### **Significance of the Study**

Since African American females do persist at higher rates than African American males, despite numerous personal and social obstacles, there is value in studying what persistence means to them and how they manage to accomplish it. The study was based in Los Angeles, which has a large African American population, an urban metropolitan area with substantial populations of different races and cultures. The results of this study offer researchers and community college leaders a broader and more in-depth perspective into the essence of persistence for African American female students. By focusing on individual students rather than groups of students, the study described how persistence actually works in the day-to-day lives of these students, and what factors affect their persistence. The study expressed these women's concerns and may help make colleges more aware of their needs and issues.

What makes African American women, as a group, so successful in their persistent pursuit of higher education? What factors influence their persistence? What factors affect their persistence? Identifying and understanding the dynamics of persistence among African American female students at community colleges could provide community college leaders with the knowledge they need to develop programs, instructional techniques, and services that will benefit not only African American women but members of other minority groups as well. An in-depth knowledge of what these women face and what they need to succeed could well lead to a new, more in-depth and more realistic perspective in shaping those services designed specifically for diverse student populations.

### **Background of This Study: African American Women in Higher Education**

This section reviews the role of community colleges for minority students. It then turns to the status of women in higher education, followed by the background of African American women in American higher education. It examines the current status of African American women in education in general, noting their increased enrollment in recent years and that they now represent the majority of African American students. It then reviews their current position in community colleges, and discussed why community colleges have become an important way of meeting the educational needs of these women. This provides context for the study and its significance. It concludes with a discussion of the historical importance of persistence in education for African American women and what education has meant for them as a method of combating racism and sexism.

**Community colleges.** In most inner cities in the United States, community colleges serve extremely diverse student populations. According to Zamani (2003) and others (Cook & Córdova, 2006; Lester, 2008a, 2008b; Townsend, 2008), community college student populations comprise the most diverse collegiate student groups in the United States. People from many different backgrounds attempt to optimize their opportunity for a better life through higher education via the urban community college. “Urban community colleges—those located in or close to major cities—play a key role in higher education by serving economically, educationally, and ethnically disadvantaged, and nationally diverse student populations” (Hirose-Wong, 1999, p. 1). “Minority students represent 6 to 8% of all students enrolled in higher education, yet they constitute nearly 60% of the total enrollment in community colleges” (Nora, 2002, p. 3).

The main reasons why minority students attend community colleges appear to be that these schools offer very low tuition, convenient locations, flexible scheduling suitable for both part- and full-time students, open-door admission policies, and a wide range of programs designed to serve at-risk students trying to overcome a variety of academic and social barriers. Urban community colleges are “providing knowledge, skills, and support for upward mobility in society. These institutions are truly ‘gateways to democracy’ for those who might otherwise be denied access to higher education” (Hirose-Wong, 1999, p. 1).

According to the College Planning Center (2001), some of the major reasons people pursue a community college education are better job opportunities and increased earning power later in life. The community college is an institution that offers an affordable and accessible higher education, much more so than four-year colleges and universities, at least for the initial two years. According to Laanan (2000), community colleges offer people an opportunity to explore and advance their careers and educational goals. Kazis and Liebowitz (2002) have attempted to measure just how much a community college credential is actually worth.

Community college credentials have a significant payoff in the labor market. A two-year degree can increase income an average of 20 to 30 percent over a high school diploma. For women, even a one-year certificate yields a 20 percent earnings jump. Community college credentials open up higher-skilled occupational categories. (p. 5)

The challenge for urban community college leaders is to improve the current services offered to students of color (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Evans, 2007b; Lester, 2008a, 2008b; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Twombly, 2007). With their open-door policies, community colleges are attracting ever-higher numbers of African American

women and are becoming one of the major gateways to higher education for this population group (Cook & Córdova, 2006; Johnson, 2001). Aragon (2000) noted that community college institutions might want to consider rethinking their testing practices, methods of instruction, and counseling techniques in order to foster their students of diverse backgrounds. For African American females in particular, there is a pressing need for urban community colleges to begin to understand how and why these women persist, especially since they are choosing these institutions to help them improve their way of life.

**Status of women in 21st century American higher education.** One good reason that colleges need to focus on their women students is the steadily increasing number of women enrolled in American colleges and universities, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the total enrollment (Cook & Córdova, 2006; Evans, 2007a; King, 2007; Townsend, 1995a, 1995b, 2008). Women now account for the majority of students at American institutions of higher education (Townsend, 2008). Women at community colleges now receive the largest number of associate degrees and certificates (Evans, 2007b; Zamani, 2003).

The growth in the number of women students has been so great, in fact, that since the mid- to late-1990s, a distinctive gender gap has been emerging in American colleges, one occurring in all racial and ethnic groups and at all levels of higher education (King, 2007; Townsend, 2008). As of 2008, the ratio of female to male college students in the U.S. was 133:100 (Townsend, 2008). The percentage of male students relative to that of female students is steadily declining among both traditional and non-traditional (older) students and at all college levels. Townsend (1995a, 1995b, 2008) has written extensively

on this subject. In a recent overview reviewing gender equity in community colleges, she noted that the percentage of traditional-age male undergraduates declined from 47% in 1995–1996 to 45% in 2003–2004. Among older, non-traditional students, which is the fastest growing segment of the student population, male students are now outnumbered nearly two to one (King, 2007; Townsend, 2008). This trend is also seen in African American enrollment. In 1980, 58.1 percent of the African Americans attending institutions of higher education were female. By 2004 this percentage had increased to 65 percent (Verdugo, Henderson, & Dial, 2009).

Townsend (1995a; 1995b; 2008) reported, however, that the percentage of women at community colleges who enroll in traditional and lower-paying fields is still essentially the same, with most of them still avoiding higher-paying fields such as engineering and high-technology. Women continue to dominate in fields seen as traditional women's work, especially nursing and teaching (Townsend, 2008). Townsend noted this pattern in 1995 (1995a, 1995b) when she edited a special edition of *New Directions in Community Colleges* that focused on *Gender and Power in the Community College* (1995a), and she confirmed the pattern's continued existence in another special edition that reviewed the issue in 2008. (Interviews conducted for this current study with African American women students currently enrolled at community colleges also confirmed this pattern, with several of these students pursuing nursing certificates and none interested in engineering or anything involving high-tech.)

While women now comprise the majority of students at all types of colleges and universities, community colleges are the only educational level to have achieved gender parity in the faculty as well, even up to the level of full professor (College and University

Personnel Association, 2007). In 2003, 49% of full-time community college faculty were women, reaching 50.8% in 2005 (Townsend, 2008), a significant gain for just a two-year period. Women are not yet quite equal in terms of tenure, with only 62% of women faculty at community colleges being tenured compared to 68% of the male faculty (Townsend, 2008). Nevertheless, the progress in the past decade or so has been remarkable.

However, the larger number of women faculty (Townsend, 2008) does not necessarily imply a correspondingly larger number of African American female faculty members, at least in relationship to the number of African American men. The picture is complex. Evans (2007a) has recently written about the plight of African American women in the academy and says that despite the increasing number of African American women students, there is still a strong trend for African American women to hold fewer faculty positions than African American men, and, for those who do, to hold more junior positions and have less tenure.

Nevertheless, and despite the fact that the very highest ranks of community college administrators, especially presidents, continue to be dominated by men, generally gender equity in community colleges, for students, faculty and all but the highest-level of staff, has been achieved (Townsend, 1995a, 1995b, 2008). Because of this progress, Townsend suggests that “twenty-first-century community college women can move beyond the twentieth-century issues of parity in numbers and salary and focus on what will improve their lives as women, not just as gender-neutral individuals” (2008, p. 13).

Townsend is speaking of women of all races and ethnicities and of both students and faculty, but the implications for African American female students are clear and

encouraging. One of the major themes explored in this study is the importance of students feeling themselves to be part of the college community (Lester 2008b; Tinto, 1993). Another major theme is the importance of mentors and role models in supporting successful student persistence (Guiffrida, 2005; Johnson, 2001; Kasworm, 2002). Nothing could encourage the feeling of community or encourage the possibilities of mentoring more for female students than the presence of larger numbers of female faculty on campus. The prospect of even greater increases in the number of female students provides a compelling reason to examine the lives and experiences of currently enrolled women. Their experiences provide the clues to what kinds of services colleges will need to offer women in the future.

**Status of African American women at community colleges.** African Americans, especially women, are attracted to urban community colleges, and their numbers there are increasing (Cook & Córdova, 2006; Evans, 2007a). Statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau (2004) indicated that African American female students in 2004 comprised 9.9% of all students attending community colleges. This is an encouraging percentage, over 40% larger than the 6.7% percentage of African American women in the population as a whole. However, the relatively high percentage of these women in community colleges may also be due to the fact that they have less opportunity and means to attend four-year colleges and universities (Gillett-Karam et al., 1991; Hirose-Wong, 1999).

The American Council on Education publishes an annual survey entitled *Minorities in Higher Education*. The 22<sup>nd</sup> and latest version, published in 2006 (Cook & Córdova, 2006), indicates that from 1993 to 2003 the total number of African American

women enrolled in higher education increased 50.4%. In 2003, there were 842,817 African Americans enrolled at community colleges (Cook & Córdova, 2006), approximately 60% of whom were women (Lester, 1995b). The number of African American women who graduated from community colleges and received associate degrees increased from 27,565 in 1993–94 to 52,570 in 2003–04, an increase of 90.7%, nearly doubling in one decade. The percentage of associate degrees awarded to African American women overall increased from 5.3 to 7.9% (Cook & Córdova, 2006).

At community colleges, as in other institutions of higher learning in the U.S., the number of African American women students is increasing at a rate much faster than that of African American men (Cook & Córdova, 2006; Evans, 2007b; Zamani, 2003). While women of nearly all races and ethnicities are now either equal to or slightly ahead of men in terms of enrollment and the number of degrees earned, the disparity is even greater in the African American community (Evans, 2007a; Lester, 2008a, 2008b; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Twombly, 2007). This is primarily due to the exceptionally high percentage of African American men in prison, higher than that of any other group (Evans, 2007a).

That the disparity between women and men is even greater between males and females among the African American community is sometimes obscured by statistics that commonly show only the total rates of college enrollment and completion, including both men and women. The American Council of Education report on minorities in education cited above (Cook & Córdova, 2006), for instance, gives community college enrollment figures only for the racial group as a whole. The report gives the different numbers of male and female African American graduates, but not the separate male and female enrollment figures.

Despite the increased enrollment of African American women, the gap in higher degrees continues to persist (Evans, 2007a, 2007b). While African American women are doing increasingly well at community colleges, they continue to experience difficulties at four-year institutions and, even more so, in attempting to attend graduate school and pursue academic careers (Evans, 2007a, 2007b). African American women may dominate African American men in the number of students enrolled, but not in the number of higher degrees earned and thus not in the number hired as faculty, both areas where the statistics for women are consistently lower. More African American women have been enrolling in college than African American men since the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but by 1995 the women had earned only 20,000 Ph.D.'s, compared to 30,000 for the men (Evans, 2007a).

**The historical legacy: The impact of race, gender, and class.** African American female students persist successfully despite having three inherent obstacles to overcome: race, gender, and class (Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Collins, 2000; Evans, 2007a, 2007b; hooks, 2000). Not all students face all of these obstacles, since some African American females enjoy the privileges of high socio-economic status, but all African American women share the legacy of oppression, at least to some degree.

Evans (2007a) has extensively enumerated the various problems historically faced by African American women in American academia, including the pressures that they endured. She especially noted the impact of their struggles on their ability to *persevere* and pointed out how extraordinary it was that so many were able to succeed.

Historically, Black collegiate women have suffered much: from racialized sexual harassment and violent intimidation; racial segregation and stigmatized separation; stereotypes that presume Black and female

intellectual inferiority; lack of role models and professional mentors; feminization of poverty; and intense pressure to be family and community caretaker at the expense of individual development. Each of these factors has worked against Black women's college degree attainment and impacts their will to persevere through academically and socially challenging course of study at universities that were at best unwelcoming and at worst hostile. (Evans, 2007b, para. 21)

To African American women, education is about much more than a degree; it becomes a transformation of the soul (Collins, 2000; Gillete-Karam, Roueche & Roueche, 1991). Education is about making the journey from "oppression to grace" (Berry & Mizelle, 2006) and about moving from "the border to the center" (hooks, 2000). For African American women, however, the greater significance of education lies in its historical significance as a foundation of the struggle toward a better life, a struggle that continues in its role of giving African American women a voice with which to make themselves heard and, above all, respected.

Collins (2000) has explored how closely African American women see the connections between education and activism. In her view, in fact, the two are essentially the same activity. True, the goals of these women are generally different from the goals of most people in the American mainstream, and African American women approach their education in different ways. Equality for African Americans can only come from acquiring at least a certain amount of economic and political power, and education is clearly seen as the first and most essential step towards acquiring some degree of power in those areas.

Common knowledge has long held that walking in somebody else's shoes is difficult. For most people, including college administrators, learning to set aside a personal perspective to understand problems and experiences from the student's

perspective is not an ability that comes naturally. Johnson (2001), in suggesting that community colleges could become more proactive in supporting African American women, recommended listening to the stories that enrolled students tell about what is working for them and where they are having problems at college.

There are various factors that account for the successful (or unsuccessful) persistence of African American female students at urban community colleges. According to Johnson (2001), minority students' social integration into the society as a whole and their involvement in college life plays an important role in their success. The in-depth understanding of factors that facilitate persistence for these women can play an important part in clarifying the true meaning of why the group persists the way it does. Hackett (2002) stated:

As the numbers of African American women students increase on community college campuses, we find a pressing need for information about what these students need in order to persist and succeed. This information could be the key, not only to attracting African American women to higher education, but also to ensuring that they complete their programs of study. (p. 3)

According to Clements (2000), many of the services designed to assist students in acclimating to the community college do not adequately help students of color, because the system is built on traditional assumptions that all students attending the institution will be able to get their needs met regardless of previous educational experiences or backgrounds. These assumptions ignore major social and economic disadvantages that often prove to be greater than most individuals can overcome on their own. Further, Clements claimed that the colleges have to ignore the disadvantages of students of color, for to recognize them would be to acknowledge the possibility that college administrators

are complicit in perpetuating factors that contribute to the disadvantages and in failing to change the system, an undertaking that is very difficult to achieve. There are many people within these institutions who are aware of these problems and who would like to make changes, but the institution itself has a life and purpose of its own.

Improvements regarding civil rights and equal opportunity in recent decades have created a situation where colleges are officially and technically free of prejudice and discrimination. A climate of “political correctness” has arisen that makes it impossible for institutions to openly acknowledge the continuing existence of oppression, or to directly confront it (Clements, 2000). In a recent work titled *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, Kozol (2006) has shown how many of the gains of previous decades are being reversed, despite numerous claims that American schools are now free of discrimination.

Many community college administrators often ignore or are not aware of the fact that people from different cultures experience and perceive things in markedly different ways and that processes that work for members of one culture may confuse those from another. Giving students a voice may help them overcome the confusion that arises from cultural differences. Through expressing themselves and associating with others who have similar views, students can have their own experiences and perspectives validated by peers so that what they learn is made more meaningful (Kasworm, 2002; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). More important in the long run is that giving these students a voice adds to the general dialogue and helps them describe their struggle to overcome a legacy of oppression.

One problem for urban community college leaders attempting to address issues of diversity is that although they may provide services for students of color or other groups, these services are not always individualized enough to capitalize on each group's strengths. If each underrepresented group does not have a specific voice expressing its members' needs then it is more difficult for the college to determine if that group has any particular unaddressed needs, and, if so, to develop methods of addressing them. In this context, the present study is important because it will not only increase the limited scholarly research available, but also offer African American female students the benefit of hearing each other's stories of persistence, a sharing of information that may help to clarify what the problems are as well as provide role models for future generations.

The present study contributes to achieving this goal by outlining the experiences of women who have actually gone through these programs. By specifically asking these women about what has helped and hurt them in their educational careers, this study helps delineate what has worked and which areas need further study and development.

### **The Meaning of Persistence for African American Women**

The focus of this study is on the meaning of persistence for African American female students attending urban community colleges. More women successfully persist in American higher education than men, including at community colleges (Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Twombly, 2008), and this is true for the African American population as well (Evans, 2007a, 2007b; Hackett, 2002; Lester, 2008a, 2008b; Nora, 2002; Schwartz & Washington, 2000; Zamani, 2003). The rate of persistence among African American women cannot be given precisely, since it varies a good deal, depending on the level of education (community college, undergraduate or graduate), as well as in different parts of

the country, and between rural and urban areas as well. One of the problems in determining the precise rate of persistence for women in specific groups of Americans is that the separate figures for each gender among different minorities or ethnic groups are rarely given, usually only the overall percentages of men and women. Nevertheless, that African American women are persisting very successfully is well established (Evans, 2007a, 2007b; Lester, 2008a, 2008b). A few studies have explored this topic by aggregating the overall experiences and conditions among African American female students, this study will focus on the experiences of specific individual African American women and will attempt to describe their “lived experiences” at community colleges, using accounts presented from the students’ own perspectives and placed within their own cultural context.

Informing community college leaders about the meaning of persistence within this specific student group is significant because identifying and sharing this information gives a voice to an underrepresented group that is attempting to benefit from a post-secondary education. Much more important, the content of this study has great significance in the context of African American women and their long struggle to achieve both education and equality, one aspect of which is the problem of establishing their own voice and making themselves heard.

For disadvantaged African American women, in particular, education has traditionally been seen as the key to fighting oppression, and obtaining access to education has become a core goal of their struggle (Collins, 2000; Evans, 2007a; Freire, 1970, 1995; hooks, 2000). Being a minority, however, means that African American women must first gain access to the facilities of the majority, despite having a long-term

goal of escaping domination by that majority. In that context, one of the most pivotal successes of the civil rights movement has been the 1954 Supreme Court decision desegregating schools, thereby increasing educational opportunities for African Americans and allowing education to become a key success factor and the foundation for other advancements (Collins, 2000). Sharing African American women students' stories of success provides knowledge about experiences that are at the very heart of both national and global struggles for social justice and prosperity, stories that will also help individuals from other undereducated groups (Evans, 2007a, 2007b).

The proposed study is part of the much larger struggle to respond to issues raised by the concept of the "pedagogy of the oppressed" (Freire, 1970, 1995). Its objective is to step out of the framework of the college and see this institution from the point of view of "others" – in this case, African American female students. That is, the focus of this study is to help facilitate the expression of these students' voices and of their cultures, as well as to understand what factors affect their persistence in college.

Freire (1970, 1995) has demonstrated the close relationship of education and social justice and stated that for many disadvantaged people the meaning of persistence is as much about helping others in their group as it is about helping themselves. He reminds us that the struggles individual students who are disadvantaged and oppressed must face in order to get an education have to be seen in the larger context of their social groups' efforts to overcome disadvantage and oppression. He makes the point that the efforts of other groups to help oppressed groups are inherently limited and that oppressed and disadvantaged groups must help themselves, for only they can effectively achieve the desired outcome.

This idea, when applied to African American female students, emphasizes the importance of facilitating the expression of these women's own voice so that their experiences can be understood, not from the perspective of the dominant group, but from the women's own individual perspective and that of their own cultural group or groups. The group identification for each sub-group and for each individual woman must include all of the different cultural designations that apply—not just race, but class and gender as well. This view of the situation for African American female students in community colleges is, in many ways, the primary focus of this study.

### **Addressing the Need for More Research**

Currently, the literature available that addresses African American female persistence at community colleges is limited. Johnson (2001) collected data on 10 African American females attending community colleges. According to her findings, there is little qualitative literature that discusses why and how African American females persist at urban community colleges. Much of the literature available focuses on African American students as a whole and usually includes community college students along with students at four-year colleges (Kasworm, 2002). The research generally uses enrollment trends, financial data, and other statistics about the group as a whole (e.g., Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 1993).

The emphasis of this proposed study is on those African American women who are achieving the most. The intent is to find out why these students are successful. Adding to the current literature helps urban community college leaders in their attempts to address the specific needs of these women, and it assists these leaders in identifying the barriers within colleges that may oppose successful persistence as well as the

conditions that may encourage it. Most of the work done researching African Americans in higher education focuses on four-year colleges and universities. There is a distinct lack of work that focuses on giving voice to their experiences at the community college level, a void that it is hoped this study helps to fill.

### **Summary of Chapter One**

The purpose of this study is to provide insight into an understanding of African American females' persistence while attending urban community colleges. The research questions for this study attempted to investigate the meaning of persistence for African American female students attending urban community colleges, identified personal factors that affect persistence, and examined the social and cultural factors that specifically impact on African American women. These findings may clarify and help to focus the efforts that the urban community colleges are taking to foster and increase this group's persistence

Community colleges play an increasingly important role in contemporary education, especially in the inner-city, urban environment. Their open-door admissions policy helps disadvantaged students, older students, and those who simply did not apply themselves in high school and need a second chance. Community colleges appeal to many different groups of people, but have proven to be especially helpful to African American women, who have shown some of the highest college completion rates of any ethnic or racial subgroup in American society. In doing so, African American women confirm the ideas behind a number of different schools of thought relating to education in general, and especially to higher education.

African American women have historically suffered from intersecting oppressions—those of race and gender, and some have experienced class oppression—a fact that makes their situation unique. Some African American women have a history of illiteracy due to persistent efforts to deny them access to education. Education is the key to success in modern society; and the ability to read, write, and understand basic mathematics is the key to successful education. Illiteracy is a major problem in American society, one that affects *all* social groups (Kozol, 1980, 1985, 2006) but has had a particular impact on African American people. It is just one of many barriers to education for disadvantaged people, but is perhaps the area where society can most directly help them and affect their futures.

Community colleges are a proven and cost-effective way of helping disadvantaged and other marginalized groups acquire an education, and it is therefore important to understand the role that these colleges play in modern education. By studying the experiences of African American women attending these colleges, much useful information can be gathered that would help the colleges better understand their role, learn which of their programs are working and which are not, and in general find ways to be more effective educational institutions.

Despite the many obstacles, African American women have demonstrated an extraordinary ability to overcome their problems and to succeed in a society dominated by White men. This study adds significance and focus to scholarly research by increasing the current amount of limited research in this area, particularly relating to community colleges.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of the review of literature related to this study was to examine specific research on the persistence of African American females attending urban community colleges, as well as on the background issues necessary to put this work into context. The literature review was organized into four sections, beginning with the more generic areas and then moving to the more specific: (a) examples of studies based on lived experiences; (b) studies related to persistence and student retention in general, and the meaning of education and persistence to students; (c) personal factors affecting persistence for all students at community colleges, disadvantaged or otherwise; and (d) larger college, cultural and social factors and issues, including the myriad and interwoven impacts of race, gender and class.

To identify literature related to the proposed study, I have reviewed the following: community college and higher education journals, ERIC Documents, U.S. Department of Education documents and papers, the Wilson Web, U.S. Census Bureau Statistics, and dissertations. I have conducted key-word searches in the ERIC Database as well as the University of California's Melvyl Catalog search primer using the following terms and phrases: African American female student, women students, Black feminism, community college persistence, academic success, retention, minority student completion, Black students at two-year colleges, student intervention programs, and student persistence. The focus was on recent studies related to both African American women and persistence at community colleges.

### **Lived Experiences of African Americans in Higher Education**

Since this study is a collection of lived experiences, it was necessary, in order to demonstrate the value and validity of this approach, to review the existing literature on the lived experiences of African American woman attempting to gain a formal education. The idea of collecting verbal accounts from these students about their experiences echoes the traditional African American focus on using oral rather than written accounts to remember their history.

The literature about African American women gaining their voice is extensive, with strong roots in an oral tradition (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000). The great topic of African American women's literature is, in fact, the act of gaining a voice in a country where they have been historically denied the right to be citizens and to be heard (Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Collins, 2000, pp. 105–119). It is their struggle to gain a voice about which they primarily write, along with the struggle to be their own women, free of oppression. Even where they have been denied the right to write, African American women have been able to use music and other forms of expression to be heard. Billie Holiday, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and many of the other great blues singers of the early twentieth century used their music to express themselves and to reach out to and unite other African American women (Collins, 2000, pp. 105–108). They did so quite consciously and deliberately, and the lyrics of the songs they wrote should not be overlooked in any compendium of the literature of African American women.

Evans (2007a, 2007b) has recently explored the roots of African American women's higher education in *Black Women in the Ivory Tower: 1850-1954*. She tells the stories of African American women who managed to obtain graduate degrees during the

age of segregation as well as the experiences of those few who managed to become college professors. These women existed between African American communities that were poor and uneducated and White academies where they felt out of place and generally not very welcome. Evans also pointed out the historical importance to African American higher education of the small African American colleges in the South, and also noted the contributions of a few small integrated colleges such as Oberlin and Fisk.

In an interview, Evans (2007b) very eloquently described why she wrote her book. What she said perfectly encapsulates the purpose of this study and explains why it was so important and valuable to record the voices of African American women. Recounting these women's stories had a profound effect on Evans and greatly helped her to make sense of and to progress in her own academic work. It is notable, and quite in line with the goals of this study, that she noted that hearing these women's voices helped her face and overcome her own fears and insecurities.

I am grateful to have this book completed and honored to have been able to tell the compelling stories here. I believe it will help Black women in particular but will also free all academics from the harrowing myths of Black female intellectual inferiority. Though the academy was not made for women like me, I offer reflections that help make sense of why I am NOT an outsider. I operate, like the women have before me, as a negotiator of the space between individuals and institutions. After reading the varied histories of Black women academics, I posited the standpoint of social contract as a way to destabilize the assumptions of White male superiority but also to uncover the intellectual gems offered by Black women academics. This book has given me confidence, insight, and appreciation for my work. After reading what Black women of prior generations have overcome, I feel well armed for the challenges I face. To have glimpsed the inner turmoil experienced and recorded by past African American women academics, I am better prepared to face my own fears of inadequacy, intimidation, and insecurity. . . . After reading these women's stories, I was able to clearly articulate my personal and professional values: love, balance, human rights, civil rights, humility, and sustainability. (para. 24)

Berry and Mizell's (2006) *Oppression to Grace* gathered together personal accounts of a number of women of color, primarily, though not exclusively, African Americans who had made it to graduate school and into permanent academic careers. The book provided well-documented examples of the lived experiences of female students and professors. It illuminated many aspects of their different, unique, and individual experiences by placing those experiences within the context of each woman's entire life. It demonstrated that racism, sexism, and classism interact in many different ways to affect one's life and that every individual's experience of these social forces is different. One problem with this work, however, as with many other collections of lived experiences, was that it focused on women in graduate school and beyond. This narrow focus has illustrated the need for more such accounts from students at community colleges, as well as from four-year university students.

Edwards and Polite's (1993) *Children of the Dream: The Psychology of Black Success* offered another collection of life stories and examples of success that demonstrate the value of lived experiences in illuminating the African American experience. These accounts of success in various areas provided a good background for the present generation's struggle for success and illuminate the way today's African Americans are inspired by both the successes and failures of earlier generations. The book's content was not limited to the stories of students, however, and included the stories of both men and women.

Green and Scott's (2003) *Journey to the Ph.D.: How to Navigate the Process as African Americans* also illustrated the type of lived experiences found in the literature. It gathered together the lived experiences of African American students in a variety of

fields. However, as with many of these studies, it too was focused on undergraduate and graduate students at four-year colleges, not on community college students.

**Summary.** This section reviewed some of the existing literature regarding the lived experiences of African American women in higher education. These works demonstrate the value of recording lived experiences because they illuminate how unique and different each person's experiences are. These accounts of individual lives and struggles, demonstrate how racism, sexism, and oppression affect each woman, and how these women were able, or in some cases unable, to overcome those forces, get their degrees, and establish their careers. The fact that the collections focus almost exclusively on women who have attended four-year universities and graduate schools accentuates the need for the same types of studies involving community college students. The present study will hopefully help fill this gap by adding to the growing library of studies of community college students.

These compendia of lived experiences help to confirm the validity of the current study and of its qualitative approach. Each of the stories reveals how unique each person's path in life is and just how many different factors can come to influence someone's actions. In doing so, these stories illustrate the limits of quantitative approaches, which simply do not catch the many subtleties and complexities shown in the overall picture. The stories also demonstrate the need for and value of collections of lived experiences at the community college level. Because the primary focus in these studies is on students at four-year universities and in graduate programs, their limitation accentuates the need for similar studies involving students at community colleges.

### **Studies of Persistence and the Meaning of Persistence**

This section reviewed a number of studies involving research done on various aspects relating to persistence in higher education. Specific topics addressed included student departure, student involvement theory, predictors of success in education, and, finally, motivation and goals, a theme that runs through all of these issues, and which connects both the meaning of persistence and the factors that affect it.

The underlying “meaning” of persistence has to do with the meaning and value that African American women students find in their educational experiences. What does college, and their education in general, “mean” to them, and which parts of the college experience do they value most? These kinds of questions need to be asked, because people of different genders, races, classes, and cultures find meaning in their experiences that reflect these classifications and their own personal histories, and respond to their experiences accordingly.

**Student departure.** The current study focused on persistence rather than departure, but since the issues are related, in order to inform the study and provide the necessary background to the current scholarship in this area it was important to examine the research on departure as well. The first step is to distinguish between the terms persistence and departure. The two are related, but are often confused. As discussed in chapter one, while both terms fall under the general rubric of student “retention,” the emphasis and points of view are quite different. Roughly speaking, persistence reflects a student’s point of view, while departure reflects the college or institutional perspective. Rather than focusing on why some students are able to stay in school despite difficulties, most research in this area has instead examined why some leave. One reason for this is

that it is somewhat easier to identify the specific reasons that a student has dropped out, while those that allow one to persist are much more tenuous. The literature on departure is reviewed in this section.

Tinto (1993) has called the question of why certain students leave college and others do not the *departure puzzle*. In his view, departure was not an isolated event, but a process consisting of a series of events that led up to the student dropping out. Such events could be a failed test, financial problems, a family illness, pressures at work, and so on. In Tinto's view it is not any one event or situation that causes students to quit, but the accumulation of these issues.

Tinto (1993) has also demonstrated that departure is not necessarily due to academic problems. He showed that even students with good grades could and did depart. He believed that the crucial factor was whether the students felt that they belonged on the campus. He urged colleges to create a "community" on campus, a place where students feel welcome and as though they belong.

Tinto (1993) has also pointed out one very important difference between the environment at community colleges and four-year institutions.

Compared to patterns of departure in largely residential institutions, departure from commuting colleges appears to be influenced less by social events than by strictly academic matters and more influenced by external forces which shape the character of students' lives off campus than by events internal to the campus. (p. 78)

Four-year institutions generally have an on-campus community with a wide range of facilities and also offer programs that foster involvement, such things as live-in dormitories for students, prestigious athletic teams, cultural centers, and other facilities and activities that make up a campus community. Community colleges generally do not

offer these kinds of services and are especially lacking in dormitories where students can live on campus. Community college students typically commute to campus, attending for just a few hours a day (Tinto, 1993). There is little incentive for them to remain on campus after their classes are finished, other than perhaps to use the library. Their lives are shaped much more by factors external to the campus, and their persistence is generated more by their own intentions and commitments. The college can reach them, and they do desire contact and mentoring, but they have to be approached in a different manner than students at four-year institutions (Gillett-Karam, Roueche, & Roueche, 1991; Kasworm, 2002; Tinto, 1993).

Tinto (1993) acknowledged that socioeconomic issues come into play and that not all students have all of the resources they need.

Finally, some evidence exists to suggest that finances and financial aid may be more important to disadvantaged students from traditionally under-represented groups than it is for White students generally . . . . Thus one can discern of significant differences between groups of individuals (identified here by race, social class, sex, and age) and between types of institutions (classified by level, size, and residential character) in both the patterning and roots of student departure. Though the research on these issues is still quite limited, it does appear, for instance, that the departure of students of color arises from a somewhat different mixture of events than that of majority students, and that patterns and roots of departure among commuting colleges are not identical to those observed among residential institutions. (pp. 75–83)

Tinto (1993) also made the worthwhile point that the departure figures for community colleges may be deceptive in that they commonly also report as “departures” the students who leave in order to move to four-year institutions. He summarized the basic reasons for student departure:

Individual departure from institutions of higher education arises from several major causes or roots. These have been described here as intention,

commitment, adjustment, difficulty, congruence, isolation, obligations, and finances. The first two pertain to dispositions with which individuals enter institutions of higher education, the next four to experiences they have after entry, and the latter two to external forces which impinge upon their experiences within the institution. (p. 81)

Note that Tinto did not acknowledge the importance of social conditions, such as racism or sexism. His emphasis was almost entirely on individuals, not on the community at large.

Tinto's basic *interactionalist perspective* holds that the primary reason for student departure is that those students who are unable to "connect" with the various "subsystems" of their colleges are more likely to leave. More recently, in a book of essays edited by Braxton (2000), Braxton and others revisited Tinto's work and reevaluated it in light of recent experience. They, including Tinto himself, felt that his theories needed to be updated to reflect more recent developments, especially those regarding multicultural issues, demographics, and institutional perspectives. Braxton and his colleagues (2000) discussed what is called the *assimilationist/acculturation perspective*, which has developed in conjunction with, and partially in response to, Tinto's basic interactionalist theories.

In summary, it is important to note again that these theories focus on the reasons students leave school, not the reasons that some are able to persist, and therefore only part of this analysis is directly relevant to the literature on persistence itself. However, the issues related to departure are related to those related to persistence, and the study of departure has clear implications for this study.

One of the interview questions focused specifically on student departure, and asked the women why they thought other students were not able to persist. One of the

most curious results of the current study was that the women interviewed were not able to see, or at least would not acknowledge, the existence of barriers to their own persistence, but when asked why they thought other students dropped out they were able to give extremely detailed and perceptive explanations.

**Student involvement theory.** The theoretical notion of *involvement theory* (Derby & Smith, 2004) suggests that community colleges must proactively track students of color in order to encourage them to become involved on their campuses, a first step toward establishing the framework for future persistence and success. The emphasis is on getting the students to become active participants in their education and college community.

Derby and Smith (2004) suggested that the paramount necessity for community colleges is to track the needs of their students and to be active in students' academic success. "Students can enter into a community college to take classes for the purpose of obtaining a two-year transferable degree or a terminal certificate, enhancing general job skills, or for personal enrichment" (p. 763). The literature they reviewed, as well as that reviewed by Opp (2002), suggested that when community colleges actively implement strategies to increase minority student populations through various service-oriented programs such as mentoring and multicultural centers, there is an overall increase in persistence.

Student involvement theory is based on student participation, which requires that the college promote and encourage students' involvement both academically and socially (Derby & Smith, 2004). According to these authors, orientation courses facilitated for students by the community college can be a contributing factor to student involvement

and success. One of the desirable outcomes of the orientation program is that “successful students have completed the requirements of a transferable degree within a two-year period” (p. 766).

According to Opp (2002), community colleges can employ several strategies to get students of color involved in campus activities that foster academic success and persistence. “Involvement theory suggests that policies and practices that promote interactions among students and among students and faculty and staff are crucial in enhancing the student talent development process” (p. 160). Some involvement strategies that community colleges have put into action to increase the success of students of color include tailored financial aid programs, tutoring, intrusive academic advising, the creation and staffing of multicultural centers, and increased interaction between students of color and the faculty and staff. Such policies and practices are important in promoting students’ academic success rates (Opp, 2002).

In summary, student involvement theory focuses attention on the importance of students becoming involved in the campus community. It suggests that giving personal attention to students promoting the development of personal relationships with faculty and staff are effective methods to encourage involvement. This idea informed the current study, with several of the interview questions exploring students’ relationships with faculty and other college staff.

**Student perspectives on learning.** Each student has different reasons for going to school, and values what they learn there in terms of their own lives and what it can do for them. The current study examined why African American women valued an education, and how what they were learning related and contributed to their lives. It also

examined what factors affected their learning, and how the learning process affected their persistence.

Students Kasworm (2002) interviewed valued their education; not just for the degrees and greater career opportunities it offered, but also for the way it enhanced their lives and helped them clarify their own thinking. Kasworm reported that education also helped them cope with discrimination and led them to seek out courses on African American literature and culture. One student said that they did this “so that we can learn about ourselves versus other people. I think it would help me to want to learn and to want to know about it, if I felt like I was initially a part of it or somebody was initially a part of it” (Kasworm, 2002, p. 16). Kasworm reported that gaining meaning from their learning motivated the students and gave them reasons to establish goals. “Learning connected to their lives and applied to their work. They also had future goals that involved continued learning” (p. 18). The women Kasworm interviewed all saw persistence as directly related to achieving goals, but they did not mention overcoming discrimination as one of the reasons for their persistence.

In order to have meaning to the students, adult learning required cultural congruence (Kasworm, 2002), an issue discussed in more detail in the section on larger cultural and social issues. For African American students, persistence was derived from their feeling that achieving an education was important to improving their underrepresented status in society, and the ability to persist was assisted by supportive relationships that helped the students visualize a positive outcome in both their personal and professional lives.

And I guess, the new horizons, if you will, that have opened for me [from attending college] and the knowledge that I have acquired being able to use that in the work place . . . and seeing that knowledge at work. So that it just kind of adds fuel to the fire . . . . I can actually see some improvement, as far as my thought process and the things that I accomplish at work. Because most of it is important . . . . Sometimes people they'll ask you a question [about going to college] . . . . And I just tell them, 'cause I want to, 'cause I want to. (p. 15)

Guiffrida's study (2005) involved 19 African American students at a northeastern university, all of whom self-identified themselves as "high achievers." There were 11 females and 8 males, with an average GPA of 3.2. Guiffrida chose to concentrate on those with higher grades, thinking that these more successful achievers would provide more insight into what made them able to persist. His study focused on the relationships with faculty and mentors. He also discussed how African American students' interpretation of persistence was developed through relationships with faculty members who made an effort to reach out to them, especially African American faculty and those with whom the students shared a similar background and cultural orientation.

Guiffrida's study (2005) indicated that African American students expected their faculty advisors to help them on a deeper level than just basic advice about course selection and other academic problems. They looked for meaningful relationships that fostered future professional success beyond the educational experience. The students Guiffrida interviewed reported that they had more difficulty establishing relationships with White faculty than they did with non-White faculty, although they had successful and problematic relationships with instructors from both groups. Guiffrida did not discuss whether the nature of the relationships was shaped a result of discrimination from either the students or the professors. The differences in relationships did not seem to be the

result of overt discrimination, but rather of a social construct that neither side was able to overcome.

In any case, student-centered faculty made the experience for African American students more enriching and helped maintain their self-worth and their perception that they could be successful. African American faculty played a critical role in fostering the success of African American students because they were viewed as role models who helped provide motivation (Guiffrida, 2005).

In summary, this section reviewed student perspectives on learning. It examined why students went to school, and what the value of their education was to them. Kasworm's (2002) work demonstrated that students valued their work not just for the opportunities it opened up to them, but also for how it helped clarify their own minds. It helped them connect their education to their goals, and helped them feel that they were overcoming discrimination and accomplishing something with their lives.

Furthermore, their persistence was fostered by relationships with faculty. Guiffrida's (2005) work on student-faculty relationships confirmed this connection. Guiffrida demonstrated how students looked to faculty relationships not in terms of their immediate education, but also as a way of fostering future opportunities. He found that students found it more difficult to establish relationships with White faculty than with Black ones, and that they particularly saw African American teachers as role models that motivated them.

The impact of student-faculty relationships on persistence has clear implications for the current study and was a major focus of both the literature review and the interviews. Students were asked about their role models, about their mentors, about the

amount of guidance they received at community colleges, and about their goals, all issues which related to faculty relationships. The idea that persistence in students was fostered by relationships with their teachers has been confirmed by the findings of this study.

**Predictors of success.** Predicting which students would persist is quite problematic. It is not merely a question of ability or support. For instance, many students with good grades or backgrounds do not successfully graduate, while others, who may not be as intelligent or fortunate are able to somehow find the ability to persist (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Kienzl, & Leinbach, 2005; Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2005; Braxton, 2000; Johnston, 2006; Tinto, 1993). This section reviewed some of the work that has been done on isolating the factors that can help predict the likelihood of any particular students' success or failure.

Johnston (2006) studied the predictors of success among African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic students, trying to determine the factors that would indicate the likelihood of successful persistence. She had found that high school grades, one common measure used to predict college success, were problematic as predictors, and wanted to determine if there were other factors that could help colleges predict persistence and help them increase retention and success.

Johnston (2006) based her study on the work of Strage (1998, 2000), who studied family context variables and other predictors of success, and developed the *Student Attitudes and Perceptions Survey* as a way of measuring these variables. Johnston focused on four different factors: (a) achievement motivation; (b) student rapport rating with peers; (c) student rapport rating with instructors; and (d) grade point average. In

particular, she wanted to know if there was any correlation or relationship between self-reported grade point averages and achievement motivation. Her conclusions were that,

The findings demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between achievement motivation and grade point average, between rating of rapport with peers and grade point average, as well as rating of rapport with instructors and grade point average. No difference was found across ethnic groups when measuring achievement motivation, rating of rapport with peers, rating of rapport with instructors and grade point average. (Johnston, 2006, p. iii)

In a study of African American students at community colleges, Kasworm (2002) noted that the persisters had a clear set of goals, declared majors, good study habits, and strong self-discipline. In terms of clearly set goals, Kasworm found that *persisters* have higher aspirations (which is consistent with clearly set goals) and are more *multiplistic* and *relativistic* thinkers. They were able to view college work, not just as learning things, but also as developing skills and contributing to their own “self-directedness.”

Kasworm (2002) also noted other factors, such as having financial resources, identifying the benefits offered by specific classes when scheduling courses, and being able to take multiple courses. Kasworm also found that students do better if they come from a high school with a strong academic focus, especially if they have learned good study and work habits and have formed clearly defined goals. Finally, both Kasworm and Johnson (2001) observed that it is especially important for students to have completed their previous education, since those who have dropped out before find it harder to re-enter school and continue their education.

Kasworm (2002) noted that students who have had past negative experiences in school, especially previous negative college experiences, or who were returning to school after some years away found it more difficult than those who continued on directly from

high school. Students who were clear about their motivations and goals found it easier to continue, while those students who were uncertain about their goals or who had unrealistic long-term goals experienced great difficulty. Students without clear goals were indecisive, unorganized, and less able to cope with the demands of college. Goals generally originate with parents or other adults who motivate their children.

In summary, some of the major predictors of success were family background, school background, solid and disciplined study habits, and the financial and other resources enabling continuation. However, these did not seem to be the determinant factors, and in particular high grades or coming from a good school were not accurate predictors. Rather students who persisted were found to have a clear set of goals and were able to understand the motivation for those goals. They also had good rapport with their peers and teachers. It was also found that it was important to stay in school, and that those who withdrew and then returned were less likely to finish.

**Summary.** The distinction between persistence and departure was discussed in this section. Although relevant to the subject of persistence, research on the departure puzzle, which is done from the institutional perspective of retention, generally focused on why students leave, not why they succeed. The research of Tinto and others indicated that departure was not generally a single step but a process consisting of a series of steps and difficulties leading up to a final withdrawal.

The subject of student involvement theory was also discussed. This theory indicated that students need to feel that they are part of a community and not struggling on their own. Since community college students are commuters and usually on campus

for only a few hours a day, fostering this kind of environment is difficult to do. Colleges have to be proactive and reach out to students in order to keep them involved.

Positive feedback from faculty appeared to be nearly essential for most students if they are to find the college experience meaningful. A large proportion of African American women at community colleges are older students, and they reported that they found that their college experiences, both in and out of the classroom, helped them find meaning in their larger lives by giving them a better sense of their place in their communities. In addition, humanistic psychology and the concept of client-centered therapy have helped provide institutions with an intellectual justification for developing programs that focus on students' own experiences, enabling students to "actualize" their sense of autonomy and interpret what they are learning in terms of their own cultural perspectives and values.

The studies on persistence demonstrated that, at college, African American women found meaning in the ways that the school helped them visualize themselves making improvements in their own lives and in the lives of other African Americans. College helped them become more confident and better able to deal with discrimination. It helped motivate them and encouraged them to set higher goals for themselves. They especially found meaning in the personal relationships they developed with faculty and with other African Americans, and those experiences helped them believe that what they were doing was not just beneficial for themselves but for other African Americans, and other minorities as well. Mentoring has especially been found to be important in helping students at community colleges find meaning in their educational experiences.

As the percentage of both women and minorities in higher education continues to increase, it becomes ever more important to focus on ways to improve the retention and persistence of this new generation of students. Is persistence seen entirely in terms of immediate goals, or is it connected with larger issues? Interviewing African American women students helped clarify what persistence means to them today and how they see it in terms of their own daily struggle and long-term goals.

### **Personal Factors Affecting the Persistence of All Community College Students**

There are a number of general factors that affect persistence for all students, regardless of their race, gender, class, culture or religion, which were reviewed in this section. While numerous researchers have categorized the facilitators and the barriers (Harvey-Smith, 2002; Kasworm, 2002), the distinction may not be so clear-cut. Most of the factors could be considered either facilitators or barriers, depending on the experience of the individual student. They are often two sides of a single coin. For example, coming from a literate, well-educated family that has encouraged higher education is a major facilitator, but coming from an illiterate family with no college graduates, or possibly not even any high-school graduates, constitutes an enormous barrier. Work constraints and schedules can be a major barrier, but a supportive employer can be a godsend. The employer may even pay the tuition.

Earlier drafts of the current study divided this section into two subsections, categorizing the factors affecting persistence as either facilitators or barriers. However, during the course of the current study it became clear from both the literature and the interviews that the perception of these factors as separate was incorrect. They were very much related to each other, and needed to be discussed in tandem. One of the major

conclusions of the current study, in fact, is that the major barrier to persistence is simply the lack of the positive factors; the students succeed who have better backgrounds, support, mentors, role models, encouragement and so on, preferably beginning from birth, and those who do not have them do not succeed.

All of the women interviewed for the current study indicated, mostly unequivocally, that they saw no barriers at all. This was even true for factors that may seem at first glance to be barriers, or which once were, such as those caused by race, gender, or class. But in this day and age, race and gender can also be an advantage. It may qualify a student for additional scholarships, preferential enrollment, and other assistance. Given that the majority of students are women now, gender may mean that the community college is a place where women can find support and encouragement, and most of all daily examples of women that are succeeding. Presupposing that any individual factor is a facilitator or barrier may cloud the perception of the way that these factors really do affect someone's persistence. During the course of the current study it was found that examining factors from a more neutral position illuminated interesting aspects of the way these factors affected each woman's educational experience. Therefore, the current study examines each factor affecting persistence in turn, both its positive and negative aspects, and its implications for the current study.

The factors discussed in this section include: family and personal background, spouses and friends, finances and employment, mentoring, age, spiritual strength, and the general theme of role models, which seems to be related in many ways to all of the other factors. The most persistent themes running through all of the factors, from family to work, are those of role models and goals, both of which closely relate to motivational

factors. Role models may be acquired from family, friends, employers, college staff, and former or current teachers. Students look for someone to advise and guide them, and for someone whose success serves as a model. They get their goals from the same sources. Finally, one of the most valuable lessons learned from the current study is that *being* a role model can be as significant a factor in persistence as having a model of one's own, if not more so. A significant motivation for persistence for women is the desire to be a role model for children and to help them aim for higher goals.

**Family and personal background.** It is difficult to underestimate the influence of one's family and background on a student's education. Families can do everything from teach a child to read to fund college. They can provide a constant source of encouragement. On the other hand, there is probably nothing that more greatly hinders a child than the lack of parents and other family.

Kasworm (2002) categorized several important characteristics of adults who persist. She found that family background played a significant role in the success of students. One consistent predictor of student persistence she found was the student's family and scholastic background. Those who have parents or grandparents who went to college or at least finished high school, generally do better than those who are the first in their family to go to college.

In her study of African American students, Johnson (2001) suggested that these women admitted that the pressure to succeed exerted by their families was considered a positive force, because the high expectations helped motivate them to complete their studies. African American women considered that the determination to succeed, along with the ability to complete an educational goal, was a positive mindset to have. Setting

high expectations for oneself was vital to the persistence of these women. On the other hand, African American women who attended community colleges also stated that familial and social restraints were present, especially when there was a lack of support for their desire to get an education

The motivation to act as a role model for children is a major factor in persistence for those women students who have children. According to Shaw and Coleman (2000), the presence of children in the lives of African American women who chose a path of post-secondary education provided a powerful motivating force that stemmed from the desire to live up to the images that their children had of them. Johnson (2001, pp. 55–58) reported that some African American women felt that the demands of attending college were difficult to manage, but they persisted through the difficulty in order to be solid role models for younger generations within the family.

During the course of the current study, both in the literature review and in the study itself, family emerged as a major factor affecting student persistence. It affected students' educational experiences in a number of ways, both for good and bad. Families are the primary source of role models, inspiration and support. Lack of familial support emerges as a major factor hindering persistence. Helping their families is the primary goal and motivation of women students, especially for those with children.

Because of the importance of family background it was a particular emphasis on the questions asked during the interviews. The women were asked about their role models, and especially who in their family influenced them and in what ways. These issues informed the writing of the interview questions and the analysis of the responses.

**Spouses and friends.** On a day-to-day basis, perhaps nothing is so important to persistence as the support and encouragement of spouses and friends. Spouses are both family and friends, and many of the issues related to family background also apply to them, although in some different ways. They are another aspect of persistence that should be examined.

Researchers have noted how spouses can benefit students by providing encouragement and support of all kinds (Kasworm, 2002; Shaw & Coleman, 2000). “Of the adult students’ personal support systems, spouses (if married) appeared to have been the greatest support and encouragement” (Kasworm, 2002, p. 15). Perhaps most important, spouses offer daily feedback and help maintain the long-term focus that is essential.

The encouragement of friends can also support persistence. Those African American female students who acknowledged having supportive friends while pursuing their education felt the friendships were a contributing factor in their achievement of upward mobility in society. “I’ve been staying with her [a friend] because she lives close to school. She wakes me up every morning . . . She really pushes me” (Shaw & Coleman, 2000, p. 11).

However, sad as it may seem, sometimes friends can be discouraging and negative (Shaw & Coleman, 2000). Some students find that they have to choose between old friends and new opportunities. “Long-term friendships that formed well before these women decided to improve their life chances were cherished only if these friends were seen as supportive” (p. 11). Some people may feel threatened by others’ successes, and unconsciously seek to thwart them.

**Mentors and guidance.** Numerous studies on both student departure and student persistence have emphasized the importance of adequate faculty and school support to students, and the significance of mentoring to students (Kasworm, 2002; Tinto, 1993). Obviously, students need advice and guidance from those who are more experienced. However, mentoring seems to be something more than just a factor affecting persistence. Mentoring appeared to affect the meaning and value of the educational experience to the student.

On a basic prosaic level, students need help learning about the complexities of college. “The search for information is a prominent feature of the community college experience. Whether or not a student manages to access information and whether or not that information is timely or accurate has a tremendous impact on success” (Woodlief & Olson, 2002, p. 39). Students need mentors to help them navigate these unfamiliar circumstances.

Besides getting students involved, it is equally important to get instructors to take an interest in students, not just in class-related matters but with their other classes, their long-term educational goals, and their personal experiences at college in general. The availability of mentoring has been shown to be one of the greatest factors influencing students’ success (Johnston, 2006; Kasworm, 2002; Tinto, 1993). Close contact with instructors is one of the students’ strongest desires (Kasworm, 2002), and mentoring has proven to be an extremely important part of the educational process. The importance of goals and goal-setting was noted above, and goal-setting is most effective when it is accompanied by regular feedback and progress reports. This is an area where a friendly instructor can make a significant difference.

Several studies have examined the relationships of African American students with faculty. Chandler (1999) stated that when urban community college campuses offered mentoring for African American students, it was considered a useful service that helped these students develop a positive sense of self that contributed to their persistence. Researchers have noted that having mentors who assist in validating the African American students' potential to succeed is vital to the students' academic persistence at the institution (Guiffrida, 2005; Kasworm, 2002).

Kasworm (1997, 2002) did an extensive study of over 90 African American adult undergraduates, men and women, from a variety of higher educational institutions in North Carolina. The students she interviewed, all older adult undergraduate students over 30, were selected to represent a balance of different institutions that included community colleges and adult education programs at liberal arts colleges and universities. She reported that most of the students felt that college was a "strange and often alien culture for them" (2002, p. 17) and were uncertain and unsure of their worth or their place there.

Establishing contact with faculty helped these students develop confidence and a feeling that they belonged. It gave personal context and meaning to what they were studying and provided the feedback necessary to help them evaluate their progress.

These students placed sole reliance on the faculty members to be judges and key communicators of their future success. Unfortunately faculty did not always communicate acceptance, nor did student strategies of "hard work" always bring them success in the classrooms. (Kasworm, 2002, p. 17)

The faculty members that students in Kasworm's (2002) study valued were those who used the classroom and the course content to make connections and enhance the students' general understanding of their lives. The students also valued the collegial

interaction with faculty and worked hard to get good grades in order to develop this relationship. Indifferent teachers made everything much more difficult. This finding emphasized the importance of instructors having some degree of cultural competence and empathy, as well as having schedules that allow them to spend time with students.

The relationships the African American women in Kasworm's (2002) study had with faculty clearly contributed to their persistence. Strong relationships with the faculty were seen as essential in providing the motivation to get through the struggles of the classroom environment. "They [African American women] described the community college participation as a struggle, but a struggle that was important to them" (p. 15). Persistence, then, depended on being actively involved in the community college classroom in such a way that the students could see the relationship between what they learned at school and what shape their future adult lives might take.

Barnett (2007) studied the relationship between the validation of student experiences and achievements by faculty and student persistence in urban community colleges. She found that faculty validation directly affects student persistence in a number of ways. Students who felt validated by their instructors felt more integrated with the campus community, confirming the conclusions of Tinto (1993) and Braxton (2000) that students were more likely to succeed if they felt themselves to be a part of the campus community. The influence of faculty was indirect, mediated through the students' "sense of integration," but it was significant.

Barnett (2007) especially confirmed the value of mentoring to students, and found it to be a significant factor in persistence. Other factors were also important, such as good instruction, classes small enough that the students could get to know the instructor on a

more personal level, and faculty appreciation of diversity and respect for various racial and ethnic groups. But mentoring emerged yet again as perhaps the most significant factor. This was especially important at the urban community colleges, where a large student population would likely cause students to feel lost or out of place.

Of all the factors and issues related to student persistence, none seems quite so significant and directly relevant as mentoring. The research mentioned in this section has documented the positive effect that mentors have. This conclusion appears over and over in the persistence-related literature. Students need role models and encouragement along the way. They very much need someone to personally guide them through the intricacies of modern colleges and universities and to give them advice on future plans.

The value of mentoring is central to both of the central focuses of the current study, the meaning of persistence and the factors affecting it, and has clear implications for the current study. The extent to which students feel included in the campus community and are active participants in their education has clear implications for the current study, and is closely related to the relationship of persistence and mentoring. The “campus community” is an abstract concept to a student. It only becomes real when it is personified in the form of a direct relationship with an actual member of that community.

Because of this central importance, questions related to mentoring, both directly and indirectly, were a major focus of the current study. Three of the interview questions directly addressed the issue: the one about role models, the one about the need for more guidance, and especially the one that specifically asked whether or not they had a mentor. If they did have one, they were asked about the nature of their relationship and what it meant to them. Their answers were varied and quite illuminating. Mentors came from

many sources (family, work, school, friends, etc.), and were sometimes even people younger than them.

**Finances and employment.** Every student has to deal with financial concerns, and even more so in this period of rapidly rising tuitions. Those from families with greater wealth have an enormous advantage over those who come from poorer families.

Kasworm (2002) and Harvey-Smith (2002) have both noted that students who can afford to go to school full-time do better and are more likely to persist than those who have to work. Chandler (1999) has documented that African American female students are better able to persist when community colleges provide them with innovative financial aid and support systems that help them purchase books, pay tuition, and gain access to childcare services when needed. Moreover, this additional assistance continued to help them even after they completed community college. They were also more able and willing to consider moving to four-year institutions after they completed the standard two years at the community college. Often the community college degree helped them get a better-paying job while they are going to school, which made a significant difference.

Kasworm (2002) noted the importance to students of employer support in several areas. A number of students said that a helpful employer made a definite difference in their ability to remain in school. Flexibility in scheduling and time off for examinations and other needs removed potential barriers. Employer tuition reimbursement programs were also quite important and provided a direct incentive for students to continue their studies.

Kasworm (2002) also reported that positive feedback from employers and co-workers was very encouraging, especially when it led to increased responsibilities and

opportunities at work. The positive feedback and increased opportunities reinforced the students' belief that education pays off. Sometimes these payoffs can be quite concrete. Some employers offer pay raises to employees who attain college credentials or degrees. Seeing an actual increase in their paychecks acts as a powerful motivator to continue their education.

As barriers, though, work and family responsibilities related to financial issues also played a major role in causing students to drop out, often leading to scheduling problems and other difficulties (Harvey-Smith, 2002). Harvey-Smith found that most African American women in community colleges came from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and required a certain amount of support, financial and otherwise; those that did not receive any such support or got only limited assistance found it harder to continue their studies.

Generally, the more financial issues faced by a student, the lower the likelihood that the student will be able to stay in school. Harvey-Smith (2002) reported that the amount of time spent working while attending school directly affects students' persistence. Those with full-time jobs drop out more often than those with part-time jobs, and, in turn, part-time workers drop out more than students who do not have to work at all. A stable yet flexible job and a secure financial environment can make all the difference.

Financial issues are of concern to all students, and their impact on student persistence has obvious implications for this study. The women were asked about what hindered them in their education, and several mentioned money. The role of employers was explored with the interview questions regarding role models and mentors, and the

factors that either encouraged or enhanced the students' ability to stay in school. More study into the role of employers and how they can contribute to student success is needed.

**Age of students.** In recent years there have been an increasing numbers of older students (e.g., those over 30) returning to school. Older students often have quite a different perspective on their education than younger students just out of high school. They generally have a clearer idea of their goals and a greater appreciation of the long-term value of a higher education. After being out of school for a period of time, when they return, they are usually quite motivated in a way that younger students often are not.

Sorey and Duggan (2008) have focused on evaluating the different factors that affect persistence among younger, traditionally aged students, and older students who are returning to school after some years of absence. They studied the different predictors of persistence between older and traditional-aged students at a community college in Virginia. They found that there were some measurable differences in the predictors for these two groups. They found, for instance, that the fall grade point average was a good predictor of persistence throughout the rest of the year for younger students, but not so much for older ones, who were more likely to persist regardless of their immediate success or failure. In fact, older students seemed to be more motivated by initial difficulties, which acted as a spur to them to work harder.

Sorey and Duggan (2008) found that social integration, feeling part of the campus community, and financial support were also more important to older students. They found that older students were found to be more focused on achieving degrees with a specific and focused utility, a factor that acted as a significant motivation to continue their studies.

It is important for community colleges to be aware of the changes in their student populations, and to ensure that their services meet the needs of all of their students, including the more mature ones. Because of this several older students were included in the interviews, and were asked about how their age affected their educational experiences and what the colleges could do to help them.

**Spirituality and religion.** Spirituality and religion can greatly influence a person's ability to persevere and overcome obstacles. Exploring the relative importance of these issues to each student was important in evaluating the factors that encouraged success and persistence. This section examines the ways that individual spirituality and group religion have affected students' persistence.

According to Johnson (2001), spirituality among African American women was a college survival strategy used for discipline and focus. Johnson noted the importance to these women of religious and spiritual belief systems:

Most of them lead spiritual lives and spoke about the strength, guidance, and encouragement they received from their belief in a Supreme Being. They combined their appeal to spirituality with personal responsibility and family support as fundamental to their perseverance in community college. (p. 71)

Watt (2003) investigated how spirituality helped African American women "cope, resist, and develop identity" (p. 30) and how it helped them navigate between the cultural majority and the smaller African American minority. According to her, African American women students develop a healthy view of themselves that helps them cope, not only with being a minority, but also with being a double minority of both race and gender. "Once she arrives on campus, it is not unusual for her to be the only person of color in most of her classes" (p. 31). A strong spiritual life is a source of inner strength, and the

church community can be a reliable source of support when the larger community is not welcoming or supportive.

Although there were no questions specifically about religion in the interviews, the current study explored what helped the women stay in school and what hindered them. They were asked about their role models, yet none mentioned any that were religious figures. They were also asked about the importance of community to them, what community meant to them, and to which community groups they looked for support.

**Summary.** This section reviewed the factors affecting persistence for all students at community colleges, regardless of their backgrounds, race, gender, or class. Topics reviewed were family and personal background, spouses and friends, mentors and mentoring, finances and employment, age, and spirituality and religion. Students at community colleges are more likely to persist if they come from a more supportive and better-educated family; if they have the emotional, social, and financial resources to continue their study; and if they receive help and encouragement from their spouses, friends, and employers. They are especially more likely to persist if they have a helpful spouse or supportive friends and teachers, and indeed some sort of outside support or mentoring seems almost essential.

How family and personal background affect persistence was examined. Family background, both for better and worse, has been found to be a significant factor affecting future persistence. Coming from an illiterate or poorly educated family was found to be a significant barrier to persistence, and coming from a well educated one a significant advantage. Families are a major source of role models and goals, teach discipline and good study habits, provide funding, and offer support and encouragement.

Children were found to play a crucial role in persistence. Wanting to help their children is the major motivation of women students who have them. Being a role model for their children is an extraordinarily powerful motivation. Children help students focus on and realize their goals, and provide a concrete, day-to-day reason for persevering.

The role of spouses and friends as a factor affecting persistence was examined. Spouses and friends are an important source of support and encouragement, and they provide a source of the focus and feedback that facilitates the long-term accomplishment of goals. However, occasionally spouses and friends can be hostile to or feel threatened by someone's desire to change or improve their lives.

The importance of mentoring and guidance to persistence was examined. Students need advice and guidance from more experienced people. It is important for instructors to take an interest in students. Students greatly desire and benefit from close contact with professors. Motivation and focus on goals are better maintained with regular feedback and counsel. Several studies have found that mentoring is especially important to African American and other minority students. Mentors, especially from the same race, can help validate students' experiences and give meaning to their education. However, mentoring seems to be something more than just a factor affecting persistence, and appeared to significantly affect the meaning and value of the educational experience to the student.

The influence of financial and employment factors on persistence was examined. Although there are many students who are able to overcome a poor socioeconomic status and succeed in school, it is clear that students with greater financial resources are more able to persist. Those who receive additional financial aid and support are more likely to persist. Students who do not have to work, or only work part-time, have been found to be

more likely to persist. On the other hand, employers have also been found to be a significant source of role models, financial assistance, and motivation for students. Positive feedback from fellow workers and employers has been found to contribute to persistence in education.

How the age of students affects their persistence was examined. Older students seem to be more motivated, more disciplined, and better able to overcome setbacks. The importance of clearly set goals to persistence has been mentioned, and older students generally have very clear and specific goals in mind when they return to school. They usually are focused on obtaining very specific skills and certifications. Older students have also experienced more setbacks in life, and are less likely than younger students to become discouraged.

The role of spirituality and religion in affecting persistence was examined. These can play an important role in the lives of those who successfully persist. Spirituality has been found to be a useful survival strategy for college. It helps provide discipline and focus, and can provide a source of inner strength that helps students withstand adversity. Of particular relevance to the current study, it has also been found to be a useful method of helping African American students navigate between minority and dominant cultures.

The major barrier affecting students' persistence seems to be the lack of positive support and assistance. Coming from a family that has no members with a college education greatly hinders students, as does a personal background that does not include adequate preparation for higher learning or inadequate elementary or secondary schools. Other major reasons these students are not able to continue are the burdens of childcare and other family demands, work demands, and financial restraints. A lack of support

from family, friends, employers, and the colleges themselves affects their ability to stay in school.

Study of the factors supporting persistence informed the writing of the interview questions used during the current study. Indeed, it was a major focus of the current study, and of the interviews. The women were asked about what facilitated or helped them in their college experience, what barriers or obstacles they had encountered, and what they thought would help them persist more successfully.

### **Cultural and Social Factors Affecting the Persistence of African American Women Attending Community Colleges**

Having evaluated the factors that affect the persistence of all students, this section now focuses on the larger social, socioeconomic and cultural factors and issues that specifically affect African American women students at community colleges. It is impossible to understand modern African American women without considering their unique history and place in American culture and without evaluating the many social and other factors that affect their pursuit of education. This section reviewed some of the many and interrelated issues involved. The basic factors of class, race, and gender were considered separately, followed by sections on African American feminism, multicultural concerns, and the challenges that diversity represents to modern, urban community colleges.

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that most African American women belong to three different major groups that have been significantly marginalized in the United States, albeit in different ways: women, non-White minorities, and the working class. The American post-secondary educational system is stratified by a socioeconomic status quo

that poses barriers to African American women who have to persist in spite of gender and racial bias (Collins, 2000; Evans, 2007a, 2007b; hooks, 2000; Johnson, 2001; Kozol, 2006; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996; Townsend, 1995a, 1995b, 2008; Zamani, 2003). In order to fully examine these issues, it is essential to acknowledge and confront the historical existence of racism, sexism, and classism in the United States and the legacy of their ongoing and pervasive impact on African American women, and especially on their opportunities to educate themselves.

Such historical and environmental conditions impact on African American women in many ways. These conditions constitute more than just barriers within education. They also prop up a pervasive environment of racism and sexism, sometimes institutionalized, and a host of economic and social ills, most especially illiteracy (Kozol, 2006). For example, African American women, on average, earn less than their White counterparts (Collins, 2000; Evans, 2007a), which directly and immediately limits their opportunities to pursue education. Lower socioeconomic status creates additional problems for African American women, leading to difficulties when they do manage to continue. This results in lower salaries, on average, when they finally succeed in obtaining higher degrees and begin working in their chosen fields. Furthermore, lower average pay also makes it more difficult for them than wealthier people to help their children with school expenses, creating an ongoing cycle of disadvantage and frustration.

Zamani (2003) noted the need for educational institutions to assess and determine which environments foster or inhibit success for collegiate African American women. This stance is an extension of his multicultural approach to the problem and of his view that the problems of the colleges are primarily social, reflecting the problems of the larger

society. He and others (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000) found that African American women often bear the responsibility of representing their race as a whole in a predominantly White higher education system, with no regard for their own individual achievements. His solutions, however, are more focused on solving larger problems, particularly what is seen as a lack of democracy in the country, and these solutions fail to pay enough attention to the needs of individual students.

It is difficult if not impossible to evaluate the effect that the factors discussed in this section have on the persistence of individual students. Asking the students directly is not very useful. A student may be able to tell who their role models were, and what their goals were, but evaluating the impact of racism or sexism on their education and lives is much more problematic. Therefore, these issues are discussed in an attempt to inform the discussion of the persistence of African American women students at community colleges and to provide a context with which to examine the larger social and cultural issues involved.

**Class issues: Socioeconomic status, illiteracy and the pedagogy of the oppressed.** The issues discussed in this subsection relate to all minorities and disadvantaged groups, not just African Americans. The factors and issues discussed in this section include socioeconomic factors, literacy and illiteracy, and the pedagogy of the oppressed.

*Socioeconomic factors.* Socioeconomic factors affect student persistence in a number of ways, from early family influences to financial difficulties in college (Harvey-Smith, 2002; Kasworm, 2002; Walpole, 2008). Due to the necessity of having to work more, poorer parents generally have less time to supervise and assist their children. They

have fewer resources to invest in their children, which affects the quality of education at every step of the way, and reduces the opportunities available to these children. It takes money to educate a child, and education to make money, so an enduring cycle is created that leaves poorer families trapped (Collins, 2000).

Walpole (2008) studied the difference in college experiences and outcomes for African American students of lower socioeconomic status. Using a national database, she found that there were significant correlations between socioeconomic status and success in college. The necessity to work more significantly impacted the time students had to devote to their studies and campus activities in general. Poorer students had significantly less contact with faculty and student organizations on campus. They studied less, and had measurably lower grades than students of higher socioeconomic status of all races and ethnicities, including other African American students.

Walpole (2008) also found that socioeconomic factors continued to affect the lives of disadvantaged African American students even years after they completed college. Evaluating their status nine years after beginning college, they reported lower incomes and lower aspirations than their peers of higher socioeconomic status and were significantly less likely to attend graduate school.

Socioeconomic problems and status directly affects the persistence of many students from minority and other disadvantaged groups. While the current study did not focus especially on socioeconomic issues, they were addressed in the interview questions. The women were asked about how they thought social and economic conditions affected the African American community and the persistence of individual students.

*Literacy and illiteracy.* Kozol (1980, 1985, 2006) and others (Dolan & Scariano, 1995; Rose, 2005) have extensively documented the extent of illiteracy in the United States. In an important series of works over the past few decades, Kozol in particular has demonstrated that possibly as many as one-third of American adults are functionally illiterate and that this condition has a devastating effect on these people's lives and on society as a whole. According to Kozol these adults are not just trying to overcome the disadvantages of coming from families with little education but, even worse, from families that are functionally illiterate. This is why it is so important to tell the stories of African American female students; so that people can understand just how difficult it is for most of them just to make it to college, much less persist in completing their degrees.

In *Illiterate America*, Kozol (1985) claimed that adult illiteracy is growing in the United States and that it constitutes a "pedagogic time bomb" (p. 57) that threatens the very viability of American learning and civilization. Perhaps more significant for this study was Kozol's (1980, 1985) analysis of the psychological effects of illiteracy on individuals and the ways in which illiteracy impacts their lives. He has shown that illiterates are crippled in a number of different ways. First, they suffer enormous social and economic exclusion and are prohibited from participating in many important social activities. Second, illiteracy leads in turn to a lack of education, which then results in a fundamental inability to understand the reasons for their having been disadvantaged and makes it virtually impossible for them to overcome this disadvantage. Third, they are generally unable to express themselves well enough to make the society at large (the literate society) aware of their problems and the disadvantages that result from them. As Kozol stated,

So long as academic humanists resist the obligation to cross borders, and to participate in unfamiliar, openly political, and therefore highly dangerous assaults upon societal injustice, there will be no potent advocates for the illiterate, no written expositions to be read by a society that manages to segregate its victims and anaesthetize itself to the persistence of an anguish it has sealed away in celluloid containers. (1985, p. 171)

The problem of literacy is particularly relevant to the struggle of African Americans for equality. Of all the conditions left behind by centuries of oppression of African Americans, perhaps none is so long-lasting and pervasive as that of illiteracy, which goes back to the time when slaves were prohibited from reading or even possessing books (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000). A great deal of the current struggle of African American women is to overcome this legacy and to reclaim the previously subjugated knowledge and history of African American women, so much of which has been lost due to the lack of literacy and education among these women. Writer Alice Walker has explained why this has inspired her to write and how it has given meaning to her writing.

In my own work I write not only what I want to read—understanding fully and indelibly that if I don't do it no one else is so vitally interested, or capable of doing it to my satisfaction—*I write all the things I should have been able to read.*" (Walker, 1983, p. 13, quoted in Collins, 2000, p. 13) [Emphasis added]

A major result of the heritage of illiteracy has been a central emphasis placed on learning within the community of African American women, along with a great stress on promoting teaching as a profession for African American women and education as a path for their improvement (Collins, 2000). Another result is the recognition of the church as a center for the empowerment of African American women. When denied access to public

schools, African American women turned to the church as one of the few institutions through which they could promote education (Collins, 2000).

Keeping people illiterate is the single most powerful tool oppressors have, and educating people is the single most powerful way of fighting oppression. Literacy is the foundation of self-empowerment and self-esteem in the modern world. It is essential to any efforts to earn a living or to be able to be a productive member of society (Freire, 1970; Kozol, 1980, 1985).

*Social justice and the pedagogy of the oppressed.* The issue of illiteracy is in many ways a subset of the larger struggle of disadvantaged and marginal peoples to educate themselves. In his landmark work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Brazilian educator Paulo Freire viewed education for oppressed and disadvantaged people from a larger perspective, showing how issues of social justice and other social problems influence any individual student's learning experiences. He claimed that the dominant "banking" model of education is primarily, and even deliberately, a tool for oppression and the suppression of knowledge, not for liberation and the expansion of learning, and stated that the problem of massive illiteracy cannot be dealt with without addressing the fundamental social, economic, and political problems underlying it. He further maintained that new ways of thinking and new educational methods are necessary if literacy and social justice are to be achieved. One of Freire's core conceptions was that the oppressed have a "fear of freedom," that they cannot see beyond their own oppression. When they do get free of it, it is to become oppressors themselves, not to change the system. They are, he said, "co-opted."

Freire (1970) presented his ideas by recounting his own life as a student and educator, by showing how his methods have evolved out of his own experience, and by describing the successes and failures he has had in using them. His purpose was to share his life experiences as a successful educator of illiterate and oppressed peoples in order to encourage others to tackle the problems and in order to provide educators with the unique and effective teaching methods he has developed. His approach relates directly to the problem of literacy and the necessity of dealing with its underlying social problems.

*Summary.* The impact of class and socioeconomic factors was discussed. It has been shown that financial status and other aspects of coming from a disadvantaged group affect a student's ability to persist in higher education in a number of ways. Students from poorer families get less help from their parents at the elementary level, and generally attend schools with fewer resources. They have more difficulty in acquiring the money to pay for college. Finally, even if they are successful in getting into college and persisting, it has been shown that these disadvantages continue to hamper students after they graduate and throughout their later careers.

The problems and issues related to literacy and illiteracy were reviewed. Kozol and others have documented that illiteracy in American society is a growing problem. Not being able to read and write seriously impacts any individuals' ability to function in an increasingly complex world, one in which high school and college degrees are basic prerequisites for nearly all jobs. The problem of literacy is particularly relevant to African Americans attempting to improve their position in life, as they have had to overcome an historical legacy in which they were often denied access to education, and women more

so than men. As a result, African American women have placed an extraordinarily high value on educating themselves.

Freire's ideas about the pedagogy of the oppressed were reviewed. He has examined the larger social issues relating to the education of disadvantaged and oppressed people, demonstrating how it impacts on the ability of both individuals and larger groups to educate themselves. In particular, he has demonstrated how the denial of access to education has been used a way of facilitating oppression, and ensuring the continued power of the elites and the dominant groups. The ideas raised by Freire's work inform the current study. They do not represent a daily concern of the students, but are examined in order to provide background and the social, cultural and socioeconomic context.

**Racial issues.** There is, of course, an enormous amount of literature regarding African American's educational experiences at all levels, from elementary school to graduate work, and evaluating it all is beyond the scope of the current study. The section on the lived experiences of African Americans in education that began this literature review gave a good overview of the many issues that need to be addressed, and the value of placing these experiences in the context of the historical legacy of African American America. Other sections have discussed other aspects of experiences of African American students.

This section reviewed only specifically racial issues and their impact on the persistence of African American women at community colleges. The subjects addressed were the nature and impact of discrimination, identity issues resulting from the struggle of African Americans to define themselves in terms of and in relation to a dominant

White society, and the emerging gap in the education and prospects of African American men and women.

The issues discussed in this section relate only to the specific impact of race itself, and that only generally. Later in this chapter other more specific issues related to racial issues are reviewed. These include the growing gender gap in colleges between African American men and women, the views of African American feminism, the multitudinous issues raised by the issues of multiculturalism, and finally the challenges that racial issues present to modern, urban community colleges.

***Discrimination.*** One of the major issues the current study attempted to examine was the extent and impact of racial and sexual discrimination on the persistence of African American women in community colleges. Although it is widely acknowledge that discrimination exists in American society, the civil rights and women's rights movements and affirmative action programs have been responsible for major changes in attitudes and practices in American educational institutions, reflecting the changes in society at large. One of the purposes of the current study is to examine the current state of those changes, and their influence and impact on the current generation of African American women students.

Kasworm (2002) reported that most of the African American students experienced to some degree what they felt was racism, if not from the institution as a whole, then from certain students and even instructors. "Most of the adult community college students reported experiencing prejudice or discrimination through their community college involvement" (p. 16). As a result, African American students commonly resorted to preferring their own groups and even their own courses. Kasworm (2002) came to the

conclusion that overcoming discrimination in this way gave meaning to African American women's persistence and in many ways strengthened their resolve.

Whether such discrimination is experienced is one of the questions that the present study attempts to answer. In the interviews conducted as part of this study, nearly all of the women denied that they had experienced overt discrimination in their educational experiences. This may be because Los Angeles is an extremely multicultural and multiracial environment, and there are large numbers of African American students attending both community and other colleges.

Two of the interview questions directly asked if the woman had ever experienced discrimination in her educational experiences, and how their race and gender had affected their educational experiences.

*Identity issues.* Racial perceptions have impacted African American woman in the past, and continue to affect them today, by raising conflicting and confusing questions about personal and social identity for each individual. These identity issues affect African American women in a number of ways. As African Americans, they must deal with a history that has forced them to repeatedly redefine themselves and their relationship to the world.

Cross (1991) and Jackson (2001) have discussed and analyzed many of the identity issues affecting African Americans, especially the many psychological issues and problems identity raises for them. Identity issues begin with simple names. Under slavery, African Americans were denied any identity at all, especially surnames or the right to belong to any family. When the slaves were freed, one of the first things they had to confront was their own name, many famously choosing to name themselves after

American Presidents such as Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, or Lincoln. Some took the last name of the family that owned them. Later, during the 1960s, many felt that in order to reclaim their identities, they had to reject their White names and thus changed their names to reflect their African heritage. Those who became African American Muslims chose Muslim names.

Beyond individual names, there is the long history of finding appropriate terms to refer to African Americans, and especially to replace derogatory terms. Thus came the long development of African American consciousness and the African American experience and the progression from *Colored* to *Negro* (and the almost forgotten term *Negress*) to *Black* to *African American*. Both Cross (1991) and Jackson (2001) felt that this development parallels the development of identity that every individual African American goes through over the course of his or her life. Both writers have analyzed the process by which African American people come to understand, redefine, and reconceive themselves and their relationship to others. Cross has developed what he calls a *Nigrescence Model*, which describes the “Negro to Black conversion experience.” Jackson referred to *Black Identity Development* (BID). Inspired by the ideas of Erik Erikson (1968), who described eight stages in the process of youths defining themselves, Jackson felt that there are certain common stages in the growth of an “Afrocentric” consciousness, or a series of stages in the redefinition of the self: naiveté, acceptance, resistance, redefinition, and internalization. He also concluded that the process of personal growth for African American individuals roughly follows the path of the development of African American consciousness in general.

Jackson (2001) also discussed the differences between ethnicity and race and the fact that in recent years ethnicity has begun to replace race as a way of defining oneself and one's group. "Many of those who believe that race is a failed, flawed, or negative term have embraced ethnicity as an alternative" (p. 26). He also acknowledged the emergence of different classes of African American people in recent decades and stated that many now are suggesting that "one's socioeconomic class identity is as significant as, if not more significant than one's racial identity in determining how we think and feel about ourselves" (p. 28).

The issue of identity for African Americans is also affected by the conception of the "other." African American women are the "other" in American society, a role that denies them their own identity and allows them to exist only as an adjunct to more established or recognized groups, never as a group in and of themselves (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000; Jackson, 2001). Should they pursue the goals of feminist or civil rights groups? Should they take courses in Women's Studies or Black Studies? As individuals, they have to deal with membership in multiple groups. Where are their priorities, and how do they resolve these ongoing conflicts?

**Summary.** This section discussed specifically racial issues that affected the persistence of African American students. The extent and impact of discrimination on these students education was examined. Cross's (1991) and Jackson's (2001) ideas about the evolution of identity issues for African Americans were highlighted. Both Cross and Jackson traced the historical development of the various terms used to refer to African Americans and noted how each individual African American has to go through her or his own process of self-identification. Both writers demonstrated that African Americans

have had, and continue to have, great difficulty in dealing with identity issues and defining themselves, and this contributes to further difficulties in finding and defining their place in American society at large. However, since there have been so many changes in African American society over the past decades, including the emergence of both a sizable African American middle class and even a small but fairly wealthy African American upper class, the question must be asked to what extent individual African Americans still experience identity issues.

**Gender issues and the gender gap.** As the current study focuses particularly on women students, there a number of gender-related issues that need to be addressed, in particular the growing gender gap between men and women in higher education. Women of all races, ethnic groups and classes now constitute the majority of college students, and increasingly the majority of staff and faculty as well. Being in the majority is a significant change from the past, and directly impacts on the persistence of all women. The importance of role models and mentors was discussed above, and the increased numbers of women on campus makes it more likely that female students will other women to inspire and assist them.

In 2000, the American Council on Education (ACE) published *Gender Equity in Higher Education: Are Male Students at a Disadvantage?* (King, 2000), which attempted to evaluate and understand why there was a growing gap between the persistence of men and women college students, and if the gap reflected all social groups or just a few. Women have received the majority of bachelor's degrees in the U.S. since 1990, although the gender gap did not become pronounced until the mid-1990s. Their conclusions were that,

There is not a generalized educational crisis among men, but there are pockets of real problems. In particular, African American, Hispanic and low-income males lag behind their female peers in terms of educational attainment and are far outpaced by white, Asian-American and middle-class men and women. (King, 2000, p. 2)

Reviewing the King study (2000) a few years later, King (2007) revisited the problem to determine if the situation had changed in recent years, and, if so, in what ways and why. She found that there was still a persistent and gradually growing gender gap, but that it was not necessarily coming at the expense of men. It would seem that the changes reflect increasing educational attainment among women of all races and ethnicities, rather than a decline among men *per se*. The absolute number of degrees awarded to men has not declined, but in fact has increased; rather it is the percentage of women attaining degrees that has increased. And this is true not just within the U.S., but represents a widespread global trend.

Women are much more likely to re-enter school at an older age, and are also more likely to persist and complete their education, and King (2007) speculated on the reasons for this disparity. It was mentioned previously that African American male role models in contemporary America, such as athletes and other celebrities, have traditionally been less likely to emphasize and encourage academic work, while female role models have been more likely to stress it. King also suggested that this was a reason for the disparity in education. King summarized the reasons for the gap into three major categories, economic incentives, school effects, and social/psychological factors, but acknowledged that there was insufficient research from which to draw any final conclusions.

Many recent studies on persistence regarding gender-related issues have focused on the increasing gender gap between male and female African American students in

college. There is an increasing gender gap between African American men and women in institutions of higher learning (Hill, Holzer, & Chen, 2009). Hill, Holzer, and Chen (2009) reviewed the current status of minority youth in American society. They noted, in particular, the growing gender gap between African American men and women in terms of their level of educational achievement and the opportunities it represents to them. The African American gender gap in education raises significant issues relating to the problems faced by the contemporary generation of African American men and women, especially those related to the increasing rate of incarceration and unemployment among African American men and the growing number of African American families headed by single women.

Hill et al. (2009) also noted the large percentage of African American families headed by single parents, mostly women, and the challenges that this development represents. The increase in the numbers of African American families headed by single women appears to be having significant impacts on the cultural makeup of African American families and culture (Hill et al., 2009). There are also differences in the role models presented to African American men and women, with African American men being under the influence of athletes and entertainers. Well-educated African American women want to marry someone of similar educational attainments, which they are increasingly unable to find in African American men.

**Summary.** There are gender gaps in higher education now of one variety or another in all American populations and groups. The gender gap resulting from the switch to a female majority from the traditional one is a significant development with far-reaching ramifications for both genders. For instance, much the curriculum of American

colleges and universities still emphasizes preparation for the type of careers favored by men. It is important to keep in mind that gender gaps add to other social and cultural factors in their impact. In terms of persistence, the different employment and career opportunities currently available to African American men and women may significantly affect their motivation and goals.

The changes in the status of women at community colleges represent a significant shift in the school environment. It requires adaptations in a number of areas, from the focus of outreach programs to the career options offered. Women may be the majority of college students but in many ways the schools are still primarily geared towards meeting the needs of men. The current study offers some useful insights into one particular group of the new generation of women students.

**African American feminist thought.** Now that we have discussed class, race, and gender as separate issues, it is possible to examine the way they interact to affect student persistence. There are many issues involving multiculturalism and diversity discussed in this section. It is first necessary to examine the specific combination of race and gender, and the perspective of African American women themselves, through the lens of African American feminism. Examining the thought and perspectives of African American feminists such as hooks (2000) and Collins (2000) is essential towards framing the questions that need to be asked.

Understanding African American feminist thought is helpful to understanding the goals of African American women at community colleges. African American feminists such as hooks (2000) and Collins (2000) have claimed that the position and needs of African American women are substantially different from those of mainstream American

feminism. hooks and Collins also argue that African American women, as well as women from other marginalized groups, need to develop their own movements.

hooks (2000) was one of the first, beginning in the 1970s, to stress that African American feminism is very different from White feminism. Her view, and one shared by many later African American feminists (Collins, 2000), was that African American women must actively unite and organize in order to confront their problems and to acknowledge that those problems were the result of the intersecting issues of sex, race, and class. The combination of these issues makes the interests and goals of African American women fundamentally different from those of White women. African American women cannot look to others to help them and cannot expect that those individuals who benefit from a system that puts certain people in power and excludes others will be dedicated to changing that system.

In her comprehensive overview of the position of African American women, *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins (2000) stated that the ideas, values, problems, and needs of African American women cannot be expressed or understood in the terminology of other groups or cultures and that it is necessary for African American women to create a new framework by which they can better evaluate their lives and control their destinies. Gaining their own voice and, through that, regaining their heritage are both the means and the end for the struggle that African American women face. Collins specifically stated that her own work is part of “an ongoing struggle to regain my voice” (p. vi) and that this cannot be done within or from the perspective of the dominant class.

I place Black women’s experiences and ideas at the center of analysis . . . .  
Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened  
to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and

comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups. (p. vii)

Collins' purpose was to present African American women with the ideas and beliefs of African American feminism in order to empower them to make changes not only in their own lives but in the lives of other women of color as well. She saw the process of the change itself as the core of the African American experience. She placed African American women at the center of her thought and analysis because only from that point of view could their unique experience be understood.

As an historically oppressed group, U.S. Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression. Not only does the form assumed by this thought diverge from standard academic theory—it can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like—but the purpose of Black women's collective thought is distinctly different. Social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of U.S. Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice. (Collins, 2000, p. 9)

African American women are typically, if not always, the “other” in present-day society. African American feminist bell hooks (2000) argued that African American women have historically made up the only group in the United States that does not have another group as an “other” to oppress.

As a group, Black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group. Occupying such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression. At the same time, we are the group that has not been socialized to assume the role of exploiter/oppressor in that we are allowed no institutionalized “other” that we can exploit or oppress. (hooks, 2000, p. 16)

This special position includes hardships, but it also gives African American women a special vantage point from which they can come to conceive of a “counter-hegemony”

(hooks, 2000, p. 16) and a perspective that they can use to take charge of their own destinies.

Both the women's and civil rights movements have pushed education in different ways. hooks (2000) made education a core part of the feminist agenda and placed great emphasis on literacy. She criticized feminists who have attempted to promote feminism through written materials but neglected the problem of basic literacy. She also addressed basic problems arising from cultural dissonance and pointed out how difficult it is to teach a class that includes people of varying ages, sex, degrees of literacy, ethnic background, and so on. She maintained that educators must consciously learn and work to develop the skills to teach these kinds of classes. She suggested that the variety of backgrounds is so great that perhaps conscious efforts are needed to "translate" materials for different groups. She discussed feminist educators in particular, but what she wrote applies to all educators attempting to reach a multicultural group:

All too often educators, especially university professors, fear their work will not be valued by other academics if it is presented in a way that makes it accessible to a wider audience. If these educators thought of rendering their work in a number of different styles, "translations," they would be able to satisfy arbitrary academic standards while making their work available to masses of people. (hooks, 2000, p. 112)

Collins (2000, pp. 21–43) has identified six distinguishing features that characterize African American feminist thought; they are summarized here:

1. African American women are not just an oppressed group, but, as the members of three separate oppressed groups (African Americans, women, and working people), are at the intersection of a network of oppressions.
2. Social justice must be advocated. African American women must offer

support for a broad range of social justice issues.

3. Social injustice is a reality. It is multicultural and, as such, responds to the fundamental contradictions in U.S. society.
4. Racism, along with all of the other “differences” (race, sex, class, religion, citizenship, language, cultural history), is institutionalized in the United States.
5. African American women have in common a set of shared experiences that have created a distinctive consciousness.
6. Their shared experiences, history of oppression, and cultural consciousness have made African American women a distinct group, one with a collective wisdom and its own organizational network.

Thus, African American women have had to prove, on the most basic level, not just that they are entitled to civil rights and the benefits of citizenship, but that they are *human*.

African American feminists have a mixed relationship with White feminists. A great deal of the difference is historical (Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Collins, 2000; Evans, 2007a; hooks, 2000). One major difference between African American women and White women is that African American women have always worked, from the time of slavery. White women also worked, of course, but generally not as hard or as much as African American women did, who were generally given the most difficult and menial tasks. In addition, African American women usually worked *for* White women and, as domestics, often did the work that would otherwise have been done by White women. So while African American feminists share some common goals with White feminists, in many ways they also stand in opposition to them, seeing them as both allies and as the enemy (Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000).

*Summary.* In summary, this section on African American feminism reviewed the historical and cultural issues influencing African American women's attempts to educate themselves through the perspectives of African American feminism. It discussed the importance that African American women have historically placed on literacy. Education has been viewed as a way of fighting racism, sexism, and social oppression.

African American feminist bell hooks' (2000) ideas on the nature of the "other" in society demonstrate the extent to which African Americans in general, and women in particular, have been excluded from mainstream American society, as well as the many ways that this exclusion has affected their prospects. Collins (2000) has shown that centuries of oppression and exclusion have resulted in the development of a separate community of African American women with its own cultural heritage, perspectives, and goals. Hooks and Collins have both noted that while African American and White feminists share many goals in common, those related to gender issues, they also are at odds over many issues, those related to racial issues.

Both hooks (2000) and Collins (2000) showed how African American women have been forced to rely on themselves and each other for assistance and how this reliance has, in the end, strengthened and empowered them. One of the major purposes of this study was to investigate whether African American women of current generations continue to share these feelings, or whether the advances made in recent decades have changed things substantially. Does the emergence of relatively successful and powerful African American women, such as Condoleezza Rice and Oprah Winfrey, mean that contemporary African American women no longer feel the same degree of solidarity with other African American that their mothers and grandmothers did?

The influence of African American feminist thought on today's African American female students was a special focus of the current study. Does African American feminism inspire or empower them? How much do these greater social concepts and ideals affect the personal agendas of these women?

**Cultural factors and multiculturalism.** Class, race, gender, and the other issues discussed above all interact with each other in many different ways. Beyond the more obvious barriers that race and gender create, there are the more subtle differences in cultures, values, and learning behaviors that can affect the experiences of African American women students. *Multiculturalism* is a single word that encompasses many of the issues involved with the education of African American women. The following subsections discussed some of these issues, specifically cultural differences, canonization and class issues, cultural learning differences and cognition, and cultural dissonance and the curriculum.

**Cultural differences.** Rhoads and Valadez (1996) have examined cultural differences and multiculturalism in the community college. Their study delved into the many different strands of multiculturalism and revealed the various ways it impacts African American women attending community colleges.

This study focused on African American women, a population that has its own cultures and values, developed in response to their own unique experiences. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the existence of cultural differences when examining the experiences African American women at institutions that represent a predominantly White American culture.

Hofstede (2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) has addressed the issue of cultural differences in societies, and the ways that these affect the education and learning processes of various groups. He has delineated five different areas where there were significant differences between cultures:

1. Small versus large power distance. This dimension reflects the degree of equality or inequality in a society, and measures the extent to which the less powerful members of society, particularly those within its institutions, accept the extent to which power is distributed unevenly. It does not reflect actual power distribution but rather the perception of it. In cultures with a lower power distance people expect power relations to be more consultative or democratic and less paternalistic or autocratic. In these cultures, subordinates expect to be able to contribute to the decision-making process and are more willing to challenge and critique their superiors.

2. Individualism versus collectivism. This refers to the extent to which people in a society focus on their own individual goals and needs or are willing to subordinate those to those of the larger group. Some cultures, such as those in Latin America, are more collectivist, while some, such as the United States, are more individualist and encourage their citizens to focus more on achieving their own goals rather than serving the purposes of the larger community.

3. Masculinity vs. femininity. This refers to the emphasis that cultures place on what are labeled “traditional” male or female values and roles. Masculine societies, such as Japan, are more competitive and are more focused on the acquisition of wealth and other individual gains. More feminine societies, such as Sweden, focus more on the overall quality of life for all.

4. Uncertainty avoidance. This is the idea that some cultures are more anxious about eliminating uncertainty from life than others. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance are generally more structured and rely on established rules as a guide for individual behavior. In these cultures, people tend to stay with the same employer longer, for example, and are less inclined to challenge the status quo or to take significant risks.

5. Short versus long-term orientation. Finally, the fifth idea relates to the differences between short and long-term orientation. Long-term oriented societies tend to focus more on such values as persistence or perseverance. Short term oriented societies focus more on maintaining stability and respect for tradition. Generally, Asian cultures seem to be more long-term oriented, while Western nations tend to focus on achieving short-term goals.

Hofstede's (2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) ideas have significant implications for the study of persistence in education by students from any specific group or culture. The U.S. tends toward smaller power differences, but education can lead to increased social gaps. The U.S. is more individualist than collectivist, which would encourage individuals to focus more on achieving their own goals rather than social ones. And, the U.S. is also a culture that focuses more on masculine values of acquisition and competition rather than the more feminine values that focus on improving the overall quality of life for everyone. Subsequently, females in American schools are more likely to be taught male values, and judged by their ability to achieve what males think important than what women may think is important. They will likely have more difficulty in aligning their own values and goals with those of the dominant culture. Finally, the

U.S. is a society that focuses more on achieving short-term goals, even if those goals come at the expense of the greater good.

The issues Hofstede (2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) raises illuminate the experience of African American women in American schools in various ways. They will very likely have more difficulty in aligning their values with those of the dominant class and gender. At the same time, the American emphasis on individualism and short-term thinking helps African American women ignore the larger social issues and problems and encourages them to focus on achieving their own personal goals. The American encouragement of risk-taking, and the individualist view that each person is responsible for their own success or failure, will also encourage African American women to focus on improving their own lives, usually at the expense of concerns about the larger social issues.

However, the American emphasis on individualism and risk-taking may also act to encourage individuals to believe that they can, through their own efforts, affect social issues and cause changes in the larger society. It must be remembered that issues are quite complex, and their influence is not so easily categorized or delineated. Cultural differences might arise for these women. But throughout the data gathering process cultural differences never became a factor. The women did not seem to recognize them as significant factors in their persistence.

***Canonization and class issues.*** A major concept relating to multiculturalism is that of “canonical” knowledge (Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). The *canon* is the established body of Western European–oriented, or so-called “White male,” thought that forms the foundation for American education. Much of this canon is informally passed on, as much

through the culture as through formal education. Children of the dominant class inherit a “cultural capital” that gives them a great head start. Those that come from different cultures have a much harder time relating to and valuing the canon.

There is also the issue of whether the canon is taught because it is more valuable or because it is a method of accomplishing an *assimilationist* strategy (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000). Such a strategy is a way of co-opting minority cultures into the mainstream. Some educators think that teaching the canon to minorities is “cultural genocide” (Collins, 2000; Kozol, 2006).

There are clear implications for the current study in examining multicultural issues. Is the primary goal here more social mobility for these students or their assimilation into the dominant culture? Or should the goal for African Americans (and poor people in general) focus on vocational classes rather than on more academic and intellectual pursuits (Collins, 2000; Kozol, 2006; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996)?

***Cultural learning differences and cognition.*** It is extremely difficult to isolate and define cultural differences and their effect on a student, especially when that student lives in a multicultural environment and is subject to the influences of a variety of cultures and subcultures. Most individuals are not consciously aware of how cultural factors affect their behavior or cognition, except for the most obvious and outward signs, such as food and music. However, although cultural differences can be very subtle and difficult to detect and influence, it is important to note their existence and their possible impact on student persistence.

Cognition refers to the learning process as a whole and the way people absorb information and learn (Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). Learning is a cultural process, both in

the content of the learning and the mental processes involved. Some learning differences are responses to the varying values among cultures and to the endless variety in human psyches and responses; in addition, some learning preferences are culturally specific (Johnson, 2001; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). Individuals from groups, including that of African Americans, whose cultural and cognitive patterns are significantly different from the mainstream, can have enormous *cultural dissonance*, difficulty adjusting to other learning patterns.

The role that multicultural issues play in the learning process for African American women illustrates that they face serious challenges that involve cognition and the learning process (Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). Since different cultures perceive and learn in different ways, it can be very difficult for African American women to understand what they are studying. They experience what Johnson (2001) called a *cultural deprivation paradigm*, not possessing enough understanding of the dominant culture to be able to internalize what they are being taught. These differences can be very subtle and difficult to address.

***Cultural dissonance and the curriculum.*** The term *cultural dissonance* (Rhoads & Valadez, 1996) referred to the gap between cultures and the difficulty a member of a minority culture may have in grasping the ideas and norms of the majority. Kasworm (2002) suggested that the majority of White colleges are not involved just in education, but play an important role for society in imparting and maintaining the values of the dominant culture. She suggested that to a certain extent these institutions, not only offer no help to African American students in promoting their own lives and cultures, but instead actively work to suppress those cultures.

Rhoads and Valadez (1996) suggested that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds enter community college at a distinct disadvantage in that they are subjected to a curriculum and learning style designed primarily for social classes above them, a learning environment with which they may be unfamiliar. If community college educators really desire to assist working-class, underrepresented students, “they should provide them with a historical and political context from which to understand the dismal choices they face” (p. 47). Rhoads and Valdez further elaborated by saying:

The challenge then for the multicultural organization is to create an environment where cultural difference is respected and at the same time to provide opportunities for diverse groups to come together to engage in cultural struggle over important organizational and social issues. (p. 50)

One method suggested by McPhail and McPhail (1999) for improving African American learners’ persistence at the community college is to incorporate the concept of using African American cultural themes to teach critical communication skills. They have suggested that the characteristics of cognition among African Americans, as well as among the members of any other minority group, require fostering learning environments that involve interpreting sensory events in ways familiar to these students. These events should be grouped into familiar categories by searching past experiences in order to relate the information within a social setting. “African American learners use strategies that are universalistic, intuitive, and most important, person oriented” (p. 26). According to McPhail and McPhail, community colleges must continue to strive toward making classroom and institutional practices both multicultural and multicognitive for African American learners so that they are fostered in learning environments where they can be

successful. They authors have found that this strategy has resulted in substantial growth in the basic skills of these students.

Kannady (1999) discussed the need to implement multicultural courses in a curriculum in such a way that they enrich the students' perception of social norms in society. There are various ways to introduce multicultural elements into the curriculum. They may be courses specifically aimed at emphasizing minority or neglected cultures, such as Black, Hispanic, or Women's Studies classes. Or they can be classes in established departments that focus on specific cultures, such as history classes that trace the history of certain groups or English courses devoted to specific literatures. Another approach would be to introduce multicultural perspectives to already established courses: for example, emphasizing the role of other cultures in Western Civilization or in American history courses. According to Kannady, multicultural courses can offer students of color some cognitive experiences that challenge them to enrich the learning environment with their own experiences, an approach that, in turn, promotes a sense of belonging.

*Summary.* The importance of having a faculty and staff that are attuned to cultural differences, class sizes, and cultural dissonance was discussed. Because African American women come from a different culture, one peripheral to the dominant culture, an effort must be made to help these students interpret what they are learning in terms that relate to and are natural to their own culture. If the colleges and, in particular, the faculty do not take steps to help bridge these cultural differences, cultural dissonance is often the result, and learning potential is greatly diminished.

Discussion of the issues of canonization, cognition and cultural dissonance illustrated ways in which the educational experience of African American women might differ from those of students from the dominant culture. This section explored the fundamental importance of providing extra support to students from different cultures or groups who face the challenge of adapting to and coping with the dominant culture and integrating its values with those of their own culture.

The concept of multiculturalism has become a significant issue in modern education. Clarifying and examining these issues can help community college educators understand the many issues that arise when numerous people of many different races, ethnic groups, languages, and cultures all come to work together to help each other achieve their own individual goals, while also working towards the common good.

The current study attempted to explore the educational experiences of African American women, who constitute a separate subculture in American society. It sought to examine if and how their experiences differed from those of other groups and cultures at American community colleges. The implications for the current study are that it is important to address the questions related to the role of multicultural issues in the diverse, multi-ethnic, and multi-racial environment of contemporary colleges in large urban areas. Several of the interview questions used in the current study directly do so. By asking African American women currently attending community colleges their views on the subject of multiculturalism and related issues, and by exploring what these women think about them, it is hoped that this study will help contribute to the discussion.

**Community colleges and the challenges of diversity.** There are many ways to incorporate concepts of multiculturalism into the community college agenda, but

promoting diversity in general is a good place to start. Diversity is a single word that encompasses a wide range of issues. Colleges must be able to serve the needs of students of different genders, races, ethnicities, languages, socioeconomic groups, religions, sexual persuasions, and ages. They must be able to address the needs of a wide variety of “special needs” students, from those with physical or mental disabilities to those with inadequate preparation in basic academic skills or for whom English is not their native tongue.

Juggling the diverse needs of their student population can be challenging at the best of times, and even more so when administrators have limited resources. Gillard and Simpson (1999) have suggested that community colleges should take action by creating a diversity management plan to serve diverse students. A successful diversity program at a community college campus begins with the diversification of curriculum and course offerings. To be truly effective, however, it must also include the diversification of administrators, faculty, and staff.

One problem that administrators face is a result of social pressure to promote an agenda that goes beyond education, namely promoting democracy, diversity, and multiculturalism for their own sakes (Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Collins, 2000; Gillett-Karam et al., 1991; hooks, 2000). A multicultural agenda can easily obscure and even come to dominate the primary educational agenda and can cause priorities to become distorted (Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Chandler, 1999; Kannady, 1999). Colleges with this agenda may promote multicultural classes at the expense of programs that would help individual students accomplish their more personal goals. Choices about priorities have to be made, and often the needs of the group are allowed to supersede those of the

individual. Chandler (1999) and Kannady (1999) have both discussed more specifically the offering of multicultural courses for African Americans attending urban community colleges as well as the opportunities for mentoring. They showed that efforts by the colleges to focus on the specific needs of individual African American females, rather than the needs of the group, do indeed help these women to persist.

The community college must be open to the process of change so that new perspectives in diversity can be incorporated into the school's educational plans, from multicultural curriculums to overall programs. Faculty and administrators need to recognize the importance of meeting the needs of diverse student populations through student programs that allow for continuous change and adjustment rather than stagnation. Efforts must be made to ensure that faculty and staff remain open to the presence of students from different cultures, and have at least some training or familiarity with the issues involved and the needs of the students. Flexibility and specificity are critical because each student of color served has different needs (Gillard & Simpson, 1999).

Szelenyi (2001) found that when community colleges are able to accommodate diverse student learning styles through specific student seminars early in the educational process, as well as provide mentoring programs and a diverse campus climate, the result is a comfortable atmosphere that promotes persistence. The author reported that minority students were more likely than White students to attend community college in order to improve their job status and overall educational experience. He also found that courses that fostered student success made students more aware of campus resources and helped them establish lasting relationships with other students and faculty members, all of which led to increased persistence.

In their study of African American men at community colleges, Bush and Bush (2005) found that community colleges often lack the incentive to examine the academic outcomes of minority students in meaningful ways, primarily because there is no legislation that creates incentives and there are no financial requirements that motivate the institutions to produce equitable outcomes. In California, low-income and minority student populations are attracted to community colleges because of the open access and low cost, yet the mandate to foster minority student success is not consistently maintained by the colleges due to financial restraints and/or the lack of qualified personnel (Woodlief & Olson, 2002). Incentives to foster minority student success in community colleges are not consistently enforced by administrators and faculty, and while many initiatives are planned, few if any are put into practice. The result is diminished achievement as well as less recognition for what minority student populations have, in fact, achieved.

Woodlief and Olson (2002) suggested that some of the difficulties the California Community College System has faced in relation to serving ethnic minority students have resulted from the low level of funding the state offers to colleges on a per-student basis. These authors reported that in 2001 the state of California provided \$4,675 per student per school year for community college students. This per-student funding was lower than that provided for the University of California, the California State University system, and the K–12 system. Thus, although community colleges are open to the enrollment of minority students and do register significant numbers, the current policies that limit funding diminish the degree to which the colleges can effectively help these students.

The primary need is for both colleges and students to become involved with each other in ways that go beyond the classroom. There is a need for both students and faculty

to take a proactive approach to promoting student involvement. However, faced with the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, it is difficult to educators to focus on and understand the experiences and needs of any particular group. By examining the experiences of one of the many different groups of students, African American women at community colleges, it is hoped that the current study will help illuminate how diversity is experienced at the level of individual students.

*Summary.* This section reviewed the issues related to diversity, and the challenges that colleges face in meeting the numerous needs of an increasingly diverse student population. It was noted that administrators need to take a proactive approach and create a diversity management plan to address these issues. In particular, it was demonstrated that satisfying the needs of a diverse student population requires diversity in the administration, faculty, and staff. One particular challenge is meeting both the needs of individual students, and helping them their achieve their specific career goals, and those of the society at large, which expects colleges to address larger multicultural issues and address minority concerns.

All college personnel must be aware of the changing needs of their students and avoid stagnation by regularly adjusting their curriculum and other programs. One way to accomplish this is to encourage faculty and staff to remain open to new ideas, and to ensure that they have the training necessary to understand the needs of students from different cultural groups and backgrounds.

The problems that administrators face is in satisfying many diverse demands in an era of financial constraints were reviewed. Colleges are often mandated to address minority concerns, yet are not generally given the resources necessary to do so. Many

programs are planned, but few are implemented. It was noted that community colleges in particular often lack economic incentives to address issues of diversity. They receive less resources per student than four-year colleges and universities do, even though community colleges' open access and lower tuition make them particularly attractive to minority students.

### **Limitations to the Current Literature**

The literature in this chapter provides some detail about African American female students' needs with regard to academic persistence at community colleges.

Unfortunately, only a few studies (Johnson, 2001; Watt, 2003) focused specifically on African American women attending community colleges. Most of the other studies (Guiffrida, 2005; Kasworm, 2002) included students from four-year colleges along with those from community colleges. More qualitative interpretive research is needed to facilitate a voice for African American female students that enables them to express their opinions, desires, criticisms, evaluations, and other opinions or perspectives regarding a college's policies, processes, programs, curricula, services, and the like.

Often African American females are only studied as part of the larger minority student population and are not distinguished as a specific group. Kasworm's study (2002), for example, included community college students along with those attending four-year institutions. In addition, statistics for African American students in general are often presented as averages that disguise significant disparities between males and females, such as in the rates of college completion (Harvey-Smith, 2002; Hill, Holzer, & Chen, 2009). In particular, dropout rates for African American men are abnormally high, masking a correspondingly higher rate of persistence for women (Harvey-Smith, 2002;

Hill, Holzer & Chen, 2009). Generally it is only the average for the group as a whole that is reported, and the resulting higher-than-average dropout rate is what is stressed, obscuring the successes hidden in the data. This further demonstrates the need for and value of this study, which will help focus attention on the actions of students leading to persistence for African American women.

### **Summary of Chapter Two**

Chapter two was divided into four sections, each of which reviewed the literature relevant to different aspects of the current study, beginning with more general issues and then focusing on the factors that specifically affected the persistence of African American women attending community colleges. The first section evaluated recent works that presented and examined the lived experiences of African American students. The second section reviewed general studies on persistence and the meaning of persistence. The third section examined factors that affected the persistence of all students, regardless of their background, race, gender, class, or culture. The fourth and final section of this chapter examined the factors that specifically affected African American women at community colleges. This chapter concluded with a discussion of the challenges that diversity represented to contemporary community colleges and the programs community colleges have developed to help meet the needs of minority students.

The first section of this chapter reviewed some of the existing collections of the lived experiences of African American women pursuing higher education. The literature reviewed in this section indicated that the existing studies focus almost exclusively on those women who attended four-year colleges and universities, including graduate schools. This focus of the previous studies suggests a gap in research on women at the

community college and emphasizes the need for studies on the lived experiences of African American women attending community colleges, such as the present study.

The second section of this chapter reviewed general studies on persistence and the meaning of persistence. It began by discussing the issues of retention and student departure, why some students drop out of school. It described the *departure puzzle*, and the *interactionalist* theory, along with the *assimilationist/acculturation* perspective. The next part of the second section reviewed student involvement theory, the theory that suggests that colleges must proactively work to encourage African American and other minority or disadvantaged students to become part of the campus community. Student perspectives on learning were then discussed, examining why students went to school, what it meant to them and what they hoped it would accomplish for them.

The final part of the second section of this chapter reviewed studies that examined predictors of student success, such as family and school background, good study habits, and financial resources. But the most significant factor among persistent students was a strong sense of motivation and very clear and well planned goals.

The third section of this chapter reviewed the factors affecting persistence for all students at community colleges, regardless of their backgrounds, race, gender, or class. Topics reviewed in this section were family and personal background, spouses and friends, mentors and mentoring, finances and employment, age, and spirituality and religion. Family background, especially the educational background and level of literacy, was found to be a significant factor affecting future persistence. Children were found to play a very significant role in persistence. Being a role model for their children is a powerful motivation to persevere. Spouses and friends were found to be significant

sources of support and encouragement, but they could also act as a source of discouragement. Close contact with professors significantly enhances persistence. Long-term focus on goals is helped by faculty feedback and support, particularly for disadvantaged and minority students. Mentors validated students' experiences and in doing so gave meaning to their education. While many students from lower socioeconomic groups are able to successfully persist, having greater financial resources definitely enhances persistence. Having to work while going to school can constitute a significant barrier to persistence. However, work can also be a source of encouragement, funding, role models, mentors, and motivation. The age of a student appears to be related to persistence. Older students seem to be better motivated, more disciplined, and possess the maturity to overcome disappointments. Finally, spirituality and religion has been found to be a successful coping strategy for college, providing discipline and focus along with a source of inner strength that helps students withstand adversity.

The fourth and final section of chapter two evaluated the factors that specifically affect the persistence of African American women at community colleges. It began by discussing class, race, and gender as separate issues, then discussing areas where they intersected: African American feminism, multiculturalism, and diversity.

The first part of this final section discussed class and socioeconomic issues relevant to the higher education of all minorities and disadvantaged students. Coming from a poorer family significantly affected students' persistence throughout their educational career and later in life. In addition, African American women were historically denied the right to learn to read. Their struggle to obtain equality has focused on overcoming obstacles to education, which becomes a social justice issue. This was

related to Freire's (1970) landmark work on the pedagogy of the oppressed. His view was that oppressed people were unlikely to be educated by the dominant classes, who gained by keeping them uneducated, and that they must see their education as part of a larger social struggle and take responsibility for educating themselves.

The next section reviewed racial issues affecting the persistence of African American women attending community colleges. The problems of discrimination were discussed and the findings that many African American students felt discriminated. Identity issues were discussed, examining how African Americans have had to continually redefine themselves over the years, changing their names and the terms they have used to refer to themselves. Last reviewed was the notion of how African American women have always been the "other" in American society, and how this has made it more difficult for them to define their own identity and achieve recognition of their own group.

Gender issues such as sexism and feminism were reviewed next. The changes resulting from women now being the majority of students at American institutions of higher learning were noted. Particular focus was given to the growing gender gap between African American men and women, and the cultural changes that this represents. The historical background of African American women in higher education, the legacy of the civil rights movement and the emergence of African American feminist ideas was discussed. It noted how African American feminists have demonstrated that being rigorously excluded from the American mainstream has resulted in the emergence of a unique and separate culture of African American women in the United States, one that is self-reliant and self-empowering and that has historically focused on acquiring literacy and education as a way of fighting oppression and disadvantage.

Cultural factors and multicultural issues were discussed, including how race, gender, class, and culture all interact to affect the educational experiences of African American women college students in a number of ways. Modern urban community colleges face many challenges in trying to meet the needs of students with a wide range of different backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities, and languages.

Hofstede's (2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) ideas regarding cultural differences between societies were examined. These ideas help illuminate the differences between African American culture and the dominant White culture of the United States. The concept of canonization was discussed and how a "canon" of knowledge based on the experiences and values of Western European males dominates American education. Children from the dominant class possess a cultural capital that gives them an advantage over students from minority or disadvantaged groups.

Cultural differences also result in learning differences and other cognitive problems. People from different cultural groups develop different learning patterns that reflect the values of their cultures. When students from a minority or disadvantaged culture are forced to deal with and adapt to the values of the dominant culture, they may develop *cultural dissonance*, difficulties in adjusting to the dominant learning patterns. This can have a serious impact on the ability of disadvantaged or minority students to understand the how and why of what they are studying, and to be able to relate it to experiences in their own lives. This has been described as the *cultural deprivation paradigm*, and it was noted how it can cause considerable difficulties for some students throughout their educational career. It has been suggested that colleges incorporate different cultural themes into their instruction, and develop learning strategies better

suiting for the particular culture of different students. There are many problems related to incorporating multicultural elements into the curriculum.

The last part of this section reviewed the challenges of diversity to community colleges, and the difficulties inherent in adapting multicultural concepts. Today's community colleges have to deal with students from a multiplicity of cultures and groups, and it is increasingly difficult to satisfy the needs of all different students. The challenges faced by community colleges in dealing with various multicultural issues and incorporating the views and values of other cultures into the curriculum may be referred to as the "multicultural agenda." A particularly difficult problem raised by multicultural issues is whether or not to focus on programs that promote the goals of the minority or ethnic group as a whole, or on those that focus on helping individual students achieve their own personal goals.

Not only do the colleges have to meet each individual student's needs, they have to also address society's desire to promote diversity in general. One way to do so is for colleges to develop diversity management plans that will focus on the diversification of the curriculum, as well as addressing the diversification of faculty and staff. Above all, colleges must remain open to new ideas and develop programs that allow for continuous adjustment in response to changing needs.

This literature review has demonstrated the extensive number of studies made examining various aspects of persistence in general, as well as the fewer number of those that have attempted, in one way or another, to examine the overall experiences of African American women in their long struggle to educate themselves and especially at American institutions of higher learning. It is clear from the literature that: (a) women in the U.S.

are pursuing in higher education at all levels in large numbers, greater than ever before, and increasingly in higher percentages than men; (b) both males and females from minorities, ethnic, and disadvantaged groups are taking advantage of the social changes and economic advances in the U.S. during recent decades to avail themselves of the opportunity to get a higher education; and (c) due to the confluence of these two trends, African American women are becoming increasingly successful at persisting in their attempts at higher education.

What remains to be done is to look more closely at the experiences of specific groups of students, especially those from minorities or disadvantaged groups, in order to help put the data already gathered into a context that reflects the personal nature of each student's culture, values, and life experiences, as well as the continual changes in 21<sup>st</sup> century American society. The current study attempted to address these concerns by focusing on the experiences of one, select group of students, who happen to be African American women, at a specific community college. An urban community college was chosen since enrollment at community colleges in large American cities has expanded significantly in recent decades. They also serve an increasingly diverse multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multicultural population, one very typical of the changing demographics of the American population in general. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was chosen to examine the experiences of these women, because it was thought that persistence and these women's voices concerning persistence could not be easily defined or reduced to quantitative data. The design of the study, the interview questions, and the participants were all chosen with these considerations in mind.

### Chapter 3: Design

This chapter describes the design and methods used in the study. It includes a personal disclosure statement, methods and rationale, participants, the criteria used for dependable knowledge, the data needed to conduct the study, the data analysis procedures, the strategies used to ensure data accuracy and dependability, and the protection of the human subjects.

The method of a study should reflect the purposes and intent of the study. The primary purposes of this study were to investigate the meaning of persistence among African American women attending community colleges and to explore the factors that either helped or hindered them in their persistence. Persistence is not only a quantitative concept. One can compile statistics on the numbers of women attending community college or the percentages of those who complete their course of study or go on to attend a four-year college or university. But it is difficult to quantify *why* any particular woman succeeded while another woman with largely the same background did not. In his work on student departure, Tinto (1993) demonstrated that the reasons that students are not able to complete college are complex. For instance, many students with very good grades do not graduate, while others with marginal grades are somehow able to overcome the obstacles and continue. Some students with strong family backgrounds fail, while others from poor backgrounds succeed.

To better understand this complexity, this study asks the women themselves what motivates them and why they want to, and are able to, succeed. Interviewing has proved to be an effective technique for obtaining this type of qualitative information and was therefore chosen as the primary technique for data collection used by the current study.

The questions used for the interviews in the current study were directly based on the questions and issues raised by the research questions and discussed in the literature review.

The method used to conduct the study within the domain of interpretive social science was the *hermeneutic phenomenological* approach. A phenomenological study attempts to describe the meaning of a *lived experience* for one or more individuals. A lived experience is “something” that certainly exists, such as parenting or learning, but which cannot be easily measured quantitatively or formally described. In this case, the study content focused on the experiences of several African American women students persisting at community colleges. These experiences entailed more than just the statistical rendition of such things as courses attended and grades received. The experiences involved the totality of the student’s struggle to keep school, family, work, and personal obligations together in order to make it through the college curriculum.

Different students may have different reasons for going to college.

Phenomenology is a method by which each experience can be documented in such a way that other parties can use the information to understand what school means for the students in this study. Student interviews were gathered in the attempt to record each individual’s experiences and voice and to present, as far as possible, the totality of the experience. What was learned was summarized in a series of writings by the researcher, with follow-up feedback from the participants.

### **Personal Disclosure**

My interest in persistence among African American females attending urban community colleges began with a reflection on my past experience as a minority

individual attempting to persist and persevere among a dominant group. I had the opportunity to gain insight into what persistence meant to me while playing Division 1 collegiate basketball as a scholarship athlete. My experience with basketball as a White player playing a predominately African American man's game was both rewarding and frustrating. Because of my "minority" status on the team, I had to continually prove myself as a player who deserved my scholarship.

I cannot equate my situation with that of African American women. My minority status was only temporary. When I left the basketball court, I went back into a world where I was part of the dominant culture. I did not have to put up with prejudice and discrimination all of the time and everywhere I went. While I may have been struggling, I was always aware that I had the backing and resources of a dominant group, and I was able to come to the struggle with many advantages and a background of my own success. It was important to me to succeed on the team, but it was not a life or death matter, and I would have survived in any case. For many African American females, going to college is indeed very much a question of survival, the one and only path to a better life. It is not just *their* struggle, but the struggle of their families, communities, and race as well. It is made more difficult because most of the African American women attending community colleges come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have fewer resources available to them.

Although my situation was quite different, nevertheless my struggle with identity caused me to try to justify and explain my life experiences. I persisted because of the relationships I eventually formed with the African American basketball players who saw my perseverance as encouraging. I felt that, as one of the few White players in the game,

I needed to be able to carry on as a role model for other White players. My persistence ultimately allowed me to obtain an education and continue with my career path as an educator in post-secondary education.

Since then, as a White male faculty member teaching speech at an urban community college, I have had considerable experience instructing African American women in the classroom. How these women are able to persist in a post-secondary system is quite intriguing to me because their experiences seem similar to mine as a basketball player. In addition, their success in higher education as an underrepresented group is vital to their success in our society and to the enrichment of society in general.

Much of the African American female students' persistence is a result of their comfort in and perception of the learning environment, which exists mainly in the classroom. "Success is a peace of mind which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best you are capable of becoming" (Tobin & Wooden, 2004, p. 85). Success in the learning process can encourage the learner's self-actualization and ongoing ability to facilitate her own success in future learning environments. I feel that it is my responsibility as a social justice educator in higher education to assist in increasing the success of minority students attending urban community colleges.

The goal of the proposed research study was to formulate new ways to understand how and why African American females manage to persist despite numerous obstacles and to suggest what can be done to change some existing, but ineffective, perspectives and outlooks. I believe that even as a person of a different race and gender, my relationship to African American females gives me a somewhat unique perspective on the

meaning of persistence as it relates to their success as students and individuals. I am aware that they are an underrepresented group in the academic literature on college education, and I believe that, as such, if they do have a success story to tell, it is of enormous value to me as a teacher, to my fellow educators, and to other students.

One of the principles of phenomenology is that the observer be sympathetic towards the subjects. Observers should have an understanding of what the subject has gone through, an understanding that is best gained by having experienced similar situations themselves. As a White American male, I cannot imagine the kinds of pressures under which these women operate. I do, however, feel a great deal of empathy towards them, and I feel that my experiences regarding my own minority status and my own persistence on the basketball court and throughout my education, as well as my teaching experience at community colleges, give me the background and insight necessary to do a successful phenomenological study of this type.

Finally, studying this group will not only help enable schools to support these students more effectively, but it may also illuminate some of the problems other student groups may be experiencing. As I have noted, African American women represent a unique intersection of oppressed groups and are probably the best example of how race, gender, and class impact on each other in American society. Therefore, examining their stories does not just illuminate their own situations but relates to issues of social justice, social diversity, and the struggle of the oppressed against a powerful and entrenched dominant class.

### **Interpretive Social Science Worldview**

The worldview I applied is the interpretive social science approach. According to Neuman (2003), the goal of the interpretive social researcher is to develop a better understanding of how people make meaning out of social settings. The focus is not so much on gathering or analyzing statistical data as on using it to enhance and express the students' voices. The focus is on creating a phenomenological snapshot or record of an aspect of an individual's experiences, in this case persistence at community college, and on understanding what that experience has come to mean for both the individual and society as a whole.

The interpretive social science worldview relates to the significance and purpose of this study because the study's intention is to find out what persistence in educational endeavors means to African American female students who are attending urban community colleges. "Interpretive researchers start out with the assumption that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness and shared meanings" (Myers, 2006, sect. 6). Experiences may be documented or presented in many ways and from many perspectives. The objective here was to present the students' experiences and voices in such a way that they reflect the unique values, perspectives, and understanding of these students. The goal in this type of study is to find meaning, not to determine results.

### **Human Science and Phenomenology**

The concept of *human science* has been developed over the past century as a way of developing a fuller understanding of the totality of a human being's experience of life (Van Manen, 1990). This concept allows a broader approach than what was possible

using the prevalent notions of *natural science*, which acknowledges the existence of only phenomena that can be objectively measured and described. Human science was, and is, an attempt to reintroduce the use of “philosophy” to the sciences, disciplines where philosophical approaches came to be ignored when *natural philosophy*, the older term for science, evolved into *natural science* and eventually into just *science*. Ancient scientists philosophized and speculated, while modern ones mostly tend to measure and analyze. The human sciences are an attempt to reestablish the balance, as well as to acknowledge the existence of subjectivity in all interpretations of human behavior.

The term *human science* was popularized by Dilthey (1987), who felt that human phenomena were fundamentally different from natural phenomena. He maintained that human phenomena have to be interpreted and understood, while natural phenomena require just observation and explanation. “We explain nature, humans we must understand” was how he put it (quoted in Van Manen, 1990, p. 181). Dilthey sought to use the philosophies and techniques of hermeneutics, originally developed to interpret religious and other texts, in his interpretation of human behavior and the fullness of life’s experiences.

The ideas of phenomenology and hermeneutics have been used within the framework of human science and the interpretive social science worldview in an attempt to develop a methodology for studying non-objective phenomena, such as human beings, while maintaining the rigors and objectivity of science. Phenomenology refers to the descriptive aspects, or the methods used to describe phenomena, while hermeneutics is interpretive and provides a method of analyzing and interpreting subjective data (Creswell, 1994, 1998; Van Manen, 1990).

The idea of the lived experience is one of the core concepts of human science, and especially of phenomenology (Gadamer, 1989; Van Manen, 1990). Another such concept is that everything is constantly in a state of flux, as was also discovered by natural scientists investigating atomic particles, and that many phenomena are ongoing processes consisting of more than simply a series of discrete events. When the subjects are human beings, the theory simply cannot be separated from the actual practice and reality of living. Human behavior only makes sense when put into the context of the human's biology, background, values, personality, family, and life experiences, including such simple things as how a person happens to "feel" on a particular day. To attempt to separate the theory from the practice is not just a waste of time; it is inherently incorrect and will lead to inaccurate conclusions. Everything is subjective, and the results of any studies of humans are always subject to some sort of interpretation and subjectivity.

Pedagogy is inherently a lived experience (Freire, 1970, 1995; Van Manen, 1990). Education is a process, a series of ongoing interactions and interpretations. Every student is different, and each person's education is a unique experience whose meaning can only be truly known or understood by that individual. This concept of *pedagogical human science* is why hermeneutic phenomenology is such an appropriate and effective choice for studying educational processes. It is a method for investigating the ongoing process of what is called education, in this case the lived experiences that affect these women's persistence in a community college environment. In a hermeneutic phenomenological study, the research and the writing are concurrent parts of the same process. The final results are writings that were created throughout the process of interviewing and analyzing and were the product of repeated feedback and rewriting, including comments

on both the writings and the writing process (Creswell, 1994, 1998; Kvale, 1996). This material should encapsulate some of the “meaning” inherent in the students’ persistence simply by describing the students’ experiences as accurately as possible and as much as possible in their own “voices” (Van Manen, 1990).

The phenomenological process is a circular one. It is not introspective, but retrospective. “A good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience—is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 27). Van Manen calls this the *validating circle of inquiry*, in which the scholar becomes part of the process itself and in which the data about the researcher is as important and as valuable as the data about the subjects. In addition, there are no “punch lines” as such in phenomenological writing; it does not aim at coming to any conclusions or at objectively measuring or graphing any data. It is a “poetizing activity” that aims at becoming the “voice” of the person (p. 13), which was precisely the goal of this study.

Phenomenology is the study of something from a personal and specific point of view. It acknowledges that all appearances are fleeting and that the way things are seen varies from one person to another. A phenomenologist searches for the essence or underlying meaning of a experience and, where the experience contains an outward appearance and an inward consciousness based on memory, images, and meaning, emphasizes the intentionality of the consciousness (Creswell, 1994, 1998). Furthermore, the objective of the phenomenological researcher is to uncover themes that exist within the lived experiences of the participant or phenomenon being studied. Themes are a way

to explore common experiences among individuals or groups. They are one of the ways to establish common parameters that can be used to connect different experiences.

### **Human Science and Hermeneutics**

If phenomenology is the art of describing lived experiences, hermeneutics is the art of interpreting them. Hermeneutics is the practice of the art of interpretation and the study of the philosophies behind it. The discipline of hermeneutics originated in the interpretation of religious texts and in the idea that there might be multiple meanings depending on the reader's interpretation and point of view. The idea is that the meaning of a selection of text depends on the context and the reader's point of view. Since there is no single point of view free of prejudice or cultural interpretation, a particular point of view is selected to use as a point of reference. No matter how objective, a person consciously or unconsciously selects a particular point of view from which to evaluate and judge. So the interpretation of the data becomes as important a part of the research as the data collection itself.

Edmund Husserl (1963, 1989, 2001a, 2001b) and Martin Heidegger (1962, 1982) are the founding fathers of modern hermeneutics. Georg Gadamer (1989) and sociologist Max Weber (1978) are most responsible for formulating its application to modern sociology. Its relativistic approach attained a certain prominence during the 1960s and 1970s. Its principal difference from most other interpretative schools of sociology is that it gives equal weight to both the content and the form of any process or social behavior, and it insists that the meaning of any behavior cannot be derived without first putting it into context (Elwell, 1996). Understanding is an ongoing process, or what is referred to

as the *hermeneutic circle*. This cycle consists of a continuous process of relating the parts to the whole and the whole to the parts.

The principal notion of hermeneutics is that thinking is always rooted in a particular cultural context and is essentially inseparable from it. The meaning of an object or experience can only be grasped by relating it to the worldview from which it comes. Things not only must be put in context but in fact are meaningless without that context. An example is putting a piece of paper into a box. This could be the act of voting, part of a larger democratic process; it could involve making a deposit in a bank deposit box, part of an economic process; or it could be simply a way to dispose of trash. The act gains a particular meaning only when it is explained in context and, in fact, has no meaning at all without that context.

The sociologist Max Weber (1978) helped develop a sub-discipline of sociology, the sociology of knowledge, which tries to examine the way that one's perception of the world is related to one's position in the social structure. He coined the term *action* to describe the method by which an individual attaches subjective meaning to any behavior. So a hermeneutic phenomenological study of an experience tries to put things into context by taking into account social class, membership in groups and subgroups, and other variables that may influence behavior and perceptions.

The stories of African American female students at community colleges take on meaning only when put in the contexts of African American culture, the community college culture, the particular experiences of these women in a still sexist and racist society, and, last but not least, the larger cultures of American and modern global society. Each of these women also experiences different subcultures—geographical, vocational,

and otherwise—all of which should be taken into account. Finally, each of them also has her own personality, motivations, goals, and spiritual beliefs that cannot be ignored.

### **Criteria for Dependable Knowledge in Interpretive Social Science**

Specific criteria were used to ensure that dependable knowledge emerges from the interpretive social science perspective. The importance of interpretive social science research depends primarily on portraying as accurate an account of an experience as possible. It acknowledges that there is no actual true objectivity and that everything is seen through one perspective or another.

Interviewing is one of the primary techniques in hermeneutic phenomenology, and a great deal of the work in intersubjectivity, that is, working with content relating to, used by, or comprehensible to a group of people (such as language, experience, beliefs), involves developing interviewing methods that acknowledge the existence of both subjectivity and personal interpretation of the results. Spiegelberg (1984) and Giorgi (1967, 1970, 1971) are two of the major researchers who contributed to the use of interviewing as a process for gathering data for the phenomenological method. According to Kvale (1996), Giorgi (1967, 1970, 1971) conceptualized the notion that, within the qualitative research process, deep reflection is needed to investigate the meanings derived from the interviewing process. Spiegelberg “outlined a phenomenological method that includes description, investigation of essences, [and] phenomenological reduction” (Kvale, 1996, p. 53).

A phenomenological study is scientific in a broad sense when it is: (a) systematic, (b) explicit, (c) self-critical, and (d) intersubjective, in addition to being based directly on the subject matter’s lived experience. The combination of an interpretive social science

methodology with a phenomenological approach can validate that the study contains dependable knowledge, because “it is intersubjective in that the human science researcher needs the other (for example, the reader) in order to develop a dialogic relation with the phenomenon, and thus validate the phenomenon as described” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 11).

There are a variety of ways to achieve verification of truthfulness in an interpretative study. Accuracy and critical analysis can be checked in a phenomenological study only by having others read and challenge the study’s validity and then by engaging in an ongoing process of incorporating others’ feedback into the work (Neuman, 2003). The study participants themselves did the first such reading. They had the opportunity to review the reporting of their answers for accuracy. Four of the nine study participants were re-interviewed and were able to participate in the discussion about the themes emerging from the study. This hermeneutic phenomenological circular process of writing and rewriting continues until it is clear that the major themes have been clarified and all parties are satisfied.

Another important issue to consider is that of the “validity” of qualitative data (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2001). Russ-Eft and Preskill have identified four basic factors that one can use to establish the validity of qualitative data and have related these to concepts used with quantitative data: (a) truth value or internal validity, (b) applicability or external validity, (c) consistency or reliability, and (d) neutrality or objectivity.

Truth value reflects the degree to which one can assume that the interviewees are telling the truth and whether the results are believable. In this case, for instance, one could reasonably ask whether African American women would be honest in their responses about the extent of racism when being questioned by a White male interviewee.

Under what conditions would they tailor their responses in order to say what they felt the interviewer wanted or expected them to say?

This issue is discussed in greater detail in chapter five, where the outcomes of the study are evaluated. Briefly, it should be mentioned however that human science openly acknowledges the existence of bias in any study of human behavior, and takes it into account when presenting any findings or drawing any conclusions. The fact that the interviewer was a White male is not hidden or glossed over, but explicitly acknowledged as one of the parameters of the study, and represents one of the virtues of the current study. The results of the study are not presented as objective truth, for phenomenology does not admit the existence of such a concept, but simply as the findings, observations, and conclusions of a an admittedly White man evaluating the experiences of African American women through the lens of his own experiences, values, and inevitable biases. This is the “truth” as he found it; not the complete truth about the experiences of African American women students, but merely a piece of it, and intended only to be a contribution to the body of lived experiences about a particular group of women’s educational experiences at a specific place and time, and to offer what additional perspectives it can.

The principle of applicability or external validity asks whether the findings would have relevance to other situations. What are the lessons learned from the study, and are they applicable to other situations? One could ask, for example, whether, given the same questions, the answers given in this study would be similar to those of African American women in other community colleges, such as smaller or less urban colleges or colleges in other parts of the country. Someone from a smaller community college in a less urban

environment might find that some of the lessons learned here are applicable to his or her own situation, but others would be less so. It is likely, for example, that an African American woman attending a college in a nearly all-White community (as opposed to the multi-ethnic and multi-racial environment of Los Angeles) might report significantly more racism.

Consistency and reliability refer to the extent to which the results would be consistent in different situations or under different conditions. Would these women respond the same way on a different day, for instance, or to a different interviewer, say an African American woman interviewer. In any qualitative study, it is inevitable that inconsistencies will appear; if not, then one could simply use quantitative methods that would objectively measure statistical data. Inconsistencies can also arise due to a respondent's confusion over the nature of a question or an interviewer's possible misinterpretation of the meaning of a response. In order to avoid inconsistency, it is important to carefully document all aspects of a study, including collecting all documents and maintaining a daily journal. This is referred to as the audit trail. It is also important to have both the interviewees and third parties review the material to confirm that the transcription is accurate and that it does indeed contain accurate information. The processes by which this was done in the current study are outlined in detail later in this chapter.

Neutrality or objectivity refers to the need to attempt to eliminate human bias from the evaluation of qualitative data. Each individual reflects her or his own upbringing and the values of her or his culture. Human beings have a wide variety of prejudices and biases, some conscious and some unconscious. These biases may take the form of various

prejudices—racial, sexual, or other—or relate to intellectual or philosophical presumptions of various sorts. A researcher with certain political or religious views, for example, may be motivated to interpret results in light of personal views and prior assumptions, thus losing objectivity and impartiality. Researchers may be more interested in confirming their own views or buttressing their own theories than they are in collecting objective data. Russ-Eft and Preskill (2001) stated that “it is impossible to completely separate the evaluator from the method” (p. 155). This is why it is so important to keep an accurate “audit trail” as one carries out the study, to use carefully defined methods in conducting the study, and to have the results of the study reviewed by qualified and objective third parties.

### **Study Participants**

The participants were selected from a community college located in the southern California area and serving a student population that includes African Americans. The study participants were all African American females enrolled at this institution, a large, urban community college in the Los Angeles area serving a relatively large African American population. The school encompasses both full- and part-time students pursuing different courses of study. Participants were interviewed individually and then given a chance to review their interview transcripts (member checking) and add any additional comments. The intention was to choose participants from the selected urban community college by first using data saturation techniques in order to determine the optimal sample size. I advertised for women interested in participating in a study, so these were voluntary participants. The process of data saturation involved beginning with a selected group and continuing to expand the size of the sample until the analysis yielded relatively stable

results. Participants were found by distributing flyers to social science professors at a local community college, who then mentioned it to their students.

The established definition of persistence for the purpose of this study was enrollment in the community college, and all study participants met this standard. The study began with six participants who met this definition and continued until data saturation was reached, at a total of nine participants. Later, four of the participants were re-interviewed. They were asked to review and confirm the identified themes (second-level member checking) and to shed more light on questions that arose after analysis of the original interview transcripts. The data were collected over a two-month period from September to October, during the fall 2007 semester.

In the context of the women and college chosen, and since the current study addresses what may be considered *minority* issues, it should be noted that both Los Angeles and California no longer have a majority of any single race or ethnic group, including Whites. So in one sense *all* students there are *minorities*. This means that one cannot assume that African American women in Los Angeles experience significant discrimination or feel that they are fighting a dominant culture. There really *is* no dominant culture in the city, although admittedly many people have considerable trouble grasping this or modifying their actions to reflect a rapidly evolving culture.

Therefore, it should be kept in mind that the experiences of the women at this particular community college may be substantially different from those of African American women in colleges or communities elsewhere, where they do represent a genuine minority. Many African American women in the United States may experience more overt discrimination and disadvantages than those found by their sisters in the

multiracial and multicultural environment that is early 21<sup>st</sup> century Los Angeles, while some may experience less.

### **Data Gathering and Analysis**

A formal process has been developed for hermeneutic phenomenological studies, which provided the guidelines used for the process that was followed in this study. Creswell (1994, 1998), Van Manen (1990), and other human science researchers have outlined it quite clearly. There are several steps in this process, which is cyclical and is repeated as many times as necessary in order to establish reliable descriptions of the phenomenon under study.

These basic steps are delineated below, each followed by a summation of how the researcher implemented them in the current study:

1. *The researcher obtains a full description of the experience or the phenomenon.*

I am a teacher at a community college and am familiar with and have observed African American women students in my classrooms for several years. I obtained a fuller description of their experiences by interviewing a number of students on specific questions. There was an initial face-to-face interview process, which was followed by an evaluation and assessment of the interview tapes.

2. *The researcher locates statements in the data (interview process/horizontalization) about the individuals' experiences and treats them as having equal importance without giving added weight for repetitiveness and overlapping statements.*

I transcribed the tape recordings of the interviews. During the initial perusal of the interview transcripts, basic themes were identified, regardless of their frequency.

Each theme was then given a code to be used in a more formal analysis.

*3. The researcher groups statements into meaningful units and textual description.*

The individual answers to each question were collated together so that the answers from all students to each question could be compared. This process helped identify both differences and similarities in the answers and helped identify additional themes that were not so apparent when only the individual transcripts were reviewed. After this analysis was completed, four of the interviewees were re-interviewed as part of the member-checking process. They reviewed the themes that emerged from my analysis and offered comments on the accuracy of the analysis. Their comments were then included in the final analysis and the discussion of the findings.

*4. The researcher reflects on her/his experiences by using the process of imaginative variation or structural description in order to seek all possible methods of constructing how the phenomenon was experienced.*

Both the individual transcripts and the collated ones were then reviewed again to assign codes to statements that were seen as relevant to the identified themes.

Using this process helped identify themes relevant to each of the individuals as well as those relevant to the group as a whole. Again, this process was done with both the individual transcripts, and the versions of the transcripts with all answers to each question collated together.

*5. The researcher constructs a description of the meaning or essence of the experience.*

A preliminary analysis of the transcripts was written, and organized around each individual question. It attempted to relate the students' answers to the issues and themes previously identified in the introduction, literature review, and method chapters of the dissertation. This process helped to further distinguish between individual and common themes.

*6. In a circular fashion, the process follows first the researcher's description and then the participants' to formulate a composite written description.*

After completing the process, anomalies and other possible questions were identified. Then follow-up interviews were conducted with four of the interviewees so that discrepancies and specific issues could be explored in more depth. These additional transcripts were then also analyzed and coded according to theme, and the written analysis modified to reflect the new findings.

The purpose of the data collection and analysis was to identify common themes and develop a picture of the lived experiences regarding the meaning of persistence for African American female students while they are attending urban community colleges. "For a phenomenological study, the process of collecting information involves primarily in-depth interviews. The important point is to describe the meaning of a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p. 122). This method allowed for a diverse outcome in the meaning of persistence among members of the study group. According to Creswell (1998), the researcher is responsible for

presenting information to reflect the “essence” of the lived experiences of the participants.

Data from each participant who had been selected for the study were collected through an in-depth interview process. The data needed to answer the study’s research questions consisted of African American females’ descriptions of the meaning of persistence for them, based on the perceptions and experiences that formed and shaped their beliefs and values as members of a lower socioeconomic, underrepresented student group in higher education. It also included their comments on the various factors that affected their persistence, and on the larger social issues that related to their education.

### **Data Dependability**

Ensuring the dependability of the data was an important part of this process. The basic strategy employed to accomplish data dependability was member checking, where each woman reviewed and approved of the transcript of the interviews, re-interviewing to confirm or clarify certain questions, and submitting the transcripts and completed dissertation to an outside researcher to review. These are described below.

**The dependability of the interview transcripts.** In a study based on personal interviews, the core of data dependability is the accuracy of the transcripts themselves. The interviews were themselves recorded, and then written transcripts were made from the recordings. Finally, both the researcher and another party checked each written transcription against the tape.

The next step was to use member checking to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions from the interviewee’s point of view. In member checking, after each interview was transcribed, both the interviewer and the interviewee reviewed the

transcription in order to make sure that it actually reflected each participant's experiences and voice. Each individual woman and I agreed that the information I gathered accurately reflected the data and her experiences. If there were disagreements, I changed the material to reflect that woman's voice.

**Data dependability in a hermeneutic phenomenological study.** In a hermeneutic phenomenological study, there is no real division between the data gathering and its analysis. Each task is a different aspect of the same process, which is cyclical and continues until the study goals are reached and the research questions answered. The intent was that the collected data offer an understanding of the essence of experiences related to a particular phenomenon. The needed information came from in-depth questioning and recorded responses throughout an interview process.

The advantage of the hermeneutic phenomenological approach is that if the data analysis indicates that more information is required or just desired, the cycle can continue, and further data gathering can ensue. This process continues until the data provided captures as accurately as possible the full measure of the students' experiences.

The data from this study were first constructed into a meaningful description by me. Then the participants in a second round of interviewing were asked to verify the accuracy of the construction of the meaningful phenomenon being described as well as offer further insights into the meaning. The information gathered was reviewed repeatedly in order to gain complete insight into the phenomenon. It was imperative that I analyzed the data from the interview in its entirety. The goal was to somehow capture the "meaning" of each student's experiences, while always remaining cognizant of the fact

that this meaning is inherently subjective and will be interpreted differently by all parties involved.

**Review by outside researcher.** In the last test to ensure data dependability, and in line with the hermeneutic phenomenological goal of acquiring multiple perspectives on the material, an outside researcher was engaged to review the transcripts and the completed dissertation, and offer his feedback and comments. This reviewer was Dr. Ahmed A. Ahmed, a professor of English at a community college in Los Angeles, with some knowledge of the research on persistence. It was felt that as an instructor at a community college Dr. Ahmed was in an appropriate position to appreciate the context of the study and offer a useful perspective.

In general, Dr. Ahmed felt that it made a significant contribution to the existing literature in the field of student retention, and that its value was enhanced by the focus on the often neglected community college students. He appreciated the importance of hearing the voices of underserved student populations.

As an urban community college professor, I believe that the work is a much needed exploration into the 'lived experiences' of an extremely underserved segment of American society seeking the benefits of higher education. It is a noble effort to expose the little heard voices of African American women in urban community colleges, while at the same time, identifying areas in student services and campus resources which can be created or adjusted to assist not only this particular group of students, but which can be adapted to post-secondary educational institutions to increase success rates of other underserved student populations. (Personal communication)

His chief reservation about the study was about the number of interviewees, and the fact that students from only one college were interviewed. He felt that nine students constituted a relatively small sample, and that it "belittled" the value of the project

somewhat. In retrospect, I have to agree with him, and wish that I had included more students, including those from other colleges.

Finally, Dr. Ahmed commented that the lengthy literature review somewhat overshadowed the contents of the interviews themselves, and made some useful suggestions regarding its organization and focus. In line with Dr. Ahmed's desire to see more of the comments from the interviews themselves, I added more of these to the sections in chapter four presenting the findings.

In light of Dr. Ahmed's comments about the literature review, and in conjunction with the development of my own views on certain subjects, which had changed a bit in the process of completing the study, I made substantial modifications to the current study. In particular, I formally distinguished between the factors which affected the persistence of *all* community college students, regardless of race, gender or class, from those which affected only African American women students, or only those from underserved and disadvantaged populations. I also eliminated the formal categorization of factors into facilitators and barriers, a distinction that was not borne out in the course of the study. These changes were reflected in the literature review, as well as the findings and concluding chapters.

**The conflict between privacy concerns and data dependability.** The best way to demonstrate data dependability is to include the data itself, which in this case would be the actual transcripts of the interviews. Including this material would achieve the hermeneutic phenomenological goals of placing the research in its proper context, and doing everything possible to allow any reviewer to do their own evaluation, enriching the existing material with their own perspectives and experiences. It would allow reviewers

of this material to read the women's own words and hear their voices, and come to their own conclusions regarding the validity of the study, and especially of the interpretations and conclusions offered.

Unfortunately, privacy concerns make the release of the complete transcripts inadvisable and impossible, and the only responses from the interviews that are included are those brief selections quoted in chapter four. In this context it must be noted, and again in line with fundamental hermeneutic phenomenological principles, that any conclusions drawn from the data presented in the current study are entirely from the perspective of the author, a white male in his late thirties. It certainly would be possible for someone of another race, gender, class, ethnic group or culture to read the transcripts and interpret the same data, and come to conclusions different from those drawn here.

### **Strategies for the Protection of Human Subjects**

This study complied with the rules and guidelines of the Oregon State University Institutional Research Board (IRB) for the protection of human subjects. I learned my ethical responsibilities in June 2005 through reading Human Participants Protections Education for Research Teams (National Institutes of Health, 2002) and by passing the online course regarding my awareness and preparedness for scholarly research using human subjects. In order to ensure ethical quality and consideration for the protection of the participants, the procedures used in this study were reviewed and approved by the doctoral committee and the Oregon State University IRB.

At a pre-interview session, I gave each prospective interviewee a letter and release waiver (Appendix A) explaining the purpose of the study and stating that any information obtained during the study would only be used for the purposes of this

dissertation. I assured them that their personal information would not be revealed in any way. I also showed the interview questions (Appendix B). I had them read the letter carefully, and answered any questions they had. I explained that they would be free to pass on any questions with which they were not comfortable, and that they were free to terminate the interview at any time.

Each interviewee said that they understood the purpose of the study, they were comfortable with me interviewing them, and each of them signed the release waiver. They all said they felt safe with the questions and with the interviewer, and proceeded to complete the interview without incident.

I also explained that following the interviews, the transcripts of the interviews would only be used for the purposes of the current study, and that they would not be included in the final dissertation itself. I also explained that their answers might be used for future research but that it was unlikely. Aliases for the interviewees have been used in the current study. The only personal information included is their ages and field of study. In addition, the name of the community college where they were students is not given.

### **Summary of Chapter Three**

This chapter began by discussing the concept of interpretive social science and its use in studying persistence. Persistence is not a quantitative value, and its study requires methods suitable for a qualitative subject. Further discussion showed how the hermeneutic phenomenological method used in this study was suitable for this subject. Since the phenomenological method acknowledges that the researcher will bring her or his own individual perspective to the study, a personal account written by me was included to illuminate the events that motivated me to address the issue of persistence in

African American women, despite being a White male, and also to describe my personal background, perspectives, and experiences related to the topic.

The chapter then discussed the interpretive social science worldview and the concept of human science, which acknowledges the unique and constantly varying nature of human behavior and attempts to develop methods effective at analyzing the way people behave. The relationship of phenomenology and hermeneutics to human science were explained. Phenomenology was described as the approach to gathering data on human behavior, and hermeneutics as the method used to interpret that data. A hermeneutic phenomenological study such as this one attempts to gather the “lived experiences” of individuals who have undergone a shared experience and to present those experiences within the context of the individuals’ lives without formally analyzing or attempting to categorize them.

The next section of this chapter discussed the criteria for establishing dependable knowledge in interpretive social science. The importance and value of interviewing as a technique in a hermeneutic phenomenological study were reviewed. Because of the subjective nature of human science and the assumption that phenomenological researchers will bring their own perspectives to the study, it is important that methods be employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative data gathered so that it will be of utility to other researchers. For a phenomenological study to be considered scientific, it must be systematic, explicit, self-critical, and intersubjective. The basic principles used to ensure the truthfulness of data are truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality.

The chapter described procedures used in the study itself, including how the study participants were selected and interviewed, how privacy considerations were resolved,

how data dependability issues were addressed, how the transcriptions were then reviewed and analyzed by the researcher for relevant themes, and, finally, how an outside reviewer familiar with community college issues was brought in to review the material and completed dissertation. The issue of the conflict between privacy considerations and data dependability was discussed. The processes typically used to gather and analyze data in a phenomenological study were also described, along with the specific procedures for the present study. The final goal of a hermeneutic phenomenological study is to integrate all of the material into an exhaustive description of the essence of the human experiences being studied. The chapter concluded with a statement on the strategies used to ensure protection of the privacy of study subjects.

#### **Chapter 4: Analysis of Interview Responses and Themes**

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews, and discusses the themes that emerged that were related to both the meaning of persistence and the factors that affected it. It uses the three research questions and the issues raised in the literature review to inform the discussion, but discusses the major themes that emerged as they related to all issues.

Nine women were interviewed. All were students at a large Los Angeles-area community college. Only pseudonyms for the first names of each subject were used, not the surnames, in order to protect the identity of each participant. In order to ensure accuracy of the transcripts, all of the interviewees reviewed their transcripts and approved of them. After conducting a formal thematic analysis of the data, and spending a period of time reviewing and identifying themes that emerged, four of the interviewees were re-interviewed in order to shed light on some questions that had arisen.

In a phenomenological study, it is important that any data gathered be presented in the appropriate context and, preferably, in a variety of different contexts. To achieve this goal, interview responses on each issue are both discussed individually and gathered together in tables.

##### **Profiles of the Women Interviewed**

Kerry – 49 years old. A registered nursing major and a film minor. Kerry is married with one child.

Sally – 50 years old. A psychology major, married with one child.

Carol – 23 years old. A liberal studies major, married with no children.

Terry – 48 years old. A child development major. Terry is married with two children.

Susan – 27 years old. A vocational nursing major, divorced with one child.

Diana – 22 years old. A criminal justice major, divorced with one child.

Amy – 18 years old. An accounting major, not married.

Betty – 17 years old. A pre-med major, not married.

Patty – 18 years old. A vocational nursing major, married with no children.

### **Major Themes That Emerged From the Study**

It is difficult and probably inaccurate to delineate individual themes and tie them to specific research questions. The major themes of family, especially children, motivation through goals, role models and mentors all seemed to cross the boundaries, and relate in various ways both to the meaning of persistence and the factors that affect it. The “meaning” of persistence itself does not emerge as an individual theme in itself, but rather as a focus that gives context to the various themes. It is the thread that weaves the themes and conclusions together.

One of the intents of a hermeneutic phenomenological study is to present the data acquired in context as much as possible, and unfiltered as possible. It should be presented in such a fashion that the reader will not only be able to consider the findings and conclusions of the researchers, but will be in a position to make their own interpretations in light of their own perspectives and personal history. In light of this goal, some of the responses of the interviewees on certain issues have been collated together in tables, which are included in the appropriate section. Having all of the responses together in this manner allows the reader to compare and contrast them, and to appreciate the variety of

perspectives contained in the answers. The responses are also analyzed individually, but they lose a little something when considered solely as individual quotations and separated from the appropriate context.

The major themes that emerged from the study are listed in Table 11, at the end of this chapter.

### **The Meaning of Persistence**

The general meaning of persistence to African American women attending community colleges was the primary focus of the current study. It is not really a theme *per se*, but something that provides the general context in which the various themes can be discussed. The first question asked the women in the interviews was about what persistence in their education meant to them. Most of the responses to this question have been collated together in Table 1.

However, the meaning of persistence cannot be easily defined since it depends so much on each student's own personal history and goals. Many of the significant issues related to persistence are unique to each individual. An individual's role models, for instance, can come from their family, their friends, their employers or someone else that they have come to know at college or elsewhere. Every individual's life is different.

Therefore, to truly understand the meaning of persistence to each of these women it would be necessary to know and understand her personal background, her family history, who she was, and from where she was coming. Unfortunately, privacy considerations limit the amount of personal information on each subject that can be released, and does not allow giving a personal history of each woman. Each woman was

told before the interviews began that the only information released about them would be their age and college major.

Table 1

*Responses When Asked About the Meaning of Persistence*

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Name	Response
Carol	Persistence means completing something without stopping.
Betty	Persistence means to me all the classes that you're involved in, you complete them all and you graduate.
Sally	To me persistence means something that you've just got to keep at. That you can't let every little obstacle that you come into to stop you from doing something. So to me I try not to let every little thing that happens to me stop me from pursuing my goals. – My daughter, I have a twelve-year old daughter. I want to show her the right way. I don't want her to wait until she's fifty to go to school, I want her to do it while she's younger, fresh, and to learn and not have a lot of responsibilities, so I want her to become a better person and to be able not to be struggling so that's why, that's why I persist.
Terry	Yes, persistence means to me that being very accurate in my ideas of pursuing a higher education and pursuing my goals of what I really want to do.

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Table 1 (continued)

Name	Response
Diana	<p>Persistence to me is kind of a struggle. Because you have to stay in school, you got to stay focused, and you have to stay dedicated. And that's pretty much why I do it. Because everybody wants higher education and I personally want to make money, and I want to change things with parole officers and things like that and helping people get back on their feet, so you have to have persistence to change lives and things like that. – I don't have any children. So it's kind of like what I'm doing now while I don't have any children, whereas if I had children it would be a lot harder. So that's what made me persist.</p>
Amy	<p>Yes, it means, it's ok, my major is accounting. I'm going to go to [college name omitted] for two years, and get an AA, and then I'm going to transfer to the nearest university and I'm going to finish the four-year degree. And I'm willing to go as far as I can, long as I can take it one day at a time.</p>
Kerry	<p>This is going to help me to go forward and go to the university. Well, I want to get higher education because I retired from my other career because I wanted to be a nurse all my life, and I came back to school to do so.</p>

Table 1 (continued)

Name	Response
Susan	Persistence means to me while I'm attending this college to continue to get my R.N. certificate so that I can become a registered nurse. I would like to transfer to a four-year college if I can.
Patty	What persistence means to me is what is my outcome going to be of going to this [college name omitted]. And what I feel is that I'll be getting out of it is a better life, and being able to give back to the community by helping people since I'll be in the nursing field. Basically I just love to help take care of others in their times of need.

The responses were fairly consistent, and generally in line with what the literature suggested. Persistence generally meant *sticking to one's plans and finishing what one began*. There was a very strong connection to establishing and achieving clearly specified goals:

[Carol] Persistence means completing something without stopping.

[Betty] Persistence means to me all the classes that you're involved in, you complete them all and you graduate.

One woman made it clear that she *knew in advance that there would be difficulties, and was prepared for them*. But they were not going to stop her:

[Sally] To me persistence means something that you've just got to keep at. That you can't let every little obstacle that you come into to stop you from doing something. So to me I try not to let every little thing that happens to me stop me from pursuing my goals.

Some responses capture the idea that persistence is associated with *specific goals and timelines*. In terms of attending community college it meant completing the program

and getting a degree. In the larger sense, it means being able to achieve long-term goals, whether those are specific, such as becoming a doctor, or more general, such as just wanting to get a secure, well-paying job.

It generally comes down to the desire to make money, whether that is for the money itself or for what money could accomplish for them and their families, and these women saw college as the most effective way to do that.

[Susan] Persistence means to me while I'm attending this college to continue to get my R. N. certificate so that I can become a registered nurse.

[Terry] Yes, persistence means to me that being very accurate in my ideas of pursuing a higher education and pursuing my goals of what I really want to do. . . . And my goals of wanting a business of my own at my age now, and my job factor.

Some responses capture the idea that persistence means being able to persist in an *on-going struggle to achieve long-term goals*. Diana had a very clear vision of what persistence meant to her. Persistence meant being able to struggle toward specific long-term goals – both for herself and for others:

[Diana] Persistence to me is kind of a struggle. Because you have to stay in school, you got to stay focused, and you have to stay dedicated. And that's pretty much why I do it. Because everybody wants higher education and I personally want to make money, and I want to change things with parole officers and things like that and helping people get back on their feet, so you have to have persistence to change lives and things like that.

Three noted that getting through community college was directly related to their desire to *make it to a four-year college and complete a bachelor's degree*.

[Kerry] This is going to help me to go forward and go to the university.

[Susan] I would like to transfer to a four year college if I can.

[Amy] Yes, it means, it's ok, my major is accounting. I'm going to go to [this college] for two years, and get an AA, and then I'm going to transfer

to the nearest university and I'm going to finish the four-year degree. And I'm willing to go as far as I can, long as I can take it one day at a time.

Persistence can reflect some very *long-held goals and desires*. If someone begins something after long desiring to do it, then it is likely she will stick at it.

[Kerry] Well, I want to get higher education because I retired from my other career because I wanted to be a nurse all my life, and I came back to school to do so.

The meaning of persistence was also associated with the idea of community, and *giving something back to others*.

[Patty] What persistence means to me is what is my outcome going to be of going to this St. Francis College. And what I feel is that I'll be getting out of it is a better life, and being able to give back to the community by helping people since I'll be in the nursing field. Basically I just love to help take care of others in their times of need.

In summary, when asked to define persistence, nearly all of the women described it in terms of specific goals, but these were as much about life goals as they were goals about finishing specific programs. The women students wanted to make more money and help their families and communities. Each student interviewee saw persistence in terms of personal goals and described the meaning of persistence, as well as the meaning of her education, in terms of the prospect of improving her life.

### **Departure, or the Failure to Persist**

While this study is on the reasons that students persist in college rather than on why they leave, the two subjects are certainly related. One of the questions the women were asked examined why they thought other students were not able to persist, and they gave some rather extensive and thoughtful answers (see Table 2). The students seemed quite aware of the many different challenges students face, and that usually it was a

combination of problems that causes one person to withdraw. Several of them noted that there could be many different reasons for departure and had no trouble enumerating them.

What is interesting is that when asked what was hindering them in their education, what barriers they were experiencing, and if they saw any reason that they personally would not be able to persist, the women were almost unanimous in stating that they saw no significant problems. However, when asked why they thought *other* students were not able to persist, they were able to give extremely detailed and perceptive answers. These findings would strongly suggest that students may not be able to perceive their own problems. Alternatively, they may have been unwilling to describe their own barriers and struggles.

Table 2

*Responses When Asked Why Some Students Failed to Persist*

Name	Response
Betty	<p>I think that they hang out with the wrong crowd, or a lot of peer pressure.</p> <p>Either it may be too hard, or they were lacking help, and they feel like nobody is going to help them so they drop out. Or maybe they could be having family problems. Maybe they have to work, and their family don't have any money, so they're like the only financial person, and have money and stuff, so maybe they just drop out.</p>
Kerry	<p>I think, because a lot of people are just right out of high school, and they're not ready to continue in school.</p>
Sally	<p>A lot of people don't have what it takes to keep fighting. A lot of people give up easy. Or because they do have a problem they figure they can't overcome it so they just stop coming.</p>
Terry	<p>Could be, because of parenting, family. I think the major part is lack of guidance.</p>
Patty	<p>I think maybe the main reason that students drop out is because they don't have someone in their home to keep giving them that encouragement, just to keep going, that they'll make it. That's what I think. That they don't have someone they can go to for good advice.</p>

Table 2 (continued)

Name	Response
Amy	Probably because they having issues or something, going through things. Most of the time they're going through stuff at home and they like to keep it away from the school, so they try to stay away just so they can keep it at home. Most of the time, it's just stuff like that, they just go through things.
Carol	Things happen, having a baby at a young age. Or having a baby to where they can't maintain a child and an education. Or having problems at home. Low self esteem. Problems with mates.
Susan	Financial reasons.
Diana	Because they're not making any money. They're limited to what they can do, because they're not making any money, they can't buy books and things like that. And, like for me, it's hard to understand things in class, so a lot of people drop out so they feel like they're slow, and like they can't catch on, or they're shy and can't ask questions, or they just don't know there's something wrong with them.

The departure theories espoused by Tinto (1993) and Braxton (2000), discussed earlier, suggested that it is the *accumulation of a number of different problems and circumstances* that causes a student to drop out. The responses to the interviews strongly confirmed that.

[Betty] I think that they hang out with the wrong crowd, or a lot of peer pressure. Either it may be too hard, or they were lacking help, and they feel like nobody is going to help them so they drop out. Or maybe they

could be having family problems. Maybe they have to work, and their family don't have any money, so they're like the only financial person, and have money and stuff, so maybe they just drop out.

[Amy] Probably because they having issues or something, going through things. Most of the time they're going through stuff at home and they like to keep it away from the school, so they try to stay away just so they can keep it at home. Most of the time, it's just stuff like that, they just go through things.

Several women noted the *lack of a supportive family*, and of not having people around to help and guide a young person. "Could be, because of parenting, family. I think the major part is lack of guidance."

[Patty] I think maybe the main reason that students drop out is because they don't have someone in their home to keep giving them that encouragement, just to keep going, that they'll make it. That's what I think. That they don't have someone they can go to for good advice.

Finally, one woman noted that it could be simply a *lack of stamina or willpower*. "A lot of people don't have what it takes to keep fighting. A lot of people give up easy. Or because they do have a problem they figure they can't overcome it so they just stop coming." Here we come to the core issue of this study, why some people are able to overcome difficulties and persevere and others simply cannot.

It is very clear that all of these women were quite determined, and that if they were tempted to drop out it was due to circumstances beyond their control. A couple of students reported that when they were seriously tempted to drop out of college that it was *mostly due to financial problems*. As one woman explained:

[Diana] Yes. The reason being is because once in school full-time, and you're not really making too much money. Me I can't get financial aid because I'm under 24. So it's kind of hard to just go to school full-time, and just not to be able to make much money, so it's kind of hard just to go to school, and get your books and everything, it's kind of hard.

*So why do you stay here anyway?*

[Diana] Because I want to be successful.

In summary, examining the reasons that some students are unable to persist in college sheds light on why other students are somehow able to overcome obstacles and succeed. The reasons that some students depart are complex, and consist of a variety of factors and the accumulated effect of a number of experiences. Curiously, the women interviewed were better able to grasp why some students fail than why they themselves were able to succeed.

**Role Models**

Role models emerged as a significant theme, both as a factor affecting persistence and as something directly related to the meaning of persistence and establishing the value of their education. The responses to the question on role models are given in Table 3.

What emerged from the current study that was surprising and perhaps most significant about the role of role models was the importance, not just of having role models, but of being one. This was particularly true for those women who had children, who were very strongly motivated by wanting to set an example for them.

Table 3

*Responses to the Question About Role Models*

Name	Response
Patty	My role model when I was younger was always my mother, and she still is my role model because she loves to care for people and help them and that's how I am.
Betty	My role model was always my mom, because she was a single parent. My dad died the day I was born. She went to [college name omitted], and she

- 
- was in the nursing program, and it was me and my brother. And she, and it was a good impact on my life to see her doing that and then she got her master's at [college name omitted] and so it really was like a good job.
- Susan When I was younger? Yes, my aunt and my mom. My mom she always believed to go for what you want to do no matter what because no matter what the problem was there would always be a problem. My aunt, she's the one who's pushing me to go higher. Because I was a CNA (certified nurse assistant), and everybody kept saying you could be a doctor, they wanted me to go as far as being a doctor.
- Amy My mom and my grandmother, they pushed me to do good, through all of my school years. And they still push me though I'm grown and I'm in college. So they go, "You got an A?", yea, I got an A, and they still got it. They still push me hard enough to help me keep going.
- Kerry My mother and father. Today it's my nephew. My nephew. My nephew is a celebrity, and he come from the country, and he's went a long ways, and he taught me to get back into school so I can get a higher education and a better job.
- Terry My mom, my dad, my sister. My sister is deceased, she was a RN. She got a Ph.D. in medicine. My father was a professor at a university, and my mother was a teacher.
- Carol Yes, actually, and she's my age, she's my best friend. She completed four years of college in Louisiana. She has a bachelor's degree in biology.
-

Table 3 (continued)

Name	Response
Diana	<p>Mainly my cousin. She’s been my role model. Gwen, she’s actually graduated from [college name omitted], and she’s a RN, she’s going for a Bachelor’s degree now. I look up to her because she basically focuses, she dedicated herself to what she wanted to do, and before the age of 27 she was a RN, so, you know.</p>
Sally	<p>Nobody, I never had role models because I come from a broken family. My Mom, she didn’t tell us to go to school or not to go to school. I just seen people around me that always had a job, so all my bosses and stuff, they’d say you so smart you got to go to school. So mostly it was my bosses from jobs that pushed me to try to do more. [Also] I see a lot of young teachers that work on the college campus, they tell me all the time to just keep at it, and keep at it, and you can really do it because a lot of them didn’t start until they was later on in life too.</p>

**Family role models.** Most of the role models that the women mentioned were family members, including mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers, aunt, siblings, a cousin, and a nephew. Johnson (2001) had also found this in her study.

Role models can be any age, even someone younger if that person has been successful.

[Diana] Mainly my cousin. She’s been my role model. Gwen, she’s actually graduated from [name of college], and she’s a RN, she’s going for a Bachelor’s degree now. I look up to her because she basically focuses,

she dedicated herself to what she wanted to do, and before the age of 27 she was a RN, so, you know.

What is striking is that virtually all of the role models mentioned were female.

Seven of the nine mentioned mothers as role models.

[Patty] My role model when I was younger was always my mother, and she still is my role model because she loves to care for people and help them and that's how I am.

[Betty] My role model was always my mom, because she was a single parent. My dad died the day I was born. She went to [the same college the woman was currently attending], and she was in the nursing program, and it was my brother and I. And she, and it was a good impact on my life to see her doing that and then she got her master's at [name of college] and so it really was like a good job.

Only two of the nine mentioned their fathers. Grandfathers and one male cousin were mentioned, but generally the male members of the families seemed rather peripheral. One aunt was cited as an important role model and influence, but no uncles were mentioned at all.

**Role models at work.** Four of the women cited people at work as mentors, role models, or a source of advice and encouragement. Encouragement from those at work seemed to be quite important. Teachers and employers can inspire those that do not have parental or other forms of familial support.

Not being able to find role models in her own family, one woman who came from a broken family has been able to find them elsewhere.

[Sally] Nobody, I never had role models because I come from a broken family. My Mom, she didn't tell us to go to school or not to go to school. I just seen people around me that always had a job, so all my bosses and stuff, they'd say you so smart you got to go to school. So mostly it was my bosses from jobs that pushed me to try to do more.

She found her role models in her bosses and co-workers as well as in teachers at the college. She noted that it was her bosses that told her that she was intelligent and who encouraged her to go to college, and that now it was teachers on campus that inspired her.

[Sally] I see a lot of young teachers that work on the college campus, they tell me all the time to just keep at it, and keep at it, and you can really do it because a lot of them didn't start until they was later on in life too.

**Being a role model.** As mentioned above, one of the surprising findings that emerged from this study was the importance and value to students of having someone to whom they could be a role model, most especially children. The women wanted to please their parents and others who had encouraged and supported them, but those people were generally not in their day-to-day lives. Their children were, however, and were a constant presence in their lives, providing a day-to-day reminder of their goals and why they were persevering.

When asked what keeps her going, one woman replied, "My son. My self. My mentor." Another said, "Me wanting a better future for me and my child."

Children made their goals very concrete. On a specific basis, they want to make money in order to provide more opportunities for their children. But it is more than that; the motivation resulting from children gave meaning to their struggles and directly inspired them on a daily basis. It provided focus to their long-term goals and plans for the future.

[Sally] My daughter, I have a twelve-year old daughter. I want to show her the right way. I don't want her to wait until she's fifty to go to school, I want her to do it while she's younger, fresh, and to learn and not have a lot of responsibilities, so I want her to become a better person and to be able not to be struggling so that's why, that's why I persist.

One woman was asked during the interview what advice she would give women who found that there were barriers to their continuing education. She replied that they should do it because it is not only their lives that are at stake, but those of their children and the others in their lives. For the women who had children, wanting to provide an example for their children was the most commonly mentioned motivation for them to persist in their education.

### **Mentoring and Guidance**

The studies reviewed in the literature review showed the great importance to day-by-day student persistence of contact with professors and personal mentoring. The women were specifically asked whether they had any mentors and to describe the value they received from them. The major responses to this question are gathered in Table 4. They were also asked whether they felt that they were receiving enough guidance on campus. The major responses to this question are gathered in Table 5.

**Mentors.** Nearly all of the respondents said that there was someone that they thought of as a mentor, someone they could talk to, or who they looked up to (see Table 5). Only one said that they did not. Mentors could be professors or counselors at the college, an old teacher from elementary or high school, a supervisor at work, or even a friend their own age. They were someone that they admired, and with whom they could talk about their lives.

Table 4

*Responses to the Question About Mentors*

Name	Response
Sally	<p>Not really, I really don't know a lot of people now, we have a lot of new teachers, so the ones that I know are pretty much gone.</p>
Susan	<p>I have a teacher, she helped me get my CNA. Her name is [name of teacher]. Yes, she was my instructor.</p>
Diana	<p>My third grade teacher, elementary school teacher, [name of teacher].            Because anytime I needed something... My other school is right across from her house. Anytime I ever needed something or I needed an answer to a question, or I couldn't figure out a math problem, I could always go to her, from the time I was in third grade to now, so it's kind of like you don't get that many teachers. She was the only teacher that actually attended my high school graduation, I never heard about that, she attended my high school graduation, so I basically stuck by her. She never had any kids so I like to keep her company.</p>
Patty	<p>Yes, I have someone that I go to when I need advice and help. Which is [name of counselor]. She was my counselor through high school. Because she always saw some special light in me and she always told me I was going to do good. And here I am, I've graduated from high school. I got over-credits and I have a lot of good certificates and stuff, and now I'm in school for my nursing.</p>

Table 4 (continued)

Name	Response
Betty	My counselor. I go see him like once a week and so I can like talk about my goals and going to college and fill out college applications and stuff. So he's basically like somebody that helped me and he's somebody that I can go to.
Kerry	[Name of teacher]. She's on the DSP (Disabled Students Program) program and she does everything to help the disabled here. When I was a little girl and I was in a hospital for two months, and in a coma for a month and a half, and so my brain doesn't work like everyone else's. And they're teaching me how to read again with an understanding, and it's just been great.
Carol	That works here no, but I do have a mentor. She's actually one of the supervisors I work with. I work for the [name of city]. She helps me out a lot. She has a bachelor's degree in recreation and I want to become a teacher. So she keeps me on the straight path, let's me know what I need to do, and what I need to stay away from.
Terry	Supervisors that encourage me to pursue my goal. And family members too.
Amy	Yes, me and my friend meet at school, we talk for 45 minutes before our class, just about a lot of personal issues and things. Because she's going through things that I been through, it's just like a person I can tell anything and talk to, and it won't get nowhere else but me and her.

One said that she did not have any mentors at the moment, but that in the past, one woman had been particularly helpful to her and she apparently still keeps in touch.

[Susan] I have a teacher, she helped me get my CNA. Her name is [name of teacher]. Yes, she was my instructor.

*And was she at this college?*

[Susan] No she's not here.

One response that was particularly interesting was from a woman who had maintained a long-term relationship with one of her elementary school teachers. It really illuminates the help and long-term value that a supportive teacher can offer. In this case, the teacher-student relationship blossomed into a long-term friendship:

[Diana] My third grade teacher, elementary school teacher, [name of teacher].

*Why would she be a mentor?*

[Diana] Because anytime I needed something... My other school is right across from her house. Anytime I ever needed something or I needed an answer to a question, or I couldn't figure out a math problem, I could always go to her, from the time I was in third grade to now, so it's kind of like you don't get that many teachers. She was the only teacher that actually attended my high school graduation, I never heard about that, she attended my high school graduation, so I basically stuck by her. She never had any kids so I like to keep her company.

She was not the only one who mentioned someone from elementary or high school, although in this case a counselor, not a teacher:

[Patty] Yes, I have someone that I go to when I need advice and help. Which is [name of counselor]. She was my counselor through high school.

*And why is she special to you?*

[Patty] Because she always saw some special light in me and she always told me I was going to do good. And here I am, I've graduated from high school. I got over-credits and I have a lot of good certificates and stuff, and now I'm in school for my nursing.

Most of the mentors mentioned were not at the college itself. In fact, there seemed to be more from fellow workers or supervisors at work than from the college. One student, however, had found a professor that truly inspired her, and another had found a counselor at the college that was helping her:

[Betty] My counselor. I go see him like once a week and so I can like talk about my goals and going to college and fill out college applications and stuff. So he's basically like somebody that helped me and he's somebody that I can go to.

Another noted that she had found someone at the college, although not a professor, who was able to help her with a specific problem, a learning disability that stemmed from a childhood illness:

[Kerry] [name of counselor]. *Why her?* She's on the DSP program and she does everything to help the disabled here.

Several said someone at work:

[Carol] That works here no, but I do have a mentor. *Who would that be?* She's actually one of the supervisors I work with. I work for the [name of city]. She helps me out a lot. *What does she help you out a lot with?* She has a bachelor's degree in recreation and I want to become a teacher. So she keeps me on the straight path, let's me know what I need to do, and what I need to stay away from.

[Terry] Supervisors that encourage me to pursue my goal. And family members too.

Some said a friend, and noted that they found value in the fact that they were going through, or had gone through, the same experiences. A mentor does not have to be older, but can be the same age:

[Amy] Yes, me and my friend meet at school, we talk for 45 minutes before our class, just about a lot of personal issues and things.

*Why do you consider her mentor?*

[Amy] Because she's going through things that I been through, it's just like a person I can tell anything and talk to, and it won't get nowhere else but me and her.

**Guidance.** The answers to this question were fairly evenly divided, but the majority said that they definitely felt they could use more guidance. Four said that they did not feel the need for more guidance, and six said that they did. The responses to the question on the need for guidance are collated in Table 5.

Table 5

*Responses to the Question on the Need for Guidance*

Name	Response
Terry	[In response to the question on departure.] Could be, because of parenting, family. I think the major part is lack of guidance.
Terry	I think I could use a little more personal contact with professors and instructors, yes. Because I feel that would help me pursue my goals and getting more knowledge from them.
Patty	[In response to the question on departure.] I think maybe the main reason that students drop out is because they don't have someone in their home to keep giving them that encouragement, just to keep going, that they'll make it. That's what I think. That they don't have someone they can go to for good advice.

Table 5 (continued)

Name	Response
Carol	<p>Because someone like me, my personal, sometimes it's hard for me, because I don't know anyone on campus, so it's like you're coming to an institution where you're by yourself. And if I had someone here that I knew, that I could talk to it would probably be easier, instead of having to go to work every day and talk to my mentor.</p>
Susan	<p>Why? Because I don't think, are you talking as far as the instructors and all that, and counselors? [Yes.] I don't think a lot of them are involved in their students. I think they're just like ... I don't know, I don't know how to describe it.</p>
Sally	<p>I guess, right now, everybody probably could use more help. But I don't know if they're going to get it but yes it would be better, it would be good if they did.</p>
Diana	<p>Yes. Definitely. The reason being because my being law [pre-law major], and I'm not sure that that's what I want to do in the long run, for the rest of my life. And there's not really too many resources on campus. Or, I would look for aptitude tests, is that what it is, to show you what you're best thing is? I can't find any aptitude tests nowhere in college, and this is where you're supposed to start out in my life off, or finish your life off, get you started in life, and there's no tests on campus that will show you that.</p>

Despite the fact that most of the women reported that they had some kind of “mentor” in their life, at least half also felt that they *could use more personalized guidance at the college*. Possibly the problem here is that, while they may have people in their life with whom they can discuss their problems or goals, or who inspire them, most of these are not affiliated with the college and do not possess the academic credentials and experience necessary to advise them on school-related issues. Mentors on campus are also able to help direct students to needed resources.

[Carol] Because someone like me, my personal, sometimes it's hard for me, because I don't know anyone on campus, so it's like you're coming to an institution where you're by yourself. And if I had someone here that I knew, that I could talk to it would probably be easier, instead of having to go to work every day and talk to my mentor.

[Susan] I don't think a lot of them are involved in their students. I think they're just like . . . I don't know, I don't know how to describe it.

[Sally] I guess, right now, everybody probably could use more help. But I don't know if they're going to get it but yes it would be better, it would be good if they did.

One woman noted that she *could not find aptitude testing on campus*, illustrating at least some variance between her perception of what services the college should offer and what they did offer. Aptitude and career testing is a relatively simple service to offer, and one at the very core of the college's mission, which is to help students get started on a path fruitful for them.

[Diana] And there's not really too many resources on campus. Or, I would look for aptitude tests, is that what it is, to show you what you're best thing is? I can't find any aptitude tests nowhere in college, and this is where you're supposed to start out in my life off, or finish your life off, get you started in life, and there's no tests on campus that will show you that.

One woman mentioned the *problem with the regular turnover of faculty at community colleges*.

[Sally] Not really, I really don't know a lot of people now, we have a lot of new teachers, so the ones that I know are pretty much gone.

This emphasizes the point that community colleges do not have the stability of faculty that four-year colleges and universities generally have (Tinto, 1993). Some of the best teachers see community colleges as a stepping-stone to better university positions. Community colleges are also regularly subject to fluctuations in financial support, something which makes it all the more difficult to maintain an active and caring community on campus.

In the questions regarding mentoring and the need for more counseling, *only two specifically mentioned anyone at the community college*: a man who was a counselor, and a woman who helped one of the students with her learning disability.

[Betty]. My counselor. I go see him like once a week and so I can like talk about my goals and going to college and fill out college applications and stuff. So he's basically like somebody that helped me and he's somebody that I can go to.

These women may benefit from guidance from formally assigned mentors or advisors from within the college, but this would require further investigation.

The oldest woman interviewed mentioned that she felt that many of the *teachers did not seem to know how to teach older students*, which was a source of frustration to her. She noted the problems with teachers who assumed students knew things that some did not, and that they did not take the time to make sure. She felt that some teachers did not seem to know how to interact with an older student. Her point was that not all teachers are capable of teaching all students:

[Sally] I think some kind of teachers, some teachers don't know how, me I'm 50, so I been around a long time, I know how to deal with people, some people don't know how to teach certain type of people so I think that's the problem. That if you can get people that can reach out and teach people of all levels it would be better because people don't, it can hinder you. So that's been my problem because people just assume that you supposedly know something that you don't know, and they don't take the time off to see if you know.

It is true that it is very difficult for colleges to deal with so many different groups, but the need is clear. One of the suggestions made by those who have studied student departure and persistence is to have formal programs to make certain that each student has advice, counseling, and mentoring (Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 1993). Some studies (Guiffrida, 2005; Johnson, 2001; Kasworm, 2002) have shown the importance of regular contact with professors, both inside and outside of class, along with personal mentoring, in order to support student persistence.

### **Goals and Motivation**

There appeared to be a connection between persistence and clearly established goals. This confirms what has been shown in a variety of studies (Guiffrida, 2005; Kasworm, 2002). Achieving goals and persistence are nearly synonymous to these women. Focus on specific goals is what allows them to overcome minor obstacles.

[Sally] To me persistence means something that you've just got to keep at. That you can't let every little obstacle that you come into to stop you from doing something. So to me I try not to let every little thing that happens to me stop me from pursuing my goals.

However, there are both individual goals and communal goals.

**Individual goals.** When asked to define persistence, the majority of the women explicitly noted that finishing community college meant that they *could go to a four-year college or university or acquire a professional degree*. "This is going to help me to go

forward and go to the university.” They clearly saw it as the best path towards a profession or a business, which in turn would lead to a “better life.”

[Patty] “What persistence means to me is what is my outcome going to be of going to this [names a local college]. And what I feel is that I’ll be getting out of it is a better life.”

One woman, one of the older students in the study, noted that the reason she did not worry about dropping out was that she had a very clear idea of what she wanted, and why she was at college:

[Terry] At this point no, because I feel that this is very important at this part of my life, because I need more education to do what I want to pursue my goals in life at this point in my life and at my age.

*And why did you decide to stay in school? And what particular reason did you decide to stay?*

[Terry] Well, for number one, my age factor. And my goals of wanting a business of my own at my age now, and my job factor.

These two women seemed mostly concerned with and focused on their own individual struggles. They may be concerned with the larger picture, but they *see the primary value of education as helping themselves*. In other words, the best way to help others is to help oneself.

**Communal goals.** Students were not motivated solely by individual goals. Much of the literature suggests that students found meaning in persistence in terms of what it does for others (Berry & Mizelle, 2006), which was supported by the interview statements. Students very clearly saw the *connection between staying in school and achieving greater goals for their community*. The responses seemed to confirm what Kasworm (2002) and Guiffrida (2005) said about the value of persistence in education in helping students overcome adversity and make something of themselves.

[Patty] Being able to give back to the community by helping people since I'll be in the nursing field. Basically I just love to help take care of others in their times of need.

Certainly, each student is different and has different motives and goals that keep them on the path. Four of them noted the *importance of their children to them*, and how it keeps them going.

[Susan] Me wanting a better future for me and my child.

[Sally] My daughter, I have a twelve-year old daughter. I want to show her the right way. I don't want her to wait until she's fifty to go to school, I want her to do it while she's younger, fresh, and to learn and not have a lot of responsibilities, so I want her to become a better person and to be able not to be struggling so that's why, that's why I persist.

The importance of children and the prospect of improving their lives is consistent with the conclusions of Johnson (2001) and Kasworm (2002).

**Summary.** These women wholeheartedly believed in the value of education, regardless of whether that was to help them overcome oppression and liberate themselves from reliance on the dominant class, or because they themselves see their own best prospects in adapting to and integrating with the system. The findings would suggest that their experiences seemed to much more represent their own individual struggles than they did their particular race, gender, or class.

The main point seemed to be that these women, whether from choice or circumstance, focused mostly on their own individual goals and struggles and not on the larger issues surrounding them. If they thought about helping the community at large, or any subgroups such as the African American community, it was in terms of helping the community by helping themselves. To these women, *community* seemed to mean *family*.

They were inspired and encouraged mostly by their parents and other elders, and their primary goal was to help their children.

Zamani (2003) and Hackett (2002) discussed the need for community colleges to address the issue of colleges making African American women and other minorities feel more welcome on campus and making them feel part of the community. One of Tinto's (1993) core ideas about student departure was that students needed to feel themselves a part of the community. Tinto's view was that departure was not the result of just one event, but was rather a process in which a number of events and factors culminate in such a way as to make it difficult if not impossible for students to continue.

To a surprising extent these women's views would confirm that thesis. Several of them noted that there could be many different reasons that students might not be able to persist, and named quite a few of them: peer pressure or the influence of the 'wrong' crowd; not being able to get started, perhaps due to a lack of help, or just feeling that there would not be any help there when it was needed; financial constraints; having a baby at a young age; family background; not being literate enough or having the academic preparation for college; or, finally, simply being too young and not yet ready to accept the commitment and responsibilities of college work.

### **Race, Gender, Class, and Multicultural Issues**

Examining the many questions related to race, gender, class, multiculturalism, and other social issues was an important part of the current study. One of the questions that informed this study regarded the extent to which these women felt: (a) that they truly have a "different" cultural background, and (b) whether that makes it more difficult for them in college, and, if so, how much so.

Most of these women did not feel that they faced serious cultural barriers.

Virtually all of the women emphatically said that they did not feel they had been the victims of racism or sexism during their educational experiences. Most of them certainly acknowledged the existence of social problems in their communities, but felt that they personally had not been blocked from achieving whatever they wanted to achieve. Table 6 provides a listing of their responses on these issues.

Table 6

*Responses to the Question About Experiences with Racism and Sexism*

Name	Response
Amy	<p>No, because I'm me, my own person, and it's not what other people think.</p> <p>Long as I present myself well, they look at me like she's a real nice lady.</p> <p>And it's not like I'm one of the ones who just talk. It's just the way you present yourself, so I don't think so.</p>
Diana	<p>No. The reason being is because I mean if you have the knowledge and you're strong enough to go through society, it doesn't matter what your racial or cultural background is. I mean there are situations, if you want to be religious ... Well, not necessarily, no, no.</p>
Betty	<p>Yes, sometimes, maybe like if they were getting into a class, they might, the other race people or ... Even like getting a job, they might want to hire somebody they might not think that... I don't know...</p>
Sally	<p>No and yes. It's a two-fold question. Because sometimes the school district that you're raised in is a hindrance, not because you're Black or White but sometimes because of the way you been and the school you went to. So I think sometimes the different dominating race they have a better edge as far as elementary and high school levels because they're taught college courses in their schools, where as in our school we're just basically getting the basics. So I think that's where it's at, I don't think it's anything to do with color it's because of where you're raised.</p>

Table 6 (continued)

Name	Response
Diana	They haven't affected me personally. But because racism to me is non-existent. So if someone decides to be racial to me I just pretty much ignore it. And sexism, I just sit around away from the person that's making me feel uncomfortable. That doesn't mean necessarily mean that I have to feel bad because someone might be ignorant.
Betty	Sometimes like the head counselor, I remember he always used to say like that, oh you know you'd better off going to a two-year college or something, and I don't think that's right that for him to be telling somebody that.
Sally	Well, I'm from Detroit, Michigan, and all that so that's (racism] not a problem, that was never a problem. But I was in relationships that my male counterparts wouldn't want, didn't want me to go to school. That's why I'm going now because I had several relationships and they didn't want me to go to school. So from a male point of view, I think males too much don't want their females to be educated.

None reported any incidents of racist or sexist behavior at the community college they were attending. Some reported minor problems, but no major difficulties at all. One woman carefully distinguished between the existence of racism and sexism and their effect on her life:

[Diana] They haven't affected me personally. But because racism to me is non-existent. So if someone decides to be racial to me I just pretty much ignore it. And sexism, I just sit around away from the person that's making me feel uncomfortable. That doesn't mean necessarily mean that I have to feel bad because someone might be ignorant.

None of the women reported ever being told by a counselor when they were younger not to attempt college. All of the women said that they had never experienced any of this type of prejudice, and said so quite unequivocally.

[Susan] No. I haven't come across anything like that yet.

One woman, however, was advised to aim at a two-year rather than a four-year college, but she was still advised to go to college. She noted a negative experience with a high school counselor, who seems to have discouraged her from trying to attend a four-year college:

[Betty] Sometimes like the head counselor, I remember he always used to say like that, oh you know you'd better off going to a two-year college or something, and I don't think that's right that for him to be telling somebody that.

On the other hand, two of the women specifically said that they had been encouraged by guidance counselors and teachers when they were younger.

[Sally] No, not really. They have been real encouraging, helping me try to set a goal for myself. So no, I couldn't say that.

[Terry] No, they've always said go to school and learn, so it would not be you know anything on that aspect.

These sentiments were confirmed by all of the women.

One woman said that racism has affected her in the past, but that she was working hard to overcome it. But she was the only one who said this. However, it was her perception of racism that motivated this view. It was her warning filter, but sometime it worked to her detriment too, like a battle-scar. It helped her in some situations, but

hindered her in others. It was more her personal trauma and experiences, than it was a social problem, at least from her point of view. Identifying this as her own problem helped her to not feel boxed in and to accept this about herself, and just focus on her long-term goals. Persistence was part of her personality, and working through obstacles was part of her personality. Part of being a persistent person to her was consistently working on your own personal issues and overcoming/working through past traumas.

Virtually all said that their teachers, counselors, and others had steadfastly advised them to “keep going.” “They have been real encouraging, helping me try to set a goal for myself.” One or two mentioned receiving less than enthusiastic support or encouragement from some individuals, but there appeared to be no feeling of systematic prejudice.

Few of the women acknowledge encountering any overt sexism. Sally noted, however, that her male friends over her life had regularly and actively discouraged her from getting an education and pursuing her goals.

[Sally] That’s why I’m going now because I had several relationships and they didn’t want me to go to school. So from a male point of view, I think males too much don’t want their females to be educated.

She had to actively overcome their hostility, and not just once, but also several times.

Sally also claimed that racism had not been a problem for her, just the sexism. “Well, I’m from Detroit Michigan, and all that so that’s [racism] not a problem, that was never a problem.” This illustrates the fact that while African American women may experience racism, sexism, and classism as a group (Collins, 2000; Evans, 2007a), the experiences, background, and perceptions of each individual are unique.

These women generally did not feel disadvantaged by their background. It could be that they did not wish to acknowledge or discuss it, or that they felt that it did not make any difference to think about it, or that it was something that had to be lived with and ignored if they were to succeed, or that it did not exist for them. But the general feeling was that they felt these were relatively minor difficulties and easily overcome. The key was having faith in themselves and, above all, self-respect.

[Amy] Because I'm me, my own person, and it's not what other people think. Long as I present myself well, they look at me like she's a real nice lady. And it's not like I'm one of the ones who just talk. It's just the way you present yourself, so I don't think so.

[Diana] The reason being is because I mean if you have the knowledge and you're strong enough to go through society, it doesn't matter what your racial or cultural background is.

One woman observed that although one's educational background very definitely made a difference, but it was not simply a racial matter. The disadvantage was not just from being African American but the culminating effect of a combination of factors. It was not simply race but the location of the schools and other circumstances that caused problems.

[Sally] It's a two-fold question. Because sometimes the school district that you're raised in is a hindrance, not because you're Black or White but sometimes because of the way you been and the school you went to. So I think sometimes the different dominating race they have a better edge as far as elementary and high school levels because they're taught college courses in their schools, where as in our school we're just basically getting the basics. So I think that's where it's at, I don't think it's anything to do with color it's because of where you're raised.

The "dominating race," as she refers to it, maintains itself by virtue of its current position not by active discrimination or efforts to keep others down (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000). It is the legacy of these efforts that continues to hamper integration and

maintain classism. The crucial factors are both living in a school district with good schools and being able to attend one of the good schools within that district. She did feel, though, that the difference in the quality of schools added up to giving the dominant race a definite edge.

The quality of schools is indicative of the external problems that many students from disadvantaged groups face. However, while the quality of one's school can certainly impact any student's education, it remains true that some students are able to successfully persist regardless of the quality of their school, or possibly any other disadvantages for that matter. Some students somehow find a way to succeed no matter what obstacles they face.

**The African American community and social justice.** The women were asked about the extent to which they were inspired by the African American community and about their concern with social justice issues. Table 7 lists excerpts from their responses. Three of the women were involved in social justice issues in various ways, and another three of them saw their education itself as partially motivated by social justice concerns, that is concerns with the community at large.

While they may have identified with the African American community, they seem to have thought of the notion of community in their own ways. Four specifically saw it in the family, one in the church, and one in the local neighborhood in which she grew up. Only four saw it specifically in terms of the African American community. One cited Condoleeza Rice as an example of a role model that was meaningful to the community of African American women. Generally though, as mentioned above, to these women community was their family.

Table 7

*Responses to the Question About the African American Community as a Source of Inspiration*

Name	Response
Terry	Well, a lot of political people that are in the family inspire me. The higher education factors in my family inspire me. So overall the whole ethnic background community inspire me to succeed in life.
Sally	I can't say they haven't helped us with equal rights because they have. But I think if you look at everybody you shouldn't just distinguish just one particular culture because everybody has something positive to offer. So if you just look around you can find something positive in anything, it's just what you're looking for.
Betty	There are some positive things. Like some of the activists and stuff, are like somebody I would like to be. Since they like, I don't know how to explain it, like real positive, like when something is happening, like how they go and try to have rallies and stuff.

Table 7 (continued)

Name	Response
Diana	I have to say a lot. Because my Momma raised me, you know, being a dark-skinned woman, and you know being in [name of local city] and stuff, and going to middle school and things like that, they discriminate you from your skin complexion, and not your race. You know what I'm saying? So I have to look up to that, because my complexion to me is dominant, you know I'm darker. So I look to everybody. I see light-skinned woman, I see dark-skinned woman, I see everybody walking around, but at the same time to me they're all to me equal.
Patty	I look for my inspiration to Condoleezza Rice. I think that she's a wonderful woman. To know that she's an African-American woman working in the White House. I hardly ever may see that. And I just really look to her, she looks like a really good, smart, lady, woman.

Four of the women certainly had a distinct awareness of the larger African American community, how it affected their lives, and how they responded to it. Of particular interest is Diana's comment about what a difference skin shade makes, even among African Americans.

[Diana] I have to say a lot. Because my Momma raised me, you know, being a dark-skinned woman, and you know being in [name of community omitted] and stuff, and going to middle school and things like that, they discriminate you from your skin complexion, and not your race. You know what I'm saying? So I have to look up to that, because my complexion to me is dominant, you know I'm darker. So I look to everybody. I see light-skinned woman, I see dark-skinned woman, I see

everybody walking around, but at the same time to me they're all to me equal.

Carol eloquently spoke about the need for a community of any sort in reference to its importance if something should happen to her, such as becoming pregnant:

[Carol] I don't. I mean, I can, but if I find myself pregnant, I just work it out for myself. I mean that would be good if I can, if I could find someone or a group of people.

Intellectuals may refer to "community" in abstract terms, but on a day-to-day level, it means whatever people are around who are able and willing to offer support. Usually people do not have a choice as to where they can get help. Carol did not seem to expect the "African American community" to necessarily come to her aid if she got in trouble.

One woman noted that for her community was the church. One woman noted how she felt part of the community because she had grown up there, and that it was important to her. One noted that while she did look to the African American community, she also looked to other communities as well:

[Sally] I can't say they haven't helped us with equal rights because they have. But I think if you look at everybody you shouldn't just distinguish just one particular culture because everybody has something positive to offer. So if you just look around you can find something positive in anything, it's just what you're looking for.

Two of the women said that they did look to the community, were interested in it if not actively involved, and were encouraged by community efforts and actions:

[Betty] There are some positive things. Like some of the activists and stuff, are like somebody I would like to be. Since they like, I don't know how to explain it, like real positive, like when something is happening, like how they go and try to have rallies and stuff.

[Susan] A great extent.

*Why is that?*

[Susan] Because I feel that African Americans should try harder. I think they limit themselves in certain ways...make excuses.

*Any reasons why the limits might be?*

[Susan] No I don't know why.

African American feminists such as hooks (2000) and Collins (2000) claim that the needs of African American women, particularly African American feminists, are fundamentally different than those of the White feminists, and that they need to establish their own groups and focus on their own goals. However, the women who were interviewed do not seem especially conscious of these views. It may be that they are basically unaware of the work of African American feminists, or it could be simply that they do not agree. But nothing in these interviews indicates that these women see themselves as fundamentally different than any other groups in American society, or that they feel that their needs and goals are any different.

It may be that these women simply do not want to acknowledge the extent of racism and sexism in contemporary American life, believing that it is best to ignore it and focus on overcoming it in an individual fashion. Or it may be that they just do not feel that it is that great an obstacle any longer. In any case, their emphasis is on their own individual struggles, and not on that of African American women in general. There seems to be very little, if any, awareness of the concept of African American feminism, at least as anything distinctly separate from that of feminism in general.

This could be an example of what was referred to earlier as the *cultural deprivation paradigm* (Johnson, 2001), in which disadvantaged people are simply not aware of the learning and cultural perspectives that they lack. They are inherently unable to evaluate the quality of their education, at least until they have themselves become

educated and have acquired the necessary perspectives. Overcoming this challenge requires the assistance of teachers trained in diversity to overcome. As Rhoads and Valadez (1996) mentioned, cultural dissonance is a very subtle thing, and is nearly impossible to disassociate from the other factors affecting successful learning.

**Illiteracy.** Questions were asked about illiteracy and its impact. Excerpts of the responses can be found in Table 8.

Table 8

*Responses to the Question About Literacy and the Impact of Illiteracy*

Name	Response
Sally	You know it's bad because if you don't get the opportunity to learn then they can't by extension, because if you don't know the basic reading, writing and arithmetic then you can't even take it to the next level.
Betty	I think it's a real big problem because basically if you don't know how to read or write then you can't get a basic job, because you wouldn't know how to fill out the application, or you wouldn't know how to fill out a college application.
Terry	It holds them back a <i>great</i> deal. I think a lot of Blacks need to be educated. They need to go forward. This will eliminate a lot of poverty, a lot of crime, and such.
Amy	I don't think they hold it back at all. No, it just don't matter. I don't think it stops anything.

Table 8 (continued)

Name	Response
Diane	It holds back a lot. Because, like me for example, I have attention deficit disorder, it's hard for me to learn. But, on the other hand, I'm not afraid to approach somebody or ask somebody questions about things that I don't understand, whereas other people that basically don't know what's going, or what they have, they're scared to approach and ask them questions, because other people may criticize them or how they ask the question.
Carol	It affects society a whole lot. With not knowing how to read or write or do math.

While these women did not seem to agree that sexism or racism are major obstacles to overcome, at least four of them agreed that illiteracy was a great problem. The comments were quite consistent, and certainly confirm what Kozol (1980, 1985, 2006) has found.

[Terry] It holds them back a *great* deal. I think a lot of Blacks need to be educated. They need to go forward. This will eliminate a lot of poverty, a lot of crime, and such.

[Carol] It affects society a whole lot. With not knowing how to read or write or do math.

They clearly understood that education is the foundation for advancement in a modern society, and that literacy is the first and most essential step in acquiring an education.

[Sally] You know it's bad because if you don't get the opportunity to learn then they can't by extension, because if you don't know the basic reading, writing and arithmetic then you can't even take it to the next level.

While they did not appear to feel that they personally had been held back all that much, most of them seemed to feel that others were, in one way or another.

[Betty] I think it's a real big problem because basically if you don't know how to read or write then you can't get a basic job, because you wouldn't know how to fill out the application, or you wouldn't know how to fill out a college application.

[Diana] It holds back a lot. Because, like me for example, I have attention deficit disorder, it's hard for me to learn. But, on the other hand, I'm not afraid to approach somebody or ask somebody questions about things that I don't understand, whereas other people that basically don't know what's going, or what they have, they're scared to approach and ask them questions, because other people may criticize them or how they ask the question.

Some of the women, however, thought that it was not that serious a problem, and that it would not stop any individuals that wanted to accomplish something.

[Amy] I don't think they hold it back at all.

*And is there any reason you think that?*

[Amy] No, it just don't matter. I don't think it stops anything.

**Social justice issues.** Questions were asked about social justice issues. The responses are found in Table 9.

Table 9

*Responses to the Question About Involvement with Social Justice Issues*

Name	Response
Carol	<p>I'm not a part of any social justice issues, but I don't think, as a whole, like we're not, everyone's not going to be equal no matter how we fight for it. So...</p>
Sally	<p>Well, (laughs) social justice. Some of it is legit and some of it is self-brought on, so it just depends on what the cause is. If the cause is worth fighting for then I think everybody should fight for it, a good cause. But some causes are because of just personal opinion, and I don't get involved in people's personal opinion, so if it's not a legit cause then I don't get involved.</p>
Betty	<p>I'm involved in the Black Student Union at my school, which is, it helps like, when we have our Black History month then we can show all these great, powerful Black people who did all these great things and stuff and we try to improve African Americans, but not only African Americans, other races too because they would like to learn to.</p>
Patty	<p>Yes. Just being in this school I believe I'm active in it. Because the school is here for people to help, they want to help me get back to people that they feel are ignored. I don't know how to say it.</p>

Table 9 (continued)

Name	Response
Diana	<p>My concern is mainly the way the law enforcement enforces the law. For example, just pulling over everybody for no apparent reason and bothering people in a way. I want to get involved in showing officers of law enforcement or the people who run the law enforcement that you don't have to go about it this aggressively, just show presence, make somebody nervous, and you can get the answer out of somebody.</p>

One woman did not think that activism made much of a difference. She accepted that she would never see equality of the races, tried not to let it trouble her, and did not invest energy in trying to achieve the impossible:

[Carol] I'm not a part of any social justice issues, but I don't think, as a whole, like we're not, everyone's not going to be equal no matter how we fight for it.

One said that she was skeptical about many of the causes activists espouse. "Some of it is legit and some of it is self brought on, so it just depends on what the cause is ... if it's not a legit cause then I don't get involved."

But several of the women said that they were involved in and concerned with social justice issues. One was involved in the Black Student Union at the college, and one worked with groups outside the college.

[Betty] I'm involved in the Black Student Union at my school, which is, it helps like, when we have our Black History month then we can show all these great, powerful Black people who did all these great things and stuff and we try to improve African Americans, but not only African Americans, other races too because they would like to learn too.

One saw a direct connection between being in school and fighting for social justice.

[Patty] Yes. Just being in this school I believe I'm active in it. Because the school is here for people to help, they want to help me get back to people that they feel are ignored. I don't know how to say it.

However, few of these women seemed to be especially politically active.

[Susan] No. I try not to involved with that.

Some focus on quite specific issues. Two mentioned their concern with public services and law enforcement:

[Amy] I got my Law 5 class and we just talk about like how the police like take their time to get there in certain emergencies, like the paramedics and things. I think they should be a little faster when people are in an emergency with what they do, they shouldn't take like five or ten minutes just to come to your rescue. So I just think they should be a little faster.

[Diana] My concern is mainly the way the law enforcement enforces the law. For example, just pulling over everybody for no apparent reason and bothering people in a way. I want to get involved in showing officers of law enforcement or the people who run the law enforcement that you don't have to go about it this aggressively, just show presence, make somebody nervous, and you can get the answer out of somebody.

**Value of community college.** The final interview question asked the women if they would recommend community college to other African American women. Their responses illuminate their own reasons for going to college, and why it is so important to them to continue. Excerpts can be found in Table 10.

Table 10

*Responses When Asked if They Would Recommend Community College to Other African American Women*

Name	Response
Patty	The advice I would give them is just that if they feel they can do it, then just go ahead and do it.
Kerry	I would advise them to go and not wait as long as I did to get back into school, because education is power.
Carol	Just if you want to do it, do it, don't let nothing deter you from what goal you're trying to complete.
Susan	Go for whatever it is that you want to go for, whether it is a four-year college or a community college. Just try your best to create whatever it is that you want to do, because you can do it.
Sally	That nothing can stop you. Even if it's a teacher or a husband or a friend. If it's something that's a goal that you have in your heart that you really want to do, just knock at it, bit by bit, like I did. I took it one step at a time, and I'm almost done. It took me a couple of years to get here but I'm still trying to make it.
Betty	That they should attend a community college like if they want to transfer to a four-year college, or that they should stay focused, and, you know, like a lot of people like to go, oh I'll take a year off, but then you'll just spend a longer time in college.

Table 10 (continued)

Name	Response
Terry	They <i>should</i> attend community college. They have a lot of flexibility in community colleges, you can work at your own pace, you're not limited to what you can learn and how far you can go.
Amy	I think you all should go, it's a real, real good opportunity. You learn just as much as you learn at a four-year university. You get the two years at a community and transfer and get the other two years. It would be the same education. It's a real, real.... You'll like it, you should go. You'll have fun, you'll meet your goal. Because the only reason why I have to get in school is I don't want to be somebody's secretary all my life, so I have to go to school and do something about it. So just go and keep your head up, you'll do it.
Diana	My advice is don't go in blind. Face it head on. You already know you're going to struggle before you get here. So when you get here and you start struggling, find alternatives once you start. So when you find alternatives things will be a lot easier for you. And when you'll graduate you'll feel a lot better.
Susan	Try to work around it. Try to work around whatever it is that's gotten you stuck. Keep your head up and try!

All of the women unequivocally said that they would recommend community colleges, and that they would unhesitatingly encourage others to pursue whatever educational opportunities they could find.

[Patty] The advice I would give them is just that if they feel they can do it, then just go ahead and do it.

The consensus seems to be that all felt that if they could do it, then anyone could, and that all women should at least try. All felt that the education at a community college was quite good, and none had any regrets about going there.

One woman spoke about how it was a way out of dead end jobs:

[Amy] I think you all should go, it's a real, real good opportunity. You learn just as much as you learn at a four-year university. You get the two years at a community and transfer and get the other two years. It would be the same education. It's a real, real . . . . You'll like it, you should go. You'll have fun, *you'll meet your goal*. Because the only reason why I have to get in school is I don't want to be somebody's secretary all my life, so I have to go to school and do something about it. So just go and keep your head up, you'll do it.

One of the older women noted that education is *power* in the world, and that the sooner one is educated the better it will be. This really illuminates the meaning of persistence to them.

[Kerry] I would advise them to go and not wait as long as I did to get back into school, because education is power.

Two pointed out the importance of goals to them, and emphasized that if you set a goal for yourself and struggle to achieve it then you will eventually succeed.

[Carol] Just if you want to do it, do it, don't let nothing deter you from what goal you're trying to complete.

[Susan] Go for whatever it is that you want to go for, whether it be a four-year college or a community college. Just try your best to create whatever it is that you want to do, because you can do it.

One woman noted, as was seen in the literature review, that sometimes others that were close to you may not be supportive, but that that should not stop anyone.

[Sally] That nothing can stop you. Even if it's a teacher or a husband or a friend. If it's something that's a goal that you have in your heart that you really want to do, just knock at it, bit by bit, like I did. I took it one step at a time, and I'm almost done. It took me a couple of years to get here but I'm still trying to make it.

They were aware of the particular advantages of community colleges.

[Terry] They *should* attend community college. They have a lot of flexibility in community colleges, you can work at your own pace, you're not limited to what you can learn and how far you can go.

One woman noted the particular advantages of a community college, and how it is a viable path to a four-year college or university.

[Betty] That they should attend a community college like if they want to transfer to a four-year college, or that they should stay focused, and, you know, like a lot of people like to go, oh I'll take a year off, but then you'll just spend a longer time in college.

These attitudes are certainly in line with what is known of the history and attitudes of African American women (Collins, 2000; Evans, 2007a; hooks, 2000).

African American women are aware that community colleges offer a path to a better life and are willing to work and persevere to do what is necessary to obtain their education (Barnett, 2007).

One woman noted that African American women thinking about attending community college should not let the possible difficulties get in their way. They should know in advance that there will be difficult times, and that if they persevere then they can make it:

[Diana] My advice is don't go in blind. Face it head on. You already know you're going to struggle before you get here. So when you get here and you start struggling, find alternatives once you start. So when you find

alternatives things will be a lot easier for you. And when you'll graduate you'll feel a lot better.

One woman was asked during the interview what advice would they give women who found that there were barriers to their continuing education. She replied that they should do it because it is not only their lives that are at stake, but those of their children and the others in their lives:

[Susan] Try to work around it. Try to work around whatever it is that's gotten you stuck. Keep your head up and try!

**Summary.** The answers to the questions on racism and multiculturalism were quite interesting. That most of the women would report encountering little racism or sexism was not what I expected when the current study began. It would seem to directly contradict what most of the literature and studies have reported, and what was expected from the review of the literature: namely, that there is a great deal of racism and sexism in the American educational system.

It is difficult to ascertain if this is due to these women not ever experiencing racism or sexism, which is difficult to believe, or to the fact that they have managed to surmount it. It may be their reluctance to admit the existence of racism and sexism to a white, male college professor. Another possibility may be that since they are attending a community college in a very urban metropolis with an extremely diverse population, one with a very large percentage of students of various races and ethnicities, possibly even a majority of such students, they really have not experienced discrimination.

It may also be that these women have simply found it necessary as a survival tactic to ignore discrimination and the obstacles that accompanying it and simply proceed with their lives. This would seem to echo the general experience and attitudes of African

American women throughout American history (Collins, 2000; Evans, 2007b). Faced with overwhelming discrimination at all points in their lives, and on all fronts, they just persevere. Thinking about the obstacles and difficulties would be counter-productive, so they just ignore them and succeed anyway. At this point in time, there are enough role models of successful African American women to encourage them (Oprah Winfrey and Condoleeza Rice, to name two), and to eliminate any doubts that it is possible to succeed despite everything.

#### **Summary of Chapter Four**

The underlying focus of this study was to define persistence. Persistence was defined as sticking to one's plans, knowing about difficulties in advance and preparing for them, having specific goals and timelines, engaging in an ongoing struggle to achieve long-term goals such as getting to a four-year college, maintaining focus on these long-term goals and desires, and giving back to others.

The major factor in these women's persistence was their focus on establishing specific goals and their determination to stick to them. For the most part, they defined persistence itself in terms of goals, and it was keeping the goals in mind that motivated them on a day-to-day basis. Each woman had a very clear vision of what she was trying to accomplish and where she wanted to be eventually. Persistence was a struggle to them, but it was in the very act of struggling and overcoming the obstacles that they found meaning and value in their education. Some major themes emerged to support these definitions. These appear in Table 11.

Table 11

*The Major Themes that Emerged From the Study*

Major Theme	Description
Family	The central importance of family, especially children.
Goals	The value of specific goals as both short and long term motivations.
Role models	It is very important to have role models; but, for women with children at least, it is even more important to be one.
Mentors and guidance	Mentors are a primary factor affecting persistence and success in education in the short term, and also play a unique role in giving meaning and validation to the value of the overall educational experience. Students require continual individual guidance in order to successfully navigate the complexities of modern education.

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Note that the themes that emerged all related to both the meaning of persistence and the factors affecting it.

Family emerged as a very major theme, in many respects. Family affected all aspects of their lives, past, present and future. Their role models were nearly all from their families, and it is their families that encouraged them to continue in their education, and helped support them when they could. Their goals were to help their families, especially their children. Children are their primary motivation and inspiration.

One of the issues this study explores is the relationship of these women to the African American community at large, and to larger social issues. But the primary conclusion seems to be that for these women, the community is primarily their family, parents, and children.

The value and importance of mentors was confirmed by the interviews, as suggested in the literature. Nearly all of the women said that they had a mentor of some kind, although it was only rarely someone on campus. Many of their mentors were people from work, also confirming what was suggested in the literature about the many ways in which employers can help students. The women generally did not claim to need further guidance, but several of them indicated that there were areas in which further assistance, counseling services, and guidance would definitely be appreciated.

In the areas of multiculturalism and social justice, two major themes emerged, one that was expected, and one that was not. Nearly all of the women agreed that illiteracy was a problem, and that it held back people, not just African American people, but the community at large. This was as expected, given the work of Kozol (1980, 1985) in documenting the extent of illiteracy in contemporary America. What was unexpected was that the women generally denied having experienced any significant racism, sexism or other discriminatory behavior at the college, or in their educational experience in general.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications**

The purpose of the study was to contribute to the body of literature on African American women attending community colleges in urban communities and to attempt to capture in some way the experiences and perceptions of these women regarding their college experiences and their ability to persist in their educational endeavors. This chapter presented the major findings and conclusions that emerged from the current study, and discussed the findings and themes in terms of the three research questions that were the focus of the study.

The research questions were threefold: (a) the meaning of persistence to African American female students attending urban community colleges; and (b) what personal factors affected their persistence; and (c) what racial, gender, and class factors affected such persistence. Therefore the study examined the women's views on racism, sexism, illiteracy, and other social justice issues.

The primary goal was to help give voice to the experiences of a group of African American women attending community college in a contemporary American urban environment. The purpose was to help African American women succeed, to help community colleges better understand students' perceptions of their services, and to enhance the general knowledge of the experiences of some African American women in America's systems of higher education.

### **The Meaning of Persistence**

The findings mostly confirmed that persistence meant sticking to one's plan and achieving one's goals. It included knowing about difficulties in advance and preparing for them. The women interviewed in this study generally defined persistence as being

able to continue the struggle to achieve their goals, and maintaining a focus on these long-term goals. That is, they thought of persistence in terms of their specific goals. On a day-to-day level, to them persistence was the struggle to achieve specific goals, and the meaning of it was found in their successful accomplishment of those goals.

It was found that, generally, their primary motivation was the desire to help their family, most especially their children. The primary immediate goal was usually the need for money. They had a deeply held belief that education was the best path towards a successful career and future rewards. Even if money itself was not the long-term goal, achieving financial security was seen as an essential step towards achieving that goal. But their desire for money was motivated by what it could do for their family.

Persistence was seen as part a struggle, a daily ongoing struggle on numerous levels. They saw college as a pathway towards a better life and financial security, even if they knew it would take a while. Persistence to them meant being able to conceive of a better future, and having some confidence that, if they worked hard and persevered, they would eventually be able to achieve their goals.

The strongest message I received from interviewing these women was that community college represented to them a safe, structured, and predictable environment. As difficult as it may be, the social dynamics of community college were more attractive to them than a future being jobless or stuck in minimum-wage jobs. Many had support from their families, but that only went so far. They also needed support of various kinds from the community at large, and the community college was one place where they could find it in their own local community and at an affordable cost.

For these women, college provided a framework within which they could work towards their goals on a steady basis. College is a continual process of completing a series of tasks and accomplishing specified goals, both daily ones such as homework or writing a paper, and long-term ones such as completing a semester. The structure teaches one to organize one's life and provides tangible proof of progress that enhances confidence, as well as provides periodic rewards.

The students' primary connection to the college framework was through their personal connections with faculty and staff. There was a clear connection between relationships with faculty and other mentors, and "hearing their voice." It was not enough to speak, there must be someone to listen. They needed someone in a position of authority to be familiar with what they are experiencing and to hear what they have to say. Discussing either class material or their own personal lives with faculty added a dimension of meaning to their educational experiences, and helped them put it into context. This context and perspective added to the meaning of what they were studying. The evidence from the literature, from the work of Tinto (1973) and many others, has well established the value of mentoring and faculty relationships to students. This is why it is so important that community colleges do what they can to foster relationships between faculty and students, especially students from minority or disadvantaged groups.

All of the women were almost uniformly confident that they would ultimately achieve their goals. None of the women reported feeling or seeing any serious obstacles in their path. All seemed quite confident that they would be able to stay in community college and earn their degrees. They were clearly capable of visualizing their futures and better lives for themselves. It is my belief that African American women are the strongest

and most determined group of people in the United States, and that they have collectively developed an inner strength that has allowed them to survive and even flourish under even the worst of conditions.

### **Personal Factors Affecting the Persistence of All Community College Students**

The factors affecting the persistence of all community college students, not just African American women, were listed and discussed in chapter two. The major factors that helped facilitate student persistence were family and personal background, spouses and friends, mentors and guidance, finances and employment, age, and spirituality. The results of the interviews basically confirmed these as the major factors, with each factor being mentioned as relevant by several of the women in the present study.

Family was a core factor to almost all of the women. Support from the family was the most valuable facilitator, and the lack of it was the greatest barrier. The woman whose parents were college professors confirmed the value of a strong family background. She acknowledged that having educated, professional parents made it much easier for her to persist. In this area, the basic theme was support from the family, primarily from female relatives, with a major source of motivation being any children these women students had. As Johnson (2001) found in her study, being a role model for their children was very important to women students who had children.

Spouses and friends were also listed as important factors in encouraging persistence (Kasworm, 2002; Shaw & Coleman, 2000), and the interviews essentially confirm this. The women mentioned friends as mentors and as role models. One woman said her mentor was a friend her own age. What was important to her was having someone with whom she could discuss matters in a confidential manner.

Most of the women seemed to generally feel that the services the colleges offered were adequate, although a few inadequacies were noted. The fact that one woman was unable to find any occupational testing at the college seems to indicate that there were deficiencies in this area, at least at this particular college.

The statement from the one older woman in the study that she found some of the teachers unable or unwilling to understand the needs of older students confirms that it is very difficult to devise an educational system that effectively reaches all different groups. Kasworm (1997, 2002) has examined the different cultural realities experienced by all African American students, and has noted that the problems are enhanced for older students. Individual needs vary, and it is effectively impossible for any one teacher to meet the needs of all students.

Some of the women mentioned day-to-day difficulties with such things as transportation, which was specifically mentioned by two of the women. One woman repeatedly stressed financial concerns, but she was the only one out of nine. Most of the women were making some sort of financial sacrifices to attend college, but they generally did not bring this up or see the lack of money as a major obstacle.

### **Cultural Factors Affecting the Persistence of African American Women**

One of the more significant results of the study was the fact that few of the women felt that they had experienced significant racism or sexism during their education. Nearly all of the women vigorously denied feeling discriminated against at the college. Those who acknowledged experiencing it at some point felt that they had been able to overcome it. This was contrary to my expectations when I began the study, based on the study of the literature.

Gender and race did not appear to be major barriers to these women, or at least they did not let themselves think that this was the case. As noted, they vehemently denied that gender or race was a hindrance. It seems that their perception of gender and race as hindrances relates to the group of African American women as a whole and does not necessarily describe any particular individual's experiences. This view does present an interesting problem, however: How do we deal with group problems that the individual members do not necessarily acknowledge exist for them personally?

The women did not appear to feel particularly disadvantaged, nor did they lack any confidence in their abilities to surmount any obstacles they might encounter either in college or in life. However, although they denied experiencing discrimination in their own lives, most of the women did agree that illiteracy and other social issues held back their community as a whole.

The women did not generally feel that they were experiencing a great deal of cultural or institutional bias, although several acknowledged that bias did exist. As one woman pointed out, bias was more a matter of neighborhoods and circumstance, and being able to live near good schools was what mattered, not conscious and deliberate bias. For the women whose family and educational background made it possible for them to make it as far as community college and who were determined to persist in their education and goals, the major barriers seemed to be more mundane concerns such as transportation and finances.

It may be, however, that these women were simply unwilling to acknowledge the existence of discrimination to a White, male interviewer. Or it could be that they had in the course of their lives simply learned to disregard prejudice when they encountered it.

As discussed earlier, the history of African American women has been one of constant discrimination (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000), to the point that these women have become used to dealing with it on a daily basis and to pursuing their goals in spite of any barriers. The attitudes of the women interviewed here would certainly seem to confirm this. These women did not appear especially interested in either African American feminism or feminism in general. None of them used these terms in the interviews. But their attitudes, goals, and life experiences seem to demonstrate the resiliency and determination that is so characteristic of the history of African American women (Collins, 2000; Evans, 2007a).

With some exceptions, the women in the study did not seem to see the larger picture regarding such issues as the pedagogy of the oppressed or African American feminism, or at the least, they were not that concerned with such issues in their daily lives. The evidence gleaned from the interviews was that these women were generally not that interested in such things. They seemed to be focused mostly on their own lives and to look primarily to themselves and their families for any possibility of improvement in their situations. Perhaps this ability to focus on their own individual circumstances and not on larger social problems was the key to their successful persistence. Whether or not most African Americans could succeed was irrelevant; what mattered was that they themselves could do it, and they believed that they could.

It has been repeatedly noted in numerous studies of persistence (Barnett, 2007; Johnston, 2006; Schwartz & Washington, 2000), as well as studies of successful people in general (Edwards & Polite, 1993; Green & Scott, 2003), that the ability to disregard setbacks and disappointments is an important part of the character of persistent people. It was certainly a quality that these women generally shared. They all seemed quite

confident in their abilities, and quite determined. Again, this was a noted characteristic of successful African American women. The majority of them pointedly denied experiencing any racism or sexism, or refused to admit that it was holding them back in any way.

**Additional Findings and Conclusions**

Additional major findings and conclusions that emerged from the current study are discussed in this section (see Table 12). These conclusions emerged from both the literature review and the interviews, as well as from the researcher’s several years of experience as a professor at an urban community college.

Table 12

*Additional Findings and Conclusions that Emerged from the Study*

Finding	Description
Literacy	The level of literacy in one’s family is a major factor in one’s ability to succeed at all educational levels, especially college, and is probably the most significant social issue affecting persistence in education.
Barriers	The women very definitely did not feel that there were any significant obstacles in their way. They felt that their success or failure depended almost entirely on themselves and their ability to work hard and keep at it. Race and gender, in particular, were not seen as barriers at all.

Table 12 (continued)

Finding	Description
Student retention (both departure and persistence)	<p>It is much, much easier to identify and analyze why students drop out of college than it is to identify why they are able to persist. Every individual woman is quite different, to the extent that it is virtually impossible to truly delineate and isolate the specific factors that cause any individual woman to succeed where others might fail.</p>
Gender	<p>A significant gender gap is appearing at all levels of American education, and in all racial, ethnic and cultural groups. Since women now constitute the majority of students on American college campuses, especially at community colleges, gender is not anywhere near the obstacle it used to be, and, in fact, being a woman has become somewhat of an advantage. Colleges and universities are becoming places where women can empower each other, and this development is having a significant impact on women’s ability to persist in their educational endeavors. The result is that as the percentage of women on campuses increases, it becomes easier and easier for them to persist. (Men, on the other hand, seem to be having a harder and harder time of it, most especially African American men, who are losing ground.)</p>

Table 12 (continued)

Finding	Description
Community	<p>To these women, community seemed to mean almost exclusively family. The community at large, and specifically the African American community, did <i>not</i> appear to be a significant factor in these women’s persistence, either as an advantage or disadvantage. This is perhaps due to the fact that these women lived in a community that was extremely multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural, and in which, in fact, they were not really a minority, or did not seem to feel that they were.-They acknowledged the importance of community, but did not define it in racial or ethnic terms. Community could mean their neighborhood, their religious affiliation, their profession, or other groupings.</p>
Involvement and security	<p>Community colleges represent a structured environment to these women, one in which they can feel secure and empowered, especially now that women are in the majority on campuses.</p>
Relationships with other people	<p>The meaning of persistence and the value and goals of education are found and expressed in terms of relationships to other people, in being able to share and validate their experiences with their teachers and fellow students, and in being able to do something for others in their lives, most especially their children.</p>

**Literacy.** The level of literacy in one's family is a major factor in one's ability to succeed at all educational levels, especially college. Literacy is probably the most significant social issue affecting persistence in education. Socioeconomic, racial, gender and class issues, such as Freire's ideas about the pedagogy of the oppressed, have been discussed at length in the current study, but their strongest and most immediate impact on individual students is on how they affect their level of literacy.

The majority of the women definitely felt that illiteracy and other problems caused by poverty and exclusionary social policies had an impact on others. While they did not generally agree that illiteracy affected them personally, they did agree that it was a significant social problem. They clearly understood how widespread illiteracy was and admitted that it would be impossible for the mass of impoverished African American people to improve themselves without becoming literate. While they did not agree to the existence of racial discrimination in education, they did acknowledge that the better schools were located in better and wealthier neighborhoods and that the children who lived there had definite advantages.

**Barriers.** Another major conclusion of the current study was that each factor affecting persistence, such as literacy or family background, could be either a facilitator or a barrier. They are two sides of the same coin, and the way each factor affects a student seems to depend on each individual's personal background and circumstances. An educated, literate family was an enormous advantage, while an uneducated, illiterate one was an enormous handicap. Having to work full-time was a major challenge, but a supportive employer could be of significant assistance. Having to take care of children, in

particular, is a major obstacle to attending school full-time, but for those women who had them, children were also the major inspiration to persist.

The women very definitely did not feel that there were any significant obstacles in their way. They felt that their success or failure depended almost entirely on themselves and their ability to work hard and keep at it. Race and gender, in particular, were not seen as barriers at all. Class and socioeconomic status, especially illiteracy, could certainly be barriers, but not anything insurmountable. As noted before, the women could easily see the obstacles that other students faced, but did not seem as able to see the problems that they themselves might encounter.

In particular, and contrary to what was found in the literature (e.g., Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000) and my own expectations at the beginning of the study, these women did not feel themselves to be oppressed or subject to discrimination on the basis of their race or gender. One may speculate as to what Freire (1970, 1995) might have thought when told that these students did not feel oppressed. He may have responded that his studies were done in South America, and focused on a population where there was a large majority of clearly oppressed and mostly illiterate people facing a very powerful and dominant elite. This situation was clearly different than that in the United States, particularly following a period of great advances in civil rights. An alternative possibility would be that these women did not want to focus on what they perceived as their own, personal problems.

**Student retention, both departure and persistence.** It is not surprising that so much of the research done on student retention focuses on departure, the reasons that students drop out of college, rather than on why some are able to persist. It is simply

much easier to identify and analyze the specific reasons, or combination of reasons, that caused a particular student to drop out (e.g., they failed a class, they had financial troubles, they had a baby) than to isolate the intangible factors that allowed any particular woman to overcome whatever obstacles they faced.

Each woman, each person, is quite different, and it is virtually impossible to state with any assurance precisely why one individual woman is able to succeed and others might fail. Some people are able to overcome any obstacles, no matter what, and, in fact, seem to gain strength from the struggle to overcome them. As noted in the literature review (e.g., Kasworm, 2002; Sorey & Duggan, 2008) older students returning to school were generally not discouraged by initial difficulties or bad grades in their first classes; it just made them work harder.

**Gender.** A significant gender gap is appearing at all levels of American education, and in all racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Since women now constitute the majority of students on American college campuses, especially at community colleges, gender is not anywhere near the obstacle it used to be, and, in fact, being a woman has become somewhat of an advantage. Colleges and universities are becoming places where women can empower each other, and this development is having a significant impact on women's ability to persist in their educational endeavors. The result is that as the percentage of women on campuses increases, it becomes easier and easier for them to persist.

**Community.** The community at large, and specifically the African American community, did *not* appear to be a significant factor in these women's persistence, either as an advantage or disadvantage. This is perhaps due to the fact that these women lived in

a community that was extremely multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural, and in which, in fact, they were not really a minority, or did not seem to feel that they were.

The women interviewed acknowledged the importance of community, but did not define it in racial or ethnic terms. Community could mean their neighborhood, their religious affiliation, their profession, or other groupings. To many of these women, community seemed to mean family.

**Involvement and security.** Community colleges represent a structured environment to these women, one in which they can feel secure and empowered, especially now that women are in the majority on campuses. They are a place where women can find role models, encouragement, validation and the resources they need to accomplish their goals.

As the work of Tinto (1993) and others discussed in the literature review (Braxton, 2000; Kasworm, 1997) indicated, feeling that they are a part of the campus community is very important to keeping students in school. And this feeling of involvement begins in the classroom with the personal relationships that students are able (or unable) to establish with their instructors. Students need to have their work and efforts validated, and the most valuable form of this validation comes almost entirely from their teachers. College can be a very confusing and frightening place to students, especially disadvantaged students whose parents did not attend college, and students desperately need personal mentoring and guidance.

**Relationships with other people.** One of the most interesting discoveries of the current study, at least to this researcher, is the extent to which the meaning of persistence and the value and goals of education was found and expressed in terms of relationships to

other people. Students find meaning in their studies when they are able to share and validate their experiences with their teachers and fellow students. It is an essential part of the educational experience.

While the responses to the question on the meaning of persistence did not specifically indicate this, a major conclusion that emerged from the literature and which was confirmed by the tenor of the interview responses was that instructors played a major role in giving meaning to persistence. Students can get general encouragement and inspiration from their families, friends, employers, and others in their lives. But for their educational experiences specifically, nothing compares to support and encouragement that comes directly from their teachers. Validation of educational experiences, at least in the short term, comes from those directly involved in the educational process. There is no other significant substitute.

The importance of relationships with other people is especially relevant to students with children. It is very important for students to be motivated and have clear goals in mind, and nothing accomplishes this more than children. Children provide a concrete and daily reminder of why they are struggling, and the best of all reasons to continue despite all difficulties. Not only does completing college allow someone to help their children financially, it directly demonstrates to the children what the value of education is and how it can make their lives better. It was noted before, but bears repeating: being a role model for others is just as important as having role models.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A major limitation of the study involves the definition of persistence from the standpoint of the selection of the sample. It is possible that some of the currently enrolled

women were not, in the end, able to persist and graduate. Longer-term studies may help clarify some of the issues and provide further understanding of why some are able to persist and succeed and others who begin with the same intentions simply are not. This would also allow certain themes to be explored over a period of time. It would also give the interviewees further time to reflect on these issues and to perhaps more fully and honestly express their feelings.

The length of time allowed for the study might also constitute a limitation. Students were interviewed over a short, two-month period while they were currently enrolled in school. Viewing the study in its entirety leads to the conclusion that the nature and meaning of persistence to a group of individuals may become clearer if they were interviewed several times, both while they are enrolled and later, after they have graduated. However, this would require a more extensive and longer study than was originally envisaged.

Another limitation may have been the age of some of the interviewees. Three of the women were very young, under 21, and this most likely limited their ability to reflect on and understand their experiences. In future studies it would be recommended to limit the interviewees to those of a certain age, possibly even those of middle age who have completed their education.

This study was limited by the fact that all of the women attended the same community college. It also focused on students at a large, diverse, urban school. A similar study at schools, where African Americans are a distinct minority, might show different results. The single round of interviews and member-checking limited the number of

possible themes that might have emerged, although four of the interviewees were re-interviewed in a second round of member-checking.

I as a White male conducted the interviews. My race and gender may have inhibited the women in their responses. In particular, these factors may have affected the women's responses to the question of whether they themselves had experienced racism or sexism in their higher education. They may have been reluctant to acknowledge painful experiences to a White male. The positional status of the interviewer could also have affected the responses. I was a professor at the community college where the students were enrolled, and this may have inhibited the women from admitting to having had problems with the college or its services. However, for the reasons explained at the beginning of chapter three, I feel that I was in an appropriate position to examine the persistence of African American women at community colleges and that I could do so relatively free of bias. I also felt that the interview subjects were quite comfortable with me and not afraid to voice their true opinions.

One of the principles of phenomenology is that no study can be free of the perspectives of the researcher. Therefore, phenomenological studies seek to present any acquired information or data in context, and that context must include variables introduced by the researchers. A phenomenological study does not attempt to hide the bias, but put it in context. Therefore, to a certain extent, one of advantages of the current study is that it does indeed offer the perspective of a White male interviewer on the experiences of people of another gender, race, and class. That is not a weakness of this approach, but actually a strength. As a phenomenological study that is what it was intended to do: add to the body of material that will help illuminate complex human

experiences from certain perspectives, which may be broad or narrow. Efforts were made to introduce rigorous procedures designed to minimize or ameliorate my bias and to ensure the accuracy of data. Nevertheless, it is not intended to present an analytical description of these women's experiences, but an interpretation, and one that is clearly that of a White male.

However, despite the value of a phenomenological study such as this was, it is undeniable that other types of study would also be useful. The literature review of this study included extensive discussion of class, race and gender, and their effects on student persistence. Unfortunately, these are of limited use in a phenomenological study, which focuses on the participants' experiences, not on any quantitative evaluation of their place as part of a larger group.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

One of the purposes of this study was to stimulate further research on African American women in community colleges in order to gain insights and give voice to these women and their experiences. Their stories may foster ways that community colleges can better serve the female minority population and help them persist. With these purposes in mind, suggestions for further research area presented.

This study interviewed African American women who were in the process of getting their community college education. It would also be useful to interview some of these same women after they have graduated and are in a better position to reflect on their experiences. Persistence is difficult to quantify and perhaps needs to be evaluated over a period of time. Nearly everyone feels when they begin something that they are going to finish it, but of course not everybody does. It may be that, in the end, some of these

women were not able to successfully persist, despite their best intentions. Their reflections on why that happened would be useful. Again, a longer-term and more extensive study would be useful.

Studies at other community colleges would enhance the results of this study, which was conducted at a large, urban community college, one with a very diverse enrollment and where minorities were actually the majority. Further studies at similar colleges in other cities would help to elaborate and enhance the results gathered at this college. Additional studies could investigate the experiences of African American women attending colleges where they are a distinct minority, as well as at colleges in smaller, rural, and perhaps less diverse communities. Studying the experiences of women from other minority and ethnic groups attending community college would also help to complement this study and perhaps put these results in perspective. One question that could be examined is in what ways are the experiences of African American women at community colleges the same or different from those of Hispanic, Asian, or other women from minority or disadvantaged groups. As noted earlier, the majority of studies of college students focused on those attending four-year colleges, not community colleges. However, since the majority of minority and disadvantaged students at least began their college education at community colleges, it would be helpful to further investigate their experiences with those programs.

Additional studies could also investigate the experiences of other disadvantaged and minority groups, as well as those from the dominant class, and use these as the basis for a comparative study. This would, however, be beyond the scope of the study envisaged here, which was not intended to be a comprehensive study of persistence in all

disadvantaged or minority groups, or a critical analysis, but rather a phenomenological study focused on gathering together the experiences of a small and specific group of women from a single group.

There is also a need for further studies of persistence, both quantitative and qualitative. As noted earlier, most of the studies done in this area focus on student departure, not persistence. Given the regularly increasing numbers of women students at all levels of American education, it would be useful to have statistical data describing their experiences and success rates. Such studies could help educators more specifically document the factors, both facilitators and barriers, which affect persistence among various groups, and within the college community as a whole.

### **Recommendations for These Women**

The most specific recommendations derived from this study would be for these students to pressure colleges for adequate guidance, and most especially mentors. Such pressure may help to ensure that students have mentors and/or access to guidance counselors.

The idea that persistence is often seen in terms of relationships to other people, suggests that these students need to share their experiences more: with other students, with their instructors, and with others in their lives. African American female students, and especially graduates, should be encouraged to discuss their experiences with other students. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially those from families that are illiterate or without experience in higher education, confront a very confusing and challenging environment. They need support, preferably at early points in their college career, to help them become aware that others may share the same problems they do and

to assist them in dealing with these problems in a proactive way. Again, as with mentors, it would be useful for community college to develop more formal programs to enhance this sharing process.

One group in particular with whom these women should share their experiences would be their children. They should be encouraged to bring their children to class with them occasionally. This would seem to help both the women and their children. It would also help the instructors become more aware of the personal lives of their students and the context within which they pursue their educations.

### **Implications for Community College Practice**

Community college planners need to ask themselves if they are providing the policies, faculty, and other college leaders that will help all disadvantaged and underrepresented groups succeed in their educational endeavors (Eddy & Lester, 2008). For African American women, this especially includes having faculty role models to whom they can relate and emulate.

College administrators need to be aware of the changing dynamics and composition of the community college student population and maintain their focus on the still underrepresented groups in the larger college population (Eddy & Lester, 2008). Women overall are doing very well these days; the necessity now is to help the smaller groups of disadvantaged and underrepresented women. While disadvantaged students may be able to enter college, in order to persist in their education and achieve their goals some of them may need extra tutoring and other assistance. College administrators must ask about the needs for mentorship and personal guidance. Other services that administrators might want to investigate are childcare and psychological counseling.

The experiences of these women suggest the importance of their teachers' support, and that a teacher helped give "meaning" to a student's education and encouraged them to succeed. These students needed a teacher, preferably an individual teacher, to guide them through what is often a perplexing and confusing experience. Classroom time was simply not enough. Family background and support have been shown to be important to the success of students, but college administrators are not able to change a student's family. Given these findings, college administrators might ask about the ways in which they can encourage their instructors to take a personal interest in their students and attempt to develop programs to assist instructors in this area.

One general suggestion is that colleges, especially community colleges serving more disadvantaged populations, offer childcare programs. This would both help the students with some of the day-to-day challenges of managing the demanding schedules facing students with children, but would encourage all parties to become more involved with their education.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of a phenomenological study is to gather together the stories or "lived experiences" of a group of people and to organize the material in those experiences so that it is available for further consideration and study. Facilitating "voice" to the lived experiences described in this study constitutes a desired goal. The stories of each woman revealed how different each life was and how different factors came together to affect each of these women's educational experience.

The stories acquired their meaning on several levels: as a description of a particular group of African American women at a particular community college at a

particular time, as an exploration into the factors that support and hinder persistence among minority students, and as a contribution to the larger body of existing data that presents and enhances the voices of the groups to which these women are part. In this case, these stories contribute to the study of a number of different groups: women, African Americans, community college students, and young residents of a large American city.

All nine students were quite happy with what they were offered at the school and with their experiences at community college. The college environment provided them with a formal structure and framework within which they could work and which helped them focus on their specific goals and plans to improve their lives. They were glad they were there and uniformly recommended community colleges to others. Those whose goal was to make it to a four-year college seemed confident that the education they were receiving at the community college would be adequate to take them further.

As has been shown in this study, African American women are successfully persisting, and in doing so, they are making great progress for the African American community as a whole, including African American men. Better educated African American women will be able to teach their children more, both boys and girls, and thus help increase the opportunities available to them. Thus it is also important to focus on helping these women continue to succeed.

What persistence at the community college meant to these women was that it gave them an opportunity to extend the benefits of education to their families. These women were there to help their families, and their families strongly supported their education. Education remained the primary way that these African American women feel they can

accomplish something in life, both in their individual lives and for their families and social groups. These women all had a very clear understanding of these relationships, and these relationships may have been the most important reason that they were able to persist successfully in their education, despite disadvantages and obstacles.

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## **Appendices**

**Appendix A: Participant Letter**

My name is John Glavan. I am a graduate student studying for a doctor of philosophy in education with an emphasis in community college leadership from Oregon State University. You are being invited to take part in a research study designed to examine the meaning of persistence for African American women attending urban community colleges. The purpose is to study your “lived experiences” and to find out what has happened in your life that makes you able to successfully persist in your education.

Unlike most of these kinds of studies, which focus on the reasons that students drop out of school, this one is concerned with the reasons that they are able to remain. This is not a statistical study, but is rather being conducted using what they call the “phenomenological” method. This means it involves a cycle of feedback between the researchers and the subjects, with the goal of attempting to capture the totality of each woman’s experience.

The results of this study will be used specifically for my doctoral dissertation and, generally, to add to the body of literature recording the lives and experiences of African American women in higher education. One of the goals is to help facilitate giving voice to women such as yourself. Similar studies have been done involving students at four-year colleges and universities, but there have been very few done with community college students.

You are being invited to take part in this study because you are an African American female enrolled in the [program name omitted] program at [college name omitted]. As such, your experiences and insights are quite valuable and will contribute to helping other students succeed in school, as well as helping community colleges develop programs to help at-risk students complete their educations.

If you agree to take part in this study, your involvement will require only a few hours of your time. First, there will be a brief pre-screening conducted by telephone, likely taking just 5–10 minutes, during which you will be asked if you understand the purpose of the study, will be informed of what will be expected of you, and will be given the opportunity to ask any questions or express any concerns that you may have. If you choose to participate in the study, the next step will be an interview lasting approximately 60–90 minutes, during which you will be asked 16 different questions about various aspects of your educational experiences. Interviews will be held in a secure place on the El Camino College campus and will be audio-taped for later transcription.

After the interviews are transcribed, you will be asked to evaluate the transcript for accuracy and will be given the opportunity to add any further comments. This process is referred to as member checking and is essential to ensure the accuracy of the information obtained. This should take approximately 30 minutes of your time. In total, participation in the study will require approximately two visits over about a two- to four-week period and about two to three total hours of your time.

There are no outright risks involved in this study. If you prefer not to answer any particular question or even want to stop the interview entirely, you will be free to do so.

It is unlikely that you will personally benefit from being in this study. However, we hope that, in the future, other people might do so. Its purpose is to gather general information about what makes some students successful at colleges, while others are not. The hope is that what is learned here will encourage other students to persist in their education and will help colleges develop more effective programs to support them.

If you choose to participate in the study and are able to complete it, you will be compensated with a total of \$20. This will include \$10 for the interview and \$10 for the member-checking session. If you should choose to withdraw from the study before its completion, then you will not be compensated. All monetary compensation will be paid upon the completion of the sessions.

The information you provide during this research study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. To help protect your confidentiality, we will destroy the audio tapes after the completion of the study and will use only aliases in the dissertation itself.

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study. Students can feel free to skip any question if they do not feel comfortable answering it. If you choose to withdraw from this project before it ends, the researchers may keep information collected about you, and this information may be included in study reports, although of course your anonymity will be protected.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact John Glavan at 310-418-5536 or by email at pug.brabs@sbcglobal.net. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Human Protections Administrator at (541) 737-4933 or by email at IRB@oregonstate.edu.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Participant's Name (printed):

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

## Appendix B: Questionnaire

### *Interview Questions*

#### A. General

*1. Can you explain what persistence means to you while you are attending community college?*

#### B. Student Departure

*2. Were you ever tempted to drop out of school? If so, why? Was the reason one thing or an accumulation of things? What made you decide to stay in school?*

*3. What do you think is the major reason students drop out?*

#### C. Success and Goals

*4. Who were your role models when you were younger? Who are they today?*

*5. What obstacles do you see in your own personal path that may hinder your goals?*

#### D. Mentoring

Studies show that nothing was more important to student persistence than contact with professors and personal mentoring. These questions addressed the role of mentors.

*6. Do you have any mentors, such as a personal relationship with any professors, other people at the college, or someone else, perhaps at work?*

*7. Do you feel the need for more personal guidance and contact at college?*

#### E. Multiculturalism and Cultural Dissonance

These questions examined the relationship of language, learning, and knowledge and their impact on African American women's ability to understand the language used by the dominant culture in the academy. They related to the general area of cognitive

dissonance and the ways that cultural differences may or may not affect African American women's ability to understand and relate to the materials they are presented with while in college, materials that primarily represent White values.

*8. Do you feel that your own different cultural background makes it more difficult for you to compete on an equal footing with students from other cultures, particularly the dominant culture?*

#### F. Race, Gender, and Class Issues: Intersecting Oppressions, Identity, Diversity, and Social Justice

The following questions related to the various groups (race, gender, and class) that African American women belong to and examine the conflicting identities these groups represent and the roles they play in social justice issues. In particular, they focus on an interest in knowing how African American women's dual identities as blacks and women, which traditionally have put Black women at the bottom of the American totem pole, have affected their lives and their education.

*9. Have any guidance counselors or teachers ever advised you not to go to college or pursue higher education because of your race, gender, or class?*

*10. How have racism or sexism affected your educational experiences?*

#### G. Black Feminist Thought

*11. To what extent do you look to the African American community for your inspiration?*

#### H. Pedagogy of the Oppressed

These questions regarding class and oppression explored the extent to which individuals from disadvantaged or oppressed groups can only be helped by supporting the group at large. They also addressed the extent to which these people can be educated by a

dominant class that is simultaneously oppressing them, or at least profiting from keeping them uneducated.

*12. How much do you feel that chronic social problems such as illiteracy and poverty hold back society as a whole?*

*13. What is your concern with social justice issues in general? Are you yourself involved in social justice issues?*

I. Thoughts on Community College

*14. What has helped you persist in your community college experience?*

*15. What has caused you to flounder in your community college experience?*

*16. What advice would you offer to other African American women thinking of attending a community college?*

