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Lauren Fortune

*James Madison University*

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Being Left Behind, Not Staying Behind: A Look at College-Aged African American

Males

Lauren S. Fortune

A Research Project submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

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FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Committee Chair: Dr. Deborah Sturm

Committee Members/Readers:

Dr. A. Renee Staton

Dr. Eric Cowan

## **Dedication**

This project is dedicated to all African American males who dream of achieving success in spite of the many trials they may face.

## **Acknowledgements**

To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I would like to thank You first and foremost for all the many blessings You have bestowed upon me. I know that without You I am nothing and hope to glorify You in all that I do. To my Family, thank you for your constant encouragement to never give up and allowing me to follow my dreams. To my boyfriend, Eric thank you for enduring this process with me every step of the way even when it was not easy. I love you! To my participants, thank you for your willingness to be open and honest. I would not have been able to do this without you. To my research chairperson, Dr. Deborah Sturm, thank you for your constant support throughout this process and for challenging me professionally. To Drs. Renee Staton and Eric Cowan thank you for being on my committee and providing an example for me as Counselors.

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this Ed.S. project is to examine the barriers African American males face and their resiliency factors. The information will be used to educate others about the issues faced by this group and what factors positively impact their success. The participants consisted of six African American Males who attend James Madison University and are between the ages of 18-22. A qualitative research design was used. The interviews were semi-structured with a five-question interview protocol. There were specific themes that emerged from the research that were barriers as well as resiliency factors. Barriers included the impact of fathers and stereotypes, while resiliency factors included faith and support. Recommendations and conclusions based on this study include providing African American males with a supportive environment and focusing on the impact that race has on their belief that they can succeed.

## **Introduction**

African American males continue to be disadvantaged in many ways in the United States. Throughout US history, beginning with slavery, laws have been enacted that keep the African American male disadvantaged, such as Jim Crow laws that supported segregation where “colored” options were worse than those for “whites only.” The Voting Rights Act of 1965 put into place regulations to enforce the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment allowing African Americans to vote without restrictions. However, in today’s society, only fifty years later, there are still issues that limit freedom and access. For instance, lifetime earnings of an African American male are significantly lower than those of a white male (Hughes & Kroehler, 2005). The justice system also seems to be failing this group, and racial profiling adds to the failure. Stories of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Jordan Davis, and Eric Garner have become all too common. Among these injustices, the school to prison pipeline is also very real.

The school to prison pipeline refers to “policies and practices that push our nation’s schoolchildren, especially our most at-risk children, out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. This pipeline reflects the prioritization of incarceration over education” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2008, pg. 1). This pipeline is a result of many different factors, including in particular failing public school systems. The schools have inadequate resources for the students, are often overcrowded, and have teachers who lack qualifications. As far as discipline, schools have started to focus on police and resource officers rather than teachers and administrators. Some schools adopt a zero tolerance policy so the numbers of suspended and expelled students have grown immensely for minorities. Our educational system sends students who are

suspended or expelled to alternative schools where they fall behind academically in comparison to their regular-schooled peers, because these schools do not follow certain standards (American Civil Liberties Union, 2008, pg. 1). Schools are 3.5 times more likely to suspend Black students than white students. Forty percent of students expelled from US schools each year are Black (Amurao, 2013). The courts that these youth are sent to do not allow them certain procedural protections and rarely do they have a lawyer for trials. Thus the vicious cycle continues (American Civil Liberties Union, 2008). Seventy percent of the students involved in “in school arrests” or referred to law enforcement are Black or Latino. America incarcerates one out of three African American males at least once in his lifetime (Amurao, 2013).

Not only do African American males face disadvantages with the larger societal system and the school to prison pipeline, they tend to face other challenges as well. Many African American males live in environments that are considered disadvantaged. The United States Department of Health and Human services defines a person being from a disadvantaged background as:

“one who comes from an environment that has inhibited the individual from obtaining the knowledge, skill, and abilities required to enroll in and graduate from a health professions school, or from a program providing education or training in an allied health profession; or comes from a family with an annual income below a level based on low income thresholds according to family size published by the U.S. Bureau of Census, adjusted annually for changes in the Consumer Price Index, and adjusted by the Secretary, HHS, for use in health



professions and nursing programs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015b)

They may not have the emotional support at home because their father is incarcerated or their mother is working multiple jobs in order to provide a living (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). These lower socioeconomic areas have schools that do not have accessibility to resources that are necessary for a quality education such as quality teachers (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004). These males have limited access to other resources such as health care that would allow them to see mental health professionals, as 52% of African Americans cost or insurance was the most cited reason for not receiving treatment (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2015). The youth often do not see positive role models in the community that look like them and are able to help them become successful. Most of these youth believe that success is not attainable.

The systematic injustices faced by young Black males is important to examine because Black males need a sense of hope and support to counterbalance the effects of societal injustice. Society risks leaving this group behind. Changes that focus on resiliency should be considered. There are factors that improve resiliency in not only academics, but in life. These include: healthy familial relationships, long-term support from caring adults, and increased self-esteem (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010). Youth given the opportunity to participate in positive activities such as athletics and other incentives is another source of resiliency (Harvey & Hill, 2004). Athletics provide the student with an opportunity with social rewards not otherwise given to them (Hawkins & Mulkey, 2005). "Positive role models boost motivation by providing a guide to achieving

success; they personify plausible desired selves that people can realistically aspire to become and illustrate the means for achieving these desired selves” (Lockwood, Jordan, Kunda, 2002, pg. 855). President Barack Obama reflected on his own experience with a positive role model in a story he shared with a young man:

On January 19, I met a young man on the street named Vidal and I asked him to tell me about the person who had influenced him the most in his life. He told me about his principal, Ms. Lopez, and he explained how she had taught him that he mattered. Over the next two weeks, I learned the story of Ms. Lopez and her school, Mott Hall Bridges Academy. By hearing the stories of MHBA students and educators, my eyes were opened to unique challenges facing a school in an under-served community. Ms. Lopez taught me that before a student is ready for academic training, they must be made to understand that they deserve success. And that can be the hardest battle in education. Ms. Lopez always said that there was no place her students did not belong. Recently we received an invitation and proved just that” – Barack Obama.

Here, President Obama is demonstrating the importance of having a positive role model. Ms. Lopez provided the influence needed for Vidal to be successful. This youth is at-risk or disadvantaged like many minorities in this country. He mentions a school official influencing him positively. Success begins with the belief that a youth who has experienced an underprivileged life deserves to have better. Many times parents are unable to be a positive role model but another youth who is caring can still mitigate some of the risk factors for youth that will cause him to become part of the school-to-prison pipeline.

When we reflect on the challenges faced systemically by young African American males, counseling emerges as a potentially effective tool for counterbalancing the challenges with resiliency factors. Yet the rate of African Americans seeking counseling and actually receiving it is much lower than the majority population. African Americans are less likely to receive treatment for psychological disorders. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health (2014) in 2008 of adults 18 and over only 8.7% of Non-Hispanic Blacks received mental health treatment or counseling in the past year compared to 16% of Non-Hispanic Whites. Non-Hispanic Whites are more than twice as likely to receive antidepressant prescription treatments as are Non-Hispanic Blacks. Approximately six percent of adults over the age of 18 that are Non-Hispanic Blacks received prescription medications for mental health treatment or counseling in 2008, compared to 13.9% of Non-Hispanic Whites. However, African Americans are 20% more likely to report having serious psychological distress than Non-Hispanic Whites (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2015). African Americans of all ages are underrepresented in outpatient treatment but over-represented in inpatient treatment (Mental Health America, 2015). “The percentage of inpatient service use was higher among black adults (1.4 percent) than among Hispanic, white, and Asian adults” (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2015). This snapshot of data relating to African Americans and mental health treatment options presents only a glimpse into the complex systemic issues that stand in the way of effective early intervention and treatment.

### *Statement of Purpose*

The purpose of this research is to examine the barriers and resiliency factors in African American males in order to educate others about the issues faced by this group. There is also a need to study successful Black males because a majority of the research comes from a deficit model.

On a societal level, this project can be used to inform persons who are not in the mental health field about the barriers and resiliency factors of African American males. If more people are educated about what impacts the academic and psychosocial outcomes of African American males, these students may not face as many injustices and could experience more positive academic and psychosocial outcomes. Education could be the tool used to improve these outcomes for African American male college students in particular by informing society as well as improving their sense of self-worth and providing a strong support system.

This project is necessary for the counseling profession because it will inform mental health professionals about the concerns specific to African American males and how to support them. The information gathered will also be beneficial to school counselors who may be the only mental health professionals that these males ever encounter. Many African American males are not informed about counseling and the services that are afforded to them. Due to economic factors, many may not have the ability to get to community counseling or pay for it, therefore school counselors are the most convenient resource of mental health support; 70-80% receive services while in school (American School Counselor Association, 2015). Counseling Centers at Universities also need someone who will be able to relate to the African American male. It is important for mental health professionals to reach out to those who are less likely to

seek or access services. Ultimately the goal of this research is to give mental health professionals the tools necessary to ensure African American males across the lifespan will receive the adequate support they need in order to succeed in this world.

### **Literature Review**

This section presents relevant literature covering the barriers and resiliency factors among persons of college age., beginning first with barriers and resiliency factors for college students generally, and then highlighting those relevant for African American students, focusing ultimately on the experience of male African American college students.

#### **College Students**

College is a transitional period for students. Many students are inundated with added stress and may lack the necessary coping skills. This lack of skills may lead to mental health issues. Mental illness in college students is considered a public health issue. About 50% of the individuals in this age have a psychiatric disorder (American College Health Association, 2008). Due to this distress, as of 2008 1.8 million college students seek help from university counseling centers annually (American College Health Association, 2008). Research has shown that college counseling centers are effective at relieving psychological distress, facilitating academic functioning, and aiding in campus retention (Hayes, Youn, Castonguay, Locke, McAleavey, & Nordberg, 2011).

The students of this generation are labeled as millennials (Brunner et. al, 2014). There are specific characteristics given to them. They are seen as confident, achieving and assume they are trendsetters. They are successful academically are usually busy, smart, and ambitious. Most care about the success over the journey in comparison to baby

boomers that focused on the meaning. It is hypothesized that due to the emphasis on achievement and conformity as well as the high value of friendships makes them the most stressed out generation. This group feels pressure and is less accustomed to pending time alone and is highly sensitive to peer norms and/or opinions. Those who are different often find it difficult emotionally. This cliquish mentality could be caused by the technological world that has shaped social relationships to digital interactions. The millenials find love online in some cases and have virtual friends, however this has rendered them less able to communicate face to face. Therefore, stress has been added to peer and parental relationships. Social Media allows people to be connected anywhere anytime. This cohort is also seen as more tolerant than others.

These college students need for success and external acceptance has lead to high levels of stress. The need for constant achievement has lead to feeling overwhelmed. Therefore most seek the services of professional help such as college counseling centers. Parents also heavily depend on these centers to maintain the well being of their children.

College students are also at a unique developmental stage that is emerging adulthood. At this age, the youth are no longer adolescents however not considered an adult yet. This time is seen as a time for change and a time to develop the self. With the unique characteristics of this generation and the college age can cause greater psychological health problems. Although, there are many issues at this time most report a high degree of satisfaction during their college experience (Brunner et. al, 2014).

Developmentally, possibly due to a lack of maturity, some college students have inadequate coping skills that produce negative affect as well. Negative coping styles can be either internal or external. Internally students may repress feelings or they can

manifest externally through aggression. Developing positive coping skills and thus having the ability to regulate one's emotions is all a part of emotional intelligence. One way to increase positive coping skills is to enhance a student's self-efficacy. Using effective coping skills helps to regulate the intensity and duration of emotions.

Researchers have found that the coping style of these students can be predicted by examining the influence of regulatory emotional self-efficacy (Shi & Zhao, 2013). Once students have self-efficacy perceived stress may be reduced. Problem solving is also another positive coping style that may influence and individuals perception of their ability to engage in activities (self-efficacy) (Changxiu & Xiaojun, 2014).

With college comes many different stressors, such as academic pressure, finances, and social pressures. Two thirds of four-year college students report having some form of debt after completing their degrees (Lim, Heckman, Letkiewicz, & Montalto, (2014). Financial stress has been linked with academic problems, health issues, and thus negative financial problems. There are coping strategies to deal with financial issues for students that will in turn positively impact their overall well being. These strategies include "reducing expenses, increasing income, improving management skills, borrowing money, employing psychological means to reduce or avoid stress, and seeking help" (Lim, Heckman, Letkiewicz, & Montalto, 2014, pg. 148).

The multiple stressors faced by this age group may lead to the inability to cope in a healthy manner. This could lead to another problem that college students face, suicide. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for these students. "Eighteen% of undergraduate students have seriously considered attempting suicide in their lifetimes; 40% to 50% of these students reported multiple episodes of suicidal thoughts" (Drum,

Brownson, Denmark, & Smith, 2009). Suicidal ideation can be defined as thinking, considering, or planning to commit suicide. Suicidal ideation was researched and examined to see what factors have lead to the increase in percentages. Interpersonal factors were cited as one. Interpersonal factors include romantic partners, family, and friends. In a study done by Joiner, (2005) there were three factors highlighted that lead may be an underlying cause for suicide in the general population: acquired capability, perceived burdensomeness, and thwarted belongingness. Thwarted belongingness is broadly defined as social isolation. College students that have low social support (or the perception of) risk a higher suicidal ideation rate. Therefore, social connectedness may be a protective factor. This social connectedness can be positive peer relationships, comfort in the school environment, and parental support. These factors all are also positively correlated with mental health resilience.

The first year student transitions can also be difficult. Schlossberg's theory (2011) discusses this transition into four S's that include situation, self, strategies, and support. Situation includes the transition itself such as the timing, duration, and experience. Included in the self outside of demographics are optimism and self-efficacy. Strategies are the ways that individuals cope. Support includes people, organizations, or institutions relevant to the person. The support system is a major contributor for this age group regarding coping, and its effects are complex and vary for each individual (Workman, 2015). This theory takes into account the students' adjustment to college and what roles if any that both advising and their living learning community that may played as a support system. (Workman, 2015)



The implications for mental health professionals or student affairs employees are that if a student is expressing a low level of family belongingness it is important to know that this person may be having difficulty transitioning or coping with school and is cause for concern and is worth discussing. Professionals should gather pertinent information regarding the student's family life and struggles they are currently experiencing. Students should be given tools in order to maintain supportive and adaptive connections with their family. If students do not have healthy relationships with the family, referrals should be considered to different opportunities that provide a family-like support like mentoring groups.

College counseling centers have faced different challenges in recent years that include an increase in the need for services, funding concerns, questions about what services are needed. These centers also integrate and disintegrate at some universities with health services and other service areas. Counseling centers often try to figure out how to be involved with meaningful prevention and intervention efforts (Brunner, Wallace, Reymann, Sellers, McCabe, 2014).

Implications for counseling centers is also important to help with suicidal risk. Many students may not be willing to actually come into the center or can't, so it is vital that centers offer online resources to students and families that focus on developing or maintaining family belongingness. These resources could be focused on topics such communication, respect, or acceptance. The centers could also offer groups in order to make the student feel supported. Another suggestion is that centers also work with parent relations and try to provide support, programming, or resources that families can utilize (Ploskonka, 2015).

## **Minority Students**

There are different barriers to success for minority college students. These barriers make it increasingly difficult for minorities to succeed in college, both socially and academically. Some of these barriers affect the child at a young age and make it difficult to even attend college.

The first is the public school systems. The school to prison pipeline may be a reason that minorities are underrepresented in college and/or universities. By the conclusion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were almost a third more African American men in prison and jail (791,600) than in universities or colleges (603,000) (Wald & Losen, 2003). Since the early 1990s, many school districts have adopted a zero-tolerance approach to discipline. This is causing the number of students suspended annually from school to rise significantly, since 1974 it has risen from 1.7 million to 3.1 million. With this zero-tolerance policy there is an increase in the presence of police in schools, and the enactment of new laws mandating referral of children to law enforcement authorities for a variety of school code violations instead of school administration. This new change has affected minorities greatly as they are heavily overrepresented among those most harshly sanctioned in schools. Black students are 2.6 times more likely to be suspended as white students, nationally. In 2000, Black students represented 17 percent of the student population but 34 percent of students suspended. From 1972-2000 the percentage of White students suspended for more than one day rose 1.99 percent. In the same time span the percentage of Black students rose 7.2 percent. Racial disparities continue with minors, in 1998, black youths with no prior criminal records were six times and Latino youths three times, more likely to be incarcerated than whites for the same exact offenses.

Despite the fact that while minorities only make up 1/3 of the total adolescent population in the United States, they represent two-thirds of all youths confined to detention and correctional placements (Wald & Losen, 2003).

Academics are also a barrier for minority students in school. Most low-income students lack access to resources such as technology and print materials. These students also go to school where there is not a rigorous college prep curriculum thus the students are not prepared to succeed academically in college. When these students do have the opportunity to enroll in these courses they usually do not. It is estimated that less than 10% of Hispanic students are minimally prepared for college, parents of these students who often did not go to college lack access to academic knowledge about college such as entrance requirements, the application process, and financial aid opportunities. Low educational aspirations is also another facet to academic success. Research shows that the aspiration level does not align with achievement level. Low SES students who desire to go to college do not always meet the minimum academic requirements to attend (Knaggs, Sondergeld, & Schardt, 2013).

Minority students who do attend college are also at a disadvantage academically. Some students go to schools that do not have adequate resources, they do not know how to use updated technology. Minorities are thus becoming intellectually disenfranchised because computers are widely used in higher education.

Social barriers also occur in secondary school as well as if the students are able to attend college. These disadvantaged students do not always have the resources such as reliable transportation for employment or other activities. While students are in college, this can lead to further isolation. The family creates barriers as well. Most parents as

stated before have low education; there may be other siblings at home that need help, and financial concerns or limitations (Knaggs, Sondergeld, & Schardt, 2013). Financial aid stresses are more of an issue for minority students than White students. Many minority students' parents cannot afford to save money for their child to go to school thus their child would be in debt. Their parents often discourage attending school because of the loans or work while they are in school to pay off the debt (Landry, 2002). Pell grants, which are need based income for students, provide less than the average cost of tuition at a public four year institution. Immigrants who are undocumented do not have access to this financial award. Some students therefore elect to attend part time in order to lower their financial burden or even a community college (Knaggs, Sondergeld, & Schardt, 2013).

The attendance rate for first-generation college students is about 25% and is significantly lower than students with college-educated parents. First generation college students have to overcome many barriers however they find the motivation to attend and succeed in college. These first-generation college-students are often minorities. One of the main motivations is to have a better life than their parents did. There is a low earning potential for those who do not have a college degree versus those who do. Parental support and encouragement was also cited as a motivating factor (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014).

Minority students continue to make modest enrollment gains on college campuses; however, they are still underrepresented at every degree level (Collison, 2000). Although the transition for many first year students is difficult it is especially difficult for first generation college students where feelings of isolation and loneliness are

very common. Many minority students spend the first year struggling to find their comfortable niche on campus or where they belong. Some Hispanic students who come from rural areas find the feelings of isolation difficult and also struggle with the possibility of being the only one in classes. Native American students find the transition difficult because of the forced acculturation and assimilation; education is often linked with losses such as culture, language, and family.

These students can go through an identity crisis and experience guilt, pain, and confusion by attempting to live simultaneously in both worlds, while not being accepted in either one. Students who are grounded in their cultural heritage have a greater chance of graduating. The importance of minority subcultures is also stressed for retention of these students. A student subculture is where a sufficient number of persons of like backgrounds and interests from which viable communities are formed (Landry, 2002). It is common for minorities to feel as though they are the cultural emissary for their group. The notion is that they should be the spokesperson for their culture and if there are two of the same minority in a classroom they should think and believe the same. Furthermore, in the classroom participation is often graded. This can cause issues for minorities such as Native Americans who are taught to be active listeners and only speak if they feel they have something significant to say (Landry, 2002).

The Digest of Educational Statistics reports that in 2006 “30% of Whites age 25 and older held a bachelor’s degree, while 17% of Blacks and 12% of Hispanics age 25 and older held a bachelor’s degree” (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2008). These data show that it is important for colleges and universities to focus on retention of minority students. Those who are more integrated into college life tend to

succeed. Minority students face more difficult problems than their white student counterparts. These problems include not only keeping up with the rigorous demands of college work, finding a niche in social and academic life, as well as financial issues, which make success harder to attain. This is directly related to the Minority Stress Theory, in which poor mental health outcomes among minority groups are posited to result from the excess and chronic stress that results from experiences of minority-status stressors (Meyer, 2003). The stressors that lead to this stress as stated before include racism; feelings of isolation are linked to not only psychological distress but also depression and past suicidality (Smith, 2014).

Another social issue minorities face in college are stereotypes. Steele's theory of stereotype threat states that the "academic performance of students from specific racial minority groups may be affected by the campus racial environment" (Baker, 2013, pg. 634). Steele also asserts that students who belong to groups that are stereotyped in a negative manner often perform poorly to reflect the stereotype. These groups are often Latinos and African Americans. Because this is situational, meaning that there are only certain environments that produce these stereotypes, if minorities are in an environment that is welcoming and offers support they will succeed.

Parents and other family members are important sources of support and often encourage academic success in the African American and Latino communities. At a university, minority students may not come into contact with people who have the same ethnic background. This can be devastating to academic success if there is no support from those who are ethnically similar to them in a college setting. Most students report feeling connected in the college environment increases likelihood of success. Peer

support from friends is a strong predictor of success in the Latino community (Landry, 2002).

There are benefits to having a strong ethnic social network during college. The benefits are reinforcing excellence in academics, social support and help throughout college, as well as an increase in their ethnic identity and pride. Connections with not only peers but also professors is important for minorities more than White Students (Baker, 2013). Minorities report overall satisfaction and these relationships are beneficial throughout college, especially if the faculty is a minority as well (Baker, 2013). Along with this idea, students are encouraged to find mentors and other students as well as support in multicultural centers. These centers are supposed to provide students with a chance to meet others that are similar to them as well as a chance to retain pride in one's culture. At Dartmouth College, students can invite people to the center that honor their heritage such as elders, musicians, etc.

### **African American Students**

There are specific difficulties that African Americans face that can lead to issues in college, including issues with racism and stereotypes. Harris and Taylor (2012) believe these experiences can come to define childhood and adolescence for them. The conditions of most African American households are supported by statistics. "African American children under the age of 18 are nearly three times more likely to live in a single-parent household than are White children, and nearly two thirds of all African American children live in single-parent households" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a). Within these households, the median income has declined 5.5% and is the lowest of the all large racial/ethnic groups. (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). 50% of all African

American children lives without securely employed parents and “less than 15% of African American children have a parent with at least a bachelor’s degree” (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). Also, “more than 30% of African American children under 18 are living in poverty” (McCartney, 2011). These statistics show the economic difficulties that are affecting African American children and directly effect access to a good education. These children do not get adequate academic preparation in their early education years thus leading to issues as they progress (Kelly & Dixon, 2014). African American students rank at the bottom compared to other racial/ethnic groups. “Eighty-four percent of African American fourth-graders score below proficient reading level, compared with 58% of White fourth-graders” (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011).

Stereotypes of this group are present in today’s society through different institutions including schools. A paradox that Dancy (2014) explains is a paradox of being admired and despised at the same time. This is exemplified through praise of the black male in peer groups and athletic arenas however there are also negative stereotypes such as violence, fear, and hypersexuality. On a societal level, there is also praise for black male talent and genius in the music and entertainment businesses while there is a modern-day police and neighborhood lynchings of unarmed black males (Dancy, 2014). Some other stereotypes used to define African American males are endangered, uneducable, dysfunctional, and dangerous (villain). These stereotypes negatively impact their perceived ability and therefore the behavior of African American males. Researchers explain that now, more than ever, education is the key to success and upward mobility, which is becoming increasingly hard for African American males (Jackson & Moore, 2006).



There is often a lack of academic preparation for college and a lack of those with a similar cultural background, financial difficulties, and along with the normal anxieties of leaving home. Students of color often experience high levels of isolation and loneliness, the design, and structure of Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) do not account for cultural differences (Robertson and Mason, 2008). A study by Allen (1992) compared student outcomes of African American students at PWIs and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The results indicated African American students at PWIs reported lower academic achievement due to lower academic aspirations. The study also indicated that students had less favorable relationships with faculty members at PWIs than HBCUs and lower social involvement. Retention programs have been rising at PWIs due to the inadequate service of students of color. These programs focus on integrating these students into campus life both socially and intellectually.

In 2007, 90,996 African American female students in comparison to 26,425 African American male students received their undergraduate degrees, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education (2009). As of 2009, the unemployment rate for African Americans with college degrees was 4.6, while those without a college degree had a 10.6 rate of unemployment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). African American males face different challenges compared to their female counterparts. Due to the lack of African American women often do not date or choose a mate with less earning potential thus lowering the African American family socioeconomic standing as a whole (Brooks, Jones, & Burt, 2013).

In the African American community, there is a large emphasis on social bonds and interdependence. Social bonds and interdependence are often portrayed through the

family structure with the value of extended families and the well-being of the group as a whole. Interconnectedness throughout the race plays a role in social-emotional bonds. These bonds are developed through parental attachments. Parental attachments correlate with self-identity therefore also predicting racial identity. Identity is a crucial part of the African American experience in college. Students with high levels of trust with their parental figures and had a strong sense of family identity also had a positive sense of their Black identity and the majority culture. The strong sense of family identity and high levels of trust with parental figures will more than likely be a coping mechanism for students (Brown, Love, Tyler, Garriot, Thomas, & Roan-Belle, 2013).

African American students do not tend to seek mental health counseling. These students usually rely on informal networks for coping with stress such as family and/or friends that are also African American. Thus, it is difficult to establish these networks when Blacks are underrepresented in higher education especially at a Predominantly White Institution. Because Black students lack knowledge about college life depending on other Black students may create problems. These groups can establish maladaptive ways of handling stress. The idea of this informal network is thought to be culture specific in the African American community and shows the emphasis on interdependence. The network is often seen as a source of healing and well-being especially race-related stress. The use of these networks can be beneficial to mental health professionals on a college campus. Collaborating with Black faculty, staff, and other students can prove to be helpful (Grier-Reed, 2013).

Another explanation for underutilization of services is that some minority students prefer to seek treatment from minority providers. Students may be hesitant of Caucasian

counselors because of factors such as peer (self-reliance)/family norms (privacy), cultural mistrust, the double stigma with racism and mental illness as well as the possible doubts about availability of culturally sensitive services. Research has indicated the higher the percentage of African American therapists at a university counseling center the greater the percentage of African Americans that wanted service (Hayes et.al, 2011). Therefore increasing the number of African American counselors in counseling centers. White Counselors working with African American clients should be knowledgeable about the cultural dissimilarities. White Americans emphasize achievement, material assets, independence, planning, youth, and power. African Americans respect elders and heritage as well as emphasize sharing, obedience to authority, and spirituality (Duncan, 2005). The ability to discuss difficult issues such as race is also important. African Americans are though to be a very religious group of people and participation is positively associated with their well-being. About  $\frac{3}{4}$  of African Americans cite reading religious text at least several times month. Incorporating their spirituality may be important when working with this group as well (Duncan, 2005). Being seen as weak or feeling embarrassed for seeking services is another reason for underutilization.

Some implications for treatment outside of increasing the number of minority counselors in university counseling centers is providing outreach that is specific got the challenges Black students face due to their race such as “monitoring their behavior, questioning their ability and place at the university (i.e., tokenism and imposter feelings), balancing bicultural tensions, and succumbing to pressure to prove their worthiness to attend school”. The next implication is developing programming that increases student involvement in culturally relevant school and/or community activities. This will create a

sense of belonging and support academically. Mentoring programs with older students for younger students is another suggestion (Williams & Chung, 2013).

### **African American Male Students**

Graduation rates of college students are shown to be the most tangible measures of student outcomes and success. According to this measure, African American male college students are considered one of the most at risk students on campus, reporting the lowest graduation rates of any other demographic group (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2012). African American males face unique challenges even in comparison to their female counterparts. Most of the barriers for these students begin in childhood, thus putting them on a destructive and often bleak trajectory for the future. On average, African American boys had the lowest reading and math scores among any other demographic group and second lowest scores in math (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). As of 2008, African American males were twice as likely to drop out of high school than their white counterparts. The frequent stereotyping and stigma of being academically inferior have led to more diagnoses of learning disabled and misplacement in special education programs (Harper & Harris, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Noguera, 2003). Black males are more likely than any other demographic group to be diagnosed with a learning disability and put into a special education program. Although these students account for 20% of the overall population in public schools, they make up one third of all students classified as Mentally Retarded, 27% of students considered Emotionally Disturbed, and 18% of students with a specific learning disability.

These students are also underrepresented in Gifted and Talented Programs nationwide and few take Advanced Placement (AP) classes. In some predominantly black

school districts few if any are tested for these programs. Black males are not encouraged to participate in college prep course such as AP classes, which usually have higher qualified teachers and better resources. When they do take these class Black males score lower than any other demographic group. African American students are disproportionately put into low academic-ability classrooms in comparison to the advanced courses taken by Whites (Dancy, 2014). African American males have a disproportionate number of more negative experiences throughout their educational career than Whites (Jackson & Moore, 2006; Kozol, 1991). Researchers hypothesize many of these academic and psychological differences may be due to a misunderstanding of the lived experience of black male students (Dancy, 2012). That misunderstanding creates a foundation for one of the reason many struggle with their transition in college (Kelly & Dixon, 2014).

In the academic arena, African American males also receive harsher discipline policies than other children and are more likely to have suspension or expulsion (Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989; Noguera, 2003). This was referred to earlier as the school to prison pipeline and leads to a significant risk of long term negative outcomes. As of 2011, Black males made up almost 7% of the US student population (US Department of Education, 2011) and are least likely to secure a regular diploma four years after starting high school. Thirty-eight out of the 50 states report Black males have the lowest graduation rates among other demographic groups (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). Only fifty two percent of black males graduate high school in four years, in comparison to their White counterparts' 78% graduation rate.

African American males are disproportionately represented among those students who are forced to withdraw, have low academic performance, and report negative college experiences. These disproportions continue after high school as well. It is reported that about 40% of Black men are involved in the criminal justice system than that are enrolled in higher education. The poverty rate for Black men is one in five compared to 1 in 12 for White men and the unemployment rate of Black men is 2.3 times higher than their White counterparts (Jenkins, 2006). The income and earnings of these two groups are also unequal. Black men earn about 73% of the income that White males receive. A Black male with a college degree has the potential to earn less than the average White male with a high school degree (Jenkins, 2006).

Outside of the educational and economic arena, the disproportions continue to include rates of violence as well as quality of living conditions. African American males are 14 times more likely to die of murder than White men. The rate of homicide with this group ages 15-24 are the highest among any group in the United States. Black males have a 50% higher chance of dying by the age of 20 (Jenkins, 2006). In the past 20 years, the suicide rate is increasing as well among African American male adolescents and young adults (Day-Vines, 2007). According to the CDC, suicide is the third leading cause of death for Black males ages 15-24, and the fourth leading cause of death for ages 25-34.

Psychological issues are also present with this group. This may be due in part to an internalization of self-hatred that leads to low self-esteem and a low self-concept (Jenkins, 2006). Black males may be exposed to examples of upper class lifestyles, success, or a better way of living through the film, media, and television but are often frustrated by the lack of access to this life. This exposure to something seemingly

inaccessible is called “social teasing” and can increase frustration, desperation, and internalization of negative feelings. It can also lead youth to see their future as needing to use any means to make money, including perpetuating violence (Jenkins, 2006).

### *Interventions*

Research highlights several interventions that may be used in order to help with African American males in school. In the Schott Report, interventions are used within school districts to place youth on a better more positive trajectory by focusing on (a) limiting the impact of poverty and the resource disparities and (b) providing innovative support-based programming. A way to limit disparities is to limit temporary school closings or snow days that negatively impact youth and to focus on issues of truancy and student absences. The more students are physically present in school, the better outcomes are. Suspensions can also become an escalating issue due to their hypervisibility, others’ subjective interpretation, and inequitable punishment. Traditional suspensions lead to fewer educational opportunities and thus lower scores and higher drop out rates. When students return to school they experience increased barriers to guidance counselors, mentors, or mental health professionals who could support their needs (Dancy, 2014). Researchers suggest students facing possible suspension can be sent for less severe in-school punishments and given the support they need by qualified caring individuals. Service to young African American men within the school system must also weave an understanding of the outside of the classroom factors, such as their homes, communities, and minds. Understanding the lived experience of these students is central to developing interventions that foster their resiliency (Dancy, 2012).

College students as a whole are struggling with transition and a lack of adequate coping skills. This is leading to an increasing need for mental health support. Minority students are also dealing with a lack of community at their respective universities, which furthers the need for mental health support. African American students are dealing with additional issues including stereotypes and a disconnect with society and the ability to succeed. African American male students are facing added stereotypes and societal pressure to fulfill roles that are created by the majority and seem unattainable. These students' issues are a microcosm of society and the difficulties faced by different groups and widening achievement gap.



## **Methodology**

The purpose of this Ed.S. project is to examine the barriers African American males face and their resiliency factors. The information will be used to educate others about the issues faced by this group and what factors positively impact their success. Most of current research on African American males included participants who were incarcerated or in otherwise negative situations. More research needs to be done utilizing African American males who are successful.

### **Procedure and Research Questions**

The participants consisted of six African American Males who attend James Madison University and are between the ages of 18-22. Participants were recruited via names suggested by the Center for Multicultural Student Services, convenience sampling, and snowball sampling. Once these participants were identified, they were contacted via e-mail. The participants were interviewed individually. A qualitative research design was used. The interviews were semi-structured with a five-question interview protocol. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Once the data was collected and analyzed, all recordings and transcripts were destroyed. Questions asked of the participants were designed to assess how each person sees himself, the difficulties he may have faced developmentally as a result of his identity, as well as the resiliency factors that have helped him achieve his current perception of success. The research question is: What are the risk and protective factors that contribute to resiliency in African American male college students? The specific research interview questions are as follow:

1. Tell me about yourself. For example, year in school, family life, where you are from, are you a first generation college student, if not where did your parents attend school

etc.

2. What are some of the difficulties you faced growing up?
3. Tell me some of the difficulties you think African American males face.
4. What factors do you think contributed to your success including but not limited to persons, experiences, and characteristics?
5. What are your future goals and aspirations?

### **Participants**

This study included six African American males between the ages of 18-22 who attend James Madison University. Participant 1 was a 22 year-old senior football player majoring in Sports and Recreation Management. Participant 2 was a senior Integrated Science and Technology (ISAT) Major and a member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. Participant 3 was a Health Science Pre-Med major. Participant 4 was a fifth year senior, he majored in Sports and Recreation Management with a double minor in Human Resource Development and General Business. He is also a member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. Participant 5 was a senior Public Policy administration major and a member of the university football team. Participant 6 was a junior and an engineering major. Participant 4 graduated in May, however the other two seniors will return to school to finish their undergraduate degrees in the fall.

## Results

Participants responded to a series of questions designed to illustrate to how each person sees himself, the difficulties he may have faced developmentally as a result of his identity, as well as the resiliency factors that have helped him achieve his current perception of success. Based on the interviews several themes were identified in this study. The themes were identified through identifying items that were repeated in different interviews. These can generally be identified as: real fathers, stereotypes, role models, faith, and support. Specifically, the themes also involved added dimensions of barriers and resiliency factors.

### **Real Father**

The theme real father refers to the participants' birth fathers. Half of the participants did not have the presence of a father or quality relationship and cited this as a difficulty in their lives. This theme proves to be important because fifty percent of the participants cited this as a particular difficulty without being prompted. The following responses support the notion that a insignificant relationship may be crucial in resilience.

Question number two referred to difficulties faced by the participants individually. A theme arose of their relationship with their birth father. Participant 5 said that

I guess the one challenge another challenge would be not having my real father in my life um that could be a challenge but I also had a stepdad but it was almost a challenge balancing the two cause you got a real father and then you got a stepdad that do everything for you so yea

Participant 4 said one of his challenges was "um growing up without a father".

Participant 1 discussed his relationship with his father.

um no not really just anger anger issues like growing up me and my dad didn't have the greatest relationship like our relationship was only around football and sports so I wish our relationship was better it's gotten better now like it's got to the point that we can talk about other things other than football I grew up um I grew up my mom she worked a lot she was like a single mom I mean my dad was there but he wasn't there in the same sense so my mom she felt like she had to buy me whatever she wanted like in order to fill that void from my dad so like I always had like I had like Jordan shoes like jerseys whatever

The participant's lack of a quality relationship with their fathers is included as a difficulty that they have experienced. Father figures for males can prove to be an essential coping mechanism, when this is lacking there may not be a role model or someone to teach the males how to be an African American male in society. More specifically this could mean how to survive and be successful as a minority today. These poor relationships are a hardship that could have been prevented if there was a positive relationship. Those who had a positive relationship with their father used that as a source of resiliency.

### **Stereotypes**

All of the participants cited *negative* stereotypes that they think African American males face today. This theme is important to the culture as a whole because it allows others to believe that there are no positive outcomes. This was important because stereotypes are not always negative but they have only encountered negative ones.

The third question I asked during the interview addressed difficulties that African American males face today. All of the participants discussed negative stereotypes.

Participant 1 stated,

I think at a school like JMU you get labeled by me having dreads and tattoos and a beard in stuff I kinda get looked at like he's only here for football he's not smart and he's a thug um I think that being labeled as like thugs and just stuff like that um I think other things that we face is like just feeling like never feeling like you're good enough like I have felt like that a lot of times I felt like I was giving it my all but I felt like it still wasn't good enough so I'm pretty sure like other people you know what I'm sayin' face it too that's some things I think Black males struggle with

Participant 2 said,

Black men I feel like are regarded as being violent or in trouble and stuff like that so um one thing as a Black man you have to think about that somebody else won't have to think about as I'm walking down the street or if you're driving a car is being Black or you know what people are thinking if I'm doing those like cops and other people don't have to worry about like if I'm walking around with a hood on my head you know I have to think I may have to take this hood down but to her people don't have to worry about that

When asked, what do you think the stereotypes are the participant responded,

“um that black people or black people are dumb um or lazy or they're always scheming to do something you know I'm trying to break that”

Participant 3 stated that,

one is being judged or pre-judged people basically take one African American males actions that they see and they will apply it to the rest of the population everybody's different ... I feel African American males face is in regards to just feeling like they have to prove their selves in any given situation for instance um at times I feel like when I walk into a room I have to prove that I'm not basically here just to get by or just to um I don't care about my academics or anything like that I gotta prove myself I feel like African American males have to prove theirselves prove theirselves ugh being pre-judged um just also their actions. I feel like a lot of African American males they'll they won't let their authenticity to radiate they'll just basically composure is good in certain situations but when you compose yourself and basically suppress who you are as a person that's where I feel like it can be unhealthy so it's like you basically conform to being uh average or basically fitting in with the appropriate Black male role should be so

Participant 4 added,

stereotypes um majority of us especially like I know the people one of my friends from home well most of my friends from home we get stereotyped for being like thugs and stuff because we grew up in the inner city um but no the case if you get to like communicate with us one thing is like we all play sports um like that's basically it I mean coming here to JMU it was more so more stereotypes and stuff like that and not being able to be friends with most people.

Participant 5 said,

I think we get categorized as being you're not gonna make it unless you're an athlete or um really an athlete I think a lot of Black males get put into a box where

they are already deemed as somebody who's gonna fail so alotta people try to put their energy into tryin to make it and tryin to make it seem like that's gonna be it and alotta people made it seem like that was gonna be me especially by me playing sports they uh they automatically put me in the category of the only way out is through my sport which is not true um I think we have a lot of talented African American people um but we also talented in sports too which is a pretty cool thing and I was able to take advantage of my athletic abilities but I also had to go to school and I had to make good grades to get a full to get a scholarship to go to college so ugh I think we always get categorized and and put down a lot but the more success we have even the more success you have a lot of people try to bring you down

Participant 6 said,

as far as being a black male just has a stereotype like to it I know growing up it was just like the stereotype I saw was just like always a thug if there was a fight it was gang related always in trouble ugh just a lack of attention and just everybody wanted you to be a thug pretty much and I didn't grow up like that so I always got annoyed with that so I think just like that stereotype of just like what a black male is um its something I've always hated that stereotype I always thought I was different the savior of the black males or something like that you know um but I hated that stereotype and I always tried to get away from it so that's one of the reasons why I came to JMU um I didn't even apply to any Historically Black colleges because I was sick of that stereotype going to elementary school middle and high school with that stereotype constantly around me fights all the time at

school uh uh just that whole environment I just got sick and tired of it I need more culture I need that so coming here was like a lot different uh than I've experienced before a lot of culture and things like that but yea I would just say like a huge thing with African Americans just like facing that stereotype ugh and like me being a Black male is like I still get stereotyped as that even though I know that's not true about my race um so yea things in a job field and like that you get stereotyped by this and that like you're not as smart or because you're Black you're this or because you're Black you're that um but there was one instance where I had when I was here in Harrisonburg I was in the Dollar Tree me and my roommate who's also a Black male we were just like causally walking around I forgot what we was looking for but we saw this White male um we just casually gave him like a head nod like hey how you doing good whatever so we kept on walking but then he started talking to us and then what he said was like hey you guys play football? I was like ugh no like look at me I'm not that big to be like you know a football player my roommates about the same size and then so we kinda was like startled and we just kinda like stopped and then his follow up question was like well what are you doing here when we said no we're in school and its like that question well what are you doing here thing like I'm only in college to play football or I'm only in college to play sports that's all we good for is just to play sports or you know something like that makes the school look good um not knowing that me and my roommate he's a communications major with a minor in public relations or something like that and I'm an Engineering major Engineering is not many Black students and things like that that was really the



only experience I've had with like with racism and things like that that was one instance of racism that I faced but that's that's what I see right there can't really think of anything else so

As stated before everyone explained a negative stereotype even though the question asked for a stereotype. Every participant managed to include violence or being a thug and needing to prove himself or herself. Many seemed to think that others view them as dangerous by their outward appearance that includes their skin color, tattoos, hair, etc. Regardless of being at a predominantly white institution these males have had to prove that they are not a threat to society. These quotes speak to the idea that instead of simply living these participants think they have to overcome in order to be on level playing field with the majority. They also believe "thug" stereotypes will follow them in life regardless of their amount of success accumulated.

There were however several themes that contributed to the resiliency in the participants. They include faith, role models, and the support of family and/or friends. These resiliency factors are important to highlight because it shows what has contributed to their success and possibly replicate it in the greater population.

### **Faith**

Faith is a theme that was referenced as a resiliency factor for the participants. The participants used their faith in God to help them not only understand but cope with the difficulties. Faith can also be a unifying factor for minorities and also provides a sense of community. Half of the participants referenced this either as a factor in their success thus far or in their future.

When referencing future goals and aspirations Participant 1 said, “wherever God takes me that’s where he takes me”.

When asked about the contributions to his success Participant 2 said, “my dad is like a Bishop now so he gave me the religious background so um I feel like I make pretty good decisions”

Participant 3 attributed his success to,

God first...I had a friend who helped me with that as well as friend or a friends within my Christian faith who are helping me walk and basically hold me accountable for my actions...

When asked how God was helpful he said,

Um okay so God just basically understand that at no point do I think I am doing this by myself so in the good and the bad so when I’m so when I feel like everything is good don’t feel like I’m doing it for myself but when everything seems like it’s going bad don’t think I’m going through it by myself so also just He’s given me certain desires in my heart and I feel like He’s taken me places where I’ve never been or I didn’t think I was ugh I necessarily deserved to be in those places or I didn’t necessarily fit the standards that required me to get into certain places and I feel like he wouldn’t allow me to basically experience what its like there if He didn’t think he didn’t have it in His will for me to achieve that so its like God wouldn’t give you a sample of something if he didn’t think you could basically handle the whole thing

Participant 5 said,

also my faith um just my faith in God and uh Jesus Christ that kinda helped me get to where I am now where I'm beating the odds of the stereotype um and just going to church every Sunday with my grandma even without my parents going to church I always met my grandma at church every Sunday so I like went to church by myself from my immediate family and always met

Faith is used by some of the participants as a factor in their resiliency. This religious component is something valued by their families as well. Believing in God has giving them a way to make sense of the world and all of the inequalities. It also provides a source of comfort when dealing with the world, that although they may feel alone they in fact are not. The sense of community with friends and family through faith is added support. Religion is also a way to create structure and discipline by providing rules that govern their lives. Religion can also be a source of calm and peace in a world of chaos.

### **Role Models**

Role models are another source of resiliency, although only referenced by two people. The two that talked about the impact of their mentors were those who also had no relationship with their birth father. Role models gave them someone to look up to and ultimately follow in their footsteps. With an absent father and being raised by females these males may not have seen what a successful African American male looks like or how to become one.

Participant 5 said that,

yea having having a lot of role models in my life for example football was perfect because my coaches were like my role models also having my older brother being a student athlete was pretty cool too because I was able to see him have success

and ultimately made me to want to follow his footsteps so um so just following in his shadow and some teachers in my life have had a big influence on me and uh and why take academics why I need to take academics seriously because um one day this sport is gonna end that I'm playing and whether I make it to be a professional or not is gonna end one day and you always gotta fall back on your education no matter what job you have or what career you want to go into um but education is something that's always going to last throughout your life so I had a lot of people pour into me early on...I was blessed to have coaches and and um other parent figures and good teachers in my life to influence me to want to do better and also my brother that influenced me to want to be great and do different things in life

The use of role models and mentors were important to Participant 4,

yea um a lot of my coaches helped mentor me into the person I am and also I grew up in the Salvation Army Boys and Girls Club um when I was growing up in like middle school and high school it was like a home away from home everybody in the staff was like my mother and father away from home um so yea and like my cousin he's like the biggest role model I have he played sports and I followed his footsteps in playing sports he was the first person in our family to go off to college so that kinda like motivated me to go off to college but he stopped after his first semester because he was playing sports and once the season was over here was like he didn't want to do this anymore like his schoolwork so I was like I want to go but I don't want to go for sports because I don't want the same effect

Role models seem to be significant or fill a “void” where real fathers would have impacted them. They are able to see what steps and decisions in their lives need to be made in order to succeed because of the example. This success is based on those who have dealt with similar struggles of being an African American male in society and may possess a different level of understanding. The influence of a role model positively affected each of them.

### **Family/Friends support**

Four out of the six participants mentioned significant relationships with family and friends. The African American family is interdependent and many families involve the extended family. Families depend on each other for emotional support especially when living life as a minority. Whether it be a family member or a friend each individual received support from someone else. These people have and continue to be positive influences. This may prove to be important when attending an institution like James Madison University that is predominantly white and there are not many sources of support. The males also want to continue not only receiving support from their family and friends but also being a source of support for others.

Participant 6 attributed his success to his father. He said,

um I think just like being some of my father um like telling me the story of how he made it out of where he lived was um encouraging to me uh which is how like that same kinda like ambition and drive to like be better than the environment that surrounds you um is kinda like instilled in me as well um so that not living up to society's standards for a Black male or the stereotypes that society says about us um and just like realizing that there are bigger and better things than um where

you're at you can do more you can always do more and greater things like my father always told just like you can be anything you want if you put you're mind to it and stuff like that look at me I made it out of the hood like I shouldn't be here right now um I should be dead I should be in jail and stuff like that I should've been a product of my environment but because I didn't give in to that I made it out of that and you can do the same though you're better off than I was as a kid you can still make it so much further and you should as generations continue you should continue to go further and further um so my biggest motivator is my father like he always pushed me to do anything I wanted um football and basketball and stuff like that the things he didn't have a chance to do I wanted to do even playing drums and being in the band um my father supported me in everything I did um no matter what it was and if it was dumb he still tried to support me regardless um you know my mother too as well but my father was a huge like motivator for that you know going to college also was another thing going to college was like a huge thing cause on my father's side I'm the only male that's gone to college on my father's side so I'm the first one to make it in and like right now I just have to like make it through um but its been hard to also being an engineering major in uh college but yea so I know my dad is like very proud of that and like he uh sometimes I just don't wanna let him down and like he's one of the reasons why like I continue to do well at what I do yea

Participant 4 said,

my mother she is a like my main motivation and influence just tryin' to be like the first to ugh do stuff for others in my family like going off to college I know was a

good thing for me but it was a stepping stone for everybody else that's under me like all my smaller cousins, siblings, and other family members so let them know that they can do anything they want and I just want to be successful and make a lot of money so that my motivation

Participant 3 discussed,

My family um friends especially one friend as far as just helping me out a little bit academically um I didn't really know how to study coming into college cause it was different than studying in high school so I had a friend who helped me with that as well as friend or a friends within my Christian faith who are helping me walk and basically hold me accountable for my actions

Participant 4 said, "had a very supportive uh family um like they both went to college so they know what it's like".

Participant 1 said,

and my mom relationship was kinda like weird it was like mother-son in the same breath it was kinda like like an older sister younger brother cause we were like best friends kinda it was a lot I went and told her everything she told me everything any and everything that was going on with her I just saw like the amount of effort and the amount of determination that she had she just wanted to do anything for me and my little sister I got to pay her back by doing whatever I got to do not only to get myself out but try to help pave a way for providing a better life for her and my little sister

These specific quotes demonstrate the influence that a positive support system can have on a life. This support has helped them to want to further their education and

succeed not only for themselves by those who have been a source of support. The support allowed them to want to improve their lives. The sources of support are close family members, friends, and even classmates. The support is necessary for their emotional well-being.

There were three themes that I noticed in the research in regards to the participant's future goals and aspirations. The themes include giving back, family, and school. Simply graduating college is not enough for the participants, all of them have future goals beyond school. This is another way that they are showing it is possible to break the stereotype and succeed in the world. These aspirations are not only beneficial for them but to positively effect those around them in the process.

### **Giving Back**

Some of the participants want to give back to the community in the future because many come from low socioeconomic areas that do not have resources that will encourage youth. It is important because the same people that found support through either role models or family want to pay it forward and help another youth who may not have the necessary resources in place to succeed. One way to give back is through community service. Community service will help positively impact the youth so this cycle can be broken and more success stories of African American males are reported.

Participant 1 said,

I always told myself like if I made it to the NFL or something like that or I made it big I was always gonna give back cause like Highland Springs its its like alotta dudes that made it in football and you see them at the games and dap em up and you know who they are but you really don't see them like giving back for real for



real you always see them like look across you look ten minutes across the way and you got guys over there at Varina giving back coming back having football camp after football camp they doing this program or doing that program me I knew me in high school I can't be that way I can't like for a lot of fortunately like in our society like (inaudible) Highland Springs like a lot of people make it out for football and basketball I just want guys to know there are other avenues like if you want to like do and football is your route just talk to them about some tips and what to expect when you get to college I just I just want to give back cause I feel like a lot of people need it every weekend its like free this or RIP this you know what I'm sayin' though its crazy I just want to give back

Participant 4 would like to give back to his community,

um well after college I'm doing an internship at the Boys and Girls club and I want to go back home to Richmond to work at the Boys and Girls club there and potentially take up sports leadership at VCU for my Master's program um but I want to continue to help Richmond in any way possible to like impact them in a positive way if its to mentor the youth or help them with sports or just to just get people away from gangs and violence and stuff like that or just do my part to help

Participant 5 is already giving back to his community.

my future goals is to help the youth in any way possible whether that's through um whether that's through football being a role model um whether that's through starting my own foundation or whatever I wanna be able to be there for the youth and develop the youth no matter what race you are because everybody have different challenges or whatever um that's something I'm starting to do right now

um me and \_\_\_\_\_ started a program called TYME, T Y M E, it stands for together young men excel. So I think its important that um our youth have somebody to look up to especially in an area like Harrisonburg where it's not much to do here its not much to look forward to um its a lot of dead areas I feel like um that people don't have a voice and youth don't have something to look to look forward to so I know I was blessed to have coaches and and um other parent figures and good teachers in my life to influence me to want to do better and also my brother that influenced me to want to be great and do different things in life I feel like every young person is faced with different challenges and you never know their home life to have somebody so they that they can look up to is important so whatever job I have its its is I want it to be something around developing youth

The participant was asked more about his organization and he responded,

um we mentor students at Skyline Middle School so we have I think we have 9 9 kids 9 boys um and they all 6<sup>th</sup> graders and we kinda wanted to get them from the start of middle school to try to help them through 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade before they get to high school um last week was like our first event outside of the school ----- brought them to the Spring Game um and we I was able to see a different side of them than I was in the school because when they got to the Spring Game out of the environment of being popular and cool in school they was in an environment where um they wanted uh where they were amazed and excited about seeing football payers and they was on the field with us and um they seen me in a different way cause now I'm looked at as this superhero which I'm not

but its just like they only seen me in the school but now they see me with my shoulder pads and helmet on now I'm all of a sudden this guy that they want to be like so just having that influence um that's what our program started me and Deandre just kinda started it up and hopefully it continue to go from here and influence those guys

Participant 6 has also already started giving back,

get more involved in the outside community I went on a Spring Break trip ugh to New York city it was all about justice and things like that I learned about the injustices in the world um I've never been impacted by it that much until I was there in the city like walking the streets and actually seeing people being homeless walking past spa places and knowing that there's human trafficking going on so with that like I came back with like a passion of wanting to pursue justice and how to like help with that so its this organization called Shenandoah Valley Justice Initiative which they um they partner with organizations that help with like human trafficking and things like that so I just asked actually today to join the team

Three out of four participants have already began community service and impacting their communities positively. They want to mentor and make a difference in the lives of others just as someone has done for them in their lives. An important reason they want to give back is to prevent these youth from getting involved in the dangerous lifestyle of gangs, violence, and drugs. This lifestyle will only have negative consequences. Unfortunately sometimes gang members and drug dealers are the only ones influencing youth. Minority youth may not see that success is an option if you are

not famous or on the street. They are also giving back and not limiting it to just African American youth it also involves youth of other races and others who may have experienced trauma.

### **Family**

Some mentioned goals of wanting to start a family someday. This may be because of the positive experiences they had with their own families or a way to correct the mistakes made by their own fathers. They want the opportunity to have a better family experience not only for themselves but for the kids as well.

Participant 1 refers to wanting to raise a family.

um I just want to ultimately man I got a girlfriend right now and she ain't goin' nowhere...I just want to raise a family and live comfortably to the point that my kids don't have to ask for nothing that I don't go through eviction notice after eviction notice like I did as a child I don't I want them to have to wonder why their I want them to have their dad with them 24/7 so they don't ever have to feel like how I felt like they will never ever have to say why is my dad why is he like the only time he come around is football season so yea I just I think my biggest goal right now is just being a family man I'm real big on family wherever God takes me that's where he takes me

Participant 2 refers to wanting a family as well, "uh um I have a girlfriend I've had for a long time um idk where that's going to go but I really like her so personally maybe I'll end up married or something soon that's all".

Participant 3 also has personal goals. “I want to get married one day to a beautiful wife and have great kids and a dog and I want to have a nice house on the lake or some body of water.”

The impact of family was significant for the participants and will continue to be significant. Providing a better life for their children may be important because it is a hardship that not everyone has to deal with. Having a positive family experience can be a source of resiliency for their future. Knowing the negative impact a poor relationship with a father can have may be prove to be a motivating force for them.

### **School**

Two of the participants mentioned wanting to continue with higher education that will eventually lead to the career of their choice. Higher education may also lead to better opportunities for them and their families. Financially these opportunities will provide them with better access to resources. A graduate degree also gives them more opportunities for success.

Participant 2 has a goal of getting a graduate degree. He stated,

I would like to one day get a doctorates a doctorate degree um just to say I did it but that’s that’s a life goal I’m not in any rush to do that um more recently I just I want to get a Master’s degree and then work in a career in some IT place

Participant 3 cites wanting to be a “pediatrician”.

I was blessed to go to Yale for an internship so apply there Johns Hopkins ugh Pitt, University of Pittsburgh but that’s where I would love to apply I would love to get into every single one do I think that’s gonna happen I don’t know because I am not the best student but God has definitely opened doors that I have shut and

locked and threw away keys so . I don't know we'll see. I don't where I want to go I just want to

Participant 4 says, “potentially take up sports leadership at VCU for my Master’s program”.

The choice in extending their education will provide better opportunities and break the negative cycle. Due to the fact that there are limited African American males in college they will show those in their families and communities that it is possible. There is a constant desire to continued success academically that leads to success in other domains.

### **Discussion**

The responses from the participants in relation to the difficulties faced supports the research. Three out of the five participants reported that growing up without a father was a factor. Not having a father in your life may or may not be an important factor; however, what is important is the system that is in place. An absent father more than likely will lead to a lower socioeconomic status, which can lead to other difficulties such as no resources, poorer communities, and overall lack of opportunity. All six of the participants stated that stereotypes of African American males were *negative*, although I did not specify positive or negative. Most of the stereotypes were about being labeled prematurely and having to prove themselves no matter the situation. Many felt as though they were labeled as thugs or are violent. Also, they felt that others thought they are dumb and are only talented in athletics or hip hop culture. Stereotypes are unavoidable with African Americans because race is visible. It is not possible to change the

difficulties that they will face however buffering or finding different ways to be resilient is *survival*.

Faith was another factor that the participants cited as being important to them. This was not surprising as faith/religion has been important to the African American community through generations in slavery. Slaves used faith as a way to cope with situations they could not control and this has continued through now a different type of slavery.

Role models and support are also two very important factors. The African American community is very interdependent. In most families, “extended” family is very close and often helps raise children. When living in a world where most people are a different color, support from those like you is necessary. The research supports the clinician being the same race as the client. There is a level of comfort or support that enhances this connection.

Giving back was a theme with half of the respondents for future goals. As it is related to role models and support these males had someone there willing to help them and they would not be successful if it was not for them. Giving back to the community also allows them the opportunity to be a positive change in others lives specifically youth.

## **Conclusions**

### **Limitations**

A limitation for this project may be the small number of participants. Due to having a low number it may be hard to generalize the results. Since the university has a limited number of participants that match the criteria, the small sample size seemed

appropriate. Also due to the low number of participants matching the criteria convenience sampling was used to identify the participants.

Self-reporting may be another issue in interviews. Participants have the ability to leave out certain details that they may not feel comfortable expressing. The participants may not want to talk about topics because they want to make themselves look better to the researcher. They also may have forgotten important details or other cognitive biases. The participants also may not be as self-aware or carry a level of self-knowledge that is assumed from the researcher. For example, there could be factors that the participant does not realize providing them resiliency.

All of the participants came from one university. Therefore, there could be similar interests and or ideas that lead to each participant attending. This university also may have qualities and experiences that are different than other universities that have a different ethnic makeup, services, etc. I believe that James Madison University being a Predominately White Institution provides different experiences that a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). At an HBCU, there are more people that these participants may identify with including students, professors, and other faculty. They may not deal with the same pressures as far as identity is concerned.

### **Delimitations**

James Madison University is less than 5% African American. I was careful to control for a majority of the participants being involved in similar extracurricular activities. I limited the amount of participants involved in sports to two and the number involved in fraternities. I believe that each of those domains has its own protective factors and difficulties that needed to be controlled for in this study.



**Implications for parents**

There are implications for parents raising African American males in today's society. It is important to focus on providing an enriching, supportive environment. Throughout my research and the literature, there is a pattern of African American males having difficulties in childhood financially or not having the support they need. If kids are in areas where the schools have proper resources and parental involvement, this can lead to better academic outcomes. Academically, it is also important for parents to be involved in the child's education. Parents can foster a love of education and encourage the child to do well in school. Parents may also be involved with the child's counselor, teacher, and other faculty to make sure the child is doing what needs to be done in order to receive a quality education and stay out of the prison track.

**Implications for school counselors**

There are implications for school counselors at every level -- elementary, middle, and high. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model includes competencies that every school counselor demonstrate their attitudes/beliefs that all students deserve access to a program that focuses on narrowing achievement gaps (American School Counselor Association, 2012). Elementary school counselors need to make sure their students are not experiencing trauma at home and are given opportunities to succeed. The counselor can be the liaison between the child and the teacher if difficulties arise in order to set up the student for success. The teacher must be aware of the child. If behavioral issues are occurring, both the teacher and the counselor should work together to provide the best solution for the child. There may be factors such as his ethnicity and stereotypes held by the school faculty that may lead the student to getting

punished in school. This may limit the number of kids that will fall into the prison pipeline if intervention is not done early. Testing is done heavily in elementary school. Often African American males are misdiagnosed and overly diagnosed because school officials do not understand the culture of the kids and how to communicate with them effectively. It may be helpful to make sure that kids do not get a stigma of having a mental or emotional disability unless they truly have one.

Middle School is a transitional time for children. Middle school should also be aware of similar things as the elementary school counselors. Socially they should be aware of kids who are falling through the cracks. These students need to know that they are receiving support from adults at school. Making sure behavioral modifications are done that do not always involve suspension is also important.

High School counselors have to be aware of everything stated above plus some new added pressures. This is the time where youth decide what they are going to do after public education is complete. High school counselors need to work with students and parents to ensure that children are aware of the possibilities and how to achieve them. Students may not know what education is needed for specific careers. They may also be unaware of the college application process such as testing, essays, and grades. If the child is not interested in college, informing them of the other options available to them. High school counselors see difficult situations and where students get caught in the prison pipeline the most. Students can also at this age be tried as an adult in the justice system, depending on the offense. Providing students with the support they need instead of having a zero tolerance policy for behavior may help the students. It is important to not

fall into the stereotyping these young men and understand the struggles that come with being an African American male in today's society.

### **Implications for Counselors**

Counselors at University Counseling Centers should be aware of the services offered to these men. There are often identity issues when attending a school that is majority Caucasian and providing support to these men is key. This support will allow them the space to be free of judgment and discuss who they are and the struggles they are dealing with. Giving these men resources to groups that they may identify with can be very helpful.

It may also be important to have a counselor in the university center with whom they can identify. Research shows that these men may be more willing to seek services from an African American therapist. If this is not possible, the counselor should understand the difference in cultures. The counselor should be aware of their own biases and upbringing to ensure that the ideals they were brought up with are not implied to be important in the African American community.

Throughout my research there is a theme of faith and family. Counselors should make sure they understand how the person's religion affects their life. This can also be away of connection for the counselor, if the client sees that the counselor understand the values of the client. It is very common in the African American community to be interconnected with their family. Family is not just defined as mother, father, and siblings but if often involves extended family and friends. The counselor should understand the familial role in the client's life in order to effectively counsel

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