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A Phenomenological Study of Informal Counseling Practices on the Persistence of African-American College Students at Two Predominantly-White Institutions

Cornelia Sewell-Allen

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF INFORMAL COUNSELING PRACTICES ON THE
PERSISTENCE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS AT TWO
PREDOMINANTLY-WHITE INSTITUTIONS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Title: A Phenomenological Study of Informal Counseling Practices on the Persistence of African-American College Students at Two Predominantly-White Institutions

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This phenomenological study explores college students' perceptions of formal and informal support systems, as well as to explore the impact of informal counseling on the persistence of African-American college students attending PWIs. A qualitative approach was utilized to investigate this phenomenon.

22 African-American college students attending two Predominantly-White Institutions participated in individual and focus group interviews. The results showed that stigma, perceived need, cultural understanding, and trust are key factors that affected the participants' perceptions of formal and informal counseling. Informal counseling was utilized through family, friends, faculty and staff, and religious influences. Additionally, the participants of this study were impacted by informal counseling practices through a culture of care, racial representation, and campus climate.

These findings suggest that counseling departments on college campuses must engage in more outreach efforts to support African-American students and to decrease the stigma associated with counseling services. Establishing a sense of community and belonging for African-American college students impacts their persistence at a PWI.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
ONE	STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	1
	Background of the Study	1
	Mental Health in African-American Communities.....	2
	Problems Facing African-American College Students	4
	Purpose of the Study	6
	Significance of the Study	7
	Research Design.....	8
	Assumptions and Limitations	9
	Expected Findings.....	9
	Summary	10
	Definition of Terms.....	11
TWO	REVIEW OF LITERATURE	12
	Historical Overview of African Americans in Higher Education.....	12
	Affirmation Action.....	14
	Persistence of African Americans in Higher Education	17
	Social Supports	19
	College Counseling	22
	Issues Among College Students.....	24
	Barriers to Seeking Counseling	25
	Theoretical Frameworks	30
	Tinto’s Departure Theory	30
	Formal vs. Informal Systems of Interaction	35
	Critical Race Theory	36
	Stories, Narratives, Counter-Storytelling.....	37
	Storytelling and Counseling.....	38
	Behavior Model of Health Services Use.....	39
	Summary	42
THREE	METHODOLOGY	43
	Research Questions.....	44
	Research Design.....	44
	Population	46
	Pilot Study.....	47

Chapter	Page
Research Procedures	49
Data Analysis	53
Summary	55
FOUR	
PRESENTATION OF DATA	56
Participants.....	57
Meet the Participants.....	58
Focus Group 1	61
Focus Group 2.....	62
Focus Group 3.....	62
Data Collection	64
Results of Research Question One.....	69
Stigma	70
Perceived Need	71
Trust	73
Cultural Understanding.....	76
Results of Research Question Two.....	78
Family Support.....	79
Friends/Peers Support	81
Religious/Spiritual Influence	84
Faculty/Staff Support	86
Results of Research Question Three	90
Culture of Care.....	90
Racial Representation	93
Campus Climate.....	95
Summary	98
FIVE	
CONCLUSION.....	101
Discussion of Research Questions	103
Relationship Between Findings and Theoretical Frameworks	106
Behavioral Model of Health Services Use.....	107
Predisposing Factors	107
Enabling Resources.....	110
Need	111
Critical Race Theory	112
Interest Convergence	112
Counter-Storytelling	113
Whiteness as Property.....	115
The Permanence of Racism	115
Critique of Liberalism.....	116

Chapter	Page
Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure	117
Separation	117
Transition	118
Incorporation.....	118
Connections to Counseling	119
Implications.....	120
Counseling Outreach.....	120
Sense of Belonging	121
Student Involvement	121
Sense of Community	122
Limitations	123
Recommendations for Future Research	124
Summary	125
REFERENCES	127
APPENDICES	153
Appendix A – Participant Demographic Form	153
Appendix B – Focus Group Ground Rules	154
Appendix C – Focus Group Interview Questions	156
Appendix D – Individual Interview Questions	157

LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1	Sample Interview Questions	52
2	Participant Demographics	58
3	Individual Interview Participants	64
4	Focus Group 1	65
5	Focus Group 3	66
6	Focus Group 2	67
7	Superordinate Themes-Perceptions of Counseling	69
8	Types of Informal Counseling	79
9	Superordinate Themes-Impact of Informal Counseling	90

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1	Tinto's model of student departure	31
2	Robert Andersen's initial behavior model	40
3	Initial behavior model	41

CHAPTER ONE

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As colleges and universities strive to meet the ever-growing needs of their students, the alarming number of students entering the institution with mental health issues presents a new challenge (Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors, 2013). African-American students are enrolling in institutions of higher education with existing issues that need to be addressed by their respective institutions if they are to be successful (Anderson, 2013). One of the most pressing issues the African-American student population faces is coping with the many stressors that manifest, once they fully matriculate (Chiang, Hunter, & Yeh, 2004). Seeking counseling is vital. However, this population is accessing counseling services at a lower rate than their White peers (Constantine, Chen, & Ceesay, 1997; Duncan & Johnson, 2007; So, Gilbert, & Romero, 2005). Perceptions of seeking counseling services in African-American communities must be investigated to assist students while they enroll in Predominantly-White Institutions (PWI).

Background of the Study

The Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD) Annual Survey (2013) found that 95% of college counseling directors saw an increase in students with significant psychological problems. One in four college students suffer from a mental illness, but only 75% of those students seek help for their respective problems. As highlighted by the First Year College Experience survey (2015), 23% African-American college students felt emotionally prepared for college than 35% of White students (First Year College Experience Survey, 2015). African- American students were more likely to keep difficulties about college to themselves as compared to White students at 75% and 61% respectively (First Year College

Experience Survey, 2015). Additionally, African- American students face a variety of issues that increase attrition rates, which have a negative impact on retention and graduation rates.

According to the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES), the four-year graduation rate of African-Americans starting in 2007 was 20.8% compared to 43.3% for White and 29.8% for Hispanics students, respectively. These statistics indicate that more can be done to ensure the academic success of African-American students on all college campuses, especially in the area of access to counseling services for African-American students. African-American students encounter unique challenges while attending PWIs that include racism and discrimination, academic and social pressure, financial concerns, and family issues to name a few (Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Cokley, McClain, Enciso, & Martinez, 2013; Davidson et al., 2004). These influential factors impact the college experience of African- American students and potentially pose a threat to their success. Among these influential factors, mental health issues faced by African-American students continue to impact help-seeking behaviors. A paradigm shift in perceptions of seeking counseling services must start in the African-American communities.

Mental Health in African-American Communities

Historically, due to a combination of associated stigma, shame, and lack of access, the African-American population has been resistant to the harsh reality mental health presents to their communities (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2015). The stigma associated with mental illness in this community prevents individuals from seeking help (Murray, Heflinger, Suiter, & Brody, 2011). The fear of being labeled “crazy”, coupled with the risk of being misdiagnosed, result in a much lower number of African-Americans pursuing professional support (Masuda, Anderson, & Edmonds, 2012). According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2015), only 25% of African-Americans seek mental health care compared to 40% of

Whites. Coupled with these stigmas and the poor health in African-American communities, the likelihood of mental illness is only further increased. In poverty-stricken communities, many African-Americans do not have health insurance, which makes it even more difficult to seek services for mental illness. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, finds that African-Americans are 20% more likely to have serious mental health problems than the general population. The number of young African-American males committing suicide is steadily increasing (U.S Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, 2014). Between 1980 and 1995, the suicide rates of African-Americans aged 10 to 14 were double that of White people at 233% and 120% respectively. The mental health struggles in African-American communities indicate various issues related to depression, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These issues may explain these higher mortality rates.

The African-American community also faces systemic discrimination and racism that leads to mistrust of White people (Murray et al., 2011; Nickerson, Helms, & Terrell, 1994; So et al., 2005). Vontress and Epp (1997) stated, “historical hostility is a pattern of responses that many African-Americans exhibit, which may stem from their prolonged subjection to inferior treatment in American society” (p. 170). This theory may deliver some explanation as to why African-Americans resist seeking help from White mental health practitioners. As a result, the search to find culturally-competent and socially-sensitive providers proves to be difficult. This problem has been addressed through standards mandated by the American Psychological Association, American Counseling Association, and the American Psychiatric Association. The standards outlined by these organizations require providers to be trained in areas of diversity to effectively meet the needs of racially and ethnically-diverse populations, but does not address the

need for providers that reflect the populations they serve. Only 3.7% of African-Americans are represented in the American Psychiatric Association and 1.5% in the American Psychological Association (National Association on Mental Health, 2015). Additionally, in an attempt to talk with someone that might fit the concept of “just like me,” African-Americans often seek guidance from the church (Hardy, 2014; Hayward & Krause, 2015). Hardy (2014) stated faith and religion play a vital role in African-American communities and the clergy has become a voice of solace for many African-Americans. Therefore, African-American students who are a product of informal counseling practices and a lack of access to culturally and socially-competent providers enter higher education with additional issues that ultimately affect their persistence in the academic arena, as compared to their White counterparts.

Problems Facing African-American College Students

As the number of African-Americans entering postsecondary institutions continues to grow, the increase in the number of African-American students facing issues that would warrant support from counseling services is increasing. Accordingly, these students are entering college with at least one mental health issue and transitioning to a new environment that presents additional and sometimes unforeseen pressures (Castillo & Schwartz, 2013; Tinto, 1993). Added to these pressures is the longstanding issue of racism and discrimination faced by African-American students at PWIs (Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Cokely et al., 2013; Davidson et al., 2004). However, the new emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement has forced universities to acknowledge the struggles of this population. Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, and Thomas’ (1999) study on social adjustment experiences of African-American college students highlights the racism African-American students experience on campus through isolation, stereotypes, and

segregation. As a result of this discrimination, many students struggle with finding a sense of belonging and question whether they even belong on campus.

Perceived Racial Discrimination Distress (PRDD) was found present in 1 out of 4 African-Americans that participated in a study at Midwestern PWIs (Chao, Mallinckrodt, & Meifen (2012). This research found that as the levels of PRDD increased the distress on other presenting problems increased, as well. Chao, Mallinckrodt, and Meifen (2012) reflected on the impact institutionalized racism can have on African-American students' experience in college and suggest that counselors working with these students ask specific questions about racism and discrimination students have experienced on their college campuses.

African-American students encounter issues regarding academic pressure, financial concerns, social issues, acculturation, and unique family dynamics. Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) found that family and friends from home can either be a support or a detriment to Black students' success in college. Students who come from low socioeconomic households could benefit from breaking away from home ties. Other research outlined, in Guiffrida and Douthit's (2010) study, showed the advantage of strong parental support for their child's education. Tinto (1993) stated that separation from the past, which includes family, friends, and local high school, is an important step in the transition from high school to college. Students from low socioeconomic and minority backgrounds can especially benefit from detaching from their past if the relationships from the past do not understand the worth of college (Tinto, 1993). The second step Tinto (1993) discussed transition as "a period of passage between the old and new, before the full adoption of new norms and patterns of behavior and after the onset of separation from old ones." (p. 97). Students who cannot cope with the stress induced by transition most often withdraw from an institution. Thirdly, the integration into the new community must happen for

students to attend classes and to stay enrolled in the university. The problems faced by African-American students must to be explored to decrease withdrawal rates of these students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate African-American college students' perceptions of formal and informal support systems, as well as to explore the impact of informal counseling on the persistence of African-American college students attending PWIs. More importantly, the research will provide insight into the reasons African-American students are reluctant to use campus resources, such as counseling and psychological services, when experiencing difficult situations in their lives. This qualitative research analyzed the shared stories of African-American college students through interpretative phenomenological analysis. The stigma associated with mental health in African American communities may negatively influence help-seeking behaviors. Students do not perceive their issues as ones that warrant a visit to the counseling center (Masuda, Anderson, & Edmonds, 2012). From a cultural perspective, these students would much rather speak with a family member, friend, or pastor before speaking with a stranger about their problems (informal counseling) (Constantine, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2003; Hardy, 2014). Additionally, Nickerson, Helms, and Terrell (1994) suggest that cultural mistrust also plays a role in the utilization of counseling services among African-American students. Other variables can influence help-seeking attitudes such as social class, racial identity development, or self-concealment (Duncan & Johnson, 2007; Masuda et al., 2012; So et al., 2005. Though African-American students have higher attrition rates and lower retention rates, some are persisting even without accessing formal systems of counseling; these students may be engaging in informal counseling. This study will also investigate the formal or informal types of counseling, if any, in which African-American students might be engaging. Lastly, this

research explored whether students persist because of informal counseling practices or other variables. This study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of African-American college students toward formal and informal counseling on Predominantly-White college campuses?
2. What experiences have African-American college students had with informal counseling?
3. How do informal counseling practices impact the persistence of African-American college students?

Significance of the Study

This research will add to the existing literature on the persistence of African-American college students. Understanding the lived experiences of African-American college students attending two PWIs and how they persist from year to year can influence retention efforts to support this population. As the number of African-American students entering college has increased, the number of these students in need of counseling services has grown, as well (Castillo & Schwartz, 2013). Students are experiencing academic pressures, racial tensions, and financial issues that pose threats to success (Neville, Heppner, & Wang, 1997; Elion, Wang, Slaney, & French, 2012). These students also struggle with finding a sense of belonging, especially at PWIs. Additionally, African-Americans students trail behind other ethnic groups and White students in graduating from college (NCES, 2015). The income potential for African-American students who have a college degree is significantly higher than those who do not have degrees. This topic is also important because as institutions increase racial and ethnic diversity on campuses, many colleges and universities are not equipped with the tools to assist this culturally-diverse population. This research will aid universities in becoming better informed on how to support students of color and their mental health needs. Additionally, the study will

provide insight into the impact informal counseling practices can play in the persistence of African-American students. The research will also inform universities of institutionalized barriers that prevent these students from receiving the assistance that they need. Consequently, if these issues are not addressed, institutions run the risk of losing talented students and sacrificing diversity on their campuses.

Research Design

A qualitative approach was used to conduct this research study to provide an in-depth description of the phenomenon. Smith (2008) posits qualitative research is consistent with the researcher's commitment to preserve "the importance of language as a fundamental property of human communication, interpretation, and understanding" (p. 2). Individual and focus group interviews were conducted to explore the utilization trends of counseling services by undergraduate African-American undergraduate college students that attend two PWIs in Pennsylvania. This sample included sophomores, juniors, and seniors currently enrolled. The data will provide insight into the perceptions that students have about mental illness and counseling services. Additionally, a phenomenological approach captures the essence of a shared experience and seeks to uncover the meaning in what was experienced. Subsequently, an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the data aided in understanding how participants make sense of their world (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Research questions were constructed to facilitate interviews with a sample of African-American students to gain a better understanding of their college experiences, and to identify the resources utilized by African-American students for support.

Assumptions and Limitations

For the purpose of this study, there is the assumption that African-American students are experiencing some of the issues that Tinto (1993) highlighted in the stage of institutional departure, which include separation, transition, and incorporation. The inability to cope with these issues manifests into academic difficulty, inability to resolve educational and occupational goals, and failure to remain incorporated into the intellectual and social life of the institution (Tinto, 1993). If students are experiencing issues with the above, then the assumption is that they are seeking some means to deal with these issues utilizing formal or informal counseling to do so.

There are also some limitations to this study using a qualitative approach. In qualitative research, sample sizes are typically smaller, which does not allow for generalization of the data (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Though the sample size may be small, it garners deeper understanding about the phenomenon. Using only African-Americans students in this study does not account for perceptions about counseling services experienced by all students of color. This study does investigate a unique experience of this population that impacts their persistence in staying enrolled at their institutions. Although the researcher engaged in bracketing throughout the study, some bias may not be avoided because of the researcher's affiliation to one of the research institutions. Another limitation of this study is that it does not discern the difference in perception based on the type of institution attended by the population, as this study focused on PWIs.

Expected Findings

This study is consistent with the existing literature that already exist about African-American students' perceptions about counseling. The participants of the study may be reluctant

and less likely to use formal counseling to address their mental health needs, but more inclined to utilize social supports through informal counseling. The study will show that more African-American students are using informal counseling while talking with family, friends, religious affiliates, or other professionals on campus. The study found that there are specific cultural beliefs about counseling services that prevent African American students from seeking help from formal interactions on campus through counseling and psychological services.

Summary

The persistence of African-American students at PWIs is an extremely important issue that must be addressed to ensure the success of this population. Understanding the ways in which African-Americans students cope with issues they face during their college careers lends itself to further research around reasons for withdrawal from the institution. If students cannot successfully separate from their past, transition to college, and ultimately incorporate into the new college community, perhaps they will choose to leave the institution (Tinto, 1993). The importance of utilizing formal or informal counseling to assist students with transitioning into college environment can not only increase retention rates among African-American students, but also aid in graduating these students at similar rates to their White and Hispanic counterparts.

The subsequent chapter provides a relevant literature review on mental health in African-American communities, student departure theories, presenting problems in African-American students, and research about African-American students' feeling about counseling and mental health services. The review of literature allows for understanding the research that has already been conducted and supports the need for further investigation into this topic.

Definitions of Key Terms

African American/Black- is defined as a person having African heritage or descent (US Census Bureau, 2018)

White/Caucasian- is defined as a person having origins from Europe, Middle East, or North Africa (US Census Bureau, 2018).

Formal Counseling – is defined as engaging in client-counselor relationship from a professional psychologist, counselor, or psychiatrist (Wills & DePaulo, 1991).

Informal Counseling- is defined as engaging in a helping relationship with social support systems such as faculty and staff member employed by the research institution, family, friends, or religious affiliate (Wills & DePaulo, 1991)

Predominantly-White Institution (PWI) – is a college or university where the majority of students are White, non-Hispanic (McCorkle, 2012).

Persistence- is defined as “the belief, behaviors, and experiences that motivate students to remain in college and earn a degree” (McCorkle, 2012, p. 9).

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

African-American students have faced many challenges in higher education (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Hutcheson, Gasman, & Sanders-McMurtry, 2011; Simmons, Lowery-Hart, Wahl, & McBride, 2013). As the pressures to succeed increase, African-American students grapple with the difficulty of persisting to graduation, especially at PWIs (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). This literature review includes an overview of persistence trends among African-American college students, the issues African-American students face while attending PWIs, and coping strategies African-American students use to assist in persistence. The benefits of counseling practices, both formal and informal, will be highlighted in the research, while uncovering some of the barriers to help-seeking behaviors as it relates to African-American students. Finally, reviews of conceptual and theoretical frameworks that influence college students' persistence, and help-seeking behaviors will be addressed.

Historical Overview of African-Americans in Higher Education

African-Americans have suffered through a tumultuous history. Slavery has forever impacted the progressions of African-Americans in the United States resulting in perpetual struggles to succeed. Although laws and policies were established to benefit African-Americans in higher education, the opposition to Affirmative Action and Supreme Court cases as such *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Gratz v. Bollinger*, and *Grutter v. Bollinger* seek to challenge the progress that has been made. This historical narrative of African-Americans in higher education examines the disparities in African-American college students' persistence.

Being an African-American in the United States has been plagued by slavery and oppression (Allen, 2005). The abolition of slavery with the 13th Amendment by President

Abraham Lincoln assisted in freed slaves having the right to proactively seek education, but they had very few options if they wanted to go to school. Higher education for African-Americans was a right that many were not afforded. If they were fortunate to obtain an education, the degree was from a Historically-Black College or University (HBCU). HBCUs were fundamentally created and funded by White people; some would say to perpetuate segregation (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). The 1830s emerged as a time when more educational opportunities became available for African-Americans: Oberlin College admitted African-Americans as early as 1835 and became the first institution to openly accept African-Americans. Cheyney University and Lincoln University, located in the state of Pennsylvania, were established to serve African-Americans, and ultimately became degree-granting institutions.

Subsequently, the first and second Morrill Acts, in 1862 and 1890, respectively, which provided funds and land for the establishments of public institutions in every state, resulted in more access to education for African-Americans. However, with the landmark Supreme Court case, *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, racial segregation continued to be legalized and the belief of “separate but equal” was established (Anderson, 1988). This case ultimately led to the Morrill Acts. Following that same ideal, White-serving institutions were given more funds and resources than those meant for African-Americans, thereby further dividing the financial access and support between universities with Predominantly-White and African-American serving institutions (Brown, 2001).

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) was a monumental Supreme Court ruling that changed the face of American history forever. The court decision not only desegregated schools, but outlawed segregation in public areas, as well. *Brown v. BOE* set a precedent for what was to be a historically, legally, and socially transformative time for the lives of many African-

Americans. The beginning of the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent Civil Rights Acts of 1964 were designed to “eliminate discrimination against African-Americans and other racial groups” (Brown, 2001, p. 49). The Act manifested itself in education because Title VI of the Civil Rights Act restricted funds to segregated schools and schools that discriminated based on gender, race, or national origin (Brown, 2001). Out of this struggle and much advocacy, laws and policies such as Affirmative Action sought to restore equality, not only in the workplace, but in higher education, as well.

Affirmative Action

Following the Civil Rights Act in 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson’s executive order mandated the use of Affirmation Action in employment decisions to rectify the long years of inequities in America (Niemann & Maruyama, 2005). Affirmation Action translated into higher education in later periods, but it was met with resistance and much opposition. The “establishment” sought to maintain the beneficial treatment given to White people. In years to follow, discrimination against women, African-Americans, and other minority and racial groups persisted. As the Affirmative Action policies were enforced, White women were the main beneficiaries, changing the purpose of Affirmation Action that was meant to racially diversify the workplace (Allen, 2005).

While it seemed as if the purpose of Affirmative Action was working steadily into the 90s, those who felt they did not benefit from the Affirmative Action programs started to challenge the policy (Allen, 2005). The term “reverse discrimination” was used to justify the elimination of such programs (Allen, 2005).

The *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* was a pivotal case that has had monumental implications for successive laws in California. Allan Bakke, a White male, claimed

he did not gain admission to the university because of Affirmative Action programs (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). Ultimately, the court ruled that race could be used in the pursuit of diversity, but restricted racial quotas (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). California and Texas became two of the first states to pass anti-affirmation action laws that created even more barriers to education and the academic and professional success for people of color. Unfortunately, the dismantling of Affirmative Action policies in these states decreased enrollment and degree attainment of African-Americans and Latinos (Allen, 2005).

More recently, two cases at the University of Michigan continue to challenge the existence of affirmation action in education. The Michigan cases filed in 1997, *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger*, involved undergraduate admission processes and the law school's admission policies. The plaintiffs, Jennifer Gratz and Patrick Hamacher, both applied for admission to the University of Michigan's College of Literature, Science, and the Arts for fall 1995 and were denied admission (*Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2003). Barbara Grutter, a White female, applied for admission into the law school for fall 1996, was wait-listed, and later denied admission. In the *Grutter* case, a 5-4 decision was upheld stating "the Law school had a compelling state interest in furthering diversity in its student body" (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003). Conversely, the 6-3 decision against *Bollinger* stated the following

An institution may deem race or ethnic background a "plus" in an applicant's file, so long as it examines the applicant's potential contribution to diversity without race being decisive..... No single characteristic may be decisive in the admissions process, including race. (*Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2003)

Robinson, Franklin, and Epermanis (2007) posit *Gratz* and *Grutter* draws on the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which was originally enacted to protect newly-

freed slaves. Moreover, states are not allowed to discriminate against citizens based on race. Nonetheless, both cases help to alleviate some of the contention about the use of race in admission processes, but haven't stopped individuals from challenging its effectiveness.

Recently, *Fisher v. the University of Texas at Austin*, 2013, illustrates the uncertain existence that Affirmation Action has in policy making. Another White person, Abigail Fisher, challenged the decision of the University of Texas at Austin after being denied admission. A lawsuit brought against the University of Texas in 2008 argued that Fisher's Fourteenth Amendment right to equal protection was violated. The implications of this case were grave as it would set a new precedent for how an Affirmative Action case would be viewed. The District Court and Fifth Circuit denounced Fisher's claims, but the Supreme Court in (*Fisher I*, 2013) felt that further review was necessary. Later, the Fifth Circuit upheld its original decision; the Supreme Court ruled 4-3 in acceptance of the university's policy.

Even with the addition of laws and policies, higher education is still plagued by "separate but unequal" (Allen, 2005). According the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's [NSCRC] report (2014), persistence rates among college students continue to slip as retention remains consistent. "The persistence rate is the percentage of students who return to college at any institution for their second year; the retention is the percentage of students that return to the same institution for their second year" (NSCRC, 2014, p. 1). Therefore, today's challenge to help African-Americans persist in college continue to affect PWIs as issues regarding racism, discrimination, academic performance, financial hardship, personal and social issues arise. (Harper, Patton, Wooden, 2009). Additionally, persistence of African- American college students is stalled by historical baggage and westernized ways of thinking that continue to perpetuate

systems of oppression (Banks, 2009; Delgado & Stefanic, 2012; Gusa, 2009; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Smedley, Myers & Harrell, 1993; Yoss, 2005).

Persistence of African-Americans in Higher Education

The persistence of African-American college students can be influenced by multiple variables. Tinto (1993) suggests that pre-college attributes, level of commitment for individuals' goals, and the institution affects one's ability to persist. Other research suggests that campus climate, which includes comfort and sense of belonging, contributes to retaining African-American students (Gloria, Robin Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009). Minority status stress and imposter feeling have also been shown to affect African-American students' ability to perform well in college (Cokely, McClain, Enciso, & Martinez, 2013; Greer & Brown, 2011; Smedley, Myers, and Harrell, 1993; Wei, Ku, & Yu-Hsi Liao, 2011). Additionally, dealing with racism, discrimination, and stereotypes continue to harness feelings of inferiority and discomfort (Fries-Bitt & Turner, 2001; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012; Solorzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000).

After conducting research with 356 full time freshmen at a PWI, Hausmann et al. (2009) found a positive effect on students' institutional commitment, intention to persist, and actual persistence came from a sense of belonging. For African-American students, the largest effect in actual persistence was their grade-point average (GPA) and a sense of belonging had the least effect (Hausmann et al., 2009).

Interventions must address the academic pressure and doubt African-American students feel while attending Predominantly-White Institutions. Additionally, stereotype threat impacts how African-American students feel about their ability to perform at a PWI (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Massey & Owens, 2014; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yossa, 2000). Johnson-Ahorlu (2013)

found that stereotype threat impeded African-American students' academic success because many of the participants felt pressure to overcompensate in fear of fulfilling the contextual stereotype. Cokely et al. (2013) highlighted that minority status stress affected African-American students more than Latinos and Asian-Americans. Confirming the prior research conducted by Smedley et al. (1993), minority status stress impacts the adjustment to PWIs for African-American students.

Banks (2009) asserted that "rather than affirm the cultural identities of students from diverse groups, however, schools in multicultural nation states often marginalize students from racial, ethnic, cultural, language, and religious minority groups" (p. 101). African-American students often feel isolated at PWIs and look for individuals that look like them or have similar cultural experiences (McCoy, 2014). Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso's (2000) qualitative study on racial climate and microaggressions with thirty African-American students state that racial microaggressions within academic and social spaces impact the academic and social life of students. Additionally, the lived experiences of the participants confirmed feelings of isolation, inferiority, and invisibility. Consistent with Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) and Pyne and Means (2013), findings suggest that invisibility for students of color exists on PWIs and is another form of colorblindness. Contrary to these results, Nora and Cabrera (1996) found that prejudice and discrimination do not have a large effect on persistence among minority students. Campus climates with the existence of prejudice and discrimination affect outcomes regardless of race (Cabrera et al., 1999). Nora and Cabrera (1996) and Cabrera et al. (1999) both point to the benefit of social supports in the persistence of African-American students.

Social Supports

Informal support systems or social support have been more widely utilized as a way to seek help among students of color. McBride Murry, Heflinger, Suiter, and Brody's (2011) study with rural African-American families discovered that caregivers reported comfortable feelings in seeking help from family. Racially and ethnically-diverse students find more comfort speaking with someone they know personally and who they perceive will understand their worldview (Brooks, 2015; Yaites, 2015). In a qualitative study, 11 Black men attending at a Historically-Black College shared that family played a significant role in their college success (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011). In particular, participants expressed a unique sense of support from their mothers. Similar to June, Pope Curry, and Gear (1990), finances were found to be a concern for African-American families, but students used this struggle to fight harder to persist (Guiffrida, 2005; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011). Carter (2000) studied 20 African-Americans who were college-attending and non-college attending to explore how social support systems impact academic persistence. Various forms of social support were investigated including family, school, and community. College-attending participants benefited greatly from having the support of churches and community organizations (Carter, 2000). Consequently, social supports reflected in schools did not garner the same level of benefit as family and community. This finding implies that treatment of African-Americans in schools has significant implications for this persistence in postsecondary institutions (Carter, 2000). Other research also confirms the benefits of community organizations and churches in the persistence of African-Americans making those resources a viable option when seeking assistance for struggling students (Blash, 2010; Hardy, 2015; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999; Grayman-Simpson & Mattis, 2013).

Research confirms that strong relationships with faculty also support persistence among college students. Tinto (1993) posits that formal and informal interactions with faculty influence student departure decisions. Lamport's (1993) review of literature on the benefits of student-faculty informal interaction highlighted that faculty support is represented in eight areas: 1) academic achievement, 2) satisfaction with college, 3) agents of socialization, 4) persistence and attrition, 5) classroom atmosphere and environment, 6) career and educational aspiration, 7) intellectual and personal development, and 8) interpersonal characteristics. This informal interaction can be paramount to a student's success, but students from diverse cultural backgrounds experience faculty interaction much differently. Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) stated that African-American students face challenges connecting with White-faculty members because of a perceived lack of cultural competence. White-faculty members are perceived as being less willing to help, and unrealistic roles models for African-American college students. Conversely, African-American faculty members had higher expectations of African-American students and was much more willing to go above and beyond to assist African-American students (Guiffrida, 2005a). Understanding the cultural norms of diverse students and their unique challenges can lead to better support, such as training or workshops for informal support systems especially on campuses where formal support is utilized less frequently (Ayalon & Young, 2005).

While Tinto's theory focuses on the social interactions within the campus environment, many researchers have focused on not only student-faculty interactions, but the support garnered from family, peers, and the community (Brooks, 2015; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Lamport, 1993; Maina & Burrell, & Hampton, 2001; Pascarella, 1980). Research conducted by Baker (2013) indicate that faculty interactions had a positive influence on academic performance of

African-American and Latino students which is consistent with Tinto's theory. Additionally, having faculty of color on campus with similar races to the students provide extra guidance and support for students (Baker, 2013). For African-American students attending PWIs, approaching faculty can be difficult; therefore, it is imperative that faculty become more responsive to the needs of diverse student populations.

Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, and Thomas's (1999) qualitative study with 22 African-American students at a PWI found apprehension or difficulty in facilitating a relationship with faculty, often leaving students without academic advising, classroom support, or career guidance. Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) suggest that students withdraw from the institution for emotional, social, and academic reasons. The longitudinal research also suggests that on-campus interventions to assist with persistence trends should be identified based on whether the student is struggling academically or not (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994).

Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, and Wilson (1999) conducted a study with 99 African American students at a PWI to assess the influence of social support, university comfort, and self-beliefs on persistence. Comfort was assessed using three variables that included: 1) perceptions of the university environment, 2) academic stress, and 3) cultural congruity. Family, friends, and perceived mentoring were used to define social support. Lastly, self-beliefs were measured by self-esteem, self-efficacy, and college self-efficacy. Results showed that African Americans that had higher levels of support, positive self-beliefs, and comfortable feelings in the university environment had more positive academic persistence (Gloria et al, 1999).

A qualitative study conducted by Brooks (2015) examined the perceptions of family structure, relationships, and support on African-American students' academic persistence. One of the findings detailed the importance of extended family that did not live with the student but was

a part of the family structure. Similar to Palmer, Davis, and Maramba's study (2011), great expectations from family to fulfill collegiate dreams were forms of encouragement (Brooks, 2015). Another theme that emerged from the research was a difference in relationships among parents and the student. The relationship often improved because of the student's educational endeavors (Brooks, 2015). Students also felt the need to detach when issues at home became overwhelming (Brooks, 2015; Guiffrida, 2006). Separation from the old is appropriate if constant contact with family could potentially hinder persistence (Tinto, 1993). Consistent with Tinto's theory of student departure, college counseling can be an outlet for students that need additional support.

College Counseling

Some colleges and universities create areas on campus that provide formal and informal support to all students including Counseling and Psychological Services, Multicultural Affairs, Women's Centers, LGBTQ Centers, and Academic Advising. Although African-American students are experiencing mental health issues, they are less likely to utilize formal means such as the counseling departments to address concerns (Kearney, Draper, & Baron 2005; Williams & Justice; 2010). Establishing areas on campus that support underrepresented students serve as an informal interaction or contact for those who need additional support. Moreover, African-American students find comfort in utilizing social supports such as family, friends, pastors, or advisors to assist with personal or academic needs (Ayalon & Young, 2005, Brooks, 2015; Hayward & Krause, 2015).

The counseling and psychological profession's main goal is to assist clients in changing bad behaviors, learning the decision making process, and preventing problems (Krumboltz, 1966). The American Psychological Association's [APA], 2016 state

Counseling psychologists' help people recognize their strengths and find resources to cope with everyday problems and adversity. Counseling psychologists focus on interactions between people and their environment, and on educational and career development <http://www.apa.org/careers/resources/guides/careers.aspx>.

The counseling departments at many universities employ professional psychologists and counselors to assist students who seek help. These roles can be defined as formal support systems or formal helping roles which include social workers and psychiatrists, as well (Willis & Depaulo, 1991, p. 351). Atkinson, Thompson, and Grant (1993) postulate that psychotherapy experiences are different across cultural groups; therefore, counselors must take on various roles such as advocates, advisors, consultants, or change agents. Herein lies the challenge that counseling departments face when trying to service all students on college campuses.

Professionals working in college counseling departments must be adequately trained and culturally-competent to work with diverse student populations. Both the American Psychological Association (APA) and the American Counseling Association (ACA) have instituted specific guidelines regarding the training and education of professionals in their code of ethics and standard competences. Although, the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (ACA) established the Multicultural Counseling Competencies, White counselors still did not feel confident in their ability to service diverse students (Malott, Havlik, Palacios, & Lewis, 2014). Particularly, African-American students experience different challenges while attending a PWI that warrant counselors who are prepared to work with this population. Unfortunately, regardless of professional experience, African-American students are still reluctant to utilize their services (Ayalon & Young, 2005; Nam et al., 2010). Research confirms that individuals tend to seek help from informal supports such as family, friends, spouse, or church figures

(Brooks, 2015, Constantine, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2003; Willis & DePaulo, 1991). Additionally, racially and ethnically-diverse students are less likely to use formal counseling services for various reasons (Hayes et al., 2011; Kearney, Draper, & Baron, 2005; Nam et al., 2010; Price & McNeill, 1992; Williams & Justice, 2010). Exploring the issues among college students further supports the need for formal and informal networks on campus.

Issues Among College Students

The National College Health Assessment (2015) administered by the American College Health Association surveyed 16,760 undergraduate students which represented 40 colleges and universities. NCHA reported that 36.1 % and 58.6% of college students felt depressed or anxious, respectively, anytime within a twelve-month period. The report also highlighted that over 50% of respondents were struggling with three or more issues: 1) pertaining to academics, 2) family problems, 3) intimate relationships, 4) finances, 5) personal health, 6) social relationships, 7) death of family or friend, 8) sleep difficulties, and 9) career very difficult to handle. Additionally, almost 43% of all college students reported feeling more-than-average stress in 2015. Although, the majority of the respondents in this particular report were 78% Caucasian, the research suggests that the same issues hold true for racially and ethnically-diverse student populations.

Constantine, Chen, and Ceesay (1997) conducted a year-long archival study using intake forms and questionnaires from racially and ethnically-diverse student seeking help from a counselor. The self-reported issues among the diverse students created implications for all counseling centers as it relates to cultural awareness in counseling. The study highlighted 48 mental health concerns with the top five relating to academic concerns, familial and romantic relationships, stress management and depression (Constantine, Chen, & Ceesay, 1997).

Consistent with the research, for racially and ethnically-diverse students, family dynamics can present both positive and negative effects (Chiang, Hunter, & Yeh, 2004; Constantine, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2003; McCoy, 2014). Consequently, stigma and cultural mistrust among African-American college students impact their help seeking behaviors.

Barriers to Seeking Counseling

Stigma, cultural mistrust, and stereotype threat are among some of reasons African-American students are hesitant about utilizing formal counseling services. The historical oppression and treatment of these students continues to influence perceptions of counseling services in the United States. Although counseling services are used as a resource to assist individuals in coping with mental health issues, the perception of counseling is quite different for African-American students. There are multiple factors that influence willingness to seek help such as level of comfort, counselor's cultural competence, previous knowledge about counseling, and encouragement from others (Yaates, 2015). Many researchers have discussed the influence of cultural mistrust in the counseling process by African Americans and how counselors can help clients feel more comfortable (Nickerson, Helm, & Terrell, 1994; Scott, 2015; Terrell & Terrell, 1984; Watkins et al, 1989; Whaley, 2001).

Terrell and Terrell (1984) surveyed 135 Black first-time clients to a community health center who were considered economically-disadvantaged. The participants were surveyed using the Terrell and Terrell (1981) Cultural Mistrust Inventory in addition to an intake interview to explore their level of mistrust of White counselors and the potential for premature termination. Forty-three percent of the clients that had White counselors prematurely terminated counseling services. Terrell and Terrell (1984) found that African-Americans, who are more mistrustful of their White counselors, had a higher premature termination rate in continuing counseling than

those who saw African-American counselors. Subsequently, the rate of return was low for those seeing White counselors which meant they went untreated for their particular issue(s). Although this study was conducted with non-college students, Watkins, Terrell, Miller, and Terrell (1989) confirmed that cultural mistrust translates to college students, as well. This study examined the effects of cultural mistrust on perceptions that Black students had of White counselors' credibility, ability to help, and willingness to continue sessions with the counselor. White counselors were considered not credible for highly mistrustful Black students (Watkins et al.1989). Thus, building rapport and establishing trustworthy relationship is extremely important for counselors working with African-American populations.

Nickerson, Helm, and Terrell (1994) found that cultural mistrust was the most significant predictor of not seeking help by African-American students. The higher the mistrust levels were of White counselors, the more negative attitudes students had about seeking help perceiving that it would be less relevant, impactful, and gratifying (Nickerson, Helms, Terrell, 1994). African-American students' attitudes toward counseling services are less positive than that of their White counterparts, and Caucasian students tend to utilize counseling services on college campuses at higher rates (Kearney, Draper, & Baron, 2005; Nam et al, 2010).

Whaley (2001) conducted a meta-analysis method to examine the relationship between cultural mistrust in African-American students and mental health service use while comparing cultural mistrust to other measures of psychosocial domains. The research found that African-Americans' mistrust of White people can occur in any setting including the counseling setting (Whaley, 2001). This finding supports a Caldwell and Obasi (2010) study with 202 African-American undergraduate college students from three Historically-Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and one PWI that explored the effects of cultural mistrust, educational

value, and achievement motivation. Higher levels of cultural mistrust had a negative impact on beliefs in educational value, motivation to achieve, and increased motives to avoid failure (Caldwell & Obasi, 2010). Kim, Kendall, and Cheon (2017) found that experience with racial microaggressions was associated with increased cultural mistrust and ultimately affected well-being in Asian-American undergraduate students. A study conducted with African-American adults examined cultural mistrust, help seeking attitudes, and racial identity that suggests that higher levels of cultural mistrust, anti-White attitudes, and high Afrocentric attitudes were indicators for Black counselor preference.

Stigma has also influenced help-seeking behaviors among racially and ethnically-diverse students. Stigma is one of the most cited reasons for underutilization of mental health services (Corrigan, 2004; Kearns, Muldoon, Msetfi, & Surgenor, 2015). Vogel, Bitman, Hammer, and Wade (2013) posit that public stigma is the general population's negative feelings or perceptions about people who seek mental health service leads to self-stigma. As defined, "self-stigma is the reduction in a person's self-esteem or sense of self-worth due to the perception held by the individual that he or she is socially unaccepted" (Vogel, Wade, & Hackler, 2007, p.41). Four hundred and forty-eight participants were tested to examine the relationship between public stigma and self-stigma. The study revealed that higher initial public stigma predicted higher self-stigma. The implications of this study suggest that public stigma is a direct barrier to help seeking and the development of positive attitudes about themselves. Corrigan (2004) suggests that stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination hinder people labeled as mentally-ill from living a holistic life.

Pattyn, Verhaeghe, Sercu, and Bracke (2014) conducted a study on self-stigma and public stigma and its effects on seeking formal and informal help. Seven hundred twenty-eight

participants were given vignettes describing schizophrenia or major depression. Surprisingly, fear of perceived public stigma limited informal help-seeking, and general medical practitioners received more negative attitudes from participants with higher levels of self-stigma than non-medical practitioners such as psychologists (Pattyn et al, 2014).

Mendoza, Masuda, and Swartout (2015) surveyed Latino college students to examine the relationship between mental health stigma and self-concealment. The study found that the higher level of mental health stigma indicated more negative attitudes toward help-seeking behaviors. Like Masuda, Andersen, and Edmonds' study (2012), older age was positively associated with help seeking attitudes but differed in that self-concealment was not related to overall help seeking (Mendoza, Masuda, & Swartout, 2015). Gender also impacted help-seeking attitudes while males were less likely to have favorable attitudes toward helping seeking, confidence in mental health professionals, and recognition of need (Mendoza, Masuda, & Swartout, 2015). These findings are consistent with other studies confirming men overall have a more negative attitude toward seeking help (Davidson, Yakushka, & Sanford-Martens, 2004; Nam et al., 2010; Vogel, Wade, & Hackler, 2007; Wahto & Swift, 2016).

Stereotype threat is another factor that can hinder the persistence among African-American college students. Massey and Owens (2014) posits that stereotype threat may happen when “(1) a negative stereotype exists about a social group in society, (2) members of that social group are aware of the stereotype, and (3) group members are required to perform in a domain where the stereotype is relevant” (p. 557). According to Steele (1999), stereotype threat can affect academic performance therefore African-American students may engage in “disidentification” which allows them to detach from the situation which is causing discomfort to stress (p.46). Steele and Aronson (1995) conducted extensive studies with African-American and

White males in an attempt to examine the role stereotype threat plays in the test performance of African-American students. The four experiments showed that when a negative stereotype was perceived about a group's intellectual capability, in this case, the standardized test performance was lower compared to their White counterparts (Steele & Aronson, 1995). In contrast, when the threat conditions were reduced, performance improved.

Scott (2015) researched the influence of stereotype threat on help-seeking attitudes. The study found no significant effect between stereotype threat and help-seeking attitudes, but some significance relevant to stigma tolerance, attitudes, and stereotype threat were present. The results found that African-American students experiencing stereotype threat had a lower tolerance for stigma as it related to mental health and mental health treatment and feared being stigmatized (Scott, 2015). Burgess, Warren, Phelan, Dovidio, and van Ryn (2010) suggest that stereotype threat exists in clinical setting, as well, and share six consequences of stereotype threat for patients. These consequences are 1) adherence to treatment through negative effects on performance expectations, inability to follow treatment instructions, and reduced motivation to follow through with recommendations, 2) communication can be impaired as stereotype threat increases the likelihood of anxiety and psychological distress, 3) patients may discount feedback in situations when threats are perceived, 4) disengagement can occur as patients try to avoid the possibility of experiencing potential threat which often results in missed appointments, 5) disidentification is a long term effect of stereotype threat and causes individuals to disassociate from the experiences or things that pose a threat, and 6) stereotypes are reinforced as patients may behave in way that are consistent with the stereotypes and providers may provide treatment based on these racial stereotypes therefore reinforcing them (Burgess et al., 2010).

Barriers to help-seeking behaviors results in some African-Americans not using formal means of support. Counseling departments must find creative ways to attract more students and share the benefits of their services. More importantly, counseling centers must ensure that their staff is adequately trained to meet the needs of diverse student populations (Atkinson, Thompson, & Grant, 1993). Stigma, stereotype threat, and cultural mistrust present potential concerns for providers working with African American students who need to ensure that they are adequately serving this population. Therefore, exploring theoretical frameworks such as Tinto's Departure Theory, Critical Race Theory, and the Behavior Model of Health Service Use can assist in explaining the behavior patterns and persistence trends of African American students.

Theoretical Frameworks

The three theoretical frameworks that guided this study was Tinto's Departure Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Andersen's Behavior Model of Health Service Use. These theories provided a foundational lens to view behavior patterns among African-American college students. Each theory highlights to the impact of educational, systemic, and structural barriers to African-American college students' success.

Tinto's Departure Theory

Tinto's (1993) departure theory has been one of the most widely used frameworks to explain students' persistence. Tinto's student departure theory (1993) states that the three main reasons students leave an institution are: academic difficulty, lack of social integration, and failure to establish goals. Figure 1 describes Tinto's model for student departure which outlines pre-entry attributes, personal goal commitments, institutional commitments, academic and social experiences, academic and social integration, and the resulting departure decision. Pre-entry attributes can be described as skills, financial resources, personal attributes such as race or

gender, pre-college experiences, or family and community background (Tinto, 1995). These attributes can impact a student’s departure decisions and directly relates to intentions and goals pertaining to future educational experiences (Tinto, 1993). A student’s commitment to an institution is connected to his or her intention and goals. Tinto (1993) suggests that available resources coupled with an individual’s intentions, goals, and commitments, determine educational continuance. The academic and social systems of an institution create an environment for interactive experiences. These social and intellectual experiences can enhance goal setting and attainment that impact a student’s persistence (Tinto, 1988). As outlined by the model, multiple factors can influence student departure decisions.

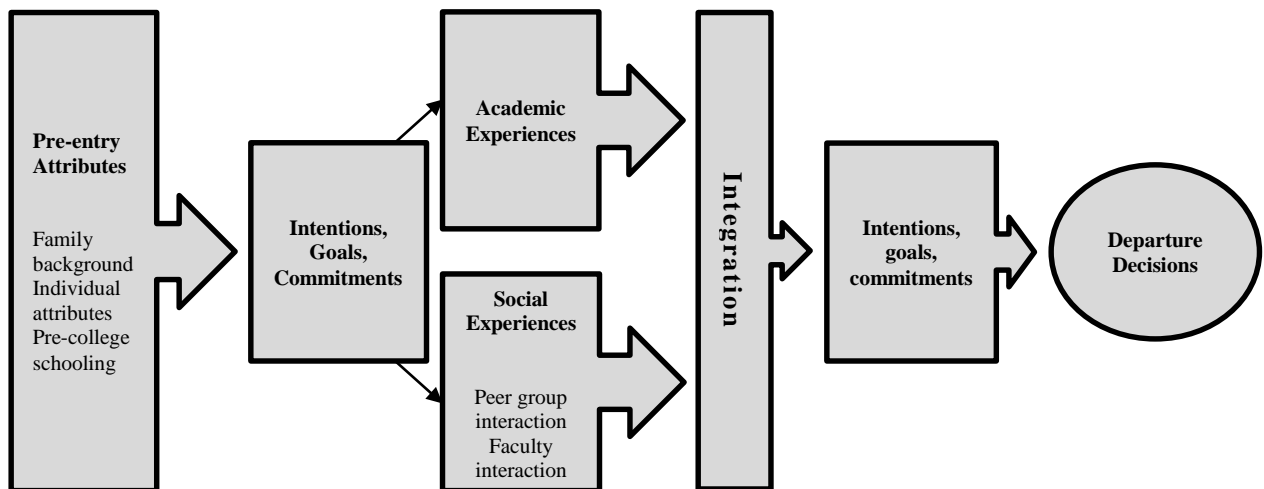


Figure 1. Tinto’s model of student departure. This figure shows the keys components that can influence students’ decision to leave an institution. Adapted from “*Leaving College: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition.*” by V. Tinto, 1993, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Adopted from Van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage*, Tinto’s stages of passage theory (1987) for college students include separation, transition, and incorporation, which entail leaving your past behind, interacting with the new environment, and ultimately assimilating into the new way of life. During separation, the student must disassociate with family, friends, and their local

community successfully to enter the transition phase. While in transition, the student hasn't quite adopted new norms and behaviors of their present environment, but has severed ties with the past. Tinto (1993) describes transition as "a period of passage between the old and the new, before full adoption of the new norms and patterns of behavior and after the onset of separation from old ones" (p.97). Finally, once a student is incorporated into the environment, new behaviors and norms are adopted (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1988) expanded upon this theory stating that transition happens over the course of a college student's career and is not restricted only to the freshman year. Tinto (1993) argued that during the separation phase, students must leave their familial ties behind to successfully integrate into an institution. This concept has been criticized as lacking sensitivity to cultural norms in the student departure process (Guiffrida, 2005; Guiffrida, 2006; Palmer, Davis, Marimba, 2011; Tierney, 1992). Research has found positive attributes connected with maintaining family ties while the child is enrolled in college (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, Wilson, 1999; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Guiffrida, 2005; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Palmer, Davis, Marimba, 2011).

Researchers such as Guiffrida (2005) and Milem and Berger (1997) have called for the revision of the so-widely-used theory. Guiffrida (2005) explains that Tinto's theory not only fails to account for cultural variables, but encourages detachment from one's culture. Ninety-nine African American college students from a Predominantly-White institution that represented leavers, low achievers, and high achievers were included in a qualitative study (Guiffrida, 2005). The study also took into account financial need of the participants. Guiffrida (2005) found that there were distinct differences among high achievers in regard to their persistence than low achievers and leavers. Low achievers and leavers reflected on the lack of emotional support

received by family and the extenuating family problems that resulted in the poor grades (Guiffrida, 2005). Lack of financial support contributed to additional stress and pressure on low achievers and leavers who wished their parents would have helped more (Guiffrida, 2005). High achievers reflected on a very different experience often citing emotional, financial, and academic support. Guiffrida (2005) study partially supports Tinto's (1993) theory as low achiever and leavers felt their inability to break away from the familial conflicts and establish connections on campus aided in their attrition. Although, the leaver and low achiever did not receive support from their family, the experiences of the high achievers suggest an update to Tinto (1993) is in order as understanding the cultural dynamics within African-American families present concerns for college persistence (Guiffrida, 2005).

Cabrera et al. (1999) found that regardless of race, parental encouragement and support aided in successful transitions into the academic and social systems of the institution, increased the likelihood of persistence, and helped with commitment to goals and the institution. Consistent with Tinto's (1993) theory as outlined by Cabrera et al. (1999), African Americans entered college with lower pre-college academic abilities. Additionally, African Americans had slightly lower GPAs than their White counterparts. This finding affirms Tinto's (1993) theory that pre-college attributes influence persistence.

Other researchers posit that a revision of Tinto's (1993) theory should include student learning and active coping as factors that affect social integration (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Bray, Braxton, & Sullivan, 1999). Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000) found that class discussions and higher-order thinking positively influenced social integration. Classroom discussions also positively influence persistence. Consequently, faculty and classroom engagement play a significant role in student departure trends. Active coping strategies suggest a

different implication for practitioners on campus. The greater the level of active coping, the lower the social integration for students which implies that students must be introduced to formal and informal support systems early in their college career (Bray, Braxton, & Sullivan, 1999). A revision to Tinto's (1993) theory must incorporate the additional variables that affect student departure.

Although some researchers have criticized Tinto's (1993) theory, others have validated either partial or most of Tinto's (1993) student departure theory. Flowers (2005) reviewed and synthesized literature from 1982 to 2002 on the variables that influences African-American college students' retention. Using Tinto's framework, Flowers (2005) organized the information reviewed by the components of the model, pre-entry attributes, goals and commitments, institutional experiences, and personal and normative integration. Based on the review of African-American student retention, Flowers (2005) supported and confirmed that Tinto's theory translated to African American students based on their perceptions of the institution and goals, their pre-college experiences, and their experiences while in college. More specifically, Flowers (2005) highlighted the results of Mallinckrodt's (1988) study, which supported the influence of social support at the institution as a predictor for persistence. Although Flowers (2005) affirmed Tinto's theory, recommendations about institutional policy, procedures, and campus services suggest that expansion of the theory is warranted. Elkins, Braxton, and James (2000) found favorable results in support of Tinto's theory. Support that includes family, friends, organizations, and churches had the largest influence on persistence among college students and students from minority groups who reported less support (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000). Similar to Guiffrida (2005), financial circumstances encouraged different levels of support received by college students. However, these finding did not align with Palmer, Davis, and

Maramba (2011) which found that support did not differ based on educational background and socioeconomic status. Moreover, Elkins, Braxton, and James (2000) further support Tinto's (1993) theory by acknowledging the "rejections of attitudes and values". Ultimately, the student who either rejected the values and attitudes from past communities or had the most support were more likely to persist (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000).

Formal vs. Informal Systems of Interaction

Tinto (1993) outlined the model of institutional departure which highlights areas of formal and informal integrations necessary for students to persist. Academic systems include academic performance (formal) and faculty/ staff interactions (informal). Wang (2013) found that when faculty showed interests in a particular student issue, they create a positive turning point in the student-teacher relationship, thereby resulting in greater interest in course content or praise of the faculty's teaching ability.

Social systems can include the peer group interactions (informal) and extracurricular activities (formal) that are also necessary for students to be successful in college (Tinto, 1993). Formal and informal interactions are naturally interwoven, which means working in a symbiotic relationship, affecting, complementing, and necessitating the other. Tinto (1993) stated that although a student's academic (formal) needs could be met; his or her social (informal) needs may not be satisfied, thereby resulting in departure from an institution. This distinction is important because research indicates that it is not solely academic performance that dictates a student's departure, but that students tend to leave college because of failure to integrate into the "social and intellectual" life of the institution and goal-setting inadequacies or failure related to education and future occupation (Tinto, 1993). Addressing the mental health issues related to

African-American students' persistence can ultimately prevent African-American students' departure from PWIs.

Expanding upon Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure and using formal and informal interactions, the same theory can be applied to counseling. Students utilizing formal counseling (counseling center staff) or informal counseling (faculty, staff, peers, or family) can also provide insight into how students perceive counseling and obtaining assistance for their problems. Tinto (1993) stated that although issues related to transition can affect a student's persistence in college, ultimately the student's response to those stressors determine whether one chooses to leave or stay. Consequently, acknowledging and understanding how African-American students choose to cope with specific stressors during their college careers can provide insight into how institutions of higher education can better serve this population.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) serves an analytical lens in which to view higher education due the many years of systemic oppression endured by African-Americans. Harper, Patton, and Wooden (2009) suggest that using critical race theory in the assessment of higher education policy gives opportunity to scrutinize, critique, and challenge the ways in which race, racist ideology, white supremacy, and meritocracy have impacted the experiences of African-Americans. CRT is used as an "epistemological and methodological tool to help analyze the experiences of historically underrepresented populations across the k-20 educational pipeline" (Ledesma & Calerdon, 2015, p. 207). Many describe CRT as interdisciplinary in nature drawing on perspectives from law, history, sociology, ethnic studies, and women's studies working toward social justice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1999). Critical Race Theorists believe the following tenets for central to the theory;

1. Racism is normal, not aberrational, “normal science, the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).
2. Interest Convergence acknowledges the benefits white people receive by fighting racism. Social Justice issues are important simply because it advance the interest of White people.
3. Colorblindness is an excuse to justify a post racial society. “Colorblindness leads to misconceptions concerning racial fairness in institutions; tends to address only the most blatant forms of inequality and disadvantage; and hides the commonplace and more covert forms of racism” (Harper, Patton, Wooden, 2009).
4. Critique of Liberalism calls for changes, but liberalism doesn’t allow for such improvements. The current legal paradigm impedes any progress because of the long, slow, and arduous process (Ladson-Billings, 1999).
5. Experiential knowledge provided by underrepresented people allows for the legitimacy of their stories and narratives and is critical to analyzing, understanding, educating about the racial inequities in education (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Stories, Narratives, Counter-Storytelling

The lived experienced of African-American college students is central to this phenomenological research study. CRT draws on the lived experiences through methods such as family histories, storytelling, parables, biographies, scenarios, chronicles and narratives (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Solorzano and Yosso state that CRT methodology in education challenges the research methods that not only distort the experiences of underrepresented people but is also critiques and analyzes the texts, theories, and paradigms used to explain the

experiences of people of color. Ladson-Billings (1999) highlights that although the story of ordinary people is not traditionally included in literature, they are still important stories. The power of voice strengthens legal discourse (Delgado & Stefancic, 2002). Three reasons “naming your reality” is vital legal discourse is 1) reality is socially constructed, 2) storytelling can educate the listener, hopefully changing one’s worldview, and 3) the storyteller is provided with an opportunity for self-preservation (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Storytelling is used as a cure for the silence; enabling the oppressed to become free and start to “debunk” the inaccurate information about the experience of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Ultimately, the voice in CRT becomes a vehicle to express the realities of the oppressed, understand the complexity of race, and to reform the judicial system (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Therefore, the voices of the African American college students in this qualitative study add to the narratives, which inform the literature about persistence trends among minorities.

Storytelling and Counseling

Trahan and Lemberger (2014) posits that using CRT as decisional framework when working with African-American clients can be very beneficial in the counseling process. Counseling departments with Predominantly-White staff who want to encourage more use of services must acknowledge the role race plays in help seeking behaviors among African-American college students (Hayes et al., 2011; Nickerson et al., 1994). Trahan and Lemberger (2014) suggest the use of the concepts of “interest- convergence, ordinariness of racism, and narrative storytelling” to engage in conversation with African-American clients about racism (p. 116). Narratives empower clients while giving the counselor insight into clients’ defensive behaviors and culturally appropriate patterns of communicating (Trahan & Lemberger, 2014).

Behavioral Model of Health Services Use

Andersen's Behavioral Model of Health Services Use serves as a conceptual framework in this study to better understand utilization trends of formal and informal supports in African American college students. Andersen (1995) explains that the original model was developed to "understand why families use health services, to define and measure equitable access to health care, and to assist in developing policies to promote equitable access (p. 1). Utilization of health services can be considered a form of individual behavior (Andersen & Newman, 1973). Rooted in behavioral science, individual behavior is viewed as a function of the characteristics of the individual and the environment in which one lives in addition to interactions of these individual and societal forces (Andersen & Newman, 1973). The model also accounts for societal determinants that affect individual factors directly and in the health service system (Bina, 2011).

Andersen (1968) explains the key components of the model as predisposing characteristics, enabling resources, and need. According to Andersen's model (1968), the three predisposing factors are demographics, social structure, and health beliefs. Demographic factors represent "biological imperatives" such as age and gender which suggest the possible need for health services (Andersen, 1995, p. 2.). Andersen (1995) indicates that social structure includes coping strategies, physical environment, education, occupation, and culture. Health beliefs are the attitudes and values individuals have about health services with influence their desire to seek help (Andersen, 1995). Enabling resources are entities that are available to individuals that choose to seek health service such as access to professionals and facilities, insurance, and financial support (Andersen, 1995). Pahl, Brook, Zhang, and Brook (2014) expanded this component of the model by adding a barrier to use of health services, which would be an opposite of enabling factors. Perceived need is influenced by how an individual views their own

general health and its severity that might warrant health service use (Andersen, 1968). Andersen (1995) posits the social structure and health belief often determine need. Subsequently, the model has been modified over the years to include outcomes and environmental factors (Aday & Andersen, 1974; Andersen, 1995; Andersen & Newman, 1973). As seen in Figure 2, Andersen’s Initial Behavior Model, the predisposing characteristics, enabling resources, and need ultimately influences an individual’s use of health services.

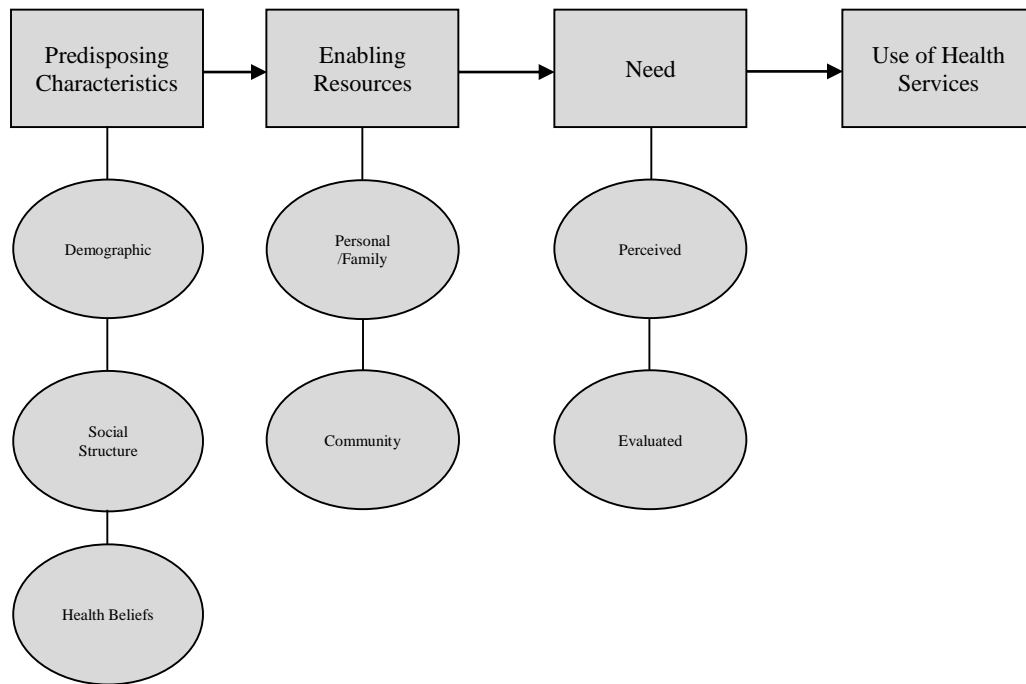


Figure 2. Robert Andersen’s initial behavior model. This figure highlights the factors that influence help-seeking behaviors. Adapted from “Revisiting the behavioral model and access to medical care: Does it matter?” by R. M. Andersen, 1995, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 36(1), 1-10.

Behavioral Model of Health Services Use primarily focuses on the use of formal services provided by physician care or hospital care (Andersen, 1968). Therefore, Pescosolido (1991) and Bina (2011) expanded the model to include informal services such as family, friends, and the community. Pescosolido (1991) suggests that social networks influence how individuals recognize health problems, seek health services, and ultimately adhere to recommended health care.

Network ties are described as any social support contacted during an “illness episode” (Pescoslido, 1991, p. 172).

The Network-Episode Model focuses on the societal factors that impact help seeking behavior and can be considered dynamic in nature because it allows for flexibility in the decision-making process (Bina, 2011). Ultimately, health service use is determined by an individual's’ culture, social network, how information is gathered and evaluated based on access to service, perceived need, and the perceived ability of health services to provide help (Pescoslido, 1991). Bina (2011) suggests integrating the two models as the Behavioral Model of Health Service Use accounts for societal norms in the decision-making process, while the Network-Episode Model outlines the use of social networks as a means that supplement formal professional health services. Figure 3 shows the integration of both models specifically adding the social factors (informal networks) and the subsequent outcome if services are utilized.

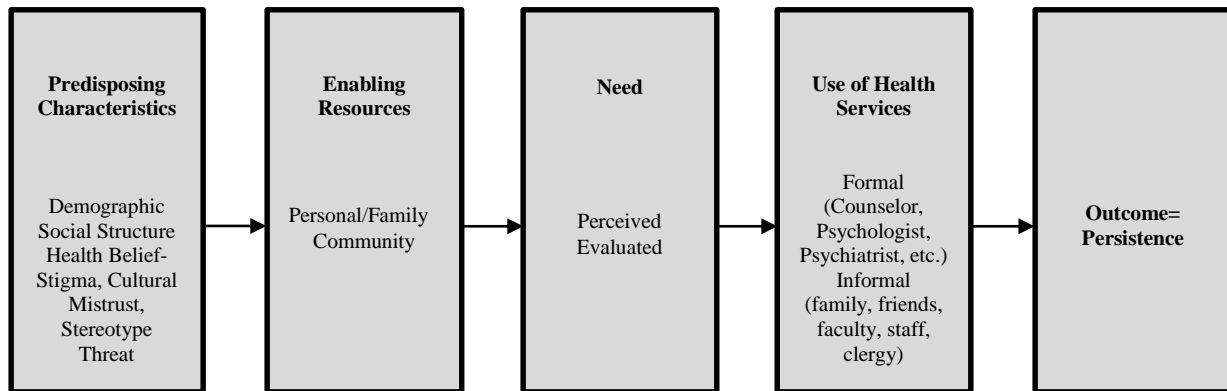


Figure 3. Initial behavior model. Displayed with application to using informal counseling practice with African American College Students. Elements added onto the model based on the Network-Episode Model. Adapted from “Illness careers and network ties: A conceptual framework of utilization and compliance.”, by B. Pescoslido, 1991, *Advances in Medical Sociology*, 2, 161-184.

Summary

The review of literature summarizes and analyzes published articles and research on college persistence among African-American college students. As reported by Tinto (1993), there are various reasons college students do not persist, but the connections students formed with faculty and peers can significantly impact their college experience (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Lamport, 1993; Pascarella, 1980). Although evidence supports the use of social supports to assist African-American college students (Constanstine, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2003; Guiffrida, 2006; Norberg et al., 2013; Tinto, 1993), there is still very little evidence which shows the impact of informal support on persistence from various on-campus staff members, not including faculty. Therefore, an investigation into informal supports outside of the classroom would add to the existing literature on African-American college students' persistence and retention patterns. Additionally, this research can potentially enhance best practices when working with African-American students.

The next chapter will focus on the methodology used in exploring the impact of informal support systems on the persistence of African-American college students. The chapter will also outline the research design, setting, pilot study, research procedure, data collection, and data analysis.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Students entering college with mental health issues have steadily increased (The Association for University and College Counseling Center Director Annual Survey, 2013). The study done by the American College Health Association using the National College Health Assessment (2015) indicated that over 35% of students experienced depression and 55% of students experienced extended periods of depression and anxiety, respectively. As campuses continue to diversify their student population, the number of racially and ethnically-diverse students enrolling with existing issues has increased as well (Anderson, 2013). While students with mental health issues have grown, the students seeking help in formal settings within counseling departments has not (Davidson, Yakushka, & Sanford, 2001; Duncan & Johnson, 2007). African-American college students are less likely to use formal means of counseling and report feeling more comfortable talking with a friend or family member about their problems (Hayes et al., 2011; Nordberg et al., 2013). The purpose of this study was to investigate African-American college students' perceptions of formal and informal support systems, as well as, to explore the impact of informal counseling on the persistence of African American college students at two Predominantly-White Institutions.

This chapter presents the methodology used in this study. Research design and procedure, data collection and analysis, institutional setting, participants, and limitations are described in this chapter.

Research Questions

The literature review presented in chapter two revealed that African-American college students are using various means of support systems when faced with issues. Although the research confirms the usage of informal support systems, such as family, friends, and faculty; there is limited research which outlines the impact of informal counseling on persistence of African-American students at PWIs. Therefore, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the perceptions of African-American college students toward formal and informal counseling on Predominantly-White college campuses?
2. What experiences have African-American college students had with informal counseling?
3. How do informal counseling practices impact the persistence of African-American college students?

Research Design

A qualitative study was conducted in an attempt to answer the research questions. Through a series of open-ended questions, used during individual and focus group interviews, the researcher was able to capture the personal experiences of each respondent. Qualitative research allows the researcher to report their understanding of culture through fieldwork (Maanen, 1988). Detailed information from a smaller sample of participants increases the depth of understanding in qualitative research (Patton, 2002). Conducting a qualitative study on African-American college students allows for greater understanding into their experiences at PWIs and how that experience influences their use of formal and informal counseling services. Patton (2002) stated that qualitative data collection methods such as observation, reviewing documents, and interviews provide deeper meaning and understanding into the participants'

world, while quantitative data offers a limited perspective. The strength of qualitative research relies on the power of words not numbers, which focuses on an inductive approach (Maxwell, 2005). A phenomenological approach to inquiry was utilized to conduct this research because phenomenology further seeks to explain how people describe and experience life through their own senses (Patton, 2002). Additionally, the shared lived experiences of African-American college students are explored using this methodology.

Phenomenological research explores the meaning of everyday experiences (Van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic or existential phenomenology is a “human science” considered to be reflective in nature (Van Manen, 1990, p. 6). Rich description of the experience is essential to phenomenology, but hermeneutic phenomenology allows for interpretation of the meanings behind the experiences of the participants (Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological methods guided this study commencing with bracketing. Bracketing involves the researcher putting one’s own biases and beliefs aside that could limit the research (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing is useful when establishing validity of data collection and analysis; therefore, bracketing was achieved through reflective journaling and note taking throughout the process (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). Data collection is also critical to the phenomenological approach. In hermeneutic phenomenological research, interviews are used to gather experiential information to deepen the understanding of a human phenomenon and it is used to develop a “conversational relation” with the interview (Van Manen, 1990, p.66). Successful interviews garner meaningful descriptions, which are defined as “the language used to articulate the intentional objects of experience” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 89). Analysis of the data in phenomenology seeks to find the essence of the lived experience and make meaning of that lived experience in the research. Data analysis methods for this study are presented below.

Population

The researcher specifically chose to interview African-American students because of the influence race has played in the historical landscape of higher education, and the hesitancy of African-Americans exhibiting symptoms of mental distress to seek treatment from college counseling centers (Davidson et al, 2004; Masuda et al., 2009). Furthermore, the research settings provide an adequate population of African American students for potential participation in the study. The persistence of African-Americans is worthy of exploration as many institutions of higher education grapple to find additional resources to assist this population. Informal counseling methods can provide a viable option to increase persistence rates.

Upon gaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the researcher contacted the advising department at Institution A to inform them of the study. This department provided specific services for first-generation college students; it serves a large number of African-American students through their summer program. The department has historically served underrepresented populations including African-American students through their ACT 101/EOP program.

The director provided the researcher with contact information for students that are coded as African-American in the reporting database. The researcher worked directly with the Applied Research Lab at Institution B to obtain the names of students who identified as African-American. A formal invitation to participate in the study was sent to all African- American students via email, outlining the purpose of the study, the research procedures, time frames and participants' roles within the study. Interested participants were instructed to respond to the researcher within seven business days from the date of the original email. Students were asked to engage in face-to face interviews that included focus group interviews and/or one-on-one

interviews. Students could choose to participate in both interview phases or choose one in which he or she felt most comfortable. Academic year level was a factor in the selection process because only sophomores, juniors, and seniors were included in the study. An exploration of student persistence, from sophomore year, could explain the factors that aided in their persistence from year to year. Individual interviews were conducted with males and females from each year level and students could also identify as transgender on the demographic information form (Appendix A).

Focus groups were utilized to further explore beliefs about counseling services at a PWI. Three focus groups were conducted with a total of 13 participants. This process helped the interviewer avoid bias and to provide comfort to the individuals participating in the study. Participation in the focus groups was completely voluntary and was based on participant availability. Students who choose to participate in focus group interviews were asked to complete a non-disclosure confidentiality form. The purposeful random sampling approach was homogeneous in nature because the study focused on African-American students, but when used in focus groups allowed the researcher to understand the phenomenon from those individuals' perspectives based on gender and year level.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted, shortly after IRB approval, to establish reliability and validity of the interview protocols, and to allow the researcher to become acquainted with the art of interviewing in both settings. Focus group interviewing can be a powerful tool in gathering large amounts of information but has limitations, which include time constraints, group management, and taking notes (Patton, 1987). The researcher was able to assess the time allotted for interviews, to employ various means of audio recording information, to practice taking field

notes during observations, to probe through questioning, and to analyze data. These components proved to be vital when conducting the actual research.

First, a panel of professionals in the field of psychology/mental health and supportive services areas in higher education reviewed each interview question to establish consistency and validity of the questions being posed. Each question was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “very strong to “very weak”. Based on the panel’s expert opinion and relevance of the interview category to the study, questions were revised or eliminated from the interview protocol.

Subsequently, the researcher piloted the interview protocol with five African-American students from Institution A who were not able to participate in the actual study. These students demonstrated the ability to participate in the two-phase process of interviews based on their schedules. All preliminary contact with the students was made via email and then students were contacted by phone to schedule interview times. Talking with the students on the phone served as an initial opportunity to practice establishing rapport with the study participants. Thereafter, focus group interviews were scheduled via email with multiple options from which to choose. Focus groups allow for interaction within group members and schema development geared toward solving a problem (Mertens, 2005). The researcher observed whether the interviewee had difficulty answering the questions and asked for feedback on the interview questions. Based on the participants’ feedback, questions were removed or revised to meet the study’s objectives. Piloting both interview methods could uncover other patterns and trends related to the research that would have otherwise gone unnoticed (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Research Procedures

The researcher developed a demographic information form (Appendix A) for all participants to complete before interviews commenced. The information gathered included cultural background, gender, academic year level, and use of formal or informal counseling. The demographic information collected represents the independent variables in the study that further assisted in identifying trends within the data. The interview protocol was developed by the researcher to further understand the overarching themes in the study. Common threads of information that reoccurred throughout the literature review were reflected in the themes. Based on a thorough review of the literature, the themes of the utmost importance to the research that guided the interview questions were:

1. Perception of counseling services
2. Cultural influences on counseling
3. Persistence of African American students
4. Utilization of informal counseling practices
5. Help-seeking behaviors of African American students

A holistic approach was utilized in facilitating data collection for the research study. By the nature of the research, attention was given to the location of the institution, the interview setting, time of year, background of the participants, and cultural factors. Data collected from the interviews was of the utmost importance. Utilizing various sources of data assisted in establishing credibility of the study and provided a foundation for data triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Mertens, 2005).

After receiving the requested documentation, the researcher emailed all students requesting their participation in the research study. Students who were interested in participating

were instructed to reply to the email and provide a phone number for contact. All students were contacted via phone or email to clarify the purpose of the study, and to schedule face-to-face interviews. Via email, study participants were asked to select one of the predetermined focus groups sessions that met their availability. The researcher also shared that participation in the study was voluntary and the student could end their involvement in the study at any time.

Before commencing the interviews, participants were given a consent form to complete. All forms were then coded to identify each participant using the respondent's first initial, last initial, gender, year level, and interview date. For example, if the student's name was George Wallace, sophomore, and interviewed on May 12, 2016, the form was coded as (GWM2-5/12/16). Identification codes were used on all subsequent documentation when referring to this participant. To prepare the interview setting, the researcher arrived at the location an hour in advance. This act allowed the researcher to arrange the chairs appropriately, check for lighting issues, check audio quality in the selected space, ensure privacy, and place amenities in the room such as tissues and water. Gorden (1992) states that providing a comfortable setting with props increases the willingness of the respondents to talk. Participants were also reminded that all interviews would be voice-recorded and transcribed later to ensure accuracy.

An in-depth interviewing approach using open-ended questions and follow-up statements to get a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' experience guided the interviews (Patton, 1987). Additionally, the researcher utilized a general interview guide approach that included the list of predetermined questions. Patton (1987) stated that this style of interviewing allows for free exploration of topics and works well during group interviews. Semi-structured interview approach allowed for the use of open-ended questions and consistency while the participants' responses guided the interview through their own narrative (McCann & Clark,

2005). Individual and group interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes in length and member checking was facilitated through follow-up meetings. McCann & Clark's (2005) use of the aide-memoire, which is a broad guide of main issues, assisted in ensuring that pertinent topics would be addressed during the interview. Although semi-structured interviews can be difficult to code and analyze, this approach offers rich data in the topic being studied (Noonan, 2013; Smith & Osborn, 2007). The researcher was mindful of body language, non-verbal communication, and voice tones during the interview (Mertens, 2005). Annotated notes were taken which assisted with follow up questions and probing (Patton, 2002). The researcher was also aware of her reactions and feelings during the interview and thus recorded this information, as well.

Table 1

Sample Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Question
1. What are the perceptions of African-American college students toward formal and informal counseling on Predominantly-White college campuses?	<p>A. How would you define informal counseling or explain what you believe is informal counseling?</p> <p>B. How would you define formal counseling or explain what you believe is formal counseling?</p> <p>C. Describe your feelings about counseling.</p> <p>D. Tell me about the counseling services offered on campus.</p>
2. What experiences have African-American college students had with informal counseling?	<p>A. What makes you feel comfortable when talking with someone about your issues or problems?</p> <p>B. Describe whom you feel most comfortable talking to when faced with an issue or problem.</p> <p>C. Who helped you get through hard times during your college careers?</p> <p>D. What individuals on campus have played an instrumental role in your persistence or success in college? Why?</p>
3. How do informal counseling practices impact the persistence of African-American college students?	<p>A. Who do consider support systems for you to succeed?</p> <p>B. When do you feel you are the most successful in school? Why?</p> <p>C. Recall a time when you felt supported the most? What factors aided in that feeling?</p>

Data Analysis

Data analysis is an important process in qualitative research. Data retrieved from the institutions were analyzed to discover common threads in the information that related to the themes identified in the review of literature. Mertens (2005) suggests that data analysis happens in levels when in the field from initial analysis of patterns, logic, and commonalities to final analysis after all information gathering have ended. Patton (2002) stated that phenomenological analysis “seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people” (p.482).

The first step in phenomenological analysis is epoche (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche requires that the researcher refrain from judgment and stay away from the normal way of perceiving a situation (Patton, 2002). Next, the researcher consciously engages in bracketing by working to dismiss judgments and biases. All transcribed interviews were read multiple times to become familiar with the narrative. Annotations are made on the margins to identify important and significant information (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In attempting to find meaning in the stories, some parts of the interview may warrant more commentary allowing for summarizing, paraphrasing, making connections, and initial interpretations (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Patton (1987) stated that “inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of the analysis comes from the data: they emerge out of the data rather than being decided prior to data collection and analysis” (p. 150). Smith and Osborn (2007) recommend rereading transcripts after preliminary annotations to document emerging theme titles.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) uses three strategies to uncover or isolate themes, holistic or sententious, selective or highlighting, and detailed or line by line (Van Manen, 1990). The selective method requires reading the text multiple times while deciding

which statements or phrases are essential about the phenomenon, therefore this approach was used for this study. NVivo, a computer software program for qualitative research, was used to organize emerging themes with key statements that described the phenomenon. Overarching concepts developed from clustering of themes that correlate with the participants' narratives (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In the next phase of analysis, a chart was created that outlines the clustered themes followed by subordinate themes and identifiers which makes it easier to find the original sources of information within the text (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Each transcript was analyzed separately to identify major themes, while using the first chart created as a standard to identify new emerging themes. Finally, all charts with the clustered themes and subordinate themes are compared to find recurring patterns in the data. Smith and Osborn (2007) suggest that the researcher must recognize the similarities and differences in the participants' narratives. Themes of the utmost importance are selected based on the richness of the data and not necessarily the prevalence within the transcript (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Ultimately, the final themes were transformed into narrative accounts of the participants' experiences that include verbatim examples from the transcripts.

Interpretative analysis involves making sense and creating meaning of the data collected during the research study (Patton, 1987, 2002; Mertens, 2005). Data triangulation was used to analyze the various sources of information collected from the beginning to the end of the research study to establish credibility in the research. Member checking by asking participants to verify that the transcriptions adequately reflected their thoughts assisted in determining validity in the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Mertens, 2005). The interpreted data reflected the narratives of the African-American students attending a Predominantly-White campus and helped to establish a phenomenological explanation of their lived experiences.

Summary

This phenomenological study explored the impact of informal counseling on the persistence of African-American students at two Predominantly-White campuses. Interpretative phenomenological analysis identified commonalities in sources of information, patterns, and themes that lead to further understanding of the phenomenon being researched. The next chapter focuses on an analysis of research findings and the implications for exploring informal counseling practices at other institutions.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION OF DATA

The purpose of this study was to investigate African-American college students' perception of formal and informal support systems as well as to explore the impact of informal counseling on the persistence of African-American college students at two PWIs. Both institutions are public post-secondary institutions with Predominantly-White faculty, staff, and students. Located in rural and suburban settings, each institution offers Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral degree programs in a variety of majors. Additionally, both institutions have counseling departments staffed by licensed psychologists to assist students with mental health issues.

Formal counseling is defined as the utilization of sources such as a counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist for perceived mental health issues (Wills & DePaulo, 1991). Conversely, informal counseling utilizes sources in the form of friends, family, clergy, faculty (classroom/non-counselors), and/or staff members. In an attempt to investigate the participants' shared experiences as African-Americans attending a two PWIs, semi-structured individual and focus group interviews were conducted to answer three research questions:

Question 1. What are the perceptions of African-American college students toward formal and informal counseling at Predominantly-White institutions?

Question 2. What experiences have African-American college students had with informal counseling?

Question 3. How do informal counseling practices impact the persistence of African-American college student?

Participants

The participants' demographic information and the emerging themes that came from the narratives in relation to the three research questions. The participants in this study were enrolled at two PWIs. Institution A is located in the eastern part of Pennsylvania while Institution B is located on the western part of the state of Pennsylvania. According to the demographic information form (Appendix A), all of the participants identified as African-American or Black. There were eight males and fourteen females that represented various educational class levels ranging from second-year (sophomores) through fourth-year (seniors). Demographic information for all participants is reflected in Table 2 which displays the gender, age, year level, residency, and formal counseling experiences of the participants. Institution A represented 68% (n=15) of the total participants that included three sophomores, seven juniors, and five seniors. Institution B included one sophomore, four juniors, and two seniors that represented 32% (n=7) of the total participants. The majority of the participants identified as residing in urban environments. Additionally, 77% of participants were Pennsylvanian residents.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Characteristics	Institution A N=15	Institution B N=7
Gender		
F	11	3
M	4	4
Age		
< or =21	10	5
> 21	5	2
Year Level		
Sophomore	3	1
Junior	7	4
Senior	5	2
Residency		
Out of State	4	0
PA	11	7
Formal Counseling Experience		
Yes	8	3
No	7	4

Note: (Information obtained from participant demographic form (Appendix E) and researcher contacted participants after the interviews to obtain age information.)

Meet the Participants

The descriptions below give insight into the background of each participant based on the information provided on their demographic forms. Additionally, information from both individual and focus group interviews are shared based on the participants' experiences with formal or informal counseling.

Eve (I-1). Eve is a senior from suburban setting in Pennsylvania. She is a Hospitality Management major who has never had an experience with formal counseling, although there were times that she could have used formal counseling services from the university. Eve has used informal counseling with friends and family that understand her worldview because they make her comfortable when seeking support.

Ashanti (I-2). Ashanti is a junior from suburban, Pennsylvania. Her major in Communications. She's had experience with formal counseling, but did not see the value in the resources until she got older. She relies on her mother and friends when seeking support. Due to her on campus involvement, Ashanti has been exposed to faculty, staff, and administrative support that she feels comfortable talking with about issues.

Rick (I-3). Rick is a transfer student from an urban setting in New Jersey. His major is Social Work. He has utilized formal counseling, but his family is his primary source of support during difficult times.

Mazie (I-4). Mazie is a transfer student from an urban setting in New Jersey. She is a major Biology. Although Mazie believes she could benefit from formal counseling, she has never utilized the services on or off campus. She suggests that counseling preferences are based on cultural differences, and counseling professionals need to be diverse in their race, as well as knowledgeable.

Tasha (I-5). Tasha is a transfer student from an urban setting in Pennsylvania. She is majoring in Hospitality Management. Tasha has never utilized formal counseling and turns to her boyfriend or mother for informal counseling. Her previous institution was a PWI and she believes that a feeling of community among African-American students is important to their overall success.

Josh (I-6). Josh is a senior from an urban setting in Pennsylvania. He is majoring in Communications. He has relied mostly on his family members for support throughout his years in college. Josh has utilized formal counseling on and off campus to address issues of mental wellness. He believes that formal counseling can be helpful if an individual trusts the process.

Cory (I-7). Cory is a junior from an urban setting in Pennsylvania. He is majoring in Political Science and has used formal counseling services on campus. He did not find the service helpful because he did not feel like the counselor could relate or understand him. Cory believes that barriers to help-seeking behaviors among African-American students stems from mistrust of counselors who do not understand their worldview.

Ashley (I-8). Ashley is a junior from an urban setting in Pennsylvania. She is majoring in Pre-Dentistry. Ashley has found comfort and stability by joining an honors fraternity. Ashley explains that her only experience with formal counseling was through a class assignment with a graduate student. She explains that she does not like to talk about her feelings, but if she needs to do so, she will talk with a close friend. Ashley is the only participant that participated in an individual and focus group interview.

Blake (I-9). Blake is a senior from a suburban setting in Pennsylvania. He is majoring in Human Resource Management. He is graduating from the Honors College at his institution. He has been able to make faculty connections through his program. These connections afforded him the opportunity to seek their guidance and support. Although he has never used formal counseling, he sees formal counseling as a positive support for students, but chooses to seek advice from friends.

Megan (I-10). Megan is a sophomore from an urban setting in Pennsylvania She has not declared a major. She has experienced formal counseling when she was younger, but she is afraid to use counseling services on campus due to lack of understanding. Therefore, Megan has developed a bond with her roommates and utilizes them for informal counseling. Her issues with trust have impacted her help-seeking behaviors.

Focus Group 1

Focus group one was conducted at Institution A. There were 5 African-American students that participated in the interview. The participants in this interview shared that having faculty and staff that care about them impacts their persistence on campus.

Margaret (P-1). Margaret is a junior majoring in Health Education from a rural area in Pennsylvania. She has utilized formal and informal counseling in the past, during difficult times. Her experience on campus has been positive because of faculty and staff members encouraging her to keep going forward.

Jaelyn (P-2). Jaelyn was a senior from an urban area in Pennsylvania. Her major was Athletic Training; she graduated in December 2017. She struggled to get full support from her academic department, which was comprised of mostly White professionals. Jaelyn has experienced formal and informal counseling, but still believes relying on family and friends is her best mode of support.

Jessica (P-3). Jessica is a junior from an urban area in Pennsylvania. She is majoring in Social Work and expressed that she has used formal counseling services on campus. Her experience was impacted by her level of comfort with the counseling psychologist. The perceived lack of cultural understanding by the counselor caused her to discontinue her sessions. Jessica stated that she feels most comfortable talking with her sister and grandma about her issues.

Tyrone (P-4). Tyrone is a junior majoring in Theater from an urban area in Pennsylvania. He is currently in the Honors College at his institution. Tyrone has used formal counseling in the past and expressed feeling more comfort doing so because his family member had previous experience using formal counseling. He has also relied on informal counseling through faculty

and staff members on campus. As an active student leader, Tyrone believes his ability to get involved in student life has assisted in his persistence in college.

Robbie (P-5). Robbie is a Theater major from an urban area in New York. He described his struggles within his academic department as an African American student. Robbie has never used formal counseling and shared that he believes males are less likely to seek counseling because of the stigma associated with it.

Focus Group 2

Focus Group two was conducted at Institution B. There were two African-American students that participated in the interview. Ashley also participated in an individual interview. During this focus group the participants shared how the racial climate impacted their experience on campus.

Michael (P-1). Michael is a junior History major from an urban area in Pennsylvania. He has used faculty and staff as support systems, and has sought counseling from them when he needed help. He is also active in the local church and expressed that having spiritual support has assisted many African-American students on campus.

Ashley (P-2). Ashley is a pre-dental major from an urban area in Pennsylvania. She expressed using her friends as a support system because she believes formal counseling would not be helpful when dealing with issues related to emotions and feelings. Ashley is the only participant that participated in an individual and focus group interview.

Focus Group 3

Focus Group three was conducted at Institution A. Six African-American students participated in this interview. The participants in this focus group shared that racial representation in counseling impacted help-seeking behaviors.

Malcolm (P-1). Malcolm is a sophomore from an urban area in Pennsylvania. He is majoring in Sports Management. He has never used formal counseling services, but believes that counseling services need to be more accessible to students. He wants his institution to make more of an effort to hire faculty and staff of color.

Bianca (P-2). Bianca is a sophomore from an urban area in New York. She is a Psychology major that participates in many student organizations on campus. Bianca has not used formal counseling, but believes students are more likely to use formal counseling if the environment is comfortable and inviting. She believes her role as a mentor for others provides additional support for new incoming students.

Erica (P-3). Erica is a junior majoring in Psychology from a suburban area in Pennsylvania. She is a member of the gospel choir on campus, and has not utilized formal counseling, even though members in her family have used it. She believes racial representation in counseling is instrumental in help-seeking behaviors in African-American students.

Josie (P-4). Josie is a senior from suburban, PA majoring in Psychology. She shared that she experienced formal counseling during a devastating time in her life when her father passed away. Her experience with the counseling center on campus was not positive, but she persisted because of her interactions with friends.

Halle (P-5). Halle is a senior from an urban area in New Jersey. She is majoring in Social Work. She indicates that she has used formal counseling on her demographic form (Appendix A), but she did not talk about her experience during the focus group interview. Halle finds a sense of community by participating in the gospel choir. She wants to be treated like an individual, and not as a person of a particular race. Halle believes that actions speak louder than words to show students that you truly care about them.

Sarah (P-6). Sarah is a sophomore from an urban area in Pennsylvania. She is majoring in Psychology. She does not have experience using formal counseling and shared that her family, in particular her mother, provides a tremendous amount of support for her while she is in school. Sarah described that faculty play an important role in students feeling comfortable academically. Being a source of support for other students on campus is something she aspires to do.

Table 3

Individual Interview Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Institution	Year	Gender	Major	Residency	Formal counseling
Eve	A	Sr	F	Hospitality	Suburban, PA	No
Ashanti	A	Jr	F	Comm.	Suburban, PA	Yes
Rick	A	Jr	M	Social Work	Urban, NJ	Yes
Mazie	A	Sr	F	Pre-med	Urban, NJ	No
Tasha	B	Jr	F	Hospitality	Urban, PA	No
Josh	B	Jr	M	Comm.	Urban, PA	Yes
Cory	B	Jr	M	Political Sci	Urban, PA	Yes
Blake	B	Sr	M	HR Mgt	Suburban, PA	No
Megan	B	Sr	F	Undeclared	Urban, PA	Yes
Ashley	B	Jr	F	Pre-Dental	Urban, PA	No

Note. Sr=Senior; Jr=Junior; F=Female; M=Male; Comm = communications; HR Mgt= Human Resource Management

Data Collection

A qualitative research approach was used to understand the shared experiences of 22 African-American students attending two PWIs. Qualitative research allows the investigator to make sense of an event or a series of events, interpret, or explain a phenomenon (Mertens, 2005). Maxwell (2005) explains that qualitative researchers are interested in the processes that led to a particular outcome. In this study, the researcher sought to explore the impact of informal counseling on the persistence of African-American students.

Semi-structured individual and focus groups interviews were used to collect data about the participants' experiences at their respective institutions. Ten individual interviews and three

focus groups were conducted to answer the aforementioned research questions. Utilizing a semi-structured approach ensures that important topics and issues are covered during the interview (Mertens, 2005). While individual interviews allow for the participant to freely share their feelings without interruption, the use of focus group provides opportunity for interaction between participants that may have similar experiences (Mertens, 2005). Additionally, participants' demographic information, the individual interviews, focus groups, and the researchers' field notes were used to triangulate the data. Data triangulation is used to minimize the risk of bias, and provide a broader understanding of the situation or issue. (Maxwell, 2005). The following section describes the participants in the focus groups.

Two focus groups were conducted at Institution A, with a total of eleven participants. Table 4 and Table 5 displays the demographic information for the participants in each focus group. Pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy of the participants.

Table 4

Focus Group 1

Name (Pseudonym)	Institution	Year	Gender	Major	Residency	Formal counseling
Jaclyn	A	Sr	F	AT	Urban, PA	Yes
Robbie	A	Sr	M	Theater	Urban, NY	No
Margaret	A	Jr	F	Health Ed.	Rural, PA	Yes
Tyrone	A	Jr	M	TV/Film	Urban, PA	Yes
Jessica	A	Jr	F	Social Work	Urban, PA	Yes

Note. Sr=Senior; Jr=Junior; F=Female; M=Male; AT = athletic training

Table 5

Focus Group 3

Name (Pseudonym)	Institution	Year	Gender	Major	Residency	Formal counseling
Sarah	A	S	F	Psychology	Urban, PA	No
Malcolm	A	S	M	Sports Mgt	Urban, PA	No
Josie	A	Sr	F	Psychology	Suburban, PA	Yes
Halle	A	Sr	F	Social Work	Urban, PA	Yes
Erica	A	Jr	F	Psychology	Suburban, PA	No
Bianca	A	S	F	Psychology	Urban, NY	No

Note. S = Sophomore; Sr =Senior; Jr = Junior; F = Female; M = Male

The table highlights the residency of each of the focus group participants. Reflected in Table 4, only one participant, Robbie, did not have any experience with formal counseling. Although he had never experienced formal counseling himself, he expressed that he believes there are benefits to seeking formal support. Table 5 highlights that out of the six participants, two students had experience with formal counseling as seniors. Josie shared that she was very depressed after her father died; therefore, she sought formal counseling to assist her during that time. She did not have a positive experience, and stopped attending sessions after two visits. She shared that she received more support from friends that would be considered informal support systems.

Table 6 reflects the only focus group conducted at Institution B, which included two participants. Both participants expressed very different experiences as African-American students on campus. Michael was involved in mostly African-American student organizations, while Ashley was only involved in an Honors fraternity that is mostly White. Ashley feels that the African-American students “stay to themselves” and White students are “scared of how to talk to African-American students”. Ashley believes White students’ lack of socialization with African-Americans hinders them reaching out to African-American students on campus.

Conversely, Michael’s perception is that White students “don’t even reach out to talk” and “they don’t let us talk about our struggles”, therefore African American students choose not to talk to them.

As shared by the participants, Institution B has experienced issues related to racism and discrimination. Both participants shared that these incidents affected the Black community, and impacted their persistence at the institution due to unfair treatment in the classroom and by White peers. Both participants questioned the possibility of leaving the institution during their time on campus.

Table 6

Focus Group 2

Name (Pseudonym)	Institution	Year	Gender	Major	Residency	Formal counseling
Ashley	B	Jr	F	Pre-Dental	Urban, PA	No
Malcolm	B	Jr	M	History	Urban, PA	Yes

Note. Jr= Junior; F=Female; M=Male.

While exploring the shared experiences of the participants through individual and focus group interviews, emerging themes became apparent throughout the narratives of the participants. The themes not only directly related to the theories guiding the research, but they begin to tell the story of the participants and their experiences as students at a PWI. Question one sought to understand the perceptions related to seeking help from formal and informal sources. The answers to these questions gave perspective into reasons some students use or choose not to utilize counseling resources on campus. The themes that emerged out of research question were stigma, perceived need, trust, and cultural understanding. Research question two explored the shared experiences of the participants using informal counseling as a support system. Themes that surfaced from this question include friends, family, spiritual influence, faculty and staff.

Research question three investigates the impact of informal counseling on the persistence of African-American college students. Caring and racial representation in faculty and staff developed throughout the narratives as major sources of impact for African-American students' experiences on a PWI.

Results of Research Question One

What are the perceptions of African-American college students toward formal and informal counseling at two Predominantly-White institutions? Stigma, perceived need, trust, and cultural understanding emerged as themes from the participants' narratives regarding their perceptions of both types of counseling services. The students shared their concerns regarding formal and informal counseling as it pertains to help-seeking behaviors as a student of color within their communities. Overwhelmingly, stigma presented was a consistent roadblock for students to access and to utilize formal counseling resources. As shown by Table 7, the emerging themes permeated throughout the participants' narratives in over half of the sample. The letter I represents the individual interview and the letter P represents the focus group participants with the number corresponding the actual participant.

Table 7

Superordinate Themes – Perceptions of Counseling

Strategic Theme	Individual Interview	Focus Group (1)	Focus Group (2)	Focus Group (3)	Present in over half of sample
Stigma	I-3, I-4, I-6, I-7, I-9, I-10	P-2, P-5	P-1	P-1, P-3, P-4	54.5%
Perceived Need	I-1, I-2, I-4, I-5, I-6, I-7, I-8, I-9, I-10	P-1, P-2, P-3, P-4, P-5	P-1, P-2	P-1, P-3, P-4, P-5, P-6	95%
Trust	I-1, I-2, I-3, I-4, I-5, I-6, I-7, I-8, I-10	P-1, P-2, P-3, P-4	P-1, P-2	P-3, P-4	77%
Cultural Understanding	I-1, I-4, I-5, I-6, I-7, I-8, I-10	P-1, P-2, P-3, P-4, P-5	P-1	P-1, P-2, P-3	72%

Note: Codes refer to participants in the study, i.e. I= Individual interview participants, P= focus group participants, number assigned to each specific participant.

Stigma

Stigma has been cited in the research as having a negative influence on help-seeking behaviors (Crawford, 2011; Vogel et al., 2013; Vogel et al., 2007). As described by Andersen's Behavior Health Service Use Model (1995), predisposing health beliefs such as stigma can prevent individuals from seeking health services. Corrigan (2004) posits that the potential for misaligning cues about a patient further perpetuates mental health stigma. In African-American communities, stereotyping can lead to misdiagnoses, and ultimately decrease help-seeking behaviors (Moskowitz, Stone, & Childs, 2012). Further, African-American college students, who exhibited mental health stigma, had less favorable attitudes toward seeking help in a professional setting. (Masuda et al., 2012).

As the narratives developed from each of the participants, key themes emerged as the students described their feelings about formal and informal counseling. One of the major themes that emerged from the data was stigma related to help-seeking behaviors; in particular, when seeking formal support. During an individual interview, Mazie shared “I have never been diagnosed with anything; just because you know it’s a stigma just going to the doctor, and if you are diagnosed with something it just follows you”. The stigma prevented Mazie from seeking help, although she described that she needs professional help to deal with her episodes of depression and anger. Blake shared the following:

I think I personally feel like counseling just could be really, really, helpful. But, like people like are like hesitant to use it *cuz* maybe like a stigma to it like... going to a therapist whatever people might think like oh like what's wrong with you whatever but I honestly think mental health like a huge thing that needs to be addressed.

He further went on to say:

Yeah, it’s kind of like I guess a negative but not in like a horrible negative sense like you don’t want to be shamed but people are probably *gonna* be in the back of their mind like ‘oh this person oh they need help or like depressed or whatever.

Another participant, Josh, not only felt nervous about formal counseling because of stigma, but he also minimized his symptoms for fear of being stigmatized. He ultimately sought help for his problems, and had a good experience.

Kearns, Muldoon, Msetfi, and Surgenor (2015) posit that students’ perceptions of counseling impact help-seeking behavior, and stigma was significantly higher when students had a strong connection to the institution, as well as previous exposure to suicide and help-seeking. Therefore, Josh choose to initially forego counseling; this behavior shows the impact stigma

plays in seeking help, but his involvement on campus also influenced his fear of stigmatization on campus.

Perceived Need

One of the first steps to seeking help is having an awareness that a problem or issue exists (Prins, Verhaak, Bensing, & van der Meer, 2008). After interviewing the participants, it was apparent that the perceived need for mental health care significantly influenced their help-seeking behaviors. Prins, Verhaak, Bensing, and van der Meer (2008) stated that an individual will seek help based on their perceptions of their health or belief about what is happening to them. “Perceived need for mental health care is a person’s awareness that something is wrong, that what is wrong relates to his or her mental health, and that professional assistance is necessary to overcome it.” (Villatoro, Mays, Ponce, & Aneshensel, 2017, p.2). As described by Villatoro, Mays, Ponce, and Aneshensel (2017), perceived need is a form of self-labeling, which explains how individuals view their mental health. In this study, overwhelmingly significant responses from the individual participants and focus group participants described instances in which formal mental health care was necessary, but they chose not to solicit that care.

The majority of the participants shared that when they actually spoke to someone about an issue or a problem, it was not necessarily perceived as an issue that warranted help from a professional counselor. Often, participants keep their issues to themselves saying that either the problem wasn’t “a big deal” or that they “could deal with the issue on their own”. Eve shared:

Yes, I feel like I would go to a friend first, and then if I felt like my issue was something that my friends couldn’t help. And sometimes I do feel like that but I don’t take the extra step to go to counseling because I’m just like, oh well. I just don’t.

Eve went on to say:

I feel like maybe it's just personally I don't make the time or the effort to I just kind of say well it's just what I am going through, it's just going to pass. It always does, I have never felt to the point where I really need to go and if I don't go I'm going to lose it. Or I can't handle this. I'm usually just able to get past whatever it is without having to do that. And maybe that's just my way of dealing with it. I've always thought about it, I've just never gone through with it (formal counseling) for whatever reason.

Eve described many instances, including the recent death of her grandmother, where she may have benefited from formal or informal counseling, but she never sought that kind of help to work through those tough times.

Others shared their tendencies to "push through" on their own as they felt their issue wasn't serious enough. Ashley shared:

But if it's like something like really like sad or something dramatic happen, I'll most likely lock myself in my house and like just like be like to myself and like cry it out *cause* I don't cry in front of people like it's a thing.

Josh said, "I'll minimize and be like oh it's not that serious; I shouldn't like use up their resources for something that's not that serious." He also shared:

Ummm. I don't know. I guess I just fight through it a little. Like I have natural tendencies just to fight stuff. So, it's kind of like if I feel like there is something standing in my way, I just figure out how to get it out of my way or get around it. I *def* (definitely) would say I push through.

All of the participants that did not see their issues as serious or felt that they must deal with their issues on their own, either did not perceive need for help or did not feel comfortable seeking help. Two male participants shared that masculinity within the African-American community is

an issue that prevents men from seeking help. In the African American community, the perceptions about mental health are that males are supposed to be tough while battling whatever problems that arise (Williams & Justice, 2010). Therefore, the male participants in this study used informal counseling as their primary resource to deal with their issues.

In many instances, the majority of participants did not recognize the need to seek help, and have also struggled with trust issues that prevented them from doing so. The next section gives voice to the shared experiences of the participants that describe the importance of trust when building and sustaining a relationship.

Trust

The next theme emerged as trust/mistrust in the formal counseling process among the participants. Their perceived level of trust aided in help-seeking behaviors, while mistrust halted any attempt to utilizing counseling resources, especially formal sources such as the counseling department. Verhaeghe and Bracke (2011) define trust as “the belief that service providers will care for them properly, and that the providers will be competent and honest, and pursue the interest of service users, and protect private information.” (p.2). Brown, Calnan, Scrivener, and Szmukler (2009) posit that the uncertainty, vulnerability, and anxiety associated with mental health care can impede trust building. Trust is essential to positive outcomes and continued health services use (Brown, Calnan, Scrivener, & Szmukler, 2009). Therefore, trust emerged as a negative perception of formal counseling that prevented the majority of the participants from seeking help or continuing treatment using formal counseling.

The majority of the participants in the study explained that trust is important in a formal and informal counseling relationship while the majority of the participants shared that feeling comfortable with an individual aids in their ability to seek help. Family members and friends

were cited in all interviews as being the people that can be most trusted with sensitive information. Students that developed relationships with faculty and staff felt comfortable enough to seek out help from these individuals because trust was established, and in more than half of instances, the individuals were also a person of color. Malcolm explained:

Just because I do know her interests... is just to make sure that...one of her duties is to make sure that all the people, mostly the colored people, and other races are.... her job is to make sure that they succeed because I know that if I tell her something she's going to go out of her way to help me find the answers and help me go find the right person to talk to... so I always go that her.

The participants in all three focus groups shared that they felt like they could trust professionals of color on campus because they may have had similar experiences. They also felt this aided in the faculty or staff member's identification their experience as African-American students attending a PWI. Michael said "I think it has to do with people just wanting to connect with people that look like them, and go through the same things as them". This shared experience has allowed students to not only connect with faculty and staff of color, but trust them even more, in Predominantly-White spaces.

Additionally, three participants in focus group three shared that "action speaks louder than words". Therefore, if a faculty or staff member took an active interest in them by checking in on their progress, participating in student protests, or showing that they cared, these acts helped to build trust, even if the person was not of color. As the students shared their narratives, cultural mistrust was highlighted as a deterrent from seeking counseling from formal sources.

Cory stated:

African-Americans don't trust anybody. And, it doesn't matter, they don't trust blacks, whites, they don't trust anybody. They feel that everyone is out to get them, and it is because we are left in these communities where so much is going on and nobody is helping.

Townes et al. (2009) found that cultural mistrust prevents Black clients from continuing counseling relationships with White counselors. Cory tried formal counseling, but discontinued using the service because he did not feel like he was being understood, and that trust wasn't established. Similarly, Megan shared, "I already have trust issues, and have a hard time believing what other people say. So, it's just like going to a counselor here; I just think it's going to be a waste of time". She explained that her trust issues prevented her from initially embracing a counseling relationship with a White counselor. Subsequently, the counselor expressed a real concern for her well-being, and it made Megan continue with the sessions.

Yeager et al. (2014) shared that concepts of mistrust develop in adolescents of color as they try to determine whether institutional systems, such as schools, can be trusted.

Inconsistencies in fair treatment and acts of bias among communities of color, perpetuate mistrust of individuals who may not identify with these experiences. Fear of stigma, coupled with deficiencies in trusting relationships, impacted the use of formal and informal counseling services on and off campus. Additionally, fear of being misunderstood due to lack of cultural competence also influenced participants' views of counseling services.

Cultural Understanding

Cultural competence is defined as "the capacity of practitioners and health services to respond appropriately and effectively to patients' cultural backgrounds, identities and concerns"

(Kirmayer, 2012, p. 251). An individual's perceived level of understanding of the students' experiences was critical in determining who the participants talked to about issues and problems. Participants at both institutions highlighted that there were no professionals of color that worked in the counseling center, and argued that hiring staff of color is necessary for African-American students to feel comfortable using the formal counseling services.

Friends and peers were referenced the most when asked whom the participants turned to when faced with an issue. The participants shared that their friends would most likely understand what they might be going through, so it made it easier to seek help or advice from them. Similarly, knowing someone may come from the same neighborhood or city, and identified with the same race, impacted their decision to seek informal and/or formal counseling. Ashley said:

My two best friends here. They are like the only two that I go to and talk to. I think I can talk to other people about stuff, but like it just seems like they don't care, so I'm just like why would I even waste my time?

Eve mentioned, "I can talk to my best friend about my relationship with my parents because she has a similar relationship with her parent. So, when I'm talking to her about it, she understands what I'm saying." Eve further went on to say:

Somebody of color I can say that I am able to explain a situation on racism, and they'll just get it. But, so can she (referring to a non-person of color), she just gets it because she gets it. It's not race but maybe that person of color has gone through it, so maybe they know what I mean.

Participants also shared that the lack of cultural understanding prevented them from using, or continuing to use, the formal counseling services on their respective campuses. Understanding the experiences of African-Americans was important to these students, as they

felt that the counselor should have some knowledge about their struggles and experiences as an African-American. Erica expressed:

We go to a black counselor so you can... a black family counselor who can understand where we're coming from as African-Americans, because I don't think any of us really want to talk to a white person, because I don't think they really understand when we say we deal with micro aggressions, or like you know self-image, or something like that they couldn't understand, they would be like.... oh why?

Mazie described that the difference in cultural experiences may prevent a counselor from fully understanding the client. She shared:

“The thing is that there is a lot of cultural differences. So, a black person's problems won't be the same as a white person, or an Asians, or a middle eastern. So, a lot of the times, when I do see a counselor, they are just white, so it's just like you might know about this issue or kind of understand it, but you haven't experienced it for yourself, so you don't really know how to deal with it probably.”

The perceptions of counseling among the participants varied depending on the type of counseling. Although the students felt like counseling could assist, most of them did not have a positive experience using formal resources. Informal counseling practices through family, friends, faculty, and staff were the most commonly used support systems for all students that participated in this study. Stigma, cultural understanding, perceived need, and trust were the main themes that emerged from the research, as student expressed their feelings about using formal and informal counseling, or not using these resources to persist in college. Research question two explores the participants' experiences with informal counseling. Utilization of this resource manifested in the form of family, friends, religious influence, faculty and staff.

Results of Research Question Two

What experience have African-American college students had with informal counseling? Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1993) highlights the importance of a student's integration into the college environment. Peer and faculty interactions are specifically connected to students' sense of belonging, and can lessen the likelihood of a student leaving the institution (Locks et al, 2008; Tinto, 1993). While interviewing the participants in the study, it was apparent that many of them used informal counseling daily because they shared various times when they talked with family and friends about a problem and shared the commonality of relying on family and friends to provide the support when they had academic issues or relationship problems. Table 7 displays the experiences the participants had with informal counseling. Previous research studies confirm the importance of family in the college transition process (Constantine, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2003; Gloria et al., 1999; Gloria et al., 2005). Participants also shared stories about friends, pastors, faculty and staff who assisted them during difficult times while in college. Initially, the participants did not recognize that they were engaging in informal counseling practices, however, they were able to describe their experiences, and how it has benefited them.

Table 8

Types of Informal Counseling

Type of Informal Support	Participants' Comments
Family	There was a lot of support from my friends and family because they were helping me do it. My mom like giving me random ideas of "try this!" and like no I can't do that at school (I-2)
Peer/Friend	I feel like a lot students rely on each other for that especially through the mentoring program. (FG-3, P-2) So like there is no limits right now because they showed me that I can fully trust them and like we all confide in each other but at first there was limits and now there's not. (I-8)
Faculty/Staff	I really looked to my advisors a lot and I'm lucky to have good advisors on campus because there's always a debate on good and bad advisors but I feel like mine are really good. (I-1) Yeah and especially for the organizations and what not I guess he is like the godfather. Cause we all go to him on his problems and stuff and just to navigate how the school is run and their whole situation and he's always a big help. (I-6)
Spiritual/Religious	You're supposed to go to church go anywhere but counseling. I don't know why but that's a thing in the black community that's something I was raised on. (FG-2, P-1).

Family Support

Family support was critical in the persistence of the participants. When asked, "describe whom you feel most comfortable talking to when faced with an issue or problem?", all of the participants mentioned that family or friends were used as a resource to get through an issue or problem while in college. Even though a family might not be necessarily close, the connection that students had with their families provided a level of comfort that a formal resource could not

give. Trust was already established with family, in addition to a sense of familiarity, because family could understand their world view. Michael described his relationship with his parents:

I just like... I tell my mom and dad everything that happens up here. I guess I'm one of those people. I tell my dad and mom everything because you should. I'll call my dad like at least twice a day; my mom once a day.... I guess when I do ask for help, it's just talk to them about the problems sometimes.

In his individual interview, Rick described his family as a tight unit that relies on each other for support. He shared that this family also have a group chat so they can have daily check-ins with one another. He also said:

Yea, our family is close. We talk about everything, but as far as like feeling like down and out, that wasn't an option because our grandfather was, my grandfather basically struggled as he raised 5 children, so just like you know, we had to be able to handle all of the issues by ourselves.

Many of the participants specifically referenced their mother when seeking help. Rick, shared that his mother provided him with advice, and encouraged him to fight through his issues. Similarly, Ashanti relied on her mother for advice, but said she would not talk to her mother about relationship issues. She saved those conversations for her friends, as she felt like they would understand her more. Megan reflected on the respect she has for her mother because she is a single parent. Watching her mother struggle makes her want to fight even harder to finish college. She explained:

My biggest support is my mom because she has been going through the same things I am going through now. The biggest difference is that she didn't go to college until she was in her 30's, so it's just like, 'she know'... what I am talking about, she know the struggle of

every class and stuff. So, seeing my mom as a single parent, raising two kids without any college education, and just the high school diploma behind her, is very sad but, very strong at the same time.

Megan also talked about the bond she has with her younger brother. She uses him as a support system as well, and wants to be a successful role model for him. Similarly, Josh spoke about the bond that he shared with his older brother, who also attended the same institution. In many instances, his brother was a support system for him. “My mom kind of told us that she wanted me and my siblings to be close so that we would kind of talk to each other about stuff that we weren’t really comfortable talking to her about yet.”, shared Josh. He attributed the closeness that he has with his siblings to his mother, because she encouraged them to be a support system for each other.

For the participants, maintaining relationships with family at home was just as important as making connections with peers on campus. As highlighted in the narratives, it was the connections with friends and peers that help to navigate stressful situations. Ashanti shared, “I guess last semester when I ran for a position. Um, I felt lots of support from friends. Um definitely because I was very... like not too sure myself and there was a lot of support from friends to get me through it.”

Friends/Peers Support

Friends and peers were highlighted within the interviews as a source of support as well. The participants laughed, cried, and shared their experiences with their friends, most of the time. This was the case, not only because there was a level of comfort, but friends could more easily relate to their issue or situation. Baker (2013) found that African-Americans and Latino students used peer support for issues not related to academics, and found that positive relationships with

faculty resulted in academic success. Tasha described her experience attending a small PWI before transferring to her current institution. She was faced with many challenges transitioning into her new environment, and felt like the institution provided her with very little support to be successful. Tasha's experience at her previous institution points to the important role that faculty can play in decreasing attrition. She struggled to find a faculty or staff member that could guide her and therefore found support in her peers. Tasha's experience began to improve once she started to establish a friendship with another student, who was experiencing the same things. They helped each other get through some tough times. She recalled, "we were living together... I think that kind of started to make me feel better cuz I wasn't like by myself all the time". Tasha feels much better in her new environment, but wishes she would have had an opportunity to develop relationships with other students from different races. Nagasawa and Wong (1999) posit that ethnic subcultures, and social networks, allow students to find a "niche" on campus, which helps "its members meet the social and academic demands of college" (p. 82). Therefore, the likelihood of survival within the college environment is increased. The formation of subcultures, specifically in higher education, among students of color, creates a community of support (Tinto, 1987).

Blake explained one situation in which he really needed to discuss an issue with a friend. Ultimately, he felt better as he could talk to someone who knew him well. He expressed:

Like a month-and-a-half ago, and my one friend and I...we talked like an hour it was about like...I was like about a bunch of stuff and it was more of you know like a life talk, and we were just talking for an hour about something you know, and got everything off my chest, and he like did his best, like to help me out the best he could. Like yeah, I

didn't get the answers I exactly wanted, just being able to talk about it made me feel a little better. Like I felt better after that talk.

Each participant described wanting to share his thoughts with someone else, or on occasion, have an opportunity to vent. In some cases, the participants were very particular about what information they shared with certain people. Two participants used their boyfriends as sounding boards for many of their issues, while also saying that they did not feel comfortable talking to their mothers about certain problems. Jaclyn stated:

My boyfriend because in him knowing who I am, and how I am, he also gives me that perspective that I know my mom wouldn't give me. That I know my sister wouldn't give me. He sees, he's been through plenty of things that I know I haven't been through, and I've gone through things that he hasn't gone through, and his perspective is always with my best interest in heart, but he's not afraid to tell me 'you're wrong'. Like, I know my mom; she'll sugar coat like 'oh you sure you want to do that?' like my mom's a big sugar coater but he's flat out no, that's wrong. You really should think about it. You really should take time yourself to think, and he'll give me other options and he'll let me create other options, he'll let me talk it out and really let me figure things out on my own. Um, so I would say that if anything the first person that I would probably call is him.

Networks, created by students of color, aid in their survival on campus because it creates a comfortable community environment. In all three focus groups and 8 out of 10 individual interviews, the participants spoke about the need to feel comfortable around their peers and the importance of community amongst African-American students. "We don't really have it on campus so we have to be there for each other.", stated Cory. Bianca also shared, "it not just all what you're familiar with so that fact that we can come together on our culture, on what we feel

like is home for us and create that community atmosphere here within ourselves.” Community was created through student involvement activities, serving as mentors to others, academic connections such as honors programs, or on campus employment. These types of networks serve three purposes that include: 1) assisting with the integration in the academic and social dynamics of campus life, 2) helping mediate the social and academic demands of a collegiate environment, and 3) creating a community-like environment for its members. The participants in this study, confirmed that the sense of community created among their peers aided in their persistence, as well as their survival, at a PWI. “The only thing I will say is just that like the sense of community that we have even though we do have our issues and we are doing stuff the sense of community is really really helpful because even when it’s not big racial incidents.”, described Josh.

In addition to family and peer support, the reliance on God, religion, and spirituality also influenced help-seeking behaviors among the participants. The next section describes the participants’ informal experiences with religious influences.

Religious/Spiritual Influence

Blash (2010) found that spiritual and religious beliefs played a significant role in African-American students navigating their college environment. Faith in God and active prayer was used as a means to elicit encouragement and strength to make it through hard times in college (Blash, 2010). Further, students that experienced racial discrimination on campus used prayer to cope with stress-related issues (Hayward & Krause, 2015). Throughout the conversation with the participants, the influence of religion within one’s life played a role in their help-seeking behavior. One participant, Michael, specifically used his pastor as a mentor and a confidant. Expressing that he had similar interests as his pastor, hoping to attend seminary school after

graduation. Others referenced prayer as a form of counseling, as it allowed them to talk to God.

Josie mentioned that she believed prayer healed her more than seeing a formal counselor.

Michael explained:

The only way you can really cope with it is to just go to church and pray, and actually pray out loud, not in your head... don't be doing that I know people that do that. You have to speak out loud that's how you actually pray.

He further went on to say:

I always say... always lean back on my faith, just keep faith that God's going to get you through to the promised land that's what every... I think that's what everyone kind of thinks of as far as what helps them get through.

African American communities have used God and prayer as a means of coping without seeking professional help (Robinson et al., 2018). Students who are connected to their faith, will also forego seeking support and resort to prayer (Blash, 2010). As Rick stated, “you basically bottled it up and just deal with it. You know? Just um, time will heal it something like that, or you just pray to God that it would go away, stuff like that.”

The Black church has historically been a lifeline and major support system within African-American communities (Hardy, 2015; Robinson et al., 2018). African-American students, attending institution B, were highly-connected to the two local Black churches in the area. There is a sense of community and comfort established because many of the African-American faculty and staff attend those churches as well. Two of the participants shared that attending church gives them easy access to those professionals if they need to talk. Church dinners allow student to have the face time they need with, not only faculty and staff, but other African-Americans that live in the area. The church community recognizes its importance in

these students' lives, and has adjusted their ministry schedule to benefit students. Therefore, most programs and events are planned when the students are on campus.

The perceived religious support allowed the participants to use this entity as a resource through community prayer, worship, and faith. The location of the churches, to both institutions, benefitted the students, while creating an opportunity for continued engagement. Additionally, the involvement of faculty and staff in similar religious and spiritual activities further strengthened the students' connection to church, and the faculty and staff who are represented there. The narratives shared by the majority of the participants further supported the importance of interactions between faculty and staff with students inside and outside of classroom as described by Tinto (1993).

Faculty/Staff Support

Influential faculty and staff members in the campus community can have a significant impact on college student persistence. Gloria et al. (1999) found that mentoring relationships between students and faculty had the strongest predictor of persistence among African-American students.

Faculty and staff of color were overwhelmingly mentioned when asked about campus resources and support. Some faculty members reached out to students of color and took interest in their success on campus. Faculty and staff of color represented a small percentage of the total population, but the participants felt that besides friends and family, they could always speak to one of these professionals about an issue or problem. These individuals serve as mentors, supporters, advisors, and acquired family to many of the students. Eve shared:

Academic advisors in my major are helpful. So I'm a hotel restaurant tourism major, but I'm also a Spanish major, so when it comes to my Spanish, that's something really

vulnerable and I'm really sensitive about it. I'm able to talk to my advisor, and I'm able to talk to her and I feel really comfortable because she's able to critique my language in a way that's effective but not offensive. It's really good, constructive criticism, and I remember when I was in the beginning of the semester and I was trying to figure out where I wanted to go with the language. She knew because I was a stronger student in the class, and she saw that I wanted to take it further but I was too nervous to. I didn't know how to go about it, and she went out of her way to say that 'you know, you could take this really far if you wanted to, you're really good you just need to do a couple of things'. I knew I wanted to study abroad. I knew I wanted to do that, so I kind of went to her with that and I presented that to her, and she was like 'you know, if you wanted to do this, if you really wanted to do this, please come talk to me'. When I was able to do that, she was able to guide me in the right direction. Every time I had a question I needed to talk to her about, as far as studying abroad, I could go to her for that. Because of her, I was able to study abroad. She was my resource, and the person I was able to go to at any time. And, even to this day, I feel like moving forward in my career in Spanish, and I am able to go to her.

Mazie shared this about one of her professors from another institution:

My professor, I feel like I'll always remember him throughout, like he actually like...there are a lot teachers that say they will help their students, but he actually did help me. I normally don't think that professors do that because, from my experience, they are just you know, not very helpful. I guess it mostly because they see so many students, so it is hard to have a relationship with them. But I feel like when you do have a

relationship with your students, I feel like they will...definitely impacted my life and will continue to impact my life.

As stated by Gloria et al. (1999), the faculty were providing guidance and supporting their students' academic success. Another student said the following about multiple individuals on his campus:

Yea um, XXX, miss XXX, um Dr. XXX and my uh *computer class* professor are all Black women, and they have been very supportive. Even when the office wasn't down here and I walked in and I was like I'm done with school, I hate school, this is annoying and you're like go for it, like what are you doing to achieve that goal, like just go for it. So, that's really big like most of the, all of the times that I've grown on this campus have been because of a black woman. So, it's really, it's really big, and Dr. XXX, he um, he also played a huge role um, my freshman year um, he's the reason that I got the chance to go out the country, go to Spain, meeting people, experiencing a new culture. So. Yea.

The students also spoke of faculty and staff that were not of color, but became people on campus they could go to for support. Participants in focus group two and three expressed that it is not about their skin color, but the individual needs to show they care. One Caucasian faculty member at Institution A was very popular among the participants. They all confirmed that this individual was loved by all the African-American students on campus because of his unwaveringly support of them. Margaret described another situation in which she felt supported by a faculty member:

For me, well professor, am I allowed to say her name or no? Okay, well professor XXX, she's definitely helped me out a lot on campus um, cause she's just. I'm the type of person, I need a pusher like I need someone who's going to be like, setting that fire under

my like my behind. Because um, unfortunately, like growing up, I didn't have that like I didn't have someone like telling me, checking my grades, and stuff like that. I feel like if I had that growing up, I would probably be in a different place. I'd be a lot more further in life.

The faculty and staff relationships with students are critical to African-American college student's persistence. Faculty interactions with students impacted their sense of belonging, and their decision to leave an institution (Tinto, 1993). It is important to note that psychologists, within the counseling department, are considered non-teaching faculty members at both institutions. The participants' level of comfort did not change because of this fact, but the participants expressed that they wanted to see counselors within the department that reflected the students on campus. Additionally, they wanted to see the counselors outside of their offices to create interactions with counseling center staff.

Finally, the participants expressed the ways in which key resources impacted their lives as college students. Table 9 highlights the ways in which the participants' persistence was impacted by informal supports. The next section discusses how the participants perceive informal counseling practices through their perception of care, racial representation and campus climate.

Results of Research Question Three

Table 9

Superordinate Themes – Impact of Informal Counseling

Strategic Theme	Individual Interview	Focus Group (1)	Focus Group (2)	Focus Group (3)	Present in over half of sample
Culture of Care	I-1, I-2, I-4, I-5, I-6, I-7, I-8, I-9, I-10	P-1, P-2, P-4	P-1	P-1, P-4, P-5, P-6	77%
Racial Representation	I-1, I-4, I-5, I-6, I-7, I-10	P-2, P-3, P-5	P-1	P-1, P-2, P-3, P-4, P-5	68%
Campus Climate	I-1, I-5, I-6, I-7, I-8, I-9, I-10		P-1, P-2	P-1, P-2, P-3, P-4, P-5	63.6%

Note: Codes refer to participants in the study, i.e. I= Individual interview participants, P= focus group participants, number assigned to each specific participant

Culture of Care

Social support is evidenced to support the persistence of African-American college students (Baker, 2013; Constantine et al., 2003; Fischer, 2007; Gloria et al., 1999; Gloria et al., 2005). Family, friends, religious influence, faculty and staff provided a perceived level of care that allowed students to feel supported in academic endeavors. Miller (2015) found that a “culture of care” can be demonstrated beyond just caring but by loving your students (p.65). Supporting students through programs designed for them, and a spirit of community, establishes a culture of care (Miller, 2015).

The participants from both institutions reflected on the level of care that is shown from the individuals that impacted their journey thus far. Whether it is a friend, a parent or guardian, pastor, professors, or a lunch room worker, they all expressed a sincere interest in the development of these students. Attending a PWI can be difficult for a student of color as

expressed by the participants. Megan shared “being at institution B made me feel uncomfortable. It made me want to transfer and not come back at all.” They struggled to feel a sense of belonging on campus and often times, had to prove that they even deserved to be there. Mazie shared “he actually did help me. Even outside of class he might ask you why you might feel a certain way and a lot of professors don’t do that.” When someone reached out or asked “How are you doing?”, the gesture was appreciated. As shared by McCorkle (2012), African-American students struggle with feeling like an imposter at PWIs. Halle remembered an event that was held specifically for students of color by professional staff of color on campus. It was a meeting to discuss their progress, and to show support for them, as students on campus. She said:

Last year I don’t know if any of you were there, but they literally had faculty of color, and they were just like ‘we need to let you know that you guys need to start talking to each other’. I appreciated that so much, cuz it showed that they cared.

Similarly, Tasha spoke of an event at her institution sponsored by faculty and staff of color. She said it was the only time that she felt supported as an African-American student. The faculty and staff were “professionally loving their students” (Miller, 2015, p. 65), therefore events that express added support for African American students aid in motivating students to push forward. These African-American students did not feel valued on campus most of the time and believed that their White counterparts had an easy time because the faculty interacted with them differently. Megan described:

There are some professors who just like look at us and just be like...’oh like they probably don’t even know what I am even talking” about and there are some professors that just like that probably treat us different. Like give us more of a harder test and like a

harder communication than they do with white people or Caucasian students. It seems to me like when it comes to white students and professors, they automatically click.

She also shared a time when she knew that a professor actually cared because the professor genuinely wanted to know more about the African-American culture. This interest was noticeable because there weren't many professors that she could identify as a support system.

She stated:

And, also; my former teacher Mrs. XXX. She was my freshman English teacher from Institution B. She was definitely a support. She understands where all of us come from. She is probably the biggest supporter we had as freshman at Institution B because there we really felt like we didn't have no body but the student life. Like Mrs. XXX like she loved the African-American culture. We taught her more than she taught us cause she wanted to understand where we all came from like our backgrounds and understand like 'yall came from this but yall here in college and getting this. I liked her because she understood where we were coming from. She sat down and paid attention to and listen to us and actually understand where we are coming from. And that was one of the things we could really change people's mind if we really get them to sit down and understand where we are coming from.

Megan's story highlights that a culture of care can be established even if you are not a member of the race. Support and care from faculty regardless of race who have an interest in helping African-American students succeed can go a long way (McCorkle, 2012). As described by the participants, a culture of care was developed especially during times of racial tension. In these instances, racial representation did matter among faculty and staff. Therefore, racial

representation emerged as a theme that impacted African-American persistence at each of the PWIs in this study.

Racial Representation

Throughout the interviews, many students talked about the value of having individuals of color that look like them on campus. The participants shared that they wanted to be represented throughout the fabric of the institutions, not only by their peers, but by the professional faculty and staff that were employed by the school. Miller (2015) found that African-American students wanted to see administrators that looked like them in high-level positions, as it reassured them that they could make it too. Representation of different races needed to be included in areas such as counseling departments, as well. Faculty and staff of color have the ability to influence the culture of the institution (Miller, 2015). During both focus groups conducted at institution A, the participants reflected on the importance of seeing a faculty member of color represented within their academic departments or major. Bianca expressed that just seeing a female faculty member of color during an orientation program made her feel more comfortable enrolling at the institution. Jaclyn shared:

I'm the kind of person who needs a fire lit under her, I need, I need like a light at the end of the tunnel. Not so much the fire to keep me going, I need something to go to. I need something to go for. Um and having role models like such as Mrs. XXX and Miss XXX um, that is something I aspire to be, I want to be able to say that I've done this, that and the third. Just because I did it. So, by you all being able to stand and have offices for underrepresented students, you know... have offices and events and helping, and helping at that point I'm always wanted to be that person. I want be Mrs. XXX. So by having that motivation and having that, that, that person. That perspective or someone else who has

accomplished what I want to accomplished, that's what helps, that's what's helped me get through and helped me decide that I'm going to graduate in December. December 16th, yeah.

Additionally, they felt that seeing African-American faculty and staff was important for their progress but seeing other professionals of color such as Latinos also created an environment of support as well. Bianca said:

I would even feel comfortable with like a Spanish somebody, Latino or Hispanic because a lot of students gravitate towards Dr. XXX and like I never knew about her... I never went to the advising office. I never came in undeclared or anything and now working for her I really get to see how she connects with students too... so may not be just black... just minority in general.

Others shared that even though they may not know a faculty or staff member personally, just knowing that they are there provided them with a level of comfort. A few students referenced seeing professionals in the office for underrepresented students and faculty in these roles was a constant reminder that they too could be successful. These successful professionals encouraged these undergraduates to keep pushing forward in the face of adversity. Josie expressed, "I just saw her; she was a psychologist and it was one of my happiest moments there's a black female psychologist!" She was describing the moment she realized there was a Black faculty member within her major and her desire to be like this individual. Students also shared that it was important for them to make connections and learn from these faculty members, even though they did not have them in class. This pursuit has encouraged one student to work with an African-American faculty member conducting research. Erica mentioned "I haven't had her either. I'm

about to enter the second semester of my junior year, but I'm doing research with her because I wanted to work with her in some way.”

The racial representation of the faculty and staff impacted the participants' experience in a positive way. The presence of these individuals provided a sense of comfort for the participants on campus. Conversely, the perceived racial climate on campus negatively impacted the students' experience and left the students wondering if they actually belonged on campus. The next section will highlight the negative impact racism and discrimination can have on African-American students.

Campus Climate

The campus climate of the institution showed up in many ways during the participants' storytelling of the participants. As discussed previously, students wanted to see diversity among the faculty and staff, but also expressed that the racial campus climate has impacted their experience on campus. Steele (1997) suggests that stereotype threat faced by African-Americans in school add unwarranted pressure to perform and impedes academic success. Perceived racism is also linked to psychological distress among African-Americans (Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2012). When living in an unstable environment due to racism and discrimination, the students' sense of belonging decreased. It was clear that racial tensions on campus made the African-American students feel like they did not belong at their PWIs.

The participants shared similar sentiments of not feeling like they were a part of the campus community. Incidents on and off campus not only changed the students' perspectives about their respective institutions, but it created a sense of discomfort with the African-American community. Cory shared:

You know with a lot of the racist issues we have been dealing with, and not only this year but years before, it seems to be a lot of things that are attacking us are just swept under the rug. And we are not really looked at as equals in certain ways, and I feel like sometimes they try to do certain things to help us but once the storm blows down, they just go back to normal and everything is fine again.

Michael explained that during a racial incident on campus, it became apparent that racism truly existed on his campus. He said:

I would say that was the first time I actually woke up per say... when I saw that (referring to social media post) I was like 'oh so we not playing out here they're actually'... this is actually real this is not just me saying these things... this actually does happen and I kind of as far as the racism up here that kind of started with that and as time went on you notice things.

Ashley described her experience in a Walmart, where she first experienced perceived racism. The feeling of being watched and followed made her feel very uncomfortable. Another participant shared a similar story, she said:

Going to Walmart, every time we all went to Walmart together, we had to go in packs. We can't just go me and a roommate. We had to go in packs cause its like, I don't like we always get these looks and Walmart associates following us everywhere. Every isle there was at least one associate looking at us. We aren't thieves we are just college students trying to get used to the adult life and independent life. And we already feel uncomfortable enough cause we are already in that small area. Its weird cause people in XXX (city) don't realize they made us uncomfortable like they made us not want to leave the campus and we just didn't feel safe unless we were all together. It's just me and one

other person, so we just don't go. We have to ask other people to come with us because we just felt uncomfortable.

Gloria et al. (1999) highlight that university comfort predicts persistence trends among African-American students. The support of faculty, staff, and friends become critical when students feel challenged by racial discrimination. African-American students are asked to speak for their race in classes, and the lack of cultural competence among their White peers, becomes a strain on their academic experience. Michael divulges:

It just kind of sucks sometimes being one of the only black kids in your class and especially the major that I'm in any time something comes up about black history they always look to black students to answer the question. They rely on us because we have to be the one to know everything apparently involving black history, that's a part of it. There's times where the white students not necessarily knowing or understanding the privilege they come from that they have will say comments or do certain things or commit certain actions and not understand we going through the same thing like it's a wrap, we might get hurt actually die because this happens out here we're not in the city where even in the city we're not protected that much but out here in the country you're just open to a lot more risk when it involves race because there are members groups out here like the KKK and Neo-Nazi groups that have been vocal on campus about their dislike toward minority students, with that being said there's a lot of times.

He further stated:

I just sit here and think I should have gone to an HBCU and not a PWI, I should have gone to a school with a lot more openness to diversity and I always laugh at that because (Institution B) puts on her face that they're open to diversity they always have these

diversity campaigns and the housing people are the people that do the most that talk about diversity then they need to talk about the type of diversity that they truly want it's never black or white, they like they support the LGBT community more than they do the black community here they support other minorities before they support the black minorities and then when they do bring in black students it tends to be the black students that they support are black students from you know rural or suburban areas that they were one of the only black kids in their high schools they grew up with in white communities and lack of a better term kind of brainwash to be conditioned from certain societies.

The shared experiences of racism and discrimination at the PWIs not only had a negative impact on the participants' experiences; it also diminished their trust in the institution. The African-American students did not feel like their respective institutions would make the necessary changes to make them feel comfortable on campus. Pearts-Forbes (2004) did not find a correlation between social support and university climate on the persistence of African-Americans. Conversely, the participants in this study questioned their belonging on campus because of the racial climate. Based on the racial climate, increased negative perceptions of an institution lessens the level of satisfaction with students (Fischer, 2007).

Summary

This phenomenological research study explored the impact of informal and formal counseling services at two PWIs. The following research questions were answered by the participant's narratives: 1) What are the perceptions of African-American college students toward formal and informal counseling at Predominantly-White institutions? 2) What experiences have African-American college students had with informal counseling? and 3) How do informal counseling practices impact the persistence of African-American college students?

Stigma, perceived need, trust, and cultural understanding emerged as major themes from the stories shared as the participants described their perceptions of formal and informal counseling. These perceptions of counseling hindered or enforced the participants' use of the resource in addition to highlighting major issues related to help-seeking behaviors. Prejudgment related to using counseling was a barrier to service in some cases while a fear of being prescribed medication to assist with the problem was also seen as a negative. Ultimately, the participants desired an outlet to share their concerns without being judged or stereotyped. Moreover, perceived need was considered the most concerning revelation for this study because it is the essential to help-seeking behaviors and the participants were not receiving the assistance that is required to effectively combat various issues.

The participants experienced informal counseling in a variety of ways through family, friends, faculty, and staff support in addition to the spiritual and religious influence. In many instances, the participants felt a certain level of comfort or a connection with these individuals which enabled them to utilize the resource. The connection or comfort with the informal support correlates to how trust is established for the participants as they felt these individuals knew them well or could relate to them.

Finally, the participants felt that their persistence was impacted by their campus climate, the racial representation on campus, and the perceived care given by faculty and staff members. Participants at Institution B reflected on situations related to racism and discrimination that had impacted their experience in a negative way but also forced the African-American students to unite. 16 out of the 22 participants discussed the importance of racial representation that needs to be reflected in, not only the student body, but the faculty and staff, as well. Overall, a culture of

care established by informal supports was displayed through actions. The stories shared by the participants showed that when genuine care is exhibited, they, in fact, notice and appreciate it.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

“At the root of this dilemma is the way we view mental health in this country. Whether an illness affects your heart, your leg, or your brain, it’s still an illness, and there should be no distinction.”
-Michelle Obama

Forty percent of college students do not seek help for mental illness according to the National Association of Mental Illness (NAMI, 2018). While the persistence and retention of African-American college students continues to be of importance to college and universities across the country, these students utilize mental health resources less than their White peers. College students are faced with a variety of issues throughout their college careers, which can impact a student’s mental stability (Aselton, 2012). Students experience stress, anxiety, and depression at high rates during their college years (American College Health Assessment, 2017). According to the Jed Foundation (2017), students of color in college are less likely to seek help if they feel anxious or depressed. Therefore, it critical that universities find strategies to encourage students to seek mental wellness while on campus. This effort can impact African-American students’ persistence to remain enrolled in college. The purpose of this study was to investigate African-American college students’ perceptions of formal and informal support systems for mental wellness. Additionally, this study explored the impact of informal counseling on the persistence of African American college students at two Predominantly-White Institutions.

Chapter one provided information about not only the issues that African-American college students face, but also the complexities of mental wellness in African-American communities. Chapter one also identified the importance of addressing issues related to help-seeking behaviors, and the support needed by African-American students to thrive on Predominantly-White campuses. Informal and formal support systems can assist students during

difficulty (Brooks, 2015; Palmer et al., 2011). The significance of this study explains whether informal counseling practices continue to be a means of support, which impacts the persistence of African-American college students to remain enrolled in college.

Chapter two reviewed the existing literature that supports the exploration of this study. Understanding the historical context of African-Americans in higher education is critical to examining persistence trends and the impact educational disadvantages that have played on the success of African-American students in academia. Additionally, investigating the complexities of mental illness, and its effect on populations of color, support further research on this topic. Theoretical frameworks guiding this research were also introduced to show potential connections between student departure decisions, the effects of racism on higher education, and behavior patterns that affect health service utilization (Anderson, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Tinto, 1993).

Chapter three introduced the methodology that guided this research study. A qualitative approach was used to understand African-American college students' experiences at a PWI. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to understand the shared experiences of the participants, and to analyze how their experiences compared to one another. Rooted in a phenomenological method, the researcher aimed to explore, not only commonalities among the participants, but also the ways in which they shared experiences at each PWI. Interpretative phenomenological analysis allowed for deeper understanding into the data collected.

Chapter four presented the results of the study. Data collected showed that although students thought formal resources could be helpful, they preferred to use informal supports such as family, friends, faculty, staff, and spiritual influences to mediate issues. Consequently, African- Americans sought and needed representation in the form of faculty and staff of color to

motivate them to persist at their respective institutions. Further, evaluation of the results highlighted how the participants' experiences with informal counseling aided in their persistence.

Chapter five will provide a deeper examination of the narratives by discussing the findings through the lens of the theoretical frameworks. Ways in which colleges and universities can further support African-American students will be discussed in addition to suggestions for future research.

Discussion of Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were rooted in a phenomenological approach aimed at understanding what is the shared experience and how it is experienced. Therefore, the following three research questions guided this study:

1. What are the perceptions of African-American college students toward formal and informal counseling at Predominantly-White Institutions?
2. What experiences have African-American college students had with informal counseling?
3. How do informal counseling practices impact the persistence of African-American college students?

All the participants in this study engaged in formal and informal counseling. The perceptions about counseling varied depending on the participant, but the participants struggled to identify life experiences that warranted seeking additional support such as academic pressures, relationship problems related to family and friends, or even death. Their understanding of their issues was perceived as something that could be dealt with intrinsically. The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH, 2016) administered by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) surveyed adults over the age of 18 about their substance abuse and mental health services use. According to the NSDUH (2016) report, the adults 18 or

older with a perceived unmet need for mental health services did not seek treatment for the following reasons:

1. Could not afford the cost
2. Thought could handle the problem without treatment
3. Did not know where to go for services
4. Did not have time
5. Might cause neighbors or community to have a negative opinion
6. Health insurance does not pay enough for mental health services
7. Concerned about being committed or having to take medicine
8. Did not feel need for treatment at the time
9. Might have negative effect on job
10. Concerned about confidentiality
11. Treatment would not help
12. Did not want others to find out
13. Health insurance does not cover any mental health services
14. No transportation or inconvenient

These results show parallels in the narratives shared by the participants about help-seeking behaviors. In particular, the reasons above reflect perceptions about trust, stigma, and perceived need. Being concerned about others' thoughts and opinions confirms that stigma is an issue that affects health service use regardless of race. Three participants said that they were "private" which prevented them from seeking help, opting to handle their issues on their own. Other participants in the study felt like counseling would not or were afraid to be prescribed medication for their perceived problem. Whether the perceived reason for not seeking help is related to cost

(access) or confidentiality (trust), they are real concerns that should be addressed by colleges and universities.

Additionally, adults between the ages of 18 to 25 used services the least (51.5%) compared to ages 26-49 (66.1%), and ages 50 and older (71.5%). This study showed that half of the participants used formal counseling, however there is a need to educate students about the benefits of formal counseling to decrease the stigma associated with it. Consequently, trainings such as Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) can be beneficial to informal supports that see African-African students at higher rates than formal supports. Mental Health First Aid training helps participants “identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders by identifying risk factors and warning signs associated with mental health” (The National Council for Behavioral Health, 2018). Adults and youth can be trained in the MHFA by finding a course being offered in their area, but does have a cost associated with it. Colleges and universities can offer MFHA to faculty, staff, and students to ensure that they can recognize signs of mental distress. Family, friends, faculty, and staff who already have strong connections with the students might be able to encourage students to seek more formalized means of support. Advocating for more support and attention to mental health reaffirms the culture of care provided by informal supports. Informal supports will continue to be a coveted first line of defense because of their connections to the participants. Informal supports and students alike must understand the consequences of serious untreated distress that can result in suicide. Increased programming, emphasizing the impact of untreated mental health, can assist in creating a culture of care around mental wellness. Additionally, involving student organizations in programmatic efforts addressing topics such as college student suicide, anxiety, and depression can attract students who would not normally attend these programs.

Finally, recognition of informal supports is critical to the persistence of African-American students and it is necessary for the development of sustained initiatives. The impact of informal counseling practices manifests in the attention given to African-American students; it creates a safe space for these students to be themselves. This safety explains why the participants have found comfort in the underrepresented student centers or flock toward faculty and staff of color.

Relationship Between Findings and Theoretical Frameworks

Semi-structured interviews were conducted through ten individual and three focus groups with African American students enrolled at two PWIs. The researcher sought to understand how the participants made meaning of their experiences at PWIs while exploring how they use formal and informal counseling as a means to persist. Stigma, perceived need, trust, and cultural understanding emerged as themes that influenced the participants' perceptions of counseling services. Students used informal counseling services. The participants sought family, friends, religious influences, faculty, and staff as sounding boards when faced with difficult times. Ultimately, the true impact of informal counseling on persistence of African-American students manifested in three ways: a sense of belonging, a level of care, and racial representation influenced the persistence or potential non-persistence of African-American students at these two PWIs. The theoretical frameworks that guided this study are the Behavioral Model of Health Services Use (1995), Tinto Theory of Student Departure (1993), and Critical Race Theory (2012). The participants' descriptions of their experiences confirm the relevance of these frameworks to the study. The narratives also provide a lens to explore the dynamics of those experiences.

Behavioral Model of Health Services Use

Andersen (1995) describes the Behavioral Model of Health Services Use as a tool to examine trends in health services use among families. As outlined by the model, predisposing factors, enabling resources, and need influence whether one chooses to seek help. This theoretical framework finds that certain criteria must be met before an individual will seek help. In most cases, the most immediate is the criteria, however, the model also highlights factors that influence help-seeking behaviors. The participants in this study had reservations about seeking formal or informal support based on the following factors: previous experiences, cultural norms, overall attitudes and perceptions about counseling, and personal evaluation of what was they were experiencing.

Predisposing Factors

When dissecting the components of the model, the research identified that predisposing factors not only relate to the perceptions the participants have about counseling, but also explained the context in which the participants made meaning of their experiences. Demographics, social structure, and health beliefs are all factors that influence help-seeking behaviors (Andersen, 1995). The demographic information of the participants such as age, gender, and hometown were not identified as factors of help-seeking behavior but influenced perceptions of counseling services. The majority of the participants in this study reside in urban environments that are characterized by:

1. A high minority population density
2. A lack of access to quality health care
3. A lack of employment and health insurance which impedes access to certain health services.

Education, culture, occupation, and physical environments are social structures which inform the level of knowledge and attention given to health concerns. The participants in the study had basic knowledge of the counseling resources available to them on campus. They recalled receiving information about the counseling center at orientation, although some did not take advantage of the resource. Unfortunately, African-American students struggle to get the proper support and assistance needed to treat mental health conditions that plague their communities, possibly due to lack of education. This lack of knowledge and education about the effects of untreated mental illnesses quells the desire to seek help (Bina, 2011). Higher levels of education increase the tendency of health services use (Pahl et. al, 2014). Therefore, the participants in this study had an advantage because they were more knowledgeable about formal and informal counseling resources, and can made an educated decision about utilization. As the findings of this study show, 50% of the participants used some form of formal counseling and all of the participants engaged in some level of informal counseling.

Additionally, individuals' health beliefs further stimulated help-seeking behaviors or delay it. Health beliefs tend to guide how a person may feel about mental health and health services (Bina, 2011). Two male participants described that they felt more comfortable seeking formal counseling because they knew a family member that had a positive experience with it. Tyrone said, "I don't know how to really explain it, but it helped a lot to have that insight. Only because he was able to get passed that and he was able to go to a psychologist". He saw this as an open invitation for him to try formal counseling at least once. Here, we see that the health belief was influenced by a family member having a previous positive experience with counseling. The cultural dynamic assumed a role in help seeking among communities of color as

many of the participants expressed their apprehension to seeking help from a counseling professional.

The concept of stigma and trust related to mental health also influenced help seeking behaviors and perceptions about counseling for the participants. As one participant shared, “There’s always that stigma in the black community,” and this stigma prevents individuals from seeking mental health assistance. The idea that mental illness “follows you” and you are labeled is correlated to the lack of seeking counseling. Self-labeling explains how individuals perceive and label their mental health problem. As articulated by the participants, the perception of being labeled “crazy” inhibits seeking professional help.

Trusting helping professionals emerged as a theme when discussing perceptions of counseling services, but it also corresponded to the willingness of some participants to engage in a counseling relationship. “We want to protect ourselves and don’t want to be hurt,” explained one participant. There is real fear around engaging in a relationship with someone unknown who could potentially use one’s words against that individual because of being misunderstood due to the lack of cultural competence. The formal counseling profession is mostly White (83.6%) compared to African-Americans (5.3%). The mistrust of White people and institutions of Whiteness have impacted diagnosis during treatment, the overall expected outcome of counseling, and counseling services use (Townes et al., 2009). Historically, trust has been an issue within African-American communities and misdiagnosis within the medical arena has further severed trusting relationships (Villatoro et al., 2017).

Enabling Resources

The study participants benefited from being on a college campus which offered counseling and psychological services. The potential for use was more likely because the resources were available on campus. These services were offered for free to enrolled students, which could be used to schedule an appointment. At these two PWIs, finances, health insurance, and accessibility to a facility did not present the same barriers that it would in other environments, such as low-income communities where most of the participants live.

Andersen and Newman (1973) define access as “the means through which the patient gains entry to the medical care system and continues the treatment process” (p. 102). The participants from Institution A expressed that although they knew the service was on campus, access to it wasn’t always available. Students must wait a minimum of two weeks before they can get an appointment due to the increased demand for counseling services. The participants felt this created additional barriers to treatment for them. One participant shared that knowing she had to wait two weeks just to follow up on her initial appointment made her not continue treatment. Unfortunately, the access provided for students on this campus may not be seen as the most convenient due to limited staff. While continued treatment was advised, college counseling centers are not meant for long term treatment; students can be referred to external counseling resources which is a personal expense to the students. Ultimately, the lack of continued treatment when needed impacted persistence as some students needed to discontinue their education to get treated at home.

Access can also be viewed in a variety of ways. Previous research has highlighted the increasing need for counseling services on college campuses, but also revealed the necessity for counseling professionals to find others ways to reach students (Benton et al, 2003; Boone et al.,

2011; Chiang et al., 2004; Hwang, et al., 2014; Mier et al., 2009). The participants wanted to identify the counselors and know them outside of their normal work environment. An annual program hosted at Institution A was not recognized as a program sponsored by the counseling department. One student stated, “they need to stress that it (the program) is coming from them and they’re trying to focus on helping students.” The departments needed to do more outreach to attract students who would not normally use their resources. The location needed to be inviting so that students felt comfortable going there. Counseling departments have an opportunity to reach students outside of their normal working space. There are a variety of ways to serve students that require collaborating with other departments such as residence life, financial aid, and academic advising. Counselor in Residence programs and Cornell University’s Community Consultation and Intervention program decreases the stigma associated with counseling and provides easier access to counselors (Boone et al., 2001, Mier et al. 2009; Orchowski et al., 2011). For example, the CIR program provides residence halls with a live-in a psychology or counselor education doctoral student which provides easier access to a counselor, if needed. It also assists in building trust among the students and becomes a pipeline for students to use the counseling center.

Need

Andersen (1995) stated that the most immediate factor in predicting health seeking behavior is need. The individual must recognize or be aware of an illness for help seeking to occur (Bina, 2011). Perceived need emerged as a theme in this study because the majority of the participants lacked the awareness that their issues warranted additional help or support. Andersen and Newman (1973) described need in two ways: perceived and evaluated. Evaluated need addresses the type and way in which treatment is administered. Need is critical to help seeking

because many students will forego seeking treatment in an effort to cope with their issues on their own. As one participant stated, “I’m a private person and that’s why I don’t seek professional help.” This comment was shared by describing her willingness to open up to others, while another student expressed not wanting to talk about personal or emotional issues with a stranger. Difficulty in identifying when additional support is necessary coupled with awareness of need created a major barrier to help seeking behavior.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory is another framework that gave perspective to exploring the lived experiences of the African-American participants. This theory was chosen because of the historical impact of racism in America and its effects on the educational system. The five tenets that critical race theorists fundamentally believe guide their views about power, race and racism are 1) interest convergence, 2) the permanence of racism, 3) whiteness as property, 4) counter-storytelling, and 5) critique of liberalism (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Examining the participants’ experiences through the lens of critical race theory, confirmed the previous research (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000; Yosso et al., 2009) regarding the existence of race and racism within higher education.

Interest Convergence

Interest convergence as defined by Derrick Bell is the belief that “the majority group tolerates advances for racial justice only when it suits its interest to do so” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 165). During the focus group, Halle commented, “I feel like we’re just dollars to them, we’re just money,” as she discussed the university’s treatment of students of color. The participants want to feel like they truly belong on campus and that they are valued members of the campus and local community. On most college campuses, diversity in students, faculty, and

staff was important to not only recruitment efforts but also served as performance indicators that are often tied to funding. All too often, African-American students are recruited to PWIs without the proper support to retain them and help them succeed. The concept of being “authentically wanted” in an environment or space was important to the participants’ existence on campus. The students’ perception was that the institution only enrolled African-Americans because they served the purpose of bringing in money for the institution and ultimately didn’t feel valued. This feeling sends the wrong message to African-American students that are already facing difficulty within other areas of the campus environment. Unfortunately, it plays into their imposter feelings about truly being accepted to the institution because of merit or for another reason.

The infrastructure must be built with a solid foundation that is fundamentally rooted in the ideology that all students, regardless of race, deserves to be treated fairly while obtaining their education. It is not enough to just recruit students of color without implementing the support mechanisms that will be in place to aid in their academic, personal, social, or career-based success. Therefore, African-American students cannot only serve a PWI as a number but they should be a part of what makes institution special. Inclusion and diversity must be central to any institution seeking to enroll these students.

Counter-Storytelling

At the core of the research was not only exploring the shared experiences of the participants, but also allowing opportunity for the participants to share their stories. Counter-storytelling in Critical Race Theory allows for the dismantling of stereotypes and gives voice to historically-marginalized groups. Although the primary research question sought to explore perceptions of counseling, cultural mistrust and cultural misunderstanding emerged as barriers of persistence for the participants. Therefore, the participants not only longed to see faculty and

staff that looked like them, but they also wanted to be treated like their counterparts. As participants from Institution B recalled the treatment they experienced such as: racial profiling in the community, discrimination through social media, or unfair treatment in the classroom, they needed to develop resilience. They were aware that these experiences were unfair and unjust, but they were still persisting. It does not take away from the fact that they were each impacted by a shared experience of discrimination. Additionally, they found comfort in a community among each other and the informal supports that have taken interest in their well-being. Listening to one participant as he described his role as a mentor for young children and his desire to make a difference in the lives of young people embodied the beauty in counter storytelling. This young man's story debunked the myths that exists about African-American males and tells the counter story of hard work and resilience. Similarly, the young women who graduated in December overcame various obstacles to get to graduation. There was a sense of joy in the room as she expressed her feeling about her upcoming graduation. She, too, felt accomplished being able to tell her story of success.

The participants were also active on their campuses and tell a counter-story about their ability to be successful members of a Predominantly-White community. Their involvement on campus proved to shape their overall experiences on campus and provided opportunities for growth. Two female participants during a focus group at Institution A reflected on how their roles in the university mentor program gave them a platform to make a difference in the lives of first-year students. Another student credited much of her success to being an active leader in various organizations on campus. These African-Americans were a vital part of the campus community and their very presence enhanced other students' experiences. Their stories reflected that they should have a place on PWIs and they can make a tremendous impact on the campus.

Student involvement can be used as a tool to not only influence persistence among African-American students, but also create a sense of belonging.

Whiteness as Property

Whiteness as property describes the benefits afforded to the majority because of their race. Being a student at a PWI provides a sense of community and belonging for White students purely because their race is dominant and they do not have the same obstacles as African-American students. As stated by one participant, “White students automatically have the advantage of being able to relate to their White professors. No one questions their ability to perform or the reason they were admitted to the institution.” African-American students struggle to deal with stereotype threats and imposter feelings simply because their race has influenced others’ perceptions of them. Incidents that involved discrimination and racism on college campuses further led these African-Americans to believe that they did not belong at PWIs.

Considering the racial diversity within counseling departments which are inherently White, again, we see an added advantage for White students. They may feel more comfortable utilizing the resource rather than African-American students who often do not see counselors of color represented. Both institutions in this study did not have racial diversity represented within their departments. Institutions of higher education must take a similar approach to diversifying counseling departments as they do when trying to diversify the classroom. Diversity needs to be reflected throughout every part of the university (Pope, Reynolds and Mueller, 2014).

The Permanence of Racism

The idea that racism is permanent and can be daunting. The permanence of racism brings context to the historical past of African-Americans in the United States. Institutional racism influences the policies and procedures which ultimately prevent African-American

students from being successful. Often, policies are not examined to identify potential barriers that may be created. One participant spent her first year at a satellite campus where she felt extremely unsafe because African-Americans experienced discrimination on campus and in the local community. The policy in place required her to attend this campus first before continuing to main campus; this policy created an obstacle to her attending college. Additionally, the policy was established without considering the existence of racism and discrimination within that community where African-American students are expected to live and to learn. The permanence of racism also acknowledges that racism is normal, and while this may be true, it implicitly and explicitly creates barriers for African-Americans to succeed. Affirmative Action has tried to rectify some of the unfair and unequal practices that perpetuate racism's permanence and Whiteness as property, but at the same time has mostly benefited White people (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

Critique of Liberalism

The idea of colorblindness goes against the individuality of each participant and ignores the issues African-American students face because of their race. The participants discussed their need to see racial representation on campus. The lack of diversity in their respective counseling departments was an example of the unconsciousness that the race of the counselors did not affect the utilization of help-seeking services by African-American students.

As articulated by an African-American male in the study, his institution has been working on hiring diverse staff for far too long and there hasn't been much change. An example of the current fight against liberalism is the thedemands.org website which lists the demands of students from 80 schools around the country. The first of the national demands as articulated by the Black Liberation Collective Demands is "WE DEMAND at the minimum, Black students and Black

faculty should be reflected by the national percentage of Black folk in the country.” This assertion recognizes the widespread collective voice of African-American students who want to not only be heard, but also seeks to affirm that their very presence on college campuses matter. As Ladson-Billings (1999) stress in her work, race still matters.

Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure

Students choose to leave an institution for many different reasons which sometimes are externa, but there are many factors that may contribute to their decision. Tinto’s (1993) stages of student departure include: separation, transition, and incorporation. The participants’ engagement in formal and informal interactions with others links to their movement through each of the stages, which can impact their persistence.

Separation

Separation posits that one should disengage or separate from their past to fully integrate into the new environment. Previous research has challenged this notion (Guiffrida, 2005; Guiffrida, 2006; Palmer et al., 2011; Tierney, 1992), as it fails to acknowledge cultural norms. This study also acknowledged the importance of keeping connections with individuals from the past environment. The informal counseling choices within this study manifested as family and friends. In many instances, the participants’ mothers and fathers were not only their sounding boards, but also served as cheerleaders for their children. Rather than detaching, dialogue about the struggles of college needs to be encouraged between African-American students and their families. Family support played a critical role in motivating the participants to persist, despite the obstacles. Additionally, these students served as a source of motivation for their peers and younger siblings or family members at home. Many of these African-American students were first-generation college students. They are the examples of the counter story that tells the

opposite of negativity shown in the media. These stories matter to their families and communities and these students have become role models for the youth of their communities.

Transition

During the transition phase in college, students start to develop an understanding of their role in the new environment. This stage correlates with establishing a sense of belonging and community on campus. Interactions with faculty, understanding the social dynamics of campus, acceptance into student organizations, and mentoring programs are key components during this transition stage. The stress and anxiety that comes with successful transition impacts departure decision, so if students cannot handle the difficulty associated with entering the new environment, transition efforts will fail. As shared by the participants in focus group two, having a faculty member and friend helped them to create a sense of belonging. Ultimately, this interaction prevented them from transferring from the institution.

Incorporation

Incorporation occurs when a student fully integrates into the new environment. Social interactions are the primary drivers that ensure incorporation (Tinto, 1993). This research study focused on those formal and informal interactions with counseling, which may have influenced persistence of the participants. Formal systems can be academically or socially-based, but they intertwine with informal systems to create a holistic experience for the students. Many of the participants in the study were very active on campus through on campus employment, student organizations, or sport activities. Involvement in these formal mechanisms gave way to opportunities for students to thrive. These opportunities manifested into study abroad experiences, internships, and greater access to faculty, staff, and administration which were critical to persistence among these African-American students.

These formal interactions must translate into informal experiences for students to feel like they belong at PWI. African-American students need to interact with their faculty inside (formal) and outside (informal) of the classroom. Participants felt a greater connection to faculty that they saw outside of the formal realms of campus, such as at church or at a student protest event. These visible acts showed signs of caring for the African-American students. Asking a student “how are you doing?” and showing interest in his well-being can happen in both a formal and informal setting. According to this study, asking the question was especially important for those faculty and staff who were not of color. The participants felt like they could relate to White faculty or staff members that showed interest in them through their interactions. The interactions made it easier for both the student and the faculty member to establish a true connection with each other. It was truly about meeting the African-American students where they are and understanding that their experiences were different from others. This sincerity mattered to the participants’ persistence on a PWI.

Connections to Counseling

As this research has shown, counseling can happen informally and formally, but the majority of the participants used some type of informal means on a daily basis. As the participants expressed, the concept of counseling was not an easy topic to discuss, and the stigma associated with any form of counseling hindered students from utilizing it. Opportunities for informal engagement became crucial as counseling centers develop relationships with African-American students. As noted by the participants, counselors need to be accessible in a variety of ways which gives them consistent exposure to students. Counseling departments that lack diversity need to explore opportunities that provide face time with African-American students before a counseling relationship becomes an option. Based on this study, African-American

students need to have relationships with peers, faculty, staff, administration, or anyone who could play a role in their persistence on a PWI.

Implications

The results of this study have implications that can impact the persistence of African-American students on PWIs. Counseling outreach, creating a sense of belonging, promoting student involvement, and building community among African-American students is vital. Based on the results of this study, the need for counselors of color was imperative to help these African-American students. In order to seek help, counselors also needed to be visible on campus.

Counseling Outreach

The outcomes of the study highlight that more outreach must be done to expose African-American students to the benefits of counseling in both forms. Of particular concern were the students' perceptions of need, and the lack of acknowledgement that a problem warrants additional help. Educating students about the signs of stress, depression, and anxiety is instrumental in influencing help seeking behaviors. Building on Andersen (1995), education helps to create social structure among students in college. The more knowledge they have about mental health, the more likely they will utilize the resources to aid their persistence.

This outreach will require more effort on the part of counseling departments to find avenues within the university environment to deliver services. Counselors can engage in many initiatives that allow the students to become familiar with them and their services in an environment that breeds comfort. Counselors need to be accessible in residence halls, dining halls, and even off-campus programs; seeing counselors on campus not only benefits African-American students, but all students. Outreach becomes a conduit for relationship building which can have a positive impact on students.

Sense of Belonging

Based on the data collected from all the participants, a sense of belonging came from the relationships that the students create primarily with informal support systems. There are different means to doing so such as student organizations, clubs, employment on campus, research opportunities with faculty, etc. However, it is the interactions that are meaningful to a student. Tinto (1993) suggests that integration into the new environment is important to a student staying on campus. African-American students should view themselves to be a vibrant part of the campus community. Everyone on campus becomes a critical player in ensuring that African Americans students not only feel safe on campus, but that they feel like they are meant to be there. PWIs must challenge the liberalistic views that rely on incremental change and employ practices that hold all constituents accountable for African-American students' persistence and success.

PWIs must dismantle systems that create inequities on their campus, and leave African-American students feeling like imposters. Reviewing policies, developing educational programs to build cultural competence, outwardly refusing to perpetuate hate and racism on campus, implementing curriculum changes to reflect the student body, and truly holding people accountable for diversity and inclusion efforts across campus are just a few ways to show African-American students that they are valued. When African-American students have to deal with discrimination and racism on campus, in addition to other stressors, it increases the need for formal and informal counseling and the likelihood that they will leave their institutions.

Student Involvement

The results of the study show that African American students who are connected to the institution because of their involvement in clubs and organizations are more likely to persist the

institution. Students must be exposed to various opportunities for growth and development early in their college career. Student involvement played a tremendous role in the participant's persistence in this study. Student involvement creates a greater affinity to the campus community while creating a sense of belonging. As stated by Tinto (1993), the formal and informal interactions provide an avenue for students to build relationships and work toward a goal. A commitment to their organization or employment decreases the likelihood of departure. Whether you are a mentor, member of the choir, actor in a play, choreographer in a dance team, or student activist, these varied roles gave the participants purpose. With purpose, comes drive, and with drive comes motivation to persist.

Sense of Community

The participants felt that having a sense of community was important to their existence on campus as African-American students. This community came from seeing other students that looked like them on campus and being able to engage with each other in formal and informal ways. A participant did not need to know someone personally to say hello or give a head nod and the same happens in communities where African-Americans are not the majority.

When issues of discrimination and racism arise on PWIs, this sense of community matters more than ever. They can unite around a common issue and work together to bring awareness to the problem. More importantly, the continued recruitment and retention of racially and ethnically diverse faculty, staff, and students should be vital to the overall mission of any institution of higher education. You cannot create community without people. Therefore, colleges and universities need to be vigilant in their recruitment of not only African American students but also faculty and staff.

Limitations

During this research study, limitations and assumptions were present in a variety of ways. In an attempt to explore the topic utilizing a qualitative approach, the researcher assumed that the participants would be truthful in their delivery of answers during interviews. The researcher also assumed that the participants would be comfortable discussing the topic of the study. Given the time allotted for interviews, much time wasn't allowed for participants to get comfortable in the setting and with the other participants if participating in a focus group. The nature of the research design presumably presented the following limitations for the study:

1. **Sample size.** There were 22 participants included in the study; fifteen participants represented Institution A and seven participants represent Institution B. The researcher was unable to conduct more than one focus group interview at Institution B, rendered only two participants.
2. **Location.** The study was conducted at two universities located in the Western and Eastern part of Pennsylvania. The validity of study can be increased by interviewing individuals throughout the state of Pennsylvania, including both public and private schools.
3. **Data Collection Method.** To investigate the experiences of African-American students, the primary source of data collection was a qualitative approach using individual and focus group interviews. A mixed methods approach would have allowed for greater participation in the study through survey used but also increases the validity of the study.
4. **Race/Ethnicity of Participants.** The participants included in this study needed to identify as African-Americans. Therefore, other race/ethnic populations were not included. Previous studies also indicate disparities in formal counseling use among other races.

5. Incentives. Incentives were not used to increase participation in the study. Incentivizing participation could have increase generalizability of the data collected.
6. Confidentiality. The researcher tried to ensure confidentiality of the participants' narratives shared during focus group interviews but, 100% confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. All participants signed confidentiality and non-disclosure form prior to participating in the interview.
7. Institution Type. Both schools included in the study were four year public institutions. Including private and community colleges might provide a different perspective regarding informal counseling and how there are utilized at these institutions of higher education.
8. Researcher's Bias. Although the researcher entered the research process trying the practice epoche from a phenomenological approach, it is possible that the researcher's connection to research institutions created implicit bias in the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

African-Americans are a unique population to study in higher education particularly because of the historical impact of racism in America. Based on the results of the study, there are some areas that should be considered for future research:

1. Females and males were interviewed in this study, but also researching African American transgender students can provide insight into the intersections of race and gender regarding perceptions of counseling.
2. Researching only male's utilization of counseling can be useful in determining how to decrease the stigma associated with seeking help as men seek out counseling far less than women (Davidson, et al., 2004; Nam, et al., 2010).

3. Research should be conducted with various racial and ethnically diverse populations to examine the impact of informal counseling on their persistence.
4. Investigating informal resources such as family, friends, faculty, and staff can provide information about the assistance needed to better support and guide students. Understanding the issues that they are helping students with can also create opportunities for formal interactions as well.
5. The primary information for this study came from interviews with the participants. Surveying participants first, and using that information to create interview questions gives the researcher baseline information into the participants' thoughts about counseling. A mixed method approach increases the ability to generalize the data collected.

Summary

This research provides critical information about the persistence of African-American students attending PWIs, and the important role informal resources play in the success of these students. The study confirms that perceptions about formal and informal counseling influences help seeking behaviors. Stigma, trust, perceived need, and cultural understanding emerged as major themes that influenced the participants' reasons for utilizing formal or informal counseling. This research confirms that colleges and universities must intentionally promote the use of mental health resources and actively work to break down the stigma associated with its use.

Overwhelmingly, the participants in the three focus groups felt that trust was important to them feeling comfortable when seeking out professional resources. As stated by the participants, trust is established by taking interests in students and working on relationship building. Therefore, it is all about the actions and not the words. Informal resources are often the first line

of defense for African-American students when an issue arises because they not only show support for these students, but express a culture of care. Cultural understanding is coupled with a culture of care because in a Predominantly-White environment, African-American students often feel misunderstood so it is necessary for individuals to take time to understand their culture. As shared by the participants, those individuals who aspired to become more knowledgeable about the participants' worldview became a utilized resource. The narratives of the participants give merit to the necessity and importance of establishing a culture of care for African-American students on PWIs. When these students believe someone cares it gives them comfort, they feel a sense of belonging, they seek out help, and they persist. A culture of care grows out of the actions shown by the people who see the purpose, value, and potential of African-American students who deserve to receive an education despite the odds. The late, Maya Angelou, said "people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." As college and universities, continue to endeavor to grow racially and ethnically diversity on their campuses, it will become ever so important to develop and sustain a campus culture of care where all members can thrive, learn, grow, and become successful members of a welcoming community.

Finally, colleges and universities need to employ faculty, staff, and administrators that reflect the student body. The participants acknowledged that their very presence at PWIs are validated by seeing a professional who looks like them. They are inspired and motivated by the idea that one day, they too, can be successful and make a difference in the lives of others. Although, hiring and retaining faculty and staff of color is one piece of the puzzle in creating inclusive campuses, it shows African American students that their existence and persistence truly matter.

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Appendix A

Participant Demographic Form

1. Do you self-identify as African American or Black?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. What is undergraduate year level?
 - a. Sophomore
 - b. Junior
 - c. Senior
3. What is your gender identity?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Transgender
4. What is your undergraduate major?

5. Have you ever used formal counseling on or off campus? (Formal counseling is defined as a client- counselor relationship with a professional psychologist, psychiatrist, or counselor, i.e. counseling and psychological services center on campus)
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

Name (PLEASE PRINT) _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Phone number and best email address to reach you

Best days and times to reach you

Appendix B

Focus Group Ground Rules

Greeting: Hello everyone, my name is Cornelia Sewell-Allen, a doctoral student in the Administration and Leadership program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in today's focus group as a part of my research study. The purpose of this study is to investigate African American students' perceptions of support systems (formal and informal) as well as explore the impact of informal counseling practices on the persistence of African American college students at two Predominantly-White institutions.

Purpose: Today's session will allow you to talk about your experiences on this campus and the various ways you elicit support. My role is to facilitate a conversation that will allow you to share your own story, therefore I will be doing a lot of listening and taking notes. This session will also be audio recorded to ensure accuracy and later transcribed for the study. This session is expected to last 45 minutes.

Confidentiality: I ask that you keep the information discussed in the session confidential and respect the privacy of your fellow participants. Although, I cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality, no names will be used during the process and a coding system will be utilized.

Ground Rules:

1. Respect others when they are talking and listen actively
2. Speak from your own experience
3. Recognize that even if we do not agree, each of us is entitled to our own perspective
4. Talk clearly and loudly, to ensure the best sound quality for audio recording
5. Allow each participant to complete their thought before talking, this will ensure that everyone's thoughts are heard
6. As the facilitator, I may have to move the conversation forward to be respectful of everyone's time
7. Confidentiality is extremely important. Please do not use names or personal identifiers during the session.

Follow up: Does anyone have any questions or need clarification on anything discussed thus far?

Closing: Would anyone like to share any closing remarks? We have reached our time. I would like to again thank all of you for participating in my research study. If you have any questions regarding the study, please contact IRB outlined on your consent form.

Appendix C

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Describe your experience as African-American students attending this institution.
(academic, social, financial, etc.)
2. How do you perceive support for African American students?
3. Have you struggled academically while in college? If so, what do you believe affected your academic performance?
4. What services did you use to assist with coping with these struggles? On campus resources, external, etc...
5. Explain the definition of formal vs. informal counseling.
6. Describe your feelings about counseling.
7. Do you know anyone who may have used the counseling services? Formal or informal
Did it help? Family
8. What makes you feel comfortable when talking with someone about your issues or problems?
9. Describe whom you feel most comfortable talking to when faced with an issue or problem.
10. What individuals on campus have played an instrumental role in your persistence or success in college? Why?
11. Who do consider support systems for you to succeed?
12. How do you define success as a college student?
13. What resources provided by your college or university do you find most/least helpful?
14. Describe how you might deal with adversity (i.e hard times, relationship problems, etc...)
15. When do you feel you are the most successful in school? Why?
16. How would you describe your freshman year of college? Do you recall any challenges or successes? If so, what were they?
17. How would you describe your relationship with your professors?
18. Describe your relationship with staff members on campus (not faculty).
19. If you could experience your freshman year again, what would you change or keep the same?

Appendix D

Individual Interview Questions

1. Describe your experience attending this institution. (academic, social, financial, etc.)
2. Describe your freshman year of college? Do you recall any challenges or successes? If so, what were they?
3. Describe a situation that may have impacted your college experience.
4. If you could experience your freshman year again, what would you change or keep the same?
5. What resources provided by your college or university do you find most/least helpful?
6. Describe your relationship with your professors.
7. Describe your relationship with staff member on campus (not faculty)
8. How would you define informal counseling or explain what you believe is informal counseling?
9. How would you define formal counseling or explain what you believe is formal counseling?
10. Describe an experience you may have had with counseling, formal or informal.
11. Describe a time when you felt you need talked with someone about an issue or problem.
Did you seek someone out or did you keep this information to yourself?
12. Describe your feelings about counseling
13. Tell me about the counseling services offered on campus
14. Describe the individuals that you believe utilize counseling services on campus
15. What makes you feel comfortable when talking with someone about your issues or problems?
16. Describe whom you feel most comfortable talking to when faced with an issue or problem.
17. Who helped you get through hard times during your college careers
18. What individuals on campus have played an instrumental role in your persistence or success in college? Why?
19. Who do consider support systems for you to succeed?
20. How do you define success as a college student?

21. Describe how you might deal with adversity (i.e. hard times, relationship problems, etc...)
22. When do you feel you are the most successful in school? Why?
23. Recall a time when you felt supported the most? What factors aided in that feeling?
24. Have you felt depressed or anxious in the last year? 6 months, if so how did you deal with that?