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Lift Every Voice and Sing: A Gospel Choir Participation Experience and the Persistence of African American Students at a Predominately White University

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LIFT EVERY VOICE AND SING: A GOSPEL CHOIR PARTICIPATION

EXPERIENCE AND THE PERSISTENCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

AT A PREDOMINATELY WHITE UNIVERSITY

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: Lift Every Voice and Sing: A Gospel Choir Participation Experience and the

 Persistence of African American Students at a Predominately White University

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The majority of our nation's academic institutions fall short in their efforts to ensure that African American students successfully persist from admission to graduation. Since the majority of African American students attend Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), these institutions must be held to the highest standard of accountability for African American student retention. Therefore, PWIs must explore alternative retention mechanisms that will increase the African American student's integration into campus life. This study examined the perceived effects of gospel choir participation on the retention of African American students at a PWI.

Qualitative methodology was utilized to assess whether or not participation in this specific extracurricular activity had implications in support of African American student persistence. Using the social integration component of Tinto's retention theory, this researcher explored whether or not gospel choir participants maintained stronger linkages to the campus and their African American and spiritual heritage, thereby decreasing feelings of marginalization and increasing persistence.

Individual interviews and focus groups were held with student choristers and the choir's musical staff to assess perceived feelings of integration. Through the summarization of qualitative responses, it was found that African American student

choristers felt an overwhelmingly strong sense of support from their peers and the musical leadership of the gospel choir. Some students reported that the choir was their primary reason for remaining at the institution.

This study concluded that gospel choir participation decreased feelings of marginalization and enhanced feelings of social integration. Therefore, this study encourages PWIs to consider college gospel choirs as an additional resource when attempting to positively impact African American student persistence at a PWI.

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Defending a dissertation in time for my 40th birthday gives me even more of a

reason to say, "To God be the Glory!" Years from now, I will look back at this

educational milestone and smile as I reflect upon the unexpected medical issues, family

challenges, and other scenes from this theatrical masterpiece called, "Life." But through

it all "Oh, God Kept Me!" **So to my God, I say, "Thank you!"**

To my ancestors whose blood was shed all through the "weary years" and "silent

tears" of the American Holocaust that we call slavery - if it were not for your suffering,

gospel music would have no story to tell. **So to my ancestors, I say, "Thank you!"**

To my family, extended family, and dear friends - those here with me now and

those who sit *"Somewhere Around the Throne of God"* – your emotional support,

encouraging words, and patience throughout this endeavor were essential to its

completion. **So to my family and friends, I say, "Thank you!"**

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Being a single parent for so many years was not easy. But in spite of very challenging

circumstances, you proved that a mother's love will always prevail. **So to my mother, I**

say, "Thank you!"

To my baby sister, Omega - thank you for delaying your commencement

ceremony so that we could don our caps and gowns together and make our mother the

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To my dissertation committee, Dr. Cathy Kaufman and Dr. Monte Tidwell, and my committee chairperson, Dr. Wenfan Yan, who thought enough of me to see this dissertation through to completion prior to his exodus from the University - your collective support was greatly appreciated. **So to my dissertation committee, I say, "Thank you!"**

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Finally, to the late Vivian Teal Howard – my college gospel choir director, with you at the piano and me on the conductor's block, we were a dynamic musical team. Over a decade and a half after you joined that "heavenly choir," your songs still resonate sweetly in my ears. You took in a college student that you did not know and loved me as though I were one of your own children. Therefore, what better tribute can I offer you than to dedicate this dissertation to you, posthumously. **So to my godmother, I say, "Thank you!"**

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM

The majority of our nation's academic institutions fall short in their efforts to ensure that African American students successfully persist from admission through to graduation. Although the baccalaureate degree is often called a "four year degree," Astin, Tsui, & Avalos (1996) report that only 19% of African American students complete the baccalaureate degree within four years. This number includes baccalaureate degrees awarded at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Unfortunately, African American baccalaureate graduation statistics only rise to 32% and 34% after six years and nine years, respectively. This represents a significant disparity when compared to the graduation rates of White students, who have significantly higher four year (43%), six year (47%), and nine year (47%) graduation rates (Astin et al., 1996). This graduation disparity of approximately 50% at the baccalaureate level reinforces the notion that institutions of higher education must do more to support campus entities that are ideally positioned to support the African American student's social integration into campus life, thereby increasing their persistence.

The retention of African American (and all) students should be of paramount importance to all facets of the university. It is unethical to recruit diverse students to campus without first solidifying the resources and support mechanisms necessary to ensure success. Bringing students to campus who have been historically marginalized, without launching coordinated efforts to enhance their opportunities for success, will most likely result in institutional departure.

Statement of the Problem

As previously stated, the majority of our nation's academic institutions fall short in their efforts to ensure that African American students successfully persist from admission to graduation. White students have a significantly higher four-year graduation rate when compared to their African American peers (Astin et al., 1996). Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) must be held to the highest standard of accountability for African American student retention, because the majority of African American students do not attend HBCUs. The large majority of them attend PWIs (Nettles & Perna, 1997). Therefore, PWIs must explore alternative retention mechanisms that will increase the African American student's integration into campus life.

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceived effect of gospel choir participation on the persistence of African American students attending a PWI. Utilizing the social integration component of Vincent Tinto's retention theory, this study will explore whether or not students who participate in a college gospel choir perceive themselves as maintaining stronger ties to the campus community, thereby decreasing feelings of marginality and aiding in their retention.

Although the university gospel choir is currently viewed by some as little more than a random student life offering, this researcher will explore whether or not this particular extracurricular activity has greater university-wide implications in support of African American student persistence.

College Student Retention

Student retention continues to be one of the most critical issues facing academic institutions. Billions of dollars in fiscal and staff resources are wasted annually as

institutions attempt to replace students who drop out or "stop out" prior to degree completion.

Of the 2.4 million students who entered college in 1993, more than 1.5 million left their first institution without receiving a degree. Sadly, this number includes approximately 1.1 million students who left higher education altogether (Tinto, 1993). Unfortunately, these statistics have not improved much, as many colleges and universities have failed to grasp the severity of the current retention crisis.

Although there are multiple factors contributing to a student's decision to leave college, institutional departure is typically the result of an individual student's (negative) experiences at a university (Tinto, 1987). Research shows that only when personal circumstances change drastically after entry (i.e. a change in family or financial circumstances), will external factors play a significant role in institutional departure (Tinto, 1987). Therefore, institutions must accept responsibility for finding ways to combat attrition on an individual/personal student basis.

Frustrated students who feel as though their goals and commitments are incongruent with the goals and commitments of the institution are more likely to voluntarily (and involuntarily) withdraw from the academy. Longitudinally, these students can be harmful to the institution even after they have departed from the campus. Although poor persistence affects all areas of an academic institution, the challenges of high attrition are most readily experienced within the fiscal domains of the institution.

The Fiscal Realities of Student Departure

Although the academy has historically taken pride in high attrition rates as a badge of academic rigor (Richmond, 1986), the fiscal realities of student departure are

now becoming more prevalent on university financial spreadsheets. Not only can a disassociated and frustrated student's continued presence at a university become potentially disruptive, the non-persisting student makes poor use of scholarship and other campus-based financial aid dollars that could have been more appropriately allocated to a fully matriculating student. Collectively, non-persisting students may also compromise an institution's long term financial stability.

From a fiscal perspective, the non-persisting student must be rapidly replaced with another equal, fee paying student. In addition, students who leave an institution without ever pursuing a degree at a later date often do not feel compelled to repay student loans for a degree that was never earned (Herr & Burt, 2005). Over time, this can negatively affect an institution's loan default rate, thereby compromising future state and federal aid funding. Finally, individuals who do not graduate will most likely not have the financial means (or desire) to make alumni contributions towards scholarship endowments.

The individual student also suffers significant financial consequences for his or her decision to depart from an institution prior to degree completion (Tinto, 1993). A 2006 report from the United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, noted that in 2005 individuals who completed high school and some college coursework earned an average of $34,840 annually. However, individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher earned an average of approximately $52,052 annually. In essence, a difference of approximately $17,212 was realized in response to the completion of a baccalaureate degree. This loss of wages becomes even more significant when multiplied over a forty

year work history in conjunction with cost of living salary increases. In summary, student retention is a legitimate concern for every entity within the academy.

It has been argued that attrition would decrease if institutions of higher education were more selective in their admission criteria. However, this has yet to be proven. Fiscal realities often override the luxury of selectivity in the admission process. As a result, many institutions are now forced to admit almost everyone who applies (Tinto, 1993).

Background Information

Gospel Music and the African American Community

In order to fully appreciate the significant impact of gospel music on African American culture, one must historically revisit one of the ugliest segments of American history – the enslavement of Africans and African Americans.   The Africans were the makers of the first musical instruments. Although they were brought here against their will in a massive 400 year slave trade (Batastini, 2001), their music, and the fundamental components of such, could not be exterminated - not even in the presence of the American holocaust that we call slavery.

The greatest judgments against slavery were deposited in the belly of the slave ships, in the "harmony and melody" of millions of God's prophetic, poetic, history making, and civilization bearing children. W.E.B. DuBois says our ancestors, our foremothers and forefathers, maintained a "harmony and melody in an ill-harmonizing and unmelodious land…It's difficult to kill culture… There was a philosophy of freedom, a theology of liberation, a song of protest that would not surrender to the slave master's rawhide and the hangman's noose. Through our

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"weary years" and along our "stony road"… we took the apocalyptic literature of biblical tradition and sent it marching across cotton fields, corn fields, and plantations (Batastini, 2001, Preface)."

A review of history shows that after a 1664 decree from the Virginia Assembly made it permissible for an African to be both a slave and a baptized Christian (Porter & Ellotson, 1996), slaves were heavily indoctrinated in Christian religious instruction and religious music. The missionaries initially tried to remove the emotional aspects of the slaves' religious music. However, they were unsuccessful in their efforts.

Although the missionaries believed that expressive singing, dancing, getting happy and becoming emotionally removed from oneself was inappropriate for sacred music, it was an integral part of African religious culture. Slaves did not support the slave owner's belief that emotionality in music was a savage act. Slaves found it both difficult and undesirable to sing naturally within the print-oriented structure of European hymns. In addition, the slaves were accustomed to simple harmonies, as most slaves could not read or write, which made the reading of the European's music notation unrealistic (Porter & Ellotson, 1996).

Percussion was (and still is) a significant component of the music of the African people. However, with an increase in storehouse burnings, runaway slaves, and plantation rebellions, slave owners took all drums away from the slaves when they realized that these musical instruments were simultaneously being used as tools for communication. The absence of drums prompted more reliance on percussion through handclapping for religious music (Porter & Ellotson, 1996).

By the 19th century, slaves grew even less trusting of their Christian slave masters. They found it incomprehensible that a person could beat, rape, and mistreat another human being, and then engage in prayer and scripture readings with a clear conscious. In summary, the slaves concluded that it was impossible for one to be both a slave owner and a Christian. This philosophical stance was reinforced through the singing of song lyrics like, "*everybody talking 'bout heaven ain't goin' there* (Porter & Ellotson, 1996)."

Slave owners preached that God did not like slaves. As a result of these preachings, slaves had no desire to worship with them. Therefore, they began to worship in the wooded brush, where the overlapping trees echoed the sounds of their voices. This creation of an "invisible church" allowed them to sing more loudly and freely than ever before (Porter & Ellotson, 1996). Now, in their own church atmosphere, the slaves were finally free to worship and practice their own musical rhythms and traditions, which included "call and response," a hallmark of African American worship.

Slaves continued to worship and sing in their own churches, even after legally being granted freedom. Church services were held in such venues as cow fields and pastures, with the first formal African American religious denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, being founded in a blacksmith's shop (Shiver, 2004). Ironically, hundreds of years later, America remains its most racially segregated on Sunday morning.

Today, the "Black Church" and its musical elements of worship continue to serve as a pillar of strength for the African American community. Mr. Jim Harvey, Executive Director of Chicago's New City Health Center, states that "Long before the civil rights movement... we went to the church for everything. The church was our social service

organization as well as our spiritual service organization. The church is still being looked on…by large segments of our community as being central in our lives (Weatherford & Weatherford, 1999)."

Gospel music is the music of the Black Church. Gospel historian, Rev. Dr. Hyatt T. Walker, states that gospel music is the primary cohesive element that "has bound Black life together in the midst of the difficult obstacles that it has faced. Racism, segregation, lynchings… Had it not been for the cohesive character of our African American sacred music…I don't think that Black people could have made it on the North American continent. It [gospel music] has been the primary ingredient that has bonded us together as a surviving people (Porter & Ellotson, 1996)."

The Beginnings of the College Gospel Choir – The Fisk Jubilee Singers

In order to fully capture the significance of the college gospel choir, we must again revisit the era of slavery. Ella Shepherd was born a slave. When her mother, Sarah Anna Shepherd, learned that her daughter was being trained by her slave-owner mistress to spy on her, Sarah Anna Shepherd thought it best to drown her daughter in the river to avoid her having to grow up under the evils of slavery. However, an old slave woman intervened, stating that God had great plans for her daughter (Porter & Ellotson, 1996).

Later in life, Ella Shepherd's father purchased her freedom. After learning to read, write, and play the piano, Ella Shepherd desired to go to college to become a teacher. Fisk University was established to prepare freed Blacks across the south to become teachers. It was established by the American Missionary Association on the grounds of an abandoned army hospital barracks. Mr. George Leonard White served as

the school's chief financial officer. However, his true passion was music. He was an experienced choir master and band director (Porter & Ellotson, 1996).

Entranced by the voices of the young former slaves who studied at the school, Mr. White assembled a choir. He appointed Ms. Ella Shepherd to be his assistant director - the school's first Black faculty member. Mr. White was intrigued by the songs that Ella Shepherd and the other students sang outside of his traditional choir rehearsals. These songs were the gospel cabin and plantation melodies that were sung by the slaves. He noticed that as the students started singing, they would remove the frowns from their faces and an emotional cleansing would occur (Porter & Ellotson, 1996).

By 1866, hundreds of former slaves crowded into the school. However, they could not afford the $12 per year tuition, as farm laborers only earned approximately eight dollars a month. After exhausting his personal savings to try and keep the school open, Mr. White brought the choir to neighboring towns to sing the cantatas and arias that he taught with the hope of receiving monetary donations. Unfortunately, this proved dangerous for both Mr. White and the singers (Porter & Ellotson, 1996).

Concerns were expressed about Mr. White "wasting" that much education on Blacks. In addition, the Ku Klux Klan was becoming even more violent in opposition to Fisk University producing college educated "Negros" who were now able to teach former slaves how to read and write.   In response, some Black schools were burned down and some of Fisk's students were murdered. Even so, Mr. White and the singers continued touring in an effort to raise money to save their school.

On one tour, Mr. White and the singers found themselves stranded at a railway station surrounded by angry mob. They called White a "yankee nigger school teacher"

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and were preparing to do them all harm. Mr. White stood between the crowd and the students and directed the students to sing their own sacred music. The singing of these songs caused the crowd to disburse. In addition, the leader of the mob cried, took off his hat, and begged them to sing again (Porter & Ellotson, 1996).

In 1871, with the school's barracks rotting away and no money for food, Mr. White developed a plan to take the students north to sing for money. Targeting White Christian audiences, Mr. White was determined to "sing money out of the people" along the path of the Underground Railroad and abolitionist's homes. Mr. White was convinced that he was chosen by God to save Fisk University. He knew that if he didn't bring money back, Fisk University would surely close (Porter & Ellotson, 1996).

As Mr. White would travel to the next city to find a safe performance venue and safe lodging, Ms. Shepherd was charged with directing the choir and arranging music for the tour. The choir's repertoire began to include less European hymns and more of the gospel slave songs. This was emotionally difficult for the students, as most of them were former slaves. The slave songs were sacred to them, many of which reminded them of the very painful experiences that they wanted to forget. Therefore, it took months before they felt open to sharing the power and emotion of their music in public forums. Yet during one performance venue at Oberlin College, the choir sang before a national convention of influential ministers. The emotional singing of "*Steal Away*" brought the entire congregation and the choristers to tears (Porter & Ellotson, 1996).

After this engagement, the group remained in high demand and quickly garnered the financial resources necessary to save their school. They were named the Jubilee Singers in response to Leviticus 25, which speaks of the Jewish year of jubilee,

emphasizing debt relief, the redemption of poverty, and the emancipation of slavery (Porter & Ellotson, 1996).

The Jubilee Singers eventually earned enough money to purchase the site of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. They later earned the $160,000 necessary to construct "Jubilee Hall." However, their largest contribution will always be the introduction of gospel music to the rest of the world, particularly in the collegiate environment. In closing, the prophesy revealed to Mother Sarah Anne Shepherd by the old slave woman was fulfilled (Porter & Ellotson, 1996).

In a 1996 interview with the current Fisk Jubilee Singers, choristers stated that they get emotionally closer to each other "not by virtue of our character but by virtue of the spiritualism in the songs we sing (Porter & Ellotson, 1996)." Hundreds of years later, this researcher seeks to explore whether or not participation in a college gospel choir has the ability to aid in African American student persistence at a predominately White institution.

Theoretical Framework

Vincent Tinto's Work on Student Retention

Vincent Tinto continues to be heralded as the father of retention and attrition literature. Tinto's model of student attrition begins with various pre-entry factors, including family background, individual attributes, and pre-college factors (i.e. high school performance). The student is then challenged to confirm whether or not his or her individual goals and level of commitment are congruent with the goals of the institution. The greater the level of institutional commitment and commitment to the goal of college graduation, the greater the likelihood the student will persist (York & Longden, 2004).

Tinto's longitudinal model of attrition unfolds into a drama between the individual

student and the academic and social systems of the university. The core of Tinto's model

encompasses a student's academic and social integration into campus life. Tinto

postulated that attrition occurs when a student does not feel a connection to other

members of the college community and no longer identifies with the values of the

institution (Lenning, Beal, & Sauer, 1980). Conversely, if a student successfully

navigates and integrates through the academic and social systems of the college, there is a

high probability that persistence will occur.

In his model of student persistence/withdrawal, Tinto identifies six factors that

contribute to institutional departure. These factors include pre-entry attributes (family

background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling), goals and commitments (intentions,

and goals and institutional commitments), institutional experiences (academic systems -

academic performance and faculty/staff interactions; and social systems - extracurricular

activities and peer group interactions), personal/normative integration (academic

integration and social integration), and outcomes (departure decision).

Tinto postulates (1987) that departure is most likely to occur when there is

inadequate intellectual and social integration into the academic and social systems of the

institution. This discourse in integration can be the result of a failure to intellectually or

socially challenge a student, or it can stem from a student feeling as though he or she is in

some way unable to meet the academic and/or social demands of the academy.

Students often struggle when their previous school norms are vastly different from

the norms of their college environment. Although they may have been successful in

meeting the demands of their previous (high school) educational institution, their past

schooling may not have adequately prepared them to successfully manage the holistic demands of collegiate life. As a result, "…the disadvantaged student, persons of minority origins…are more likely to experience problems than are other students (Tinto, 1987)."

As previously mentioned, key tenets of Tinto's retention theory are the need for academic and social integration. Successful academic integration involves the student's ability to meet the scholastic demands of the collegiate environment (Tinto, 1975). This requires knowledge of campus resources and academic expectations, and the ability to successfully navigate the formal and informal systems of the university. Social integration includes the student's interactions with his or her peers, faculty, and staff, to the extent that an appropriate support system has been established that allows the student to feel as though he or she is a valued member of the campus community (Tinto, 1975). Full integration in both systems is not necessary. However, some degree of social and/or academic integration must occur as a condition of persistence (Tinto, 1987).

Although both concepts are indicative of working towards "competent membership" in the collegiate community, academic and social integration are arguably distinct processes (Tinto, 1987). However, they are also mutually interdependent upon each other. For example, when a student's social interaction with peers is very high, he or she may experience some difficulties in keeping up with the academic demands of the institution due to increased social interactions.

Tinto (1993) describes social integration as "the formal and informal interactions that students experience at the university." He stated that the extent to which a student is integrated into the domains of the university will impact his or her level of commitment

and increase the likelihood of persistence. Therefore, commitment serves as a "mediator" between integration and retention. Active involvement with the university community is related to persistence through the mediation of commitment (Beil, C. Reisen, C. Cecilia, M., & Caplan, R., 1999).

Research suggests that early social integration into college life is linked with higher levels of persistence. Such findings have been supported by Getzlaf, Sedlacek, Kearney, and Blackwell (1984). This phenomenon also complements other research paradigms which posit that a student knows very early (within the first six weeks of their first semester) whether or not he or she will leave the institution (Noel, 1985). Therefore, extracurricular and co-curricular activities that involve high levels of social integration should be encouraged early in a collegiate experience in order to significantly impact persistence (Mannan, 2001).

Social integration is more closely related to institutional commitment, while academic integration is more of a commitment towards degree completion without regard to a specific institution (Beil et al., 1999). Popular and/or more visible students are more likely to enjoy higher levels of academic and social satisfaction, and likewise experience greater levels of commitment to degree completion. Hence, the strategic use of social networks can enhance academic performance, the quality of campus life, and student persistence (Mannan, 2001).

Social Integration and African American Student Retention

Although campuses have been racially integrated for decades, there continues to be a disparity between the graduation rates of African American students and White students

(Furr & Elling, 2002). Studies have shown that African American students as a whole are persisting and performing at a much lower rate than their White peers (Garibaldi, 1998; Mannan et al., 1986).

Cultural Issues

The study of retention literature can be very complex when applied to African American and other marginalized student populations. According to Bean (1990), retention models were designed from (and subsequently, for) the persistence of majority students. Therefore, traditional indicators of persistence may not always result in successful retention strategies for African American students. Traditional retention models and other student development theories often do not fully recognize the role of parental, church, and community support within the African American community (Bean, 1990).

African American students cannot be viewed homogenously. Therefore, theories that do not account for cultural differences may not be as meaningful in retaining this specific population of student. Bean (1990) stresses the importance of institutional fit for White students. However, this factor may be less significant for African American students, who are more likely to persist or attrit based upon positive or negative experiences at the university.

African American students at PWIs are often caught in a cultural clash between their own culture and the dominant culture of the university (Lee, 1999). As a result, many adapt a bicultural existence (Valentine, 1971), which allows them to simultaneously commit to their own African American culture and the mainstream culture of the University (DeAnda, 1984).

In addition to bringing a strong cultural heritage to the campus, many African American students bring with them various pre-entry attributes that are closely correlated with high attrition rates. For example, African American students are more likely to delay entrance to college (Tinto, 1993). This factor alone makes them statistically more likely to persist at a much lower rate than their peers who enter college immediately after high school (Caroll, 1989). In addition, they are more likely to come from poorer backgrounds (Nora & Horvath, 1989), making them much more vulnerable to the educational inadequacies of financially challenged school districts (Tinto, 1993; Archer & Lamin, 1985). Finally, since many of them are first generation college students (Lee, 1999), their families may not have been able to fully prepare them for the struggles and demands of college life (Lee, 1999; Astin, 1982) and may not be willing to fully accept participation in higher education if other pressing family issues emerge (Tinto, 1987).

Socialization Challenges

In Tinto's persistence model, a hallmark of continued enrollment is the student's academic and social integration into the life of the university. However, this can be challenging for African American students who report more difficulty making friends and participating in social activities at PWIs (Tinto, 1993). Adjusting to the social environment of the institution seems to be central to the success of African American students at PWIs (Watson & Kuh, 1996). For some African American students, success in college depends more on personality characteristics, self concept, goals, motivation, and academic and social support, than on high school grade point average and standardized admission test scores (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976; Nettles, Theony & Gosman, 1986; Hughs, 1987).

In addition to the stressors identified for the general college student population, African American students face additional socialization challenges (Ross, Niebling, and Heckert, 1999; Towes and Cohen, 1996; Suen, 1983). Many perceive the academic environment at a PWI to be hostile towards them. This results in increased feelings of marginality. Where marginality exists, departure is more likely to occur (Murguia, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991).

Feelings of marginality inhibit many African American students from initiating informal contacts with faculty. As a result, they sacrifice the benefits of these informal interactions. In addition, when problems arise, students of color are less likely to seek counseling. This is an educational tragedy, because students who seek counseling for retention related-concerns are retained at an 80% persistence rate - even if the odds were not initially in their favor at pre-entry (Sharkin, 2004).

African American students who enjoy the social environment of the campus report higher GPAs and persistence rates (Mayo, Murgia, & Padilla, 1995). Integrating African American students into the social fabric of a PWI requires a concerted effort by the whole campus. It begins with an examination of the philosophy and mission of the institution and evolves into a willingness to facilitate mentoring relationships so that the students can be intimately nurtured through the institution's organizational structures. If a PWI is unable or unwilling to invest the resources necessary to create an environment of trust for African American students, accepting them into the institution may do them more harm than good (Credle & Dean, 1991).

Campus Climate

Successfully integrating African American students into the university requires an environment that offers a sense of comfort, with reminders of their own cultural upbringing. This underscores the importance of PWIs supporting Black History Month celebrations, African American student organizations, and campus multicultural/diversity offices (Parker 1998; Tinto, 1993; Lavant & Terrell, 1994). Increasing the complement of faculty and administrators of color also has a positive effect on African American student social integration. These employees not only serve as role models with whom students can identify, but they collectively work behind the scenes to bring about a more positive racial climate (Castle, 1993; Loo & Rolinson, 1986; Suen, 1983).

Although a scarcity of African American faculty further enhances feelings of alienation, more caustic to the African American student's educational experience is the continued employment of White faculty who make racist remarks to African American students. PWIs must be more assertive in dealing with employees who make racist comments towards African American students or intentionally give less positive reinforcement to Black students than that which is given to their White peers (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976; Credle & Dean, 1991; Babit, Burbach & Thompson, 1975). As has been previously stated, African American student departure is more likely an end product of negative interactions with the institution.

If an institution is truly committed to African American student persistence, it cannot be concerned solely about their academic issues. It must also be concerned about their emotional and social experiences (Astin, 1985). A student who feels a sense of

"belonging" to the institution will have a much greater chance of persistence. Nowhere is this phenomenon better demonstrated than at our nation's HBCUs.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Many lessons in African American student retention can be learned from campus life at HBCUs. Students in attendance at HBCUs report a high level of satisfaction with the overall college experience. Patterns of intellectual development are consistently more positive at HBCUs than at PWIs (Astin, 1993). In addition, African American students who were socially involved at HBCUs report a higher level of academic engagement than their Black peers who attend PWIs (Desousa & Kuh, 1996).

Although these findings are all positive for HBCUs, they are insufficient to address a national retention crisis among African American students. Only one out of five African American students attends an HBCU (Gomstyn, 2003). Therefore, PWIs must accept the responsibility of creating a sense of community that will foster social integration for African American students. One way to foster a stronger sense of community on campus is through student organizations.

Student Organizations

As has been stated, student involvement in the extracurricular life of the university is an important component of social integration. Research shows that students who participate in extracurricular activities are more likely to remain in school (Tinto, 1993). The more socially committed a student is to the institution, the more likely he or she is to invest time and energy into his or her own learning (Tinto, 1993). Even more specifically, research shows that involvement in peer-related activities has a positive effect on African American student persistence (Desousa & Kuh, 1996). Furthermore,

formal social integration activities, which includes participation in recognized extracurricular organizations, has a greater (positive) effect on African American academic performance than informal social integration venues (i.e. informal social activities). The benefit experienced by African American students even exceeds the benefit realized by their White peers (Mayo et al., 1995).

Social involvement and community affiliation is a critical element of African American student persistence. Pascarella argues (1985) that the types of involvements, activities, and interpersonal relationships that lead to effective social integration for White students may not be the same for African American students. Students of color may find it more difficult to become a member of an extracurricular community if it again places them in a "minority" status environment.

Research shows that the persistence of students of color is influenced greatly by whether or not there is a sufficient enough number to form a viable community (Tinto, 1993). The presence of organizations that are focused on race and ethnicity provide much needed social support and aid in African American student retention, adjustment, and attachment to the institution (Chang, 2002).

Multicultural and minority focused clubs and organizations are instrumental in providing integration opportunities for African American students. These organizations help break the university down into smaller parts so that social integration is more feasible (Tinto, 1987). For many African American students at PWIs, extracurricular organizations provide a safe haven in a potentially hostile environment.

Definition of Terms

Attrition - The loss of an enrolled student because of he or she dropped out or transferred to a different institution (Tinto, 1987).

Dropout - Leaving an institution and not returning for additional study at any time (Lenning, Beal, & Sauer, 1980).

Gospel Choir - Whether college/university affiliated or community (church) based, a gospel choir is a choral ensemble whose primary focus is spiritual (Christian) ministry through song.

Gospel Music - Gospel or "Good News" music is a form of African American sacred music. It began as Negro Spirituals or slave songs, but now this genre of music has been expanded to include anthems, ballads, gospels, spirituals, and rap.

Involuntary withdrawal - When a student who wishes to remain at an institution is dismissed due to violations of academic or social conduct (Braxton, 2000).

Marginality - The belief that a person is not valued within an institution or does not have the ability to be successful (Schlossberg, 1989).

Peer Group - A collection of individuals with whom a student identifies, affiliates, and seeks acceptance (Astin, 1993).

Persistence - Continued enrollment at the same institution without an interruption in study (Lenning, Beal, & Sauer, 1980).

Retention - Students who remain at an institution over time and eventually graduate from that institution (Lenning, Beal, & Sauer, 1980).

Stop Out - Leaving an institution for a period of time, but returning to that same institution to continue academic pursuits.

Voluntary Withdrawal - When a student voluntarily leaves an institution by his or her own choice. The student is otherwise eligible to remain at the institution, but has chosen to discontinue enrollment.

Research Questions

Because this study is guided by issues of marginalization, social integration, and persistence, the following questions form the basis for this study:

1.) How do African American students perceive their experience as a participant in the gospel choir?

2.) To what extent do African American students perceive that their participation in the gospel choir facilitates a stronger social integration to the campus community?

3.) To what extent do African American students perceive that participation in the gospel choir decreases their feelings of marginalization at a predominately White campus?

4.) To what extent do African American students perceive that their participation in the gospel choir assists with their persistence at a predominately White university?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in that it provides the academy one more opportunity to examine the factors related to African American student departure. With an increased emphasis on multiculturalism, this study provides a vehicle to explore alternative, culturally significant methods of enhancing student retention/persistence.

For many people, cultural and religious diversity are salient components of their existence (Spradley, 1980). Therefore, any study that gives recognition to these two significant factors of a person's life, has the potential to significantly enhance campus climate and augment persistence. Although no one study can solely correct a nationwide

retention problem, any scholarship that can bring forward an additional method of supporting and enhancing student of color persistence efforts is well worth the effort.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. Although it will provide a frame work for inquiry regarding African American student persistence, African American religious tradition, and African American culture, its focus is specific to a college gospel choir. Additional research would be required to determine whether or not similar findings would be realized with other African American focused student organizations.

This study will utilize a small sample, which will present some challenges. Like many qualitative studies, the generalization of these findings may not be appropriate (Merriam, 2002). Although ethnography is appropriate in that it presents a rich and colorful depiction of a sociological phenomenon, it is difficult to generalize the results to a larger population, particularly in the presence of a small sample, such as the one used in this study.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Review of Retention Theories

Some institutions of higher education have failed to realize the severity of our

country's retention crisis. Collectively, American institutions yield only a 40% four-year

degree completion rate. This number increases to only 45% within a six-year time frame.

Even worse, public universities have a 34% four-year degree completion rate, with only a

6% in increase in a six year time frame (Astin et al., 1996).   Student retention is a one of

the most critical issues facing institutions of higher education. Therefore, attempts to

address retention concerns must be well coordinated efforts that are launched from a solid

theoretical platform.

Tinto's Theory

Vincent Tinto's work on student retention and departure continues to be the

vanguard of modern day retention literature. His paradigm emerged from Emil

Durkheim's (1951) research on suicidal behavior. Durkheim posited that when people

are not sufficiently integrated into the fabric of the community (values, relationships,

affiliations, etc.) there was a more significant risk of suicidal behavior - the ultimate

departure. Transposing these principles to the collegiate environment, Spady (1971)

claimed that when a student's expectations, background, and abilities are not in sync with

the academic environment, "educational suicide" could occur. Tinto (1975) culminated

these paradigms by stating that institutional departure is a longitudinal decision that is

made in response to the acceptance or rejection of the academic and social systems of the

university. If the interactions and integration between the student and the university environment are positive, the chances of persistence are increased.

Clearly, there is a need for caution when making comparisons between suicidal behavior and campus departure. Above and beyond the obvious tenet that death is a more permanent "departure" then college attrition, Durkheim has been criticized (Spady, 1971) for not appropriately accounting for family background, which was a more salient component of the theoretical models presented by both Spady and Tinto (Lenning, Beal, & Sawyer, 1980).

According to Tinto (1987), retention is dependent on some level of synchronization between the student's committed goals and the committed goals of the institution. Hence, the more clear a student is about his or her educational goals, the more likely he or she is to persist (Mason, 1998).

Although one may falsely assume that an individual enters college with a very well-defined set of goals and a clear sense of purpose, most students are somewhat "haphazard" in their selection of an institution, basing institutional choice on a relatively small body of information. This is clearly a contributing factor as to why so many students become frustrated and question their decision to even pursue higher education. The higher the level of an individual's educational or occupation goal, the greater the likelihood of persistence (Pascarella, 1982).

The enrollment of a student who is unclear about his or her educational goals can be challenging for an institution. Although some level of uncertainty is expected, and even welcomed when working with lower division students, institutional persistence efforts would be well served by investing resources to assist with goal clarification during the

early years of college. Also challenging to institutional persistence efforts is the enrollment of a student whose goals are not aligned with the goals of an institution.

Students with very limited educational goals may only desire a particular number of credits to qualify for employment advancement or to gain information about a very specific subject matter that is essential for successful work performance. This is a common occurrence with nontraditional/returning adult students. The same disequilibrium occurs with students whose goals exceed the goals of the institution. Some students enter an academic institution (i.e. a two year college) with a pre-established plan of transferring to a different (four year) institution (Pascarella, 1982). Although both of these scenarios are positive for the student, they are in contrast with institutional retention efforts.

In Tinto's model of student persistence, student integration into the academic and social life of the campus is more predictive of persistence than any other factor (Tinto, 1987). Tinto viewed colleges as having two interacting systems; an academic system and a social system. The core focus of student persistence is the successful integration into both of these systems. Therefore, strategically speaking, universities would be well-served by focusing and front loading retention efforts and scarce fiscal resources towards integrating students into the academic and social systems of the college during their first semester of enrollment (Tinto, 1993).

The incoming freshman class is typically the largest cohort of students on campus. However, they are the least integrated into the university community. Because of this, they are the most likely casualties of an unsuccessful university transition (Tinto, 1993). The majority of institutional departure occurs between the first semester of the freshman

year and the first semester of the sophomore year for both four-year (53%) and two-year (68%) institutions. Tragically, 75% of all student attrition occurs within the first two years of a college experience (Tinto, 1987). Selective institutions lose approximately 8% of their students before the start of their second semester. Open enrollment institutions lose 46% within the same time period (Tinto, 1993). All of these institutions will suffer the enrollment pains of the loss of these students over multiple years.

Early departure can occur for a wide variety of reasons. Some first year students are simply unable to cope with the stress of college life. As a result, some who are experiencing academic difficulty will voluntarily withdraw to avoid the stigma of failure. Others will stay until forced to leave by the institution. Whatever the method and/or reason for this departure, 40% of these students will not return for degree completion (Tinto, 1993).

Both academic and social integration are essential to student persistence. Although persistence can occur when only one is present, it is greatly enhanced when both forms of integration are present (Tinto, 1993). As has been previously said, social integration is more closely related to institutional commitment (Beil et al., 1999).

Student departure often occurs in the absence of sufficient contact between members of the social and academic community (Tinto, 1993). Encounters that go beyond the formalities of academic work are strongly associated with higher levels of student persistence (Tinto, 1993). Conversely, low social support is more closely correlated with non-persistence (Mallinckrodt, 1988).

Social contacts are a contributing factor in how a student evaluates his or her congruence with the institution. The absence of social contacts results in an increased

isolation from the intellectual life of the institution and an increased risk of attrition. Likewise, interactions that further one's social and intellectual integration enhance the likelihood of persistence. The lower the degree of social integration, the greater the likelihood of departure. According to Tinto, "the social (personal) integration and resulting social rewards which arise from it lead to heightened institutional commitment (Tinto, 1987)." Therefore, efforts would be well spent on creating opportunities for students to socially integrate themselves into the many formal and informal support systems of the university.

Integration into the academy can be a challenging process. However, even though transitional difficulties can be stressful, they do not have to result in departure. Individuals must be willing to work through adjustment difficulties (Tinto, 1987). According to Watson and Kuh (1996), college students encounter four significant challenges in negotiating the transition from high school to college. These challenges include:

1.) academic adjustment to college-level work,

2.) institutional adjustment and commitment to college goals,

3.) personal and emotional adjustment, and

4.) the need to manage one's own well-being (social adjustment).

Social support is a key factor in helping individuals successfully deal with transition. Social support can include guidance, emotional support, extracurricular involvements, and informal contacts with faculty, staff, and peers. Students who report more social support initiate fewer withdrawals (Cutronea et al., 1994). Also, students

who are successful at college consistently report that they not only believe in their ability to be successful, but they also receive the social support necessary to effectuate their success (Phinney, 2003).

<div align="center">Other Related Theories</div>

Alexander Astin's Involvement Theory

Another key resource in enhancing social integration at an institution is a student's involvement with the extracurricular activities. The greater the investment of a student's time and energy in the college experience, the greater the likelihood of persistence (Astin, 1993).

The literature links student involvement with a more satisfactory college experience. In essence, finding a peer group to identify with is associated with greater levels of university satisfaction (Astin, 1993).

Alexander Astin's (1985) theory on student involvement is one of the most widely used student development theories. Based on the Freudian notion of cathexis or "investing positive psychological energy in things outside of one's self (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991)," a student can enhance his or her opportunities for persistence and personal growth via involvement with the extracurricular life of the university.

Through repetitive contact with peers, extracurricular activities provide a forum to establish friendships that extend well beyond formal social activities, thereby decreasing feelings of marginalization on campus (Tinto, 1987). Student to student interaction has positive correlations for a successful student life experience (Astin, 1993). Extracurricular activities provide a venue for like-minded individuals and/or those with special interests to form a sub-community within the institution. These sub-communities

assist with integration by breaking the university down into smaller, more manageable entities, thereby increasing the chances that meaningful relationships will be established.

The Tinto model acknowledges that students can be involved in multiple communities, each with its own particular culture. This involvement in multiple communities allows them to satisfy a multiplicity of needs that no one community would be able to fill. According to Tinto (1987), the greater the number of memberships, the greater the likelihood of persistence.

Membership in a local community is a minimum condition for persistence, so long as that community is connected to the main systems of the college (Tinto, 1993). Therefore, academic and student affairs administrators must work in concert with each other to support student integration and student development through extracurricular and co-curricular opportunities (Astin, 1993).

William Cross' Theory of Psychological Nigresence

African American persistence can be enhanced through the creation and exploration of theories that more thoroughly address the developmental needs specific to African American students. When traditional student development theories are imposed on African American students, the end result can potentially be a host of inaccurate conclusions that frustrate both the African American student and the well-intentioned administrator who desired to help them (Cuyjet, 1997). "As student affairs professionals attempt to make theories of human and student development more inclusive of other populations, it seems more important to create theories rather than to modify or revise existing ones (McEwen, Roper, Brandon, & Langa, 1990)." Therefore, additional

scholarship is needed for the development of theories that specifically address African American student persistence.

African American student development is distinct from student development in general (Cuyjet, 1997). Therefore, the sole reliance on traditional student development and retention theories may not always prove helpful in improving African American student persistence.

One theory that can be beneficial in addressing African American student persistence is William Cross' theory on Psychological Nigresence (Cross, 1990). This 1970 theory on African American identity development contains many relevant implications for African American student persistence.

Cross' theory (Hall, Freedle, & Cross, 1972) identifies four stages of African American identity development. These stages are:

1.) pre-encounter, when an individual does not embrace his or her African American identity. He or she views ethnicity as nothing more than a physical attribute;

2.) encounter, when an incident or series of "eye opening episodes" disturbs their current race-neutral existence;

3.) immersion - emersion, when an individual fully engulfs himself or herself into an Afro-centric existence and has little tolerance or interest for anything that does not represent Black culture; and

4.) internalization, the coming to terms with, and being at peace with, an African American identity such that he or she no longer harbors ill feelings for individuals and things outside of African American culture.

Nigresence theory is very relevant to the African American student's persistence at a PWI. Many African American college students were educated in predominately Black high schools, where Afro-centric discussions may not have been prevalent due to their "majority" status. However, upon their arrival at a PWI, some African American students "encounter" acts of racism and insensitivity which may prompt a more in depth, internal cultural exploration. In response, their persistence may very well depend upon their ability to successfully move to the internalization phase of Cross' model so that they are able to successfully function and thrive in a predominately White academic environment. Supporting African American students through this period of cultural identification can, for some students, be the determining factor as to whether or not they will persist through to graduation.

In closing, it is not impossible to apply traditional student development theories to African American students. However, in doing so, one must be attentive to several key factors (Cuyjet, 1997). These factors include:

1.) assisting students with the development of an ethnic/racial identity,

2.) assisting students in interacting with the dominant culture,

3.) learning to understand and appreciate other cultures as well as one's own,

4.) developing an individual identity and group identification,

5.) developing interdependence on an extended campus family,

6.) fulfilling affiliational needs,

7.) surviving intellectually,

8.) developing spiritually – understanding the role of, and cultural significance of, religion and spirituality in African American culture, and

9.) developing social responsibility and social advocacy (Cuyjet, 1997).

Review of Studies Related to College Student Retention

Numerous studies have been conducted on student retention. Several over-arching themes have been developed. These themes include providing increased support for first generation students, the importance of a successful first year experience, and the need to establish effective linkages with the social systems of the university. These themes all serve as pillars for the social integration component of Vincent Tinto's retention theory (Tinto, 1987).

Regarding the retention of first generation college students, a 2006 study conducted by Terry Ishitani confirms that first generation students have lower persistence rates than their peers whose parents graduated from college. Using the National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988 – 2002, Ishitani performed a longitudinal study on persistence patterns of first generation students at four year institutions. Utilizing event history modeling, this study focused on the timing of graduation and/or attrition behaviors in order to establish some level of predictability.

The sample consisted of 4,427 students who were enrolled in both public and private colleges between 1991 and 1994. By the year 2000, 2,256 (51%) of the continuously enrolled students graduated from their institution of initial enrollment. However, of the remaining 2,171 students who did not maintain continuous enrollment, 19% did not continue their education, 25% transferred from their initial institution, 4% "stopped out," and 1% were still enrolled at the publishing of this study. Of the combined 49% of students who did not maintain continuous enrollment at their initial

institution, 79% of were first generation college students.   This affirms that the education

level of a student's parents is a significant factor in persistence.

The Ishitani study also revealed and/or confirmed several other significant findings

about student persistence. Students with family incomes of $20,000 - $34,999 were 72%

more likely to depart than students from family incomes earning $50,000 a year or more.

Students from the lowest quintile of their high school rank were almost two times more

likely to depart than their peers in the first quintile. Students receiving grants or work

study jobs were more likely to persist than students who receive no financial aid. Finally,

students attending private institutions were more likely to graduate in four years than

those who were attending public institutions.

Wolcox, Winn, and Gauld (2005) conducted a study on the importance of social

support during the first year of a university experience. They referenced previous

research findings (Tinto, 1975) highlighting the importance of new students establishing

early social networks to overcome initial difficulties, which included homesickness.

In this qualitative study, Wolcox et al., (2005) explored student experiences with

university life to gain a better understanding of the decision making process employed by

attriting students. Qualitative interviews were conducted with a sample of 22 students

who completed their first year of college. Additional interviews were also conducted

with a cohort of 12 students who withdrew during their first year of college. Only one of

these 12 students withdrew in response to selecting the wrong curriculum of study.

Withdrawal reasons for the remainder of the students encompassed three major themes;

social support, academic factors, and material factors.

Difficulties with the social systems of the university was the prominent concern of this sample of students. The presence of compatible friends was paramount in their decision to persist or attrit early in their college career. For many students, the first year of college is primarily focused on social interactions. The challenge of navigating from their familiar home life to their new collegiate environment can be a great source of tension (Wolcox et al., 2005).

This study highlighted the significance of a student's social integration into the institution. Although family support initially can serve as an emotional buffer during early transition issues, successful integration requires students to transfer their support base to their newly established collegiate social networks. It is this emotional support from their new college peers that will assist them when difficulties arise at the academy.

Another successful tool in enhancing second year persistence is the first year seminar. Although research has already documented the first year seminar's positive effects on persistence (Tinto, 1993), Porter and Swing (2006) desired to provide institutions with an evaluation of their first year seminar programs to assist with continuous improvement.

During the fall 2001 semester, the First Year Initiative (FYI) Survey was administered across 61 institutions with a 53% return rate yielding 31,755 usable surveys. After an internal review of course content, first year seminar courses were coded into one of four categories based upon the focus of the majority (75% or greater) of the course content:

1.) college success/transition theme,

2.) special academic theme,

3.) themes connected to academic or professional disciplines, or

4.) remedial theme. To ensure homogeneity in course content, surveys were only utilized from students in a transition based first year seminar, as it was the most common format.

The selection of this particular format yielded a final data set of 20,031 respondents. The findings of this study indicated that the more effective the student rated a given content area, the more likely the student was to express an intent to return to the institution. Hence, students attending schools where the first year seminar program was successful in teaching study skills and educating students about health matters had a higher mean probability of an intention to persist. For every standard deviation change in the average rating of effectiveness in study skills and health education, there was a 16 and 14 percentage point increase, respectively, in the individual student's intent to persist score.

Although the successful teaching of study skills can be directly applied to a student's academic demands, Porter and Swing were unsure how to explain the positive results of health education discussions in the seminar courses. These researchers speculated that the discussion of wellness issues indicated to students that the faculty member cared about them, resulting in an increased desire to remain at the institution.

Complementing the work of Wolcox et al., was a study by Sherry Woosley (2003). Woosley investigated whether or not a student's initial experiences, particularly those occurring during the first six weeks of a university experience, had any impact on degree completion. This study focused on three specific initial experiences: employment, initial social adjustment, and initial academic adjustment.

Woosley's study involved a sample of first time freshman at a residential, public, Midwestern university. During the third week of the semester, a survey was distributed to 3,829 freshman students, with a return rate of 67% (2,554 surveys). The results of Woosley's study supported the work of Tinto (1993), who stated that the most critical transition period for freshmen was the first two to six weeks of school, where students must learn to separate themselves from past associations and acclimate to the academic and social life of the campus.

Woosley found that success with initial social experiences was linked to a higher probability of degree completion. Students who were making friends and were satisfied with their social life during the first three weeks of the semester were more likely to complete their degree within five years. The development of friends is a critical component of a successful freshman year. Therefore, Woosley postulated that freshman retention programs focusing on relationships and social activities early in the semester can significantly aid persistence.

It is a commonly held belief that students who depart from an institution do so in response to poor academic performance. However, a study conducted by Rummel, Acton, Costell, and Pielow (1999), challenges this premise. From 1992-1997, records from 729 students exiting a small, private university in upstate New York were reviewed regarding their reasons for departure. Data extrapolated from these records included reasons for leaving and cumulative GPA. The majority of students departing the institution either gave no reason for departure (n = 217) or left because of academic problems. It is worth noting that of the 251 students who departed for academic problems, 211 of them were forced to leave by the university.

It should not be surprising that of the total number of students exiting the university, 44% (323) had a 2.0 (or lower) GPA. However, concerns should be raised by the fact that 55% (376) of the departing students were in good academic standing, possessing a 2.1 – 4.0 GPA. Of this number, 20% (143) of the students had GPAs of 3.0 or higher. This data indicates that a significant portion of student departure is not attributable to academic difficulties.

Of the students who transferred to a different institution, 87% had GPAs ranging from 2.0 to 4.0, with 42% of them having a GPA above a 3.0. The most commonly reported reason for departure was "personal reasons" or "no reason given." Institutions should be alarmed when sizeable numbers of students who are in good academic standing depart without any (successful) university intervention.

This study also points out that if GPA is a university's sole trigger for retention initiatives, students in good academic standing will not receive assistance from institutional intervention programs. When students in good academic standing made a conscious decision to leave a university, it was usually because something was "lacking" at their current institution. Considering that social integration is more directly correlated to institutional commitment (Tinto, 1993), there must be an increased effort to socially connect academically sound students to the developmental and social systems of the university so that adequate interpersonal support can be initiated prior to departure.

This study by Rummel et al., demonstrates that even after matriculation, students in good standing are still "shopping" for an institution that satisfies both their academic and social needs. Therefore, social integration initiatives must be aggressively implemented early in a student's career in order to best enhance persistence.

Review of Studies Related to African American Student Retention

The lack of student persistence at colleges and universities is by itself alarming. However, even more concern is to be expressed when specific segments of a college population fail to persist at a disproportionate level. Such is the case with our nation's African American student population.

Although college campuses have been racially integrated for decades, there still remains a disparity between the persistence rates of African American students and their White peers (Furr & Elling, 2002). Previous studies (Fleming, 1983) typically compare persistence rates of African American students at PWIs to their White peers, or they compare the persistence rates of African American students at PWIs to the persistence rates of African American students at HBCUs. No matter what the source of comparison, African American students at PWI's continue to report feelings of alienation when attending a PWI (Suen, 1983; Loo & Rolinson, 1986).

In a campus climate study of 183 first semester African American students, Furr and Elling (2002) desired to identify the factors associated with the retention of African American students that differed from the factors associated with African American students who were not retained. These researchers desired to identify significant retention factors within the first six weeks of the semester so that positive factors can be encouraged and problematic factors can be intercepted.

Data from a Freshman Climate Survey was linked to the institution's entering freshman survey data. Also, data from freshman orientation, first year seminar courses, and minority student services support data were compiled into a master data set. A chi

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square analysis was performed to compare the results of African American students who returned for a particular semester with African American students who did not return that semester.

Minimal differences in GPA were noted between the first and second semester. However, those persisting to a third semester of enrollment possessed a 2.39 GPA, as compared to the 1.64 GPA of their non-persisting peers. Differences in GPA were minimized in the fourth semester, where no significant difference were noted between those who were retained (2.16) and those who were not retained (2.17).

This study highlighted many significant key findings. One such finding was correlated to the amount of hours a student reported that he or she was going to work. 43% of the students who were not retained after three semesters indicated (pre-entry) that they were going to work 20 hours or more a week. This compares with only 10% of the persisting students who indicated that they intended to work 20 hours (or more) per week. Students who worked an average of 18 hours per week were retained at a higher rate than those who worked an average of 20 (or more) hours per work.

In addition, although 75% of all African American students reported that they would like to participate in more campus programs, there was a marked difference in the amount of non-returners (44%) who reported that the lack of information on these programs served as a barrier to participation, as compared to the percentage of returners (26%) reporting the same lack of information. Non-returners were more likely to leave campus on the weekends, thereby limiting their chances for social interaction among their peers. Non-returners were also more likely (26%) to experience a situation where they did not feel valued by the university when compared to their returning peers (9%).

Because of cost, proximity, and the open access nature of two-year institutions, many students of color begin their collegiate career at a two-year college. Hence, in lieu of their impact on baccalaureate degree completion rates at four-year institutions, it is important to discuss African American persistence at two year institutions.

In a 2002 study examining program completion rates of African American students at two year institutions, Opp references many strategies for retaining students of color. These strategies include enhanced financial aid assistance, tutorial support and intrusive academic advising (Parker, 1998); cultural awareness activities, ethnic studies courses, the creation of minority/multicultural offices, and support for multicultural student organizations (Lavant & Terrell, 1994).

A National Survey of Retention Practices for Minority Students at Two-Year Colleges was designed to garner information from Chief Student Affairs Officers (CSAOs) on their institution's retention barriers and strategies for students of color. The final version of the questionnaire was sent to 1,173 two-year institutions. Program completion data on students of color was obtained through the 1995-1996 IPEDS Completion Survey.

Utilizing a four point Likert scale ("strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," "strongly disagree"), participants were asked to rate 44 items reflecting upon the most common barriers and strategies for student of color retention. 643 CSAO's completed the survey, yielding a 55% response return rate. The average student of color completion rate within the sampled institutions was 21%.

A regression analysis was used to determine significant predictors of program completion. Of the 17 retention barriers noted, only one significant negative predictor

emerged, "Personnel here do not recognize the value of student ethnic diversity." CSAO's who agreed with this statement had lower program completion rates among their institution's student of color population. Hence, the campus racial climate can impact student of color persistence.

Significant positive retention factors that emerged from this study were "Having minorities serve on the board of trustees" and the "The institution provided students of color with minority peer tutors." Colleges with persons of color on trustee boards were more likely to have higher program completion rates for students of color than two year institutions without such representation. This study reports that this may be due, in part, to more diverse trustee boards supporting academic equity programs, hiring a more diverse workforce, and helping to foster a climate of cultural acceptance.

Institutions utilizing students of color as peer tutors yielded higher program completion rates than institutions not providing such peer tutoring programs. These tutoring encounters provided increased peer interactions with successful student role models, thereby aiding persistence.

In another study comparing the relationship of academic performance and social support between African American and White students, Hershberger and D'Augelli (1992) studied 164 Penn State University students (81 White and 84 African American) using the Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire, the General Well-being Schedule, and a review of university and pre-collegiate academic records.

African American and White students were compared across different variables via ANOVA and path analysis. Although social support remains an important

component of student persistence, this study showed that first year college GPA and pre-college GPA were the most likely predictors of college persistence.

Unfortunately, more African American students entered the university with lower pre-college scores, resulting in more of them failing to persist through to graduation. In addition to the risks affiliated with many of them entering the institution with uncertain academic skills, these students also grapple with the additional challenges of a "minority" status on campus, which often makes social adjustment more difficult.

Wynetta Lee emphasized the importance of persistence through mentoring support via a 1999 study examining the significance of race when mentoring African American students. She surveyed 120 North Carolina State University student participants in the University Transition Program (UTP) via focus groups at three different intervals during the academic year. Interview questions focused on the role that mentoring plays in persistence and student perspectives on the importance of having a mentor of the same race.

This study highlighted the fact that the process of adjusting to college occurs over the entire academic year. However, for African American students, this process is even more confounded, due in part to cultural transformation issues. Mentoring assists the students who are grappling with an incomplete socialization process by pairing them with an individual who will help them navigate within the university's culture.

The student participants in this study were very keen to the value of the mentoring relationship. Although a mentor of the same race was ideal, the race of their mentor was not as important as having quality interactions with a mentor from their academic/career

discipline who could aid them in their success through (and beyond) the university experience.

Zea, Reisen, Beil, and Kaplan (1997) also studied factors that influence the persistence of White students and students of color. The study's sample consisted of first year students at a large, predominately White, private, coeducational, northeastern university. Participants in this study were 139 ethnic minority students and 507 non-minority students who were surveyed via a self report questionnaire administered at the end of the fall semester.

Self esteem was measured by items on the Sherwood Self Esteem Scale. Identification with the university was measured through the Collective Self-Esteem Scale. Academic integration was measured via grade point average and specific questions were developed to explore issues related to coping with college.

Differences were found in the level of commitment between students of color and majority students. This study's findings indicated that the relationship between academic achievement and commitment to remain in college was strong only for ethnic minority students. Identification with the university was positively related and disrespect was negatively related to commitment for all students.

Social integration influenced both the minority and non-minority students' commitment to remain at the college. Those students who identified with the university and were active in school activities yielded higher retention rates. Those students who remained on the periphery of campus life or experienced incidences of disrespect and/or racism were retained at a lower rate. If the academic environment was unwelcoming because of ethnicity, commitment was less likely to occur. This reaffirms Tinto's notion

that the social environment is salient to the retention of African American students. Students who are involved with the extracurricular life of the university are more likely to be retained (Tinto, 1993).

Review of Literature Related to Gospel Music, African American Community and its

Role in Student Retention

The African American Community's Social Integration Through Worship.

Any research postulating relevance to African American culture would be null and void if it did not underscore the historical significance of the Black Church in the resilience of the African American community.   In a study conducted by the Barna Research firm, 85% of African Americans reported that religion was an important factor in their lives. This compares to 66% of White respondents who reported that religion was a significant part of their lives (Putre, 2002).

Throughout history, the African American community has identified the church as an emotional support system, social network, and political epicenter, with a historical platform of offering a nurturing and caring environment to oppressed individuals. Thompson and McRae (2001) state that Black congregants report a collective sense of "belonging" to their congregations.

Religious involvement within the African American community is therapeutic. Ellison reports (1994) that participation in African American religious activities has been documented to decrease instances of clinical depression. Religious activity within the African American community also offers a sense of integration into a larger familial environment, thereby aiding in resilience during difficult times.

In a study conducted by Thompson and McRae (2001), seven focus groups were facilitated on Sunday mornings with churches in the New York Metropolitan area whose congregations were 99% African American. 84 participants were involved in the study, 50% of whom had some level of higher education. This study sought to identify the meaning of the African American worship experience.

Data from focus groups was transcribed, coded, and clustered into like themes. The study reported that those who were involved in African American worship experiences felt a strong sense of "cohesion, group identity and shared meaning." They described African American worship venues as a "spiritual home," "a place of peace," "family," and "fellowship." Participants in this study described their social integration into the congregation through the usage of pronouns like "we" and "us." Also, when describing the African American worship experience, survey respondents stated "we are not just here to clap our hands, we're here to help each other through the good, bad, ugly, and indifference." "We leave feeling we are strong." "I found people that I could struggle with. They helped me to deal with the changes that I needed to make."

Most vital was the sense of belonging and integration that the survey participants experienced through their involvement in an affirming spiritual environment. This study demonstrated that for the African American community, African American worship is the "tie that binds us" – thereby reflecting integration into a supportive caring community.

The History and Meaning of Gospel Music to the African American Community

In most Black churches, singing is like a magnet that draws many African Americans to the church. Second only to the preached word, gospel music is the primary tool for spiritual catharsis in the African American worship experience (Lincoln & Mamiya, 2001).

The earliest genre of gospel music, Negro spirituals, incorporates the fundamental characteristics of African music. A study of gospel music is a lesson on how Black people "Africanized" American Christianity, while simultaneously coming to terms with the fact that they were "involuntary residents in a hostile land" (Lincoln & Mamiya, 2001).

Far from his native land and customs, despised by those among who he lived, experience-knowing the hard task-master, feeling the lash, the Negro seized Christianity, the religion of compensations in the life to come for the ills suffered in the present existence, the religion which implied the hope that in the next world there would be reversal of conditions…The result was a body of songs voicing all cardinal virtues of Christianity - patience – forbearance – love – faith - and hope – through a necessarily modified form of primitive African music. The Negro took complete refuge in Christianity, and the spirituals were literally forged of sorrow in the heat of religious fervor (Johnson & Johnson, 1969, p. 20).

The African American choral song tradition was nurtured in slavery. Slavery provided a breeding ground for the key elements of African American culture (Johnson-Reagan, 1992). As the slaves began to embrace Christianity, Black churches emerged.

The choral sounds that were emitted from the churches continued throughout the next century and beyond (Johnson-Reagan, 1992).

The rhythmic quality of the spirituals and other forms of gospel music are similar to the rhythms found in African songs (Johnson & Johnson, 1969). Spirituals recorded the struggle of a people destined to survive, and these songs still have the power to touch souls and stir the emotions of the people who hear them (Johnson-Reagan, 1992).

Following the era of the Negro spirituals, the *Transitional Period* of Gospel peaked in the 1900's under the gospel hymns of Rev. Charles A. Tindley. Tindley's songs gave imagery and interpretation to the oppression that African Americans faced as they attempted to relocate North. This style of gospel music offered "ultimate triumph over earthly oppression (Lincoln & Mamiya, 2001)."

The *Traditional Period*, also known as the "Golden Age of Gospel," was highlighted by an ex-blues musician, Thomas A. Dorsey. Dorsey, also known as "The Father of Gospel Music," composed music that lamented of the "glorious hereafter that lies just beyond our present trevail." Songs like *"Take My Hand and Precious Lord, Lead Me Home"* were a natural emergence of this era (Lincoln & Mamiya, 2001).

Music in the *Traditional Period* was most often sung by soloists, quartets, and special ensembles. However, in the *Contemporary Period* that followed, ensembles were augmented with strings, synthesizers, electronic instruments and demonstrative actions (McCall, 1986). The addition of these instruments made gospel songs sound somewhat like jazz and pop music. As a result, this contemporary style of gospel music was often shunned by conservative Black churches. Yet, this style was appealing to younger audiences, particularly those of traditional college age.

College Gospel Choirs and Their Role in African American Student Persistence

Contemporary gospel's rise in popularity among Black college students provided young gospel music enthusiasts the stamina to withstand the controversy of the church while simultaneously navigating through the cumbersome administrative university approval procedures necessary to make college gospel choirs formally recognized campus organizations (Lincoln & Mamiya, 2001).

According to Lincoln and Mamiya, a "Black college that does not have a Black mass choir or some other form of gospel enterprise is the exception rather than the rule. Even Black college students who attend White colleges and universities have often established gospel choirs as an affirmation and continuation of their heritage (Abbington, 1990)."

The emergence of college gospel ensembles often resulted in an outpouring of students into local church communities. Even today, churches with contemporary gospel choirs remain more appealing to college students. Research by Lincoln and Mamiya (Abbington, 1990) posits that the Black churches which are most successful in attracting young adults also sponsor gospel music programs.

Ethnomusicologists must agree that the world of sacred music was enlightened by the landmark sounds and struggles of Fisk University's Jubilee singers (McCall, 1986). Their legacy paved the way for institutions of higher education across the country to support the creation of college gospel choirs (Johnson-Reagan, 1992).

In 1965, Howard University music majors, Henry Davis, Wesley Boyd, and Richard Smallwood, had been forbidden to play their (gospel) music in the school's practice rooms. Eventually, a concerned student body began to demand a curriculum that

acknowledged the contributions of African American history and tradition, which included gospel music (Johnson-Reagan, 1992). Years later, contemporary gospel music can even be heard in Ivy League institutions, such as Harvard and Yale (Johnson-Reagan, 1992).

College gospel choirs developed spontaneously in response to the spiritual and emotional needs of African American students. Although not initially tied to academic departments, some gospel choirs were initially launched through Black Studies departments. Other groups were housed in minority student service offices (McCall, 1986). Regardless of their genesis, the presence of college gospel choirs and other African American centered student organizations continue to be a significant component of African American student integration.

When traditional-aged students enter college, they are in the throes of very significant developmental years. Struggles with identity development and other psychosocial crises (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998) present significant challenges throughout these critical years. This phase of life can be even more lonely for African American students who must also contend with a racial minority status in addition to the standard adjustment concerns that are common to traditional first year students.

For some students of color, interpersonal engagement is too much of an emotionally taxing experience to undertake in a foreign environment. However, failure to successfully integrate into the social systems of the university will increase the likelihood of attrition (Tinto, 1993).

In the 1960s, African American students began to demand fiscal support to establish organizations that were more aligned with their cultural heritage.   Since that time, Black student unions, gospel choirs, and other ethnically based organizations have been instrumental in assisting African American students in adjusting to the institution, thereby aiding their persistence (Chang, 2002).

The presence of ethnically based organizations aids persistence in many ways. These entities provide a collective forum to challenge instances of discrimination on campus. They also play a vital role in prompting institutions to initiate activities that will allow students of color to feel more at home on the campus. This includes responding to their spiritual needs (Chang, 2002).

In 2003, Guiffrida studied 88 African American undergraduate students in an attempt to understand the role that African American student organizations played in facilitating social integration at PWI's. This qualitative study was conducted at northwestern predominately White (82%) institution. The sample included both involved students and students who were less involved or not involved at all in extracurricular organizations. Of the survey's sample, 67 students volunteered after being recommended to the study by a faculty member who felt as though they were not living up to their full academic potential. The remaining high achieving student volunteers were solicited through campus advertisements.

During focus groups, students were asked to describe positive aspects of their college experience and the obstacles that they encountered. Participation in African American student organizations consistently emerged as a positive asset to their persistence. Specific mention was made of religious groups.

Respondents reported that these organizations facilitated cultural connections, provided a venue for out of class interaction with faculty, provided a comfortable environment where they could interact with their peers - all of which aided in their social integration into the university.

Summary

Vincent Tinto (1987) theorized that college student attrition was the end product of a failed academic and social integration. Students who do not establish supportive communities experience social isolation and do not remain at the institution. The social integration component of Tinto's theory will be used to explore whether or not students who are actively engaged in a gospel choir maintain stronger ties to the institution and decreased feelings of marginalization. In this study, Tinto's theory will provide a theoretical link between the social integration of a minority-based student organization and African American student persistence.

African American students who attend PWIs face unique challenges. These challenges are different from their African American peers who attend HBCUs. African American students who attend PWIs often experience feelings of incongruence with the University, thereby increasing feelings of marginality (Astin, 1993).

William Cross' 1970 Theory on Psychological Nigresence (Cross, 1991) challenges African American students to work from the *encounter* stage through to *internalization* so that they may function effectively in their predominately White academic environment. In this study, Cross's theory will be instrumental in gauging where students are with regard to African American identity. In lieu of its cultural and

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historical significance, gospel music has the potential to be instrumental in assisting an African American student in working towards the internalization of his or her African American identity while at a PWI.

The literature reveals a positive correlation between extracurricular activities and African American student persistence (Chang, 2002). Alexander Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement postulates that students who are involved in the extracurricular life of the university persist at a greater rate than their uninvolved peers. In this study, Astin's involvement theory will provide additional theoretical support by linking a specific extracurricular activity, the college gospel choir, to student perceptions of decreased feelings of marginalization which will subsequently in persistence.

Desousa and Kuh (1996) and Tinto (1993) highlight the significant role that cultural organizations play in the persistence of students of color. African American student organizations break the university down into smaller, more manageable components so that marginality is decreased (Chang, 2002).

Of the African American focused student organizations on a college campus, the college gospel choir stands on a platform girded by a vast history of cultural, religious, and musical significance. Although contemporary gospel music is a 20th century phenomena, it was birthed through the horrors of slavery, nursed by the resiliency of the Black church, reared through the oppression of the civil rights movements, and continues to serve as a high-powered spiritual force within the African American community (Johnson-Reagan, 1992).

Gospel music was (and still is) considered to be the emancipatory musical voice of the African American community (Maultsby, 1990). These songs communicate

cultural heritage, an awareness of Black pride and the recorded struggles of Black people from slavery onward (Maultsby, 1990). African Americans have historically used gospel music to articulate their emotional and spiritual needs (Radano, 2002).

This researcher now seeks to examine whether or not there is a relationship between gospel choir participation and African American student persistence at one PWI. Research shows (Chang, 2002) that African American focused organizations can aid in African American student persistence at PWIs. However, very few research efforts have targeted the specific organizations that help or hinder African American student persistence efforts.

Although involvement with gospel music has a historical role in the resilience of African and African American people, the research has yet to clearly determine whether or not this resilience can manifest itself in the form of African American student persistence at a PWI via gospel choir participation. This researcher seeks to close this research gap.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study examines the perceived effects of gospel choir participation on the retention of African American students at a predominately White institution. This researcher conducted a qualitative study to find out whether or not participation in this specific extracurricular activity had implications in support of African American student persistence. Using the social integration component of Tinto's attrition/retention theory, this researcher explored whether or not gospel choir participants maintain stronger linkages to the campus and their African American and spiritual heritage, thereby decreasing feelings of marginality and isolation and subsequently increasing their persistence.

Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

This researcher sought to identify the meaning and interpretation of gospel choir participation to those involved via a combination of individual interviews and focus groups. This study was ideally suited for ethnographic, qualitative inquiry. The data extrapolated from this study will required a colorful representation of the experiences gospel choir participants. This study also involved phenomenological inquiry in that it attempted to provide an in depth analysis of the individual perceptions and experiences choir participants (Merriam, 2002).

Qualitative inquiry is "richly descriptive" such that "words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon (Merriam, 2002)." For example, in a recent study on spirituality among women

educators, Merriam (2002) references a participant response as quoted by Tisdell (1999) where an African American female subject describes Aretha Franklin's singing of gospel music as being significant in connecting her to her ancestors and earlier church experiences. Her description of gospel music as noted could not be captured in numerical data:

> The way Aretha sings is very old, so when I go back to my childhood, it's really connected to my parents' childhood, and so on, and so on, so she takes me back to places I don't even know about. There are ancient roots that are beyond my memory of this time and place…When I listen to Aretha – all of those songs are songs of struggle…about how to survive, how to resist oppression, and I got to thinking about other spirituals that I know, and they're all at that level (Merriam, 2002, p. 72).

In qualitative design, the researcher observes data and social experiences firsthand with the goal of providing a rich description of the events and its subsequent interpretation to the reader. According to Merriam (2002), one of the many gifts of ethnography is that the researcher serves as the research instrument. He or she is charged with uncovering the meaning of a social situation through the utilization of a cultural "lens."

According to Spradley (1980), each social situation has three primary elements: a place, actors, and activities. In Spradley's paradigm, the *place* serves as the basis of the social situation, the host location where the researcher will conduct his or her participant observations. The *actors* are the human subjects that will be observed in the performance of their various *activities* (Spradley, 1980). Throughout this interplay of actor, activities,

and place, the ethnographic researcher is attempting to document recognizable patterns of *events* so that he or she can document and give meaning to these various exchanges.

For the purposes of this study, the *place* was of the rehearsal room and various singing venues for the choral ensemble. The *actors* were the choristers and choir staff, and the *activities* were the interactions that occur during choir rehearsals and other singing venues.

Interview and Focus Group Questions

In an effort to assess whether or not gospel choir participation plays a role in integrating students into the collegiate environment, ten participants were asked a list of open ended questions in a semi-structured interview format. Similar interview questions were also asked in a focus group venue with other student subjects. In addition, focus group questions were also asked of the musical staff, with modifications made to the questions so that the focus of the inquiry remains on the student choristers.

Participants in this study were asked a series of open ended questions regarding their perceptions of the gospel choir. The "member check" process, reconnecting with subjects to verify the content of the interview, was utilized to enhance reliability and validity (Merriam, 2002). Hence, validity and reliability was established through the identification of common themes as discovered through multiple sources of data (Merriam, 2002).

Data was compared from individual interviews and focus groups to ensure the accuracy of the findings. The questions and relevance to the previously proposed research questions are as follows:

Research Question # 1 - How do African American students perceive their experience as a participant in the gospel choir?

Table 1

Supporting Interview Questions for Research Question #1

Interview Venue	Interview Questions to Be Asked
Individual Interview	1.) What made you join the Voices of Joy (VOJ) and what does it mean for you to be a member of this organization?
Student Focus Group	1.) What made you join the Voices of Joy (VOJ) and what does it mean for you to be a member of this organization?
Choir Staff Focus group	1.) Please tell me what made you become involved with the VOJ, and what does working with this organization mean to you?
Individual Interview	2.) Please tell me about the room/setting of VOJ practices and engagements, and any meaning that this has for you?
Student Focus Group	2.) Please tell me about the room/setting of VOJ practices and engagements, and any meaning that this has for you?
Choir Staff Focus group	2.) Please tell me what made you become involved with the VOJ, and what does working with this organization mean to you?

Individual Interview	3.) Please tell me about your experiences as a member of the VOJ.
Student Focus Group	3.) Please tell me about your experiences as a member of the VOJ.
Choir Staff Focus group	3.) Please tell me about your experiences as a musical staff member for the VOJ.
Individual Interview	4.) Please describe any feelings or emotions that you experience when you are with the VOJ, and what do these feelings mean to you?
Student Focus Group	4.) Please describe any feelings or emotions that you experience when you are with the VOJ, and what do these feelings mean to you?
Choir Staff Focus group	4.) Please describe any feelings or emotions that you experience when you are with the VOJ, and what do these feelings mean to you?

Research Questions # 2 - To what extent do African American students perceive that their
participation in the gospel choir facilitates a stronger social integration to the campus
community?

Table 2

Supporting Interview Questions for Research Question #2

Interview Venue	Interview Questions to Be Asked
Individual Interview	1.) In your opinion, do African American students feel lonely and/or isolated on campus? If so, what are some of the reasons why they may feel this way? Does participation in the VOJ help combat these feelings of marginalization? Please explain.
Student Focus Group	1.) In your opinion, do African American students feel lonely and/or isolated on campus? If so, what are some of the reasons why they may feel this way? Does participation in the VOJ help combat these feelings of marginalization? Please explain.
Choir Staff Focus group	1.) In your opinion, do African American students feel lonely and/or isolated on campus? If so, what are some of the reasons why they may feel this way? Does participation in the VOJ help combat these feelings of marginalization? Please explain.

Individual Interview	2.) Has the VOJ served a role in helping you to become more socially integrated into campus life at IUP? Please explain.
Student Focus Group	2.) Has the VOJ served a role in helping you to become more socially integrated into campus life at IUP? Please explain.
Choir Staff Focus group	2.) Has the VOJ served a role in helping students become more socially integrated into campus life at IUP? Please explain.

Research Question #3 - To what extent do African American students perceive that participation in the gospel choir decreases their feelings of marginalization at a predominately White campus?

Table 3

Supporting Interview Questions for Research Question #3

Interview Venue	Interview Questions to Be Asked
Individual Interview	1.) Tell me about your relationship with the other members of the VOJ.
Student Focus Group	1.) Tell me about your relationship with the other members of the VOJ.
Choir Staff Focus group	1.) Tell me about your relationship with the students in the VOJ. what does working with this organization mean to you?
Individual Interview	2.) Do you see students and staff from the VOJ outside of rehearsals and events? If so, tell me more about those situations.
Student Focus Group	2.) Do you see students and staff from the VOJ outside of rehearsals and events? If so, tell me more about those situations.
Choir Staff Focus group	2.) Do you see students from the VOJ outside of rehearsals and events? If so, tell me more about those situations.

Individual Interview	3.) Tell me about your relationship with the musical staff of the VOJ.
Student Focus Group	3.) Tell me about your relationship with the musical staff of the VOJ.
Choir Staff Focus group	3.) Tell me about the relationship among the musical staff members in the VOJ.

Research Question # 4 - To what extent do African American students perceive that their participation in the gospel choir assists with their persistence at a predominately White university?

Table 4

Supporting Interview Questions for Research Question #4

Interview Venue	Interview Questions to Be Asked
Individual Interview	1.) What role, if any, has the VOJ had in helping you to remain in school? Please explain.
Student Focus Group	1.) What role, if any, has the VOJ had in helping you to remain in school? Please explain.
Choir Staff Focus group	1.) What role, if any, do you think the VOJ has had in helping students remain in school? Please explain.
Individual Interview	2.) Describe what it is that makes you come back to the VOJ each week?
Student Focus Group	2.) Describe what it is that makes you come back to the VOJ each week?
Choir Staff Focus group	2.) Describe what it is that makes you continue to the VOJ each week?

Individual Interview	3.) What would your college experience be like if you were not involved in the VOJ?
Student Focus Group	3.) What would your college experience be like if you were not involved in the VOJ?
Choir Staff Focus group	3.) What would the college experience for these students be like if they were not involved in the VOJ?

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Data Collection Procedures

Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland (2005) speak of the utilization of *connections* to gain quicker access and trust to the study's participants. Therefore, access to the choir was expedited via assistance from the university's Student Affairs division. This segment of the University oversees the extracurricular life of the student body, and one of the employees within the division also serves as a choral director.

Lofland et al., (2005) also spoke of giving an *account*, which entails providing an explanation as to why this research is being conducted. This is necessary, so that the researcher can be granted permission by the subjects to intrude into "their lives, their activities, their minds, their emotions (Lofland et al., 2005)."

After giving an account of my interest in conducting this study, participants for the individual interviews were selected from among those volunteering to serve in this capacity as recommended by the musical staff. Those selected for individual interviews received a consent form that was returned prior to the start of the interview. Interview participants also received a written confirmation letter highlighting the procedures, time, and location of their interview session. This correspondence also reminded them that the interview will be taped, with an explanation as to why taping is necessary. After transcribing the individual interview sessions, follow up member checks were performed to confirm this researcher's summation of the interview.

Focus group participation was again solicited on a voluntary basis, utilizing the choir director's recommendation to assist with selection. In addition, both choir directors were also be interviewed in focus group format.

All sessions were audio taped with accompanying transcriptions. The need for audio taping was shared along with the assurance of confidentiality to the highest degree that this researcher can provide (Lofland et al., 2005).

The interviews and focus group were semi-structured, lasting approximately 20 minutes to a half hour. The interviews and focus groups began with a brief explanation of the research that is being conducted in an attempt to establish a rapport with the participants. Common themes have been coded and summarized.

<center>Data Analysis Plan</center>

After a thorough review of transcriptions, focus group notes, and individual interview notes, common themes have been identified and summarized. This researcher has attempted to provide cultural meaning to that which has been documented, reserving the right to use member checks to confirm findings when necessary (Spradley, 1980).

Utilizing the Integration of Qualitative Data model as described by Gay and Airasian (2000), interview and focus group data has been read, described, and classified into like themes. During a thorough reading of the focus group and interview transcriptions, reoccurring themes were highlighted and included in the presentation of data. Qualitative responses will be condensed down to the essential elements of the encounter (Gay & Airasian, 2000). Common themes were identified and summarized. Reliability and validity was obtained by comparing individual interviews and focus group data. Interview transcriptions are included as appendices to this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANANYLIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

Volunteers were solicited from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Voices of

Joy (VOJ) for participation in both individual interviews and focus groups. It is

important to note that no financial (or other) incentives were given to participants for

their involvement in this study. Quite to the contrary, when the purpose and focus of the

study was explained to student and staff participants, this researcher received an

abundance of volunteers with a genuine interest in seeing this study through to its

completion. The choristers were excited that college gospel choirs might someday be

recognized for the critical role that they play in the lives of African American students in

attendance at predominately White Universities.

Characteristics of Participants

There were 42 members in the choir during this researcher's period of study.

Twenty seven of them were females. Regarding their class standing at the university,

there was one freshman, fifteen sophomores, twelve juniors, eleven seniors, and three

graduate students. These students studied in the various academic schools throughout

the university, including, fourteen students from Health and Human Services, six student

from Business, six from Education and Technology, nine from Math and Natural

Sciences, four from Humanities and Social Sciences, and three from Fine Arts.

Individual Interview Participants

Ten volunteer members of Indiana University of Pennsylvania's Voices of Joy were

interviewed. These student volunteers were solicited upon the recommendation of the

choir staff. Students were recommended to the researcher based upon their individual

ability to provide a rich description of their involvement with the gospel choir. At least

two freshman, two sophomore, two junior, and two senior students were desired the pool

of students who are interviewed. However, due to the retention of a significant number

of returning students, the choir did not initiate aggressive recruitment strategies with this

year's incoming freshman class.   As a result, only one freshman student was present

during this researcher's data collection time frame. Therefore, in attempt to solicit

adequate feedback from lower division students, an additional second year (sophomore)

student was interviewed individually.

A summary of those interviewed individually is as follows:

Table 5

Voices of Joy Individual Interview Participants

Name	Gender	# Sem. in VOJ	School	Class Standing
Alexis	Female	12	Ed/Technology	Graduate
Leslie	Female	9	Natural Sci/Math	Senior
Donna	Female	8	Natural Sci./Math	Senior
Marchan	Male	10	Health/Hum Service	Senior
Sharon	Female	4	Humanities/Soc. Sci	Junior
Victor	Male	6	Ed/Technology	Junior
Brandon	Male	4	Fine Arts	Sophomore
Michael	Male	4	Business	Sophomore
George	Male	2	Fine Arts	Sophomore
Olivia	Female	2	Health/Hum Service	Freshman

Focus groups were utilized in this study. Student volunteers were solicited with assistance from the choir staff based upon the student's ability to provide a rich description of their perceptions (positive or negative) of how the gospel choir has impacted their college career. Initial baseline data was obtained about the choir in an attempt to make the focus group sample representative of the larger choir.

An additional focus group was conducted with the choir staff. Both of these individuals have approximately 20 years of experience working with the Voices of Joy as the choral director and musician. These individuals were asked to share any observations and perceptions that they had about the choir's role in the social integration of the choristers and subsequent retention of the choristers.

Utilizing the analytic induction approach (Gay & Airasian, 2000), this researcher operated under the hypothesis that African American students who are involved with the college gospel choir perceive themselves as having stronger feelings of social integration and are therefore, more likely to persist. Qualitative data has been condensed in response to reoccurring themes and categorized by research question.

Findings Related to the First Research Question - How do African American Students

Perceive Their Experience As a Participant in the Gospel Choir?

Theme One: The Safety and Security of a Black Church

The VOJ practice in the former sanctuary room of the Victory Christian Assembly church. Older members of the choir can still recall this location as the previous location for church worship services. Although this room is no longer used for Sunday morning worship, 50% of those interviewed specifically identified this physical setting as being a

significant component of their spiritual worship environment. Thirty percent of those surveyed reported that this room setting was comfortable, social, and/or fun.

Older members of the choir recall worshiping in the current choir practice room, the "Old Sanctuary." In addition, the rehearsals being held in a church a church edifice is reported as being significant to many of the choristers. The church was described as being a place of "refuge," and a "safe haven" from the challenges of being a person of color at a PWI.

Students who were interviewed also reported that the choir meeting in a church makes the experience more meaningful than it would be if they were practicing at another, more generic campus location. Students look forward to attending "energizing" rehearsals and church services, and consider this activity to be a significant component of their week.

African American students expressing sentiments of safety and security in a Black Church are very much consistent with the literature and previous research findings. Putre reports (2002) that 85% of African Americans state that religion is a significant component of their life. When you consider the historical significance and emotional stability that the Black Church has provided, it is not surprising that choir rehearsals held in a church building are perceived as being more significant to the choristers.

> VICTOR
> The Old Sanctuary is what they called it when I first got here. That is where they used to have church at. So I have those memories and enjoy the memories of VOJ attached to that room. The Old Sanctuary is very sentimental to me. It is a place I won't forget ever, just because of the music that was played in there and the effect that the music had on my life. I would go to that place for refuge and it really served its purpose. It has a very deep spiritual meaning for me actually when I sit and think about the Old Sanctuary…

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What it means for me is that VOJ has made up a core of my college career. It very well may be second to my academics as far as what is keeping me up here. I got there and I was surprised to see so many Black people in one spot and a whole church. Yes, that really drew me in church and taking God more seriously as well…

It is a wonderful experience to be at VOJ practice, whether the practice is bad or good, or whether we get something done or not, it is good to be there because the spirit of God is there. The Lord is always there and being in the presence of the Lord is like no other experience.

DONNA
We rehearse in a small sanctuary, not too small, enough for about 60 people. That is about how many people we usually have. It is set up with the pews in almost like a church fashion. It is at the church but it is The Old Sanctuary. When I first joined we had church there as well, and I guess you could say it was very meaningful because it was inside the church. So it is not just like being in a building like for other organizations. We might meet at the HUB or something like that and for my team we have rehearsals in one of the dorms. When you rehearse at the church it is just different. It is a different atmosphere. Everybody there is there for the same purpose. You can have all types of people in the other buildings, but when you are in church, like you are in church. It makes you see what you are really there for...

One [emotion felt] is peace, because you can come from campus after having a full day of just working, running around, and frustration and professors, and all this other crazy stuff. But when you go to choir rehearsal you really forget about all that stuff and you focus in on that moment. Anytime that we come together it is just peace and joy.

MARCHAN
It is the Old Sanctuary actually… I just know that it is a place where I can be myself and be with friends and really be part of family. That is what it has become, more of a family than anything. It is a place where it is not just practice, it is worship and just a release. It is kind of a mid-day release or a mid-week release, it is Thursday, but other than that it is just a place to really unwind and be yourself.

VOJ has more or less anchored me in the church. It was a reason to stay. Honestly, if you have been to Victory you know how great a service it is, how awesome the word is and the ministries that come forth. It was just more of a reason to stay. When I have gone through every single semester I have always had someone to talk to, always had somebody to share my feelings, someone who has more or less gone through what I have gone through, to bear my burdens and give advice. It was also just something positive to do. There a lot of people who all they do every single weekend is go out and party, drink, smoke and do whatever. It was a reason not to do any of that and go out and have fun and do something that I really love to do with people that I care about and I love.

MICHAEL
All week at school it is craziness, classes. You have a lot of homework, and probably hectic schedules if you have a job. But on Thursday evening at eight o'clock, you know that you are going to be able to relax, you are going to be around friends, so it is a very relaxing environment. People you can talk to at any time who understand you, who share the same beliefs as you. I believe most of the people in the choir are actually Christians and it is just a liberating experience.

[People come to choir rehearsal] just knowing that you are going to laugh again, knowing that you are going to get to see all of the people again, knowing that there is going to be some form of worship experience. And as a Christian you kind of long for that. And why wait until Sunday when you can go on Thursday and get the same experience? And during practice, it is often just practice, but most times it is ministry. And we have to minister and sometimes there is worship. It is a worship experience anytime that we are here together, whether it is ministering to each other or just reading the Bible with each other, or just being in practice singing songs about God, to God that makes you go back each and every Thursday...

ALEXIS
Well I grew up in the church and I am not one to just sit back... I had been told by someone from my home church that there is a good church up there or, I should link up with people who have gone to the church up here. I could not find these people. I did not go to church until the middle of my first semester here and then God just made a way for me to meet certain people… From then on I have been in the choir...

Whether it has been on Tuesdays, which choir rehearsal used to be, or Thursdays, it is kind of like you go through a rough week, you go through a rough weekend, you go through classes, work if you have a job, and you deal with these people who probably don't understand spirituality or they do not have anything positive to say or stuff like that. You look forward to going to choir rehearsal. It is time to see people that you probably don't have class with, depending upon your major, and people that you love, that you have grown to love and you see as your brother and sister, and it is kind of like most times depending upon the day it is like a breath of fresh air sometimes. Because you are around people that you love in an organization that people look up to. That brings emotion, that brings smiles, that brings laughter.

BRANDON
Besides my close friends, the Lord is there... It is just an amazing feeling, like you really feel very happy. You can have a real sad day and come to choir rehearsal and it is just this fun energy. You really get excited about being there and knowing that we are about to just have fun. There are times that we have to be serious but there are times that we might crack a note and everybody just laughs. We will all just have fun. I really look forward to going to choir rehearsal or even the singing. It

really just builds you up to get ready for what you have to do. Even though it is at the end of the week, it is almost like a booster that keeps you going throughout the week. It is really good.

OLIVIA
I just feel happy, it is my safe haven. I just feel really safe, really happy, all stress is just like gone, out the door. I come back because I know that is the feeling that I am going to get all the time. It is like being addicted to coffee or something. It is my addiction.

I honestly do love the VOJ. It is my safe haven. If you are confused, you don't know what to do and you just need someone to turn to, you have no friends, you don't want to turn to your family completely and the Lord is always there. With VOJ you are always praising Him. So when you sing, you are not singing for everyone around you. You are singing to Him. You sing out loud and He just pushes you.

Focus group participants repeatedly commented on the emotional and spiritual

dynamics present at rehearsals. Choristers viewed coming to rehearsals as an opportunity

for a spiritual release. They enjoyed being in the presence of like-minded individuals,

and saw the VOJ as a way to reenergize themselves both emotionally and spiritually.

JW: It is like you go through a stressful week with school work and everything, and then coming together with the VOJ you see friends and your family and it is more of chill time. You know that once you come to rehearsal, that you kick back and laugh and have fun. Also while rehearsing and dancing around you are praising God.

… just the feeling that you get whenever there is singing together up there in the sanctuary. You know everyone is praising God and you get that feeling that you can only get when you are praising God with other people. You don't have to feel shy or afraid. You have the strength of singing with the other people.

VW: Every week that I come to practice I know that the spirit of God is there just from the leadership. The energy is going to be high, and it is my refuge. The music is amazing. It is my place to wind down and loosen up. It is something to look forward to.

MP: To me, like the meeting time when we do practice, it is like a family time to pray. Like we get together sometimes and you don't feel like singing. But once you get there and you start to sing, it is like praising God. It is like a new environment.

Focus group participants also report a sense of emotional security from VOJ interactions. One student described VOJ as a "refuge" from the stressors of college life. They look forward to the high energy of rehearsals and the cathartic spiritual atmosphere that is present when the group is assembled.

> AJ: There have been times when people have been down to a very low and then all we have to do is make a few phone calls and everyone is there. We are there just praying, we are there singing, we are there hugging each other. We are there to give encouraging words. I think is it so special.

> JW: I guess I will talk about like when we are ministering at the church, the feeling that you get whenever there is singing together up there in the sanctuary. You know everyone is praising God and you get that feeling that you can only get when you are praising God with other people. You don't have to feel shy or afraid. You have the strength of singing with the other people.

> CS: Coming to VOJ every week to me means another push throughout the week. Whatever was going on prior to walking through the door would disappear.

Summary of Theme One: The Gospel Choir is a Spiritual Outlet for Choristers

Choristers viewed gospel choir rehearsal as more than just a musical practice session. Students viewed gospel choir practice as an additional worship experience and an opportunity to praise God. As is common for African American worship experiences, they felt an emotional release during their worship experiences that gave them the psychological "push" and emotional stamina to make it through another week. They enjoy singing and worshiping together as a "family" and feel energized during and after choir practices.

Findings Related to the Second Research Question - To What Extent Do African

American Students Perceive That Their Participation in the Gospel Choir Facilitates a

Stronger Social Integration to the Campus Community?

Theme Two: The Choristers Assist With the Orientation of Lower Division Students

The students who were individually interviewed in this study were attracted to the

choir very early in their collegiate career for a variety of reasons, including spiritual

needs (30%), previous choir/church affiliation (30%), and assistance with adjustment to

the University (40%). Many of these students found that singing in the choir facilitated

feelings of emotional safety and a connection to a relevant peer group. Feelings of

emotional safety and belonging are essential to new students who may still be

contemplating their decision to persist at the University.

> BRANDON
> When I first got here during orientation, you really don't know anybody. And
> maybe my first couple of weeks, I only knew about two or three friends. And when
> I joined the choir, you are just meeting all these people who have known each for a
> while. So when you join their friendship base, it is like you meet all these people
> that know all these people. So my social group just started getting bigger and
> bigger throughout the choir, even to the campus part… From the choir I met so
> many people that I don't even think that I would have met if I wasn't in the choir.
> The choir has really helped me meet people.
>
> A lot of the older kids, the juniors, the seniors, and the graduate students, for a new
> freshman or sometimes even me as a sophomore, they make sure you are going to
> class. They ask how are your professors doing, how are your tests going, do you
> need help studying and so on. They say maybe you should try going to this
> professor. He will help you out better. He explains this better. They really try to
> help you out since they have been there before, they know what to expect. So as
> new freshman or upcoming sophomores join, they always try to teach you or show
> you what professor will be a good professor for your field or what you should do in
> order to get ready for your major. They are almost like a peer advisor, but they are
> friends. They have helped me personally. They tell me what I need to do, how I
> should do it, who I should talk to and stuff like that. So it is really good having
> these friends who know what to do.

DONNA
When I first came to college, as a freshman, you don't know many people and it is intimidating to be on the college campus. But by being with the VOJ it helped me find people like a core group of people that I know have the same interest and values that I have and we all hang together, not just in choir rehearsal but outside of choir rehearsal, and just still have fun with each other. We hang with each other all of the time. Those are my friends, those are my main friends.

I just appreciate it when I was a freshman first coming in. They took me in. It was not like I had to force my way in. They were very welcoming. They would say, come in, hang with us. They had little get-togethers that I would go to and that was the main thing. Then I could also say that I grew in Christ more as a Christian. I feel that my relationship is stronger because of the ministries that I was in and VOJ is one of them. I started becoming more serious about it, like after being in it. At first it was, okay I like singing, this is fun, but after awhile it was like this is really ministry and it started really meaning something more to me. Mainly it is just the friends and the relationship with the people at the church, PJ our pastor, he directs. Elder Herman, he is the assistant pastor. So you also get a relationship with them as well, and PJ works on campus too so it kind of helps you out to know somebody on campus.

MARCHAN
Well, it has been a choir that has a very good reputation for many years. I believe 20 years or so, and it is pretty much what has kept me in school and kept me going. It has kept me going with just the things that you have to go through, with initially coming to school and not really knowing where to fit in. And I think this is a part of initially coming to school. I did come with the purpose of going to school but even the reason that I came to IUP was because of the church itself and the choir. I wanted to really know God for myself and have a relationship. But initially I was kind of getting mixed up in the crowd, taking some turns here and there. Even though I went and did my own thing, it has pretty much kept me in the church, or more of a reason to stay in the church so to speak, and because of it [the choir] and Pastor Johnson and Elder Herman, I am still there.

Tinto suggests (1987) that it is essential for students to form significant, meaningful relationships very early in the collegiate experience. Integration into supportive social systems within the University will increase the likelihood of persistence. In support of the significance of peer relationships within the choir, 100% of the individual interview participants reported that they physically met with or interacted with other members of

the choir throughout the week above and beyond formal, structured choir rehearsals and activities.

These significant social bonds were not only realized while on the campus. 70% of the choir members commented on the significance of the local and statewide travel that occurred for various singing engagements. Students commenting on these engagements consistently reported enhanced emotional ties among the choristers, thereby strengthening their feelings of social integration. One lower division student reports the following:

> BRANDON
> Well, I know that us going to Philadelphia last spring, we all went on a bus, and it was sort of a time that we were all just together, it was just us. It was more like we all stuck together. If somebody needed food because we did not have food in the hotels, if somebody had food, we would borrow some. It was more like we were just a family when we went out, especially when we went to Philadelphia. We all looked out for each other. If you needed something, I have you. If I needed something, I know that I can look to you. We are more connected when we go out to different places and stuff like that. Even when we are here we are connected, but the majority of the time when we are out, like outside of Indiana, it is a real family orientation and stuff like that.

> MICHAEL
> We travel a lot in the choir, so one of the most memorable experiences being in the IUP VOJ will probably be this past semester when we went to Hershey, PA to Hershey-Milton Boarding School and we performed for a lot of students. I will say over 2000 students. The venue was awesome, but more importantly it was the response that we got from the students. They are away from their parents because it is a boarding school, so they do not get to see a lot of people. And prior to us performing, one of the teachers told us that they did not receive guests well. They were very angry. They had a lot of malice and resentment, with not being with their parents.

> But when we performed, we got a standing ovation. Pastor Johnson had allowed them to come up on the stage and perform with us, and there was a crowd of students just rushing up on the stage to perform with us and they really embraced us. They treated us almost like celebrities. It was kind of funny because we never experienced that before. We usually just performed for the church members, but the kids really received us well. So I was happy about that.

Summary of Theme Two: The Gospel Choir Can Provide Emotional, Social, and

Academic Stability to New African American Students at a PWI

Choristers reflected favorably upon their early interactions with gospel choir

members. Those interactions were integral in establishing a support network that would

sustain them throughout their collegiate experience. The upper division students

mentored and served as "peer advisors" to new students. They provided academic and

personal guidance to the new African American students, so that they were not lost to

attrition.

Findings Related to the Third Research Question - To What Extent Do African American

Students Perceive That Participation in the Gospel Choir Decreases Their Feelings of

Marginalization At a Predominately White campus?

Theme Three: The Gospel Choir Serves as an Extended Family for the Choristers

A consistently repeated theme presented throughout the course of the interviews

was the concept of "family." Students continuously commented on the level of emotional

support and love that they garnered from the other members of the VOJ. Many students

reported that this significant level of integration gives them the emotional stamina

necessary to endure the challenges of college life.

The level of social integration experienced among choir members was at times

overwhelming. Similar to most organizations, minor squabbles were at times referenced.

However, it was abundantly clear that the choristers interviewed saw the VOJ as a

significant source of social and emotional support for their university experience.

> DONNA
> This year, my senior year, is when I became fully integrated in the family of VOJ. I
> have been involved and now I feel so close, it is almost like tear jerking that I am
> about to leave and I am not going to be around here anymore.

I guess the main experience that is the most meaningful to me is the sense of family that you get. It is not just like you have sororities and fraternities and they say this is my sister. That is because they have to call each other sister and brother. But honestly, that is not family. The choir is my family. I love all of them.

ALEXIS
We are a huggy group. So when we see each other around campus we go, "Hey," and then we hug each other. We could see each other 10 times a day and we would hug. I hug everyone. It is a good relationship. We are each other's shoulders to cry on…

When I first came into VOJ I was a little shy… There are so many memories. We have had retreats, we have had choir church when I was a freshman and sophomore. We traveled to Pittsburgh a lot. So we have a lot of traveling memories which always bring excitement and fun and it is just something that I could tell stories about forever and sometimes the people that had been here with me since 2002… It is just a lot of good memories. Like I said before, you form a family.

GEORGE
What makes me come back is the comradery of the choir, it is just everything in good spirit. Everything feels right. It feels like I should be here, and I keep coming back for more.

VICTOR
All of my closest friends are members of VOJ. The woman whom I intend to marry is a member of VOJ. The man who I look at as my father up here is a member of the VOJ. My musical mentor is a member of VOJ. So it is like everything is in one spot as far as relationship wise. The people who are the most important to me are connected either to VOJ or Victory Christian Assembly. It is my family here.

MICHAEL
When I first came to this campus I inquired about a church and someone informed me that Victory Christian Assembly was one of the best churches to attend up here. So I went there and I actually saw VOJ and they were doing the ministry, and I was intrigued. I love music so I know that I wanted to be a part of it. Being in IUP VOJ, I believe this is more than just a choir. To me it is more like a family, and being there my four semesters, I have never felt left out of anything or like I wasn't a part of the organization.

They are funny, crazy at times. Just really fun people with different personalities, but we all share some common ground. You can always find something that we have in common with each other, and that makes our bond stronger. But then you have the differences in that I am stronger in, but someone else is weaker in, and we help each other with that and vice-versa.

In joining the IUP VOJ you feel like you are part of something, part of a community, so your self esteem goes up per se. And you kind of feel like you have a certain confidence being in IUP VOJ because people recognize you as a member of the IUP VOJ, so they speak to you on the street and you can go up to speak to them and as the conversation starts, say, "I am part of the IUP VOJ," and they say, "That's great." I think that has certainly played a role in my social life here on campus. That is where a lot of people know me from because I don't do a lot of partying on campus, so they don't see me at the parties.

… just being in an organization and feeling the family. It does not make you feel homesick. Because I know a lot of people who aren't a part of something usually tend to feel homesick, or they want to go home, or they don't perform as well on tasks because they don't have that support system. I believe it is Nevitz, the area of challenging the supports, speaks about that when you have challenges in college, you need something to fall back on. And I get that support from them [VOJ]. So that has helped me in my retention here at IUP. It makes me want to work harder because I am reminded that this is something that I love and that this something that I want to come back to next semester. So if I do not study for the final, I might not be coming back and I might not be able to see the people in VOJ again. So that always plays in the back of your mind. It helps you and motivates you to study and get your work done.

BRANDON
We are more than just a choir. If one of our friends is in need, we take care of them. If something is going down, we are always here to help and support whatever it is, whether it is a recital or anything like that.

The Choristers repeatedly used the word "family" to describe their relationship with each other. This is not necessarily a common sentiment among other choral groups. The choristers reported that they receive a level of emotional support from each other that appears to be much deeper than that which is experienced by other student organizations.

Gospel choir members feel very welcomed and feel as though they "fit in" and "have a place" in the organization. They are proud to be recognized as members of the organization and view this experience to be a very important component of their college experience.

Although most students join choral ensembles solely for musical purposes, participants in this focus group came to the VOJ with additional desires. Many focus

81

group participants joined the VOJ for social reasons. They desired to make new friends and/or saw the choir as an opportunity to socialize with current friends.

Although the choir's most readily visible role is that of a vocal ensemble, choristers interviewed in this focus group reported additional social integration reasons for joining the ensemble. Consistent with individual interview responses, focus group participant viewed the VOJ as an extended family. This strong bond was emotionally significant to everyone participating in the focus group interview. Students look forward to attending choir rehearsals and engagements, not just for the singing that occurs, but for the friendships that have been established as a result of participation in the VOJ. For many of the choristers, VOJ was described as being a "family."

> CA: I joined the choir because I was invited by one of my friends and I love singing. So I thought it was an interesting way to be a part of a community and be part of the church. Being a member means everything. It helps me please God the way I love to.
>
> MP: I joined the VOJ because I was in what you called a partnership. They let me sing with them, so after the partnership, I was like, I am joining the choir. I love being a member of this organization because it allows me to meet new people each year and it makes me feel like a second family away from home.
>
> JW: I can always look forward to something new that I can laugh or do something. So just that sense that I know I have friends there, and I am accepted there. I am not one to really go out and party, drink and do stuff like that. But coming to VOJ is really more like I know I have friends there and I feel accepted.
>
> AJ: We grew into this great friendship and family like a giant tree. There have been times when people have been down to a very low and then all we have to do is make a few phone calls and everyone is there. We are there just praying, we are there singing, we are there hugging each other. We are there to give encouraging words. I think is it so special.

Tinto's concept of social integration (1987) asserts that students who are actively engaged in the social systems of the institution are more likely to persist. Amidst the challenges of being an African American student at a PWI, focus group participants

found strength among their peers. They sought out the VOJ as venue to provide spiritual

and moral guidance for some of the developmental struggles that naturally occur during

this stage of development (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998*)*.

Students interviewed in the focus group cited decreased feelings of marginalization

after affiliating with the African American community on campus. For many, VOJ

played a significant role in making integral connections with peers. The choir provided a

venue for students to meet and interact outside of the classroom.

> MB: With VOJ, I was just here a few weeks, and it never occurred to me that so
> many people noticed me. It was like, "Where have you been?" Through them I
> feel their connection and I feel their love.   They have a gift of encouragement in
> some way.

> CM: VOJ is my family away from my first family.

> LW: We are pretty much like a family, sort of like a giant tree. Some people say
> we maybe branch out towards the side. We are a family and we are just so much
> more than you or I, and it is like we are growing free.

> SJ: … you are kind of lost as a freshman, and someone speaks out to you and
> tells you to come to Victory, and then you join the choir. We are really like a
> family.   These are like my brothers and sisters. I love them all very much and you
> feel like you are at home.

> JW:… I have friends here, and I am accepted there. I am not one to really go out
> and party, drink and do stuff like that. But coming to VOJ is really more like, I
> know I have friends here and I feel accepted…

> I know a lot of the people on VOJ, we work together with different organizations
> and stuff, different ministries, and we see each other almost every day, we are at
> each other's house, we go out to eat together, we do everything together, we pray
> together. We see each other every day. It is not just Thursday night, it is every day.

Summary of Theme Three: The Gospel Choir Provides a Venue for Meaningful

Relationships

In addition to the musical aspects of the gospel choir participation, choristers clearly

made meaningful social connections through this organization. They viewed choir

members to be part of their extended "family," and described each other as being

"brothers and sisters." In congruence with healthy family dynamics, students

involved with the gospel choir felt as though they were accepted there, and during

difficult times the choir would help lift their spirits.

Theme Four: The Musical Staff Serve As Paternal Figures to the Choristers

Keeping in sync with the previously expressed "family" theme, many of the

students in the choir viewed the musical staff with paternal sentiments. The relationship

between the choristers and choir leadership is a very significant one. A significant

percentage of the students who were interviewed identified the choir director (90%) and

musician (80%) as an additional "father" while away at school. These two individuals

are instrumental in creating the family-like atmosphere that was referenced so frequently

during the interviews. This paternal sentiment was universal among all the choristers

interviewed, regardless of class standing. When asked about the relationship with the

musical staff, the following sentiments were expressed.

> OLIVIA
> With Pastor Johnson, he is like my father on campus. That is what I always call
> him, my father on campus. If I have a little problem that is just bothering me, yes,
> he is the pastor, but I need to see him as a father figure. I will go talk to him. The
> elders are there for spiritual guidance… I don't have to use words, I just have to be
> there. It is really nice. The musicians, they are really cool people.

> VICTOR
> Well, Dr. Johnson, I look to him like a father up here. He treats me like that and he
> rears me in the spirit, and I appreciate him very much for that. We have a close
> relationship. I don't know how close it is in relation to other people's relationship,
> but that does not matter. I am really close with him and I admire the person that he
> is. I try to model myself after that.

> Elder Herman is an amazing musician and he always makes me feel like I can talk
> to him whenever I need to. Musically, I try and get from him because he is such a
> genius, musically. And me being a musician, I want to get as much as I can from
> him.

MICHAEL
The director who is also my pastor, also my spiritual advisor, also a musically talented person, Pastor Johnson is so wonderful because he is not only our director. If he were just our director we would only go to him for music advice. But not only does he help you with that but it is a spiritual connection that you have with him in being your pastor, and you can tell him anything that you might be going through at that time. It does not matter where, you can stop by his office and tell him PJ I am having a bad day and he will ask if you want to pray, do you want to talk, what do you think about that. He is a very, very gifted and a pastor in every sense of the word - the love, the leadership, the biblical knowledge. He helps me with a lot of stuff, a lot of problems. Not always directly, but just through messages, just through sermons, and in helping other people, he helps me. So my relationship with him is a very close relationship.

Rev. Herman, I love him dearly as well. He is a little less aggressive as PJ, he is more laid back. He plays our keyboard. Well I guess he is the pianist, I guess you would say. He writes most of our songs… I can actually go to them whenever I want, call them whenever I want. I expect to have a sound mind when I get through talking with them.

Tinto stated (1987) that social integration is more likely to occur when students are connected with social systems that are well indoctrinated into the university community. In response, 60% of those interviewed reported that they regularly meet with the choir director outside of rehearsal, and 30% reported regularly meeting with the musician outside of rehearsal. This is significant in that both of these individuals are ordained clergy, with the choir director also serving as a member of the University faculty.

The act of meeting with the choir director and/or musician outside of choir rehearsal was consistently viewed in a positive manner. Meeting with the choir leadership outside of formal choir business fostered positive feelings among the choristers. 80% of those interviewed reported that they sought counseling from the choir director, Pastor Johnson ("PJ"), and the musician, Elder Herman ("Elder"). The content of the students' interactions with the choir leadership covered a larger, more personal scope of issues then

choir matters. Students appreciated having someone to talk with and provide guidance to

them on interpersonal, spiritual, and moral issues.

> LESLIE
> You can go to leadership and talk to them and discuss almost just about anything, because I would discuss just about anything with them. I know that I would have their confidentiality in that they would be honest with me and tell me the truth. They will tell me when I am wrong about something or when I am right about something. When I need encouragement about something or when I need to be corrected on something. They are always there and I appreciate that.

> VICTOR
> Well, Dr. Johnson, I look to him like a father up here. He treats me like that and he rears me in the spirit, and I appreciate him very much for that. We have a close relationship. I don't know how close it is in relation to other people's relationship, but that does not matter. I am really close with him and I admire the person that he is. I try to model myself after that.

> GEORGE
> PJ sets a certain standard for you. He talks a lot about perfection here and perfecting of the saints, and that really helps you out in the classroom to keep striving for excellence, keep going to class, get up, study well, and go do things that the Bible asks. He teaches here and teaches us in the classroom also to be perfect as well.

The musical staff is held in very high regard by members of the VOJ. They were

consistently reported as being so much more than musicians - they both serve as mentors

to the students. Several students have credited Dr. Johnson with being a significant factor

as to why they remained enrolled in school. The musical staff has influenced members of

this focus group in much more significant ways than that which is typically found in a

choir director/chorister relationship. They have created an emotionally safe environment

for the students so that the students feel as though they can talk with them about spiritual

and other interpersonal issues.

The choir director is accessible to the students seven days a week due to his being

a full-time university employee. His full-time university employment provides additional

opportunities for students to receive counseling for issues that may be of concern to them.

Students are happy that the musical staff will be upfront with them and confront them if

their actions or behavior is inappropriate.

> GY: PJ and Elder are the only reasons I stayed at IUP, because I planned on leaving. With personal talks with them, they worked with me and I have come out so much. And I think if I had left I would have damaged myself. I would not have been able to grow spiritually or as a person, because they are not separate things. I owe them everything as far as what I do here.

> VW: Like I said before, they are like our spiritual dads. Elder may be like my uncle. They are just generally fun to be around, fun to talk to. They talk to me in terms that I understand without them losing their maturity. I enjoy my relationship with them. I am really close with both of them for various reasons. They are really encouraging. Elder is always smiling and encouraging, just to help you out.

> NV: I have a great relationship with both of them. Like they are so comforting. They welcome you with open arms each time they see you with no hesitation whatsoever. If they don't see you it will be like, "Why I haven't I seen you?" "Where have you been?" " I missed you." They will even take the initiative to e-mail you, text, or call.

> LW: We pretty much see leadership members outside of here probably like almost every other day, or every day or something because they are very accessible. You can always go to PJ's office. Elder works nearby. PJ is like, just stop at my office anytime, so he is pretty much there whenever you need him. You can text him, you can call him, you can E-mail him. Any way you can get to him he is always available. He will come to your house or unless you go to his. He is our spiritual dad.

> AJ: I know with Elder Herman, he is always welcoming me with just a hug and encouragement, and with PJ this whole week that passed, I have been working with him on a partnership in the summer time. So I had to see him basically every day this week from 1 to 5. It is just awesome to be able to work for him.

> DH: They accept you as you are. They do not judge you. They encourage you. They will correct you when you are wrong, but they will praise you when you are doing good.

> CS: I go to them usually for professional help or even personal help because it is good to see that someone probably has been in the same situation as you. It is a motivating aspect for anyone. Spiritually, you can look at them and you can tell their motivation, their drive. They make you want more and they make you want to strive for success.

The choristers view the musical staff as father figures, who will contact them if they are absent from the choir for an extended period of time. The students report that they feel accepted by the musical staff, and that they don't feel as though they are being judged when they share interpersonal issues with them. They find the musical staff to be personally motivating for them to succeed spiritually, socially, and academically.

Musically speaking, the director and musician both feel an obligation to enhance the musicianship of the young choristers. They work closely with the students who have composed songs so that they can teach new music to the choir. This mentoring of up and coming musicians provides another opportunity for the musical staff to interact with the students, and has taught them to develop the patience that is required to effectively work with college students.

> H - It has been very rewarding, sometimes frustrating when you are highly motivated, getting everybody into that one mode consistently. Sometimes that can be frustrating. You learn patience too. That was something I definitely had to learn, how to respect people with the way they are and not be a tyrant. Sometimes I am not always successful doing that. But for the most part, it has taught me how to work with people who are different from my experiences, much younger than me. And as I have gotten older now, the distance is increasing so it is just a challenge to find a new easy way to stay relevant and be able to relate to them without becoming too distant from them because of my age.

> J - I would echo those sentiments and also add that one of the things that has helped us to stay connected to them is the fact that we have tried to cultivate musicianship within the members. We have some people that have written some music over the years and that are writing songs, and also some of the younger musicians as well that play along with us. So that is one of the ways that we have been able to kind of stay relevant with them and to stay connected to the group. It has been rewarding. It has been challenging. But at the end of the day I think it has been far more rewarding than it has been challenging in the sense that I think it is making a difference in their lives and I think it is something that people look forward to.

> This musical duo continues to work harmoniously in support of VOJ students.

However, the musical staff is committed well beyond the expectations of their musical

roles. The relationship that the director and musician have with the choristers is one that

is treasured well beyond the students' time at the University. Both individuals genuinely

enjoy spending time with the students, and the students thrive in response to the

relationships that have been established with them.

Students come to the musical staff not only for musical advice, but for assistance in

confronting life's challenges that are both internal and external to their University

experience. The advice of Pastor Johnson ("PJ") and Elder Herman ("Elder") is taken

very seriously, as it is given out of the love that is genuinely felt for them. When

discussing his sentiments for students, the Elder says to them that

> H - God brought you up to here to get your diploma, but we also put this church here to help you navigate through some of the rough waters of life and some of the emotional things you are dealing with. And maybe you don't have access to your pastor back home, but you have people here that care for you.

In describing his sentiments about students, the Elder goes on to state,

> … I think through the interacting, we grow to love them as well. This is a two-way street. They grow to respect and love us, and we in turn interact with them, not just, okay I am just here to do my job and just here to teach you music and then after it is all over you go your way. I will go my way and then we will meet again next Wednesday. I think that when they feel comfortable communicating we open up ourselves, open up our homes, have them come over for dinner and then they see that there is something more going on than just two preachers, two ministers. When they go away from here, they take a piece of us with them, but they never forget. And time and time again they come back and they always are quick to tell what they received and what they got from this ministry, VOJ, and the church, Victory Christian Assembly, or just the times that they spent with Pastor Johnson - who they have access to very easily.

> A lot of ministers, especially your big name ministers, the common person cannot just walk into their office or have access to them. Pastor Johnson, whenever he is available, they have immediate access to him. They can go to him for counseling, sometimes they come to me and I will sit down and talk to them because, again, we care about the whole person. As ministers, of course, we want you to be saved and be ready to go to heaven when you die. But we are also concerned about the issues of your heart. Especially, if you have been broken.

Sometimes people tell us stuff that we were not expecting, like this happened to me, my father did this to me, and this is like what you see on television - but then when you actually hear things, and you have an actual flesh and blood person saying my uncle did such and such to me, and they are carrying this stuff around with them, it is an eye opener. But it is like they trust us enough to tell us this dark secret and I think that in some ways they want to be free. They want to be healed, and so they open themselves up to us. We can share because we are older and in some ways we have been where they are now and we can encourage them and tell them that there is light at the end of the tunnel. It is not going to be easy, we don't try to paint them a sugary picture that you just do this one, two, three, and everything will be alright. We try to be as realistic as possible. But we let them know that this God that they are singing about, that God is also interested in them. He is not just somebody who wants to be sung to, but He is a God who wants to interact with them on a personal level.

The choir director, Dr. Johnson, works at the university. This allows him to be more accessible to the students. This ease of accessibility unfolds into a more significant choir director/chorister relationship during rehearsals and singing engagements. Students frequently report that if it were not for the VOJ they would not have remained in school. For many students this was due in part to the guidance that they received from the musical staff. The choir director reports,

J - My interaction with students is a little bit different because of the fact that I am a faculty member and I am in developmental studies. So I am with students pretty much seven days a week. I am with them obviously all week in my regular job on campus and then on Thursday evenings, and when we have concerts on Saturdays obviously I am with them. And then every Sunday we are with students as well.

Truthfully, I love it. I live for the students and I couldn't see myself doing any other occupation. I could not see myself doing any other ministry. Minister friends of mine have asked me about what is it like around a student church, wouldn't it be something to be in a place where you have stable members? [He replies] I can't imagine having the same people for 30 years…

I am with them [students] all the time. I don't hang around with anybody my own age except the Elders. We have students living with us. My wife and I have students living in my house. We have students that will come up to dinner all the time. I am with students all the time. I am an advisor to various student groups on campus besides the choir. Literally, my life is students. Students are my life.

Summary of Theme Four: The Musical Staff Has Been a Significant Source of Personal

Support for the Choristers

The musical staff of the choir works very hard to nurture students who have advanced musical interests. They spend time with interested students outside of rehearsals to enhance their musicianship. However, more significant than the musical time that is spent with students is the personal counseling that is provided on interpersonal concerns. Students share their inner struggles and personal life traumas with the musical staff, and they offer words of comfort as they work through very complex and life altering emotional events. The musical staff reminds them that they God that they are singing about desires to heal some of the emotional scars that they have endured.

Findings Related to the Fourth Research Question - To What Extent do African American Students Perceive That Their Participation In the Gospel Choir Assists With Their Persistence At a Predominately White university?

Theme Five: The Gospel Choir Helps Student Refrain from Negative Behaviors

Astin's concepts of emotional cathexis (1985) and the establishment of meaningful relationships with peers were repeated themes throughout the interviews. 70% of individual interview participants described choir rehearsals as a venue to relieve stress that simultaneously prevents them from being spiritually lost and deters them from engaging in negative activities. Many of the students interviewed reported that participation in the VOJ serves as a significant reason to refrain from behaviors that are contrary to persistence, for example, excessive partying, alcohol/drug usage, etc.

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Peers can be instrumental in encouraging each other to remain in synch with the

academic and behavioral standards of a university. Student to student interaction has

positive correlations with a successful university experience (Astin, 1993).

DONNA
Like there were times when I was falling into things, like certain activities that I
should not have been involved with. But the choir always pulled me back. They
never said like, you had to stop doing this, but it was just because you wanted to
represent the choir right and you wanted people to look at you and say, "OK, she is
on choir and so she must be alright." You don't want them to say," Oh, she is on
the choir and she is doing all of that?" I did not want people to say that, so it made
me look at myself and change.

There are other students who are like you here but not all of them are doing the
right thing. Not all of them are focused on the positive things. There are students
who would just party all the time, or drink all the time, or do drugs, and that is
another environment that you can fall into if you are not in the choir. By being on
the choir, not everybody is perfect, but we are all still trying to encourage each
other to do the right thing. There are a lot of things that I did my freshman year that
I do not do anymore because I know that people are looking at me as a role model,
and I know I can't be involved in anything that is not going to help me.

SHARON
If I was not involved in the VOJ, I would honestly say that I would be a heathen. I
do not think that I would be as prosperous in my academic studies. I do not think
that I would be as devoted and dedicated to anything. I do not think I would be as
determined to succeed as I am. I know for a fact that I would not have any sort of
spiritual guidance, any at all! I would honestly be a heathen and a lost soul without
VOJ. I really love this choir and I appreciate everyone in the choir. I am very
appreciative of VOJ.

VICTOR
When we sing I receive so much and I receive so much from the people around me.
There is more than music as far as I am concerned. People in the choir have really
helped me to grow as a Christian. I believe I am spiritually mature and know how
to act like God just being around these people who are interested in the same things
and interested in getting further into Christ. Most of them are there for that. This is
such a blessing just to be in the choir because it has kept me. It is the one thing that
has held me together…

MARCHAN
VOJ has more or less anchored me in the church. It was a reason to stay. Honestly
if you have been to Victory you know how great a service it is, how awesome the
word is and the ministries that come forth. It was just more of a reason to stay.

When I have gone through every single semester I have always had someone to talk to, always had somebody to share my feelings, someone who has more or less gone through what I have gone through, bear my burdens and give advice. It was also just something positive to do. There a lot of people who all they do every single weekend is go out and party, drink, smoke and do whatever. It was a reason not to do any of that and go out and have fun and do something that I really love to do with people that I care about and I love.

BRANDON
If I was not involved in the VOJ I would probably be almost like every other person that is not really involved with the VOJ. I would probably be at every party every week, going to house parties, just hanging out, not caring, not really getting to know myself, just doing whatever I wanted to do. I feel that the VOJ keeps you grounded. We are not just singers, but people actually look at us. So we are almost like role models and leaders. They look at us and we sort of set the example. If a person wants to join, but if he sees us messing up, then they are going to mess up. So it is more as if I wasn't in the VOJ I would probably be doing things that I shouldn't be doing. And for being in the VOJ, it really keeps you grounded. I know that I am not supposed to be doing this or that. I will pray and ask God to help me get out this or whatever it is. It really keeps me grounded. It really keeps me focused on myself and what I need to do up here in IUP. I really love the VOJ.

Students consistently reported that the gospel choir participation had a positive effect on their behavior outside of choir activities. Although several of the choristers cited opportunities for illegal alcohol and drug use, they chose not to involve themselves with such negative behaviors. These actions were either in conflict with their spiritual convictions or they chose to refrain because they did not want their actions to reflect poorly on the choir.

Consistent with the findings in the individual interviews, focus group participants reported that the VOJ assisted them with staying morally and spiritually focused. Choristers frequently reported that if it were not for the VOJ, they would possibly engage in negative behaviors. However, because of their commitment to the VOJ, they are inspired to refrain from negative behaviors that go against their religious expectations.

When asked what their college experience would be like if they were not involved with

VOJ, the following were some of the responses that were given:

> VW: If it weren't for VOJ my college career would not exist. I would have been here for one semester and left because I never liked school and I would probably be a thug or 'pharmaceutical technician' on the streets.

> LW: Actually my life in the world would be awesome because I would be going out and partying and smoking and drinking every day. But because I am on the choir, I feel as though I am responsible for myself and responsible for other people in how they see me and how they may be turned on or turned off to Christ. It makes me want to be a better person. So if I wasn't in VOJ I would be in a world of hurt.

> GY: My college life would be a complete disaster, it would be boring. I wouldn't do anything. I would not socialize with people because I don't party and I don't really talk to a lot of people.

> JW: I would probably be a drop out in school. I would probably be out in the world doing whatever, probably have a few babies. Now that I am accountable it is different.

> DH: I didn't join the first semester, but all of my friends were a part of it and I was doing things that I shouldn't be doing. And when I came here, it totally transformed me from just going to church to hearing the messages. I probably would have dropped out, probably would have been doing drugs and I probably would have been pregnant.

> SA: If it wasn't for VOJ I honestly know that I would have been a heathenistic mess. I would not be at IUP at all. If it wasn't for VOJ I would not have been on this spiritual journey.

Summary of Theme Five: Gospel Choir Participation Encourages Students to Refrain

From Misconduct

Gospel choir participants reported a strong intrinsic and extrinsic desire to abstain

from negative behaviors. This was due to their spiritual beliefs that were reinforced

during gospel choir sessions. Students were also sensitive to the fact that they were

ambassadors for the choir. Therefore, any negative actions could have a corrosive effect

on the reputation and mission of the choir.

Absent gospel choir involvement, students indicated that they might have left the university, engaged in illegal alcohol and drug usage, sold drugs, and/or been forced to contend with an unplanned pregnancy. All of these circumstances can have a negative effect on student persistence.

Theme Six: The Gospel Choir Prevents Students from Leaving the Institution

A significant percentage of the choristers remained at the University in response to their participation in the VOJ. Specifically, 70% of those interviewed at one point in their college experience had planned to leave the institution. However, participation in the VOJ was reported as being a significant factor in their decision to remain at IUP.

ALEXIS
Being so far away from home, because I am from Philadelphia which is, depending on who is driving, 5-6 hours, I was one of those freshmen who basically started filling out an application for Temple University my first semester and it is probably still on line. I did not finish it yet, but as soon as I started going to the church I had a great time. It was awesome. It was a different experience and then being on the choir you formed a family. You are all going through a lot of similar things and you just have people to hang out with that have a good influence on you. So it means a lot to me. It has kept me here. Once I joined the choir and started coming to Victory, I kind of did not pay any attention to not wanting to be here. It did not matter anymore. So I had a reason to be up here…

I remember the first day that I joined VOJ. And like I said [earlier in the interview], at that time I had an application online for Temple University and was definitely looking into other schools, probably closer to home. Now I don't even want to go home. There is a friend that I met that was from home in Philadelphia… she is like my best friend right now. So it [VOJ] … brought plenty of people that are very special to me in my life, and I think that the supportive systems that it has brought to my life had a big role in me staying here.

VICTOR
It [VOJ] has played a paramount role in me remaining in school. While I have gotten tired of homework and studying and class, I have not gotten tired of VOJ. While homework, studying, and class have offered me professionalism and learning enhancement, VOJ has offered me enhancement and learning in my spiritual growth, and the church that it comes from has offered so much more. And that church and that choir, they are the paramount reason that I keep coming back. This [university] is in the middle of nowhere and I am a city kid. And there is something

that keeps drawing me here. Everybody that comes here says that God must have really wanted me here because it is not the most desirable of places. It is a beautiful campus. It is a nice school. But it is not enough for me to be drawn to it. I am drawn to the choir and for what it has done for me as a person - spiritually and naturally in the church. The Victory Christian Assembly has kept me up here. I would not be back if that church and the choir were not here…

LESLIE
With joining the choir the next semester, it really gave me a sense of just wanting to stay here at the University. The choir gave me a reason for staying here at the University. I know the education that I am receiving I can probably receive that from any other university. But because of the choir, it made me want to stay here, in Indiana. Because where I am from, I am from the city, and there are universities all over within the city where I am from. I could have gone to any school there and got the education that I am receiving here.

SHARON
VOJ, the choir has had the biggest impact for me staying at IUP. Like I was saying before [earlier in the interview], I was going to transfer in my sophomore year, but I did not want to leave the choir. It is the memories, the fun that we have, and just ministering to other people and actually seeing our work being carried out.

MARCHAN
I probably would not be here honestly, if it were not for the VOJ and Victory Christian Assembly. It has kept me out of a lot of trouble just in giving me something positive to do when I was going through certain circumstances, losing family members and friends, and break ups, and cars and just everything. It was a reason for me to look at the positive, or it was something to take my mind off of everything else in a positive way. It is a system of encouragement and I have gotten a lot of it. I really would not be the person that I am today if was not for them.

Several focus group students reported that if it were not for the VOJ, they clearly would not have remained at the university. Some students reported that had it not been for VOJ, they would have given in to their initial thoughts of attrition. Other students reported that VOJ and Pastor Johnson assisted them when they were not performing well academically, and as a result of this intervention, they were able to remain at the University.

NV: That [VOJ] is the only reason why I am here. If it wasn't for VOJ and Victory I really would not be on the IUP campus. I hate this atmosphere, but this church and these people are what keeps me complete.

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UK: If it wasn't for VOJ I think that when I was on probation I probably would have failed out and stayed out for awhile. Being under the leadership of Elder Herman and PJ, it definitely changed me. VOJ has definitely been a blessing.

GY: PJ and Elder are the only reasons I stayed at IUP, because I planned on leaving. With personal talks with them, they worked with me and I have come out so much. And I think if I had left I would have damaged myself. I would not have been able to grow spiritually or as a person because they are not separate things. I owe them everything as far as what I do here.

CM: I was on academic probation twice. I am here not just because of me wanting my degree, but also because I wanted to be in this choir. I still want to be in the Church. Going back home would have been a whole different atmosphere. So that was part of the drive. I had to get it together. I wanted to be in the choir and in the church.

Focus group participants indicated that gospel choir participation was a significant factor in their persistence at the university, with the support that they received from the musical staff being a significant component in their decision to persist. In addition, some students encountered academic challenges and were either asked to leave the institution, or were in jeopardy of being asked to leave the institution.   Fortunately, interventions by the music staff intercepted student departure.

Some students reported that they did not like the predominately White environment of the institution. However, participation in the university gospel choir made matriculation a more enjoyable experience.

In addition to helping students to feel more comfortable, the musical staff reports that the VOJ plays a role in integrating students into the larger campus community. Having gained the respect of the University community, the VOJ is now invited to sing at campus events that a gospel choir would not normally be invited to participate in for various reasons. Their presence at such events has been influential in attracting other African American students to attend these events as well.

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J - … VOJ has been sought out and sought after by institutional members, majority members within the institution to participate at various functions where African-American students would not ordinarily attend. For example, the investiture of a president or some sort of convocation. Those are the kinds of events that maybe minority students may not attend in mass, but they tend to go. And some of these students that are members of the choir will bring their friends, roommates, associates or whatever with them to these events, and I think that has helped to integrate them into the life of the institution in ways that they would not normally do if the group was not an organized group like this.

The musical staff reports that the VOJ plays a role in helping African American students feel comfortable at college. It is an environment where students can "be themselves." During the focus group session, the musical staff reflected on the challenges that a student of color faces when opting to attend a predominately White state institution. Issues of isolation and marginalization often occur. However, they have witnessed that the VOJ does assist students in combating marginalization by providing them with a familiar environment to sing and "be themselves." Pastor Johnson further explains:

Take a minority student and put him in a predominantly majority environment, they tend to feel insecure or isolated, removed, inadequate, you know all of the things that are associated with loneliness and isolation. But when they come here on a Thursday night or come to church on a Sunday and singing and all that, they just feel free to be themselves because it is kind of like a little taste of home. And that is what really started the whole church, just that whole issue of a desire to give students that feeling.

During the focus group, the musical staff spoke of the perceived role that they believe the VOJ plays in the retention of African American students. It was expressed that the VOJ has been very successful in helping students make meaningful connections at the University so that they can be more successful in a predominately White collegiate environment.   Therefore, from their observations, the VOJ appears to contribute to African American student persistence. Pastor Johnson states the following:

J - Students have told me time and again that, 'If it wasn't for VOJ, I would have left here a long time ago.' I have to believe that because of the fact that I hear it so often, and also I have seen so many students that have come and gone for various reasons. And looking at the work of people like Tinto and people like that, you know students leave college for a lot more reasons than just academics, especially if they are not connected or engaged in college life. I have to say that the engagement with the choir and the connection between African-American students, particularly at a predominantly White institution, has had an impact on their persistence and retention. And it is something that has not to date been quantified, but I think that it absolutely is very real.

When asked what college life would be like for the students if they didn't have the

VOJ, Dr. Johnson responds by saying the following:

J - That is actually an interesting question, because the ego of me wants to say it would be dead, it would horrible, it would be a nightmare. But I know that there are many students that come through here that do not have anything to do with VOJ that do perfectly fine…

I think that their lives would be filled with other things. Now we can take that whatever way you want to take it, but I think that they would find something to do or someway to fill that void. I would suggest to you that the ways in which they would fill that void would technically be more destructive. So I think that they would try to fill the void with something else other than the VOJ, I think it would be less than positive. It would be more destructive, less constructive.

Summary of Theme Six: The Gospel Choir Fills a Void for African American Students at

a PWI and Connects Them to the Larger Campus Community

Because of the gospel choir, African American students are attending campus

events that they historically did not attend. Their presence at significant university events

helps facilitate their increased inclusion into the fabric of the university.

The gospel choir has played a significant role in the lives of the choristers. Choir

alumni frequently report that they "would not have made it" through school if it were not

for the gospel choir. The choir director reports that people depart from school for many

non-academic reasons. If the gospel choir were not part of the choristers' lives, it is

believed that the students would have found another way to discharge the emotional energy dedicated towards gospel choir activities. Unfortunately, those alternate activities may not be of a positive nature.

Prior to their affiliation with the gospel choir, a significant portion of the choristers expressed a desire to transfer to a different educational institution. Some of these students went as far as to complete transfer applications. Reasons for transferring included home sickness and urban vs. rural adjustment issues.

The choristers consistently reported that when they made connections with choir members, they felt connected to a community. Once they had established connections with choir members, they no long had the desire to transfer schools.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESEARCH FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The final chapter of this study summarizes the research findings, answers the

research questions, and provides meaning to the findings. Interpretations of these

findings are then referenced back to the theoretical underpinnings, followed by discussion

and implications for future studies.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived effect of gospel choir

participation on the persistence of African American students attending a PWI. Utilizing

the social integration component of Vincent Tinto's retention theory, this study explored

whether or not students who participated in a college gospel choir perceived themselves

as maintaining stronger ties to the campus community, thereby decreasing feelings of

marginality and aiding in their retention.

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1.) How do African American students perceive their experience as a participant in the

gospel choir?

2.) To what extent do African American students perceive that their participation in the

gospel choir facilitates a stronger social integration to the campus community?

3.) To what extent do African American students perceive that participation in the gospel

choir decreases their feelings of marginalization at a predominately White campus?

4.) To what extent do African American students perceive that their participation in the

gospel choir assists with their persistence at a predominately White university?

Summary of Research Findings

The following table overviews responses to the research questions. Each research question is also individually expanded upon with theoretical support.

Table 6

Research Question #1 Summary Table

How do African American students perceive their experience as a participant in the gospel choir?

General Concepts:	Personal spiritual journey
	Viewed as being part of a larger ministry
Supporting Evidence:	Excitement about "spiritual release" at rehearsals
	Emotional catharsis
	Gives them the "push" to get through the week
	Experienced higher calling at Milton-Hershey concert
	Obligation to be role models to not degrade choir mission

Table 7

Research Question #2 Summary Table

_____

To what extent do African American students perceive that their participation in the

gospel choir facilitates a stronger social integration to the campus community?

_____

General Concepts: A very strong sense of "family" among the choir

Supporting Evidence: Peers described as "brothers and sisters"

                               Music staff described as "fathers"

                               Peer mentoring for new students

                               Closest friends are in the choir

Table 8

Research Question #3 Summary Table

_____

 To what extent do African American students perceive that participation in the gospel

choir decreases their feelings of marginalization at a predominately White campus?

_____

General Concepts: Music staff is identified as very significant to choristers

                           Connection with Black peers decreases marginalization

Supporting Evidence: Choir director available seven days a week

                           Music staff cares about issues of the heart

                           After joining students say they now "fit in" at IUP

Table 9

Research Question #4 Summary Table

_____

 To what extent do African American students perceive that participation in the gospel

choir assists with their persistence at a predominately White campus?

_____

General Concepts: Choir makes them want to stay at IUP

                               Refrain from negative activities because of choir

Supporting Evidence: Music staff counsels them to the "light at end of the tunnel"

                               Choir intrinsically steers them from alcohol/drug use

                               Choristers no longer completed transfer applications

Vincent Tinto's (1987) work on student retention served as the basis for this study. Tinto purports that academic and social integration are key components in a student's decision to persist or attrit at an institution. Full integration in both systems is not necessary. However, some degree of social and/or academic integration must occur as a condition of persistence (Tinto, 1987).

Social integration is more closely related to persistence at a specific institution and is critical for the retention of African American students. African American students are more likely depart or persist in response to positive or negative interactions at the university (Bean, 1990).

Social integration includes the student's interactions with his or her peers, faculty, and staff, to the extent that an appropriate support system has been established that allows the student to feel as though he or she is a valued member of the campus community (Tinto, 1975). Formal social integration activities include participation in recognized extracurricular organizations. Such activities have a greater (positive) effect on African American student retention than informal social activities.

Summary of Findings Related to the First Research Question

How do African American students perceive their experience as a participant in the gospel choir?

Student choristers who were interviewed individually and via focus group report similar perceptions and sentiments about their VOJ experiences. A significant number of students used the word "family" when describing their relationship with other members of the VOJ. They expressed feelings of brotherly and sisterly "love" for each other, and a

willingness to step in and "bear each other's burdens" if a member of the group was experiencing difficulties.

Members of the VOJ report feelings of safety and belonging very early in their interactions with choir members. This was particularly true for lower division students. Nationally, lower division students suffer from the highest levels of attrition. Therefore, any social connections that can be made early in the collegiate experience has the potential to aid persistence.

Tinto reports that early social integration into college life is linked with higher levels of persistence (Getzlaf, Sedlacek, Kearney, & Blackwell, 1984). Significant social integration must occur soon after a student comes to campus, as a student knows very early (within the first six weeks of their first semester) whether or not he or she will leave the institution (Noel, 1985).

In support of this concept, lower division students in the VOJ also reported that they were frequently mentored by upper division students. Lower division students expressed an appreciation for the upper division students who watched over them early in their college experience.

Until significant connections were made with other African American students on campus, lower division students initially reported feelings of isolation when they first arrived to campus. In those circumstances, upper division students in the VOJ were often instrumental in introducing freshman students to a stable peer group with whom they could identify. According to the literature (Tinto, 1987), this connection to an identifiable peer group may very well have prevented the attrition of a significant number of first year students.

Conversely, several of the upper division students became a little emotional during the interview as they internalized that fact that with their impending graduation comes the reality that their days with the VOJ will be coming to an end very soon. They too reflected on the support they received from the VOJ very early on and throughout their collegiate experience. The thought of leaving the choir, even for something as positive as graduation, was a little sad for them.

Individual interview and student focus group participants reported that choir activities were helpful in relieving stress. After a difficult weak navigating the challenges of collegiate life, choristers were often anxious to attend choir rehearsal so that they could relax and unwind with like-minded peers. They were excited about Thursday evening choir rehearsals and singing at Sunday morning worship services.

Significant in the choristers' expressed feelings of integration was the relationship with Pastor Johnson and the Elder. A majority of the students reported meeting with the musical staff outside of choir rehearsals and other singing venues. The students repeatedly referenced them as significant paternal figures in their lives and they deeply valued the advice and counsel that they received from them. The students appreciated being corrected by the musical staff when they were not acting in accordance with their spiritual, ethical, and moral values, and many students reported that they intentionally refrained from misconduct so that their actions do not discredit the work of the VOJ.

Tinto (1987) declares that integration into the campus community is a significant factor in college student persistence. In addition, the chances of persistence are enhanced when a student is integrated into a system that is central to fabric of the institution.

Both the Elder and PJ are very well respected members of the campus and surrounding community. However, further supporting the students' opportunities for persistence is the fact that PJ is also a member of the University's Developmental Studies faculty. Tinto suggests that the likelihood of persistence is enhanced when integration occurs among systems that are central to campus. This multifaceted role of choir director, pastor, mentor, and faculty member allows students to have access to him seven days a week. When you combine his pastoral counseling skills and musical abilities with a faculty member's knowledge of university resources, VOJ students are able to receive the most holistic support possible when they confide in him on matters that have the potential to interrupt their educational pursuits.

In as much as the students value their relationship with PJ and the Elder, the musical staff also thrives in the presence of students. Responses from the musical staff focus group indicate that they enjoy being fully accessible to students on such a consistent and frequent basis. They echo the sentiment of "family" that were expressed by the individual chorister and focus group interviews. They have truly integrated students into every aspect of their life.

They are concerned not only about the students' musical abilities, but also about the challenges that they face on a daily basis. Students come to their house for guidance and occasional meals. Some students even live with them in their homes. This integral relationship with the musical staff, in conjunction with the musical staff's centrality to the campus community further enhances opportunities for persistence to occur.

In closing, Tinto's (1987) concept of social integration was clearly evidenced in the VOJ. The choristers' perceptions about choir participation includes feelings of being

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part of a significant and meaningful community. The relationship with the musical staff members is also perceived as being significant to the choristers in many ways. The musical staff represents significant figures in the campus community. In addition, their pastoral training and genuine concern for the students all play a role in the perceived effects of student persistence.

Summary of Findings Related to the Second Research Question

To what extent do African American students perceive that their participation in the gospel choir facilitates a stronger social integration to the campus community?

Tinto postulated that attrition occurs when a student does not connect to other members of the college community and is, therefore, unable to identify with the institution (Lenning, Beal, & Sauer, 1980). Many students who were interviewed said that they felt lonely on campus prior to their involvement with the VOJ. Student focus group participants commented that they experienced a sense of isolation until significant connections were made with the African American student community.

One individual interview participant reflected upon initial feelings of loneliness at the university when she recalled being the only African American student eating in the cafeteria during a meal. This visible separation of the races is very noticeable to the students.

Choristers also reported that if they want activities that suit their cultural and extracurricular needs, they often have to plan them for themselves. In addition, some students felt as though they had to work harder in their organizations in order to be recognized. Yet, even in the presence of their additional efforts, they did not feel adequately supported by the university - particularly with regard to financial support for

their organizations. When a student feels as though his or her values are not congruent with the values of the institution, attrition is more likely to occur (Tinto, 1987).

In response, students recalled being very glad when they made connections with older African American students in the VOJ. Social support is a key factor in helping students successfully deal with the transition to collegiate life. The literature shows that students who receive more social support initiate fewer university withdrawals (Cutronea et al., 1994).

Both focus group and individual interview students reported that their "core" friends are members of the VOJ. There is a community within the organization, and the students "take care of each other" as members of the VOJ "family." One student reported that there are a few members of the VOJ who "can't sing, but love the fellowship" so they joined the VOJ in spite of their limited (or nonexistent) singing ability so that they could establish significant peer connections. The literature reports (Chang, 2002), that involvement with ethnic based organizations works favorably in support of African American student persistence.

Leadership skills were also developed by the choir officers. Their positions within the organization empowered them to reach out to other Christian organizations and gave them the necessary emotional push to navigate through the administrative tasks that are required of all organizations.

The choristers' additional integration into the larger campus community was an essential task that must be mastered. Although the choristers legitimately feel most comfortable among each other, the reality is that they will one day leave the university and the emotional security of the VOJ. In preparation for graduation, they must enhance

those skills that will prove beneficial to them in their post-collegiate experience so that they may effectively interact with whom they do not readily identify.

The feedback from the choir director focus group indicates that the VOJ has a calling that is even bigger than the IUP campus. They acknowledge that the music of the VOJ not only impacts the choristers, but it also impacts the individuals who hear the music.

During the choir staff focus group, the musical staff referenced a singing engagement at the Milton Hershey School – a boarding school for children with social and financial difficulties. After the VOJ sang, the Milton Hershey students flocked to the stage to meet with the VOJ students. VOJ members reported that they were treated as though they were celebrities. Their positive musical message had significantly impacted the children at the Milton Hershey School.

When the choristers reflected on this experience in an individual interview or via focus group, they recall being informed by the staff at the Milton-Hershey School that the students did not receive guests well at all. They were told that Milton-Hershey students' behavior was often problematic. However, that was not the case when the VOJ sang. The choristers felt a sense of unity and accomplishment upon realizing that they had just ministered to a very tough, juvenile crowed. This feeling of responding to a higher calling even further enhanced the choristers' feelings of integration and connection to each other. They were proud to be using their gifts to reach younger people outside of the IUP campus.

In closing, Vincent Tinto's (1987) concept of social integration was evidenced through the VOJ. Many African American students come to the campus and do not feel

fully embraced as an African American student at a predominately White campus.

However, membership in the VOJ provided them with a stable peer group to identify

with, and has offered choir officers the opportunity to enhance the leadership skills that

will prove beneficial to them in their life after IUP. Both of these opportunities are assets

social integration and persistence.   Simultaneously, the VOJ strengthens their feelings of

integration when they travel and tour off campus. Singing in support of their collective

outreach mission helps draw the chorister and musical staff closer to each other, thereby

increasing the likelihood that the students will persist.

Summary of Findings Related to the Third Research Question

To what extent do African American students perceive that participation in the

gospel choir decreases their feelings of marginalization at a predominately White

campus?

Based upon the responses given by individual interview and focus group

respondents, participation in the VOJ decreases feelings of marginalization. This is

significant, because feelings of marginality are more likely to result in student departure

(Murguia, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991).

Students interviewed individually and via focus group repeatedly used the term

"family" when describing their relationship with their VOJ peers. Some students

described their peer relationships to be more like brothers and sisters than peer choristers.

Many students appreciated the guidance given to them early in their college

experience by upper division students. One student focus group participant described a

feeling of being "lost" at the university until meaningful relationships were established

with African American students through VOJ.

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The VOJ helped choristers decrease feelings of marginalization in many ways. One hundred percent of those who were interviewed individually reported that VOJ members frequently met and interacted with each other outside of choir rehearsals and other formal choir activities. This is a testament to the bond that the choristers have among themselves.

One individual interview participant reports that she hugs VOJ members every time she sees them, even if she sees them multiple times in one day. Many students reported that they eat together and spend a great deal of time at each other's houses as a part of a standard weekly ritual.

Participation in VOJ was viewed as a stress reliever to many of the choristers. They looked forward to rehearsals so that could unwind and put the challenges of college life behind them temporarily. Alexander Astin's (1985) Student Involvement Theory emphasizes that when students invest their emotional energy into the extracurricular life of the institution, persistence was more likely to occur. This emotional cathexis that causes students to be excited about attending rehearsals is a contributing factor in their persistence.

Participation in the VOJ also aids in persistence by providing a peer group for students to identify with that reportedly chooses not to engage in illegal drug and alcohol usage. Several VOJ students stated that they would feel uncomfortable being seen as a representative of the VOJ, while simultaneously being seen at illegal parties, drinking, using drugs, and engaging in other activities that would discredit the VOJ. The presence of a stable, integrated peer group works in favor of student persistence (Tinto, 1987). In addition, refraining from negative activities decreases that likelihood that they will attrit

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in response to the negative academic and social consequences associated with these behaviors.

Key elements of the integration experienced by the choristers is the relationship that the choristers have with Pastor Johnson and the Elder. Students look to them as spiritual advisors and support resources who will remain confidential if they share their inner most thoughts and concerns with them. The students are particularly glad for the university connections that Pastor Johnson has a faculty member. Student focus group participants commented on how helpful he was when they experienced academic and scholarship difficulties.

Tinto states that persistence is highest when students are socially integrated into networks that are most closely linked to the central fabric of the university. This is even more significant for African American students, as they are less likely to seek counseling and other support personnel when problems arise (Sharkin, 2004). Therefore, connections to a university faculty member can be instrumental in African American student persistence, especially when that faculty member shares his or her ethnic and cultural heritage (Castle, 1993; Loo & Rolinson, 1986; Suen, 1983).

The focus group with the musical staff members documented a genuine desire to be a support system for the choristers. Pastor Johnson reported that they are there to make the students more comfortable during their university experience. The church was founded to provide college students a spiritual and emotional "taste of home" as they engaged in their academic pursuits.

The musical staff cares about the students well beyond their musical roles. They desire to help the student through "some of the rough waters of life." The Elder reports

that the God that they are singing about does not just want to be sung to, but He also cares about the issues of their heart.   Students openly share some of the deepest, darkest moments of their lives with the musical staff, and they respond by offering promises of a "light at the end of the tunnel."

Pastor Johnson embraces his role of assisting with the social integration of college students. During the musical staff focus group he reported that students come to college scared and insecure, but it is his goal to give them an environment where they are free to be themselves.

During the musical staff focus group, it was said that the VOJ has also been integral in assisting other African American students in becoming more integrated into university culture.   In response to the VOJ's increased involvement with more formal university events, African American students are now attending events that they historically would have not attended (i.e. convocation, presidential inauguration, etc.). In addition, they are bringing their friends with them to watch them sing – thereby further integrating African American students into the celebratory activities of the university. Student integration into the values and core of the academy is associated with higher levels of persistence (Tinto, 1987).

In summary, the VOJ assists students by decreasing feelings of marginality among choristers. Tinto's (1987) social integration concept is evidenced by the "family" bond that the students frequently reference when describing their relationship with one another. Upper division students serve as mentors to their lower division "brothers" and "sisters," and PJ and the Elder serve as father figures for the entire choir.

Students use VOJ rehearsals as a vehicle for emotional catharsis (Astin, 1985) to relieve the stress acquired during the week. The VOJ assists them in finding positive African American peer group to identify with, which decreases the chances of them being dismissed for violating the university's social codes of conduct.

Summary of Findings Related to the Fourth Research Question

To what extent do African American students perceive that their participation in the gospel choir assists with their persistence at a predominately White university?

VOJ focus group and individual interview participants were almost unanimous in their perception that the VOJ played a significant role in their persistence at IUP. Prior to their involvement with the VOJ, 70% of the students who were individually interviewed said that at one point in their college experience, they had planned to transfer out of the university. Some of these students had even gone as far to complete transfer applications.

After experiencing the social integration that Tinto (1987) speaks of in his retention theory, and investing the emotional energy into the VOJ as per Astin's (1985) involvement theory, the choristers' desire to transfer to a different institution was thwarted. Both individual interview and focus group student participants reported that they felt emotionally safe at the university because of the connections made with other African American students. VOJ is a "family" that they can depend on while away at college.

Several of the individual interview participants stated that the education that they are receiving at IUP could be obtained at another university. Specifically, at a university that is closer to home, in an urban environment, or more demographically diverse.

However, their social integration through membership in VOJ helps them to persist at IUP. This reinforces the notion that social integration is more closely affiliated with persistence at a specific institution, in comparison to academic integration, which is more closely affiliated with degree completion and is not institution specific.

Both individual interview and focus group participants reported that their involvement with the VOJ gives them the emotional "push" that they need to make it through the week. The "atmosphere' in the VOJ is inspiring to students and being surrounded by a positive African American peer group that they can readily identify with helps them refrain from negative behaviors that could be detrimental to their college career. Absent the VOJ, some student focus group members said that their lives would currently include unplanned/unwanted pregnancies, alcohol usage, drug usage/drug sales, and excessive partying.

In summary, student choristers and the musical staff perceive that the VOJ contributes to their persistence at the university. The VOJ provides them with a forum to socially integrate with like-minded peers (Tinto, 1987), provides them with a forum to channel their emotional energy (Astin, 1985), and works in partnership with an African American church – a historically significant pillar of emotional support along the continuum of African American identity development.

Discussion

Vincent Tinto's (1987) work on student persistence served as the foundation of this study. Tinto states that students must successfully navigate the academic and social systems of the university if persistence is to occur. As has been previously mentioned, Tinto identifies six factors that contribute to institutional departure/persistence. These

factors include induction into the social systems of the university, which includes involvement with extracurricular activities and peer group interactions.

Tinto's concept of social integration provides a conceptual framework for students to establish support systems whereby he or she feels as though they are a valued member of the campus community (Tinto, 1975). Hence, multicultural student organizations serve an important role in African American student persistence.

Tinto states (1993) student of color persistence is enhanced when the population is significant enough to form a viable community. Multicultural student organizations serve as a valuable resource for students of color in that they break the university down into smaller fragments so that integration is possible (Chang, 2002).

Members of the VOJ clearly felt as though their presence mattered in the organization. Choristers were both shocked and elated that someone would contact them to ensure their well being if they were absent from rehearsals or Sunday services. Although they could have easily felt insignificant in such a large student organization, a text message or phone call from a fellow chorister or musical staff member made it abundantly clear that they were a valued member of this sub community within the institution. This means that their absence was noticed when they were not around and their presence at the university indeed mattered.

Several VOJ interview participants commented on the fact that very early in their collegiate experience, older (upper division) members of the VOJ reached out to them and mentored them during the initial weeks of their first semester of college. This is important, as the literature states (Noel, 1985) that students know within the first six weeks of the semester whether or not they will remain at the institution, and African

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American students are more likely to persist or attrit in response to positive or negative social experiences at the university (Bean, 1990).

Lower division VOJ students recall being counseled by their upper division peers about them importance of class attendance, interactions with faculty, academic preparation for a specific major, and other topics relevant to a successful transition to college life. These students recount those experiences as being significant in their persistence at IUP, particularly since this advice was given during their first semester of college - the most vulnerable period of their college career.

As has been previously stated in the literature review, for African American students, success in the academy may be initially more dependent on social support than high school GPA, standardized test scores, etc. For example, some VOJ students who were interviewed recall being very uncomfortable in IUP's predominately White campus environment (i.e. "I hate this atmosphere"). In response, several VOJ students made plans to leave the institution, some of whom had even started the process of filling out transfer applications to other universities. However, once significant relationships were formed with the membership and leadership of the VOJ, their desires to transfer to a different school went away. This means that social integration had been successful in intercepting student departure.

The urgency of ensuring initial positive experiences for new students was highlighted in the Woosley (2003) study referenced earlier in the literature review. Woosley affirmed Tinto's findings, highlighting the significance of students making friends early in the collegiate experience as a condition of persistence. Therefore, Woosley simultaneously affirmed the necessity for VOJ members to continue reaching

out to lower division choristers to ensure immediate and meaningful connections with a successful peer group in support of continued persistence.

The study being conducted by this researcher is different from the Woolsey study in that the Woosley recommends the creation of institutionally driven retention programs that will engage and integrate students within the first six weeks of their college career. This researcher desires to solidify freshman engagement through the examination of a pre-existing extracurricular organization that can provide culturally relevant peer-driven support.

As was noted in the Rummel et al. study in the literature review, even after students matriculate and prove themselves academically, they are still "shopping" to ensure an appropriate institutional fit. Hence, if their social needs are not successfully addressed, they reserve the right to explore other educational options.

The majority of VOJ students who expressed a desire to transfer to a different institution because of initial feelings of marginalization were in good academic standing. Therefore, consistent with Rummel et al., the students interviewed for this study probably would not have received any institutional departure interventions, as most attrition interventions are triggered by poor academic performance. Therefore, VOJ's history of early outreach to its lower division choristers provides an augmented level of support to the university's institutional persistence efforts by giving students the desire to remain at IUP in response to stronger social integration ties. This means that once students made connections with the VOJ, their integration within the organization was much stronger than the negative factors that initially drove them to thoughts of institutional departure.

The Rummel et al., study is a post-attrition review of academic documentation relevant to student withdrawals. The study being conducted by this researcher complements the work of Rummel et al., by acknowledging that students leave institutions for reasons above and beyond academic concerns. The study at hand also stresses the importance of students connecting with like-minded peers early in their collegiate experience to decrease opportunities for marginalization could occur.

It is important for students to establish meaningful relationships early in their university experience. Institutional departure is very often a result of failed social integration efforts resulting in student marginality (Murguia, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991). Fortunately, marginality was not an expressed concern for the student choristers in the VOJ.

VOJ students repeatedly referred to their fellow choristers as "family." They were convicted their belief that their peers would provide support during difficult times. They expressed a sense of peace of mind in knowing that choristers would be there to help "bear one another's burdens" if they were personally confronted with an emotional or interpersonal challenge.

If an institution is truly concerned about student persistence, it cannot be concerned solely about academic matters. It must also be concerned about a student's social experiences (Astin, 1985). Students must feel a sense of belonging to the institution if persistence is to occur.

Referring back to the Wolcox et al., (2005) study that was mentioned in the literature review, this team of researchers highlighted the importance of social support during the first year of college. They found that difficulties with the social systems of the

university and an absence of compatible friends were common factors among the students who left the institution. They found that although family support from home could initially serve as an emotional buffer at college, students needed to transfer their support base to their collegiate peers and other institutionally based support networks if they were going to have a successful university experience.

Although the Wolcox et al., study accurately indentifies the need for students to transfer their support base from their previous home life to their new collegiate home, that study fails to adequately identify specific venues that could be instrumental in decreasing student marginalization. The college gospel choir is one of many attractive communities that could aid in African American student persistence at a PWI.

Clearly VOJ participants feel a sense of community in their interactions with other choristers. It was very common for them to gather at each other's homes, eat together in the dining hall, and visit each other during school vacations. This means that the VOJ was successful in establishing a campus based support network for the choristers, such that they could maintain less reliance on support networks that were external to the university.

Tinto postulates that student persistence is enhanced when social integration occurs among systems that are well indoctrinated into the fabric of the institution (Tinto, 1987). In addition, the research shows that involvement in peer-related activities has a positive effect on African American student persistence (Desousa & Kuh, 1996).

Significant in VOJ choristers' persistence at the university is the mentoring that they receive from the choir director, Pastor Johnson. Because of his role as a university faculty member in developmental studies, "PJ" is able to seamlessly utilize pastoral,

academic, and personal counseling skills to retain students. Considered by many to be a second "father" to the choristers, his role as a significant figure in the lives of the choristers cannot be refuted or challenged. Being accessible to students seven days a week, which includes having students live with him (and his wife), this college faculty member has dedicated his life to supporting students who are in pursuit of collegiate aspirations.

The students value his counsel and feel comfortable sharing both personal and academic concerns with him and the Elder. Pastor Johnson's role as a faculty member - an integral component of any university community - has assisted several students in remaining enrolled at the institution. In addition to counseling students through significant personal challenges, some of the students interviewed were either dismissed or in danger or being dismissed from the institution for academic reasons. However, Pastor Johnson's interventions assisted these students in remaining at the institution and in meeting the university's academic expectations.   Therefore, Pastor Johnson is a living example of Tinto's concept that persistence is enhanced when students are integrated with support systems that are well established at the university.

Alexander Astin (1993) postulated that the greater the investment of a student's time and energy in the collegiate experience, the greater the likelihood of persistence. In response to the Freudian concept of cathexis – "the investing of positive energy outside of one's self" - Astin theorized that students can enhance opportunities for personal growth through the extracurricular life of the university (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Students involved with the VOJ proudly emulated this concept.

In anticipation of a spiritual and emotional release, VOJ interview participants consistently reported being excited about singing opportunities. Attending choir rehearsals gave them the emotional and spiritual stamina to endure the challenges of being an African American student at a PWI.

VOJ choristers viewed themselves as part of a much larger campus ministry. As an example of the emotional energy invested in the VOJ, choristers consistently reported that they had to examine the role that alcohol, drugs, and other negative issues played in their life and, if necessary, modify their behavior accordingly. They were clear that they did not want anyone to be turned away from God or the VOJ because they were living a life that was inconsistent with their music ministry. This means that choristers had such an emotional investment in VOJ, that they were intrinsically willing to refraining from negative behaviors that could be perceived as socially acceptable on a college campus (i.e. high risk drinking).

A significant factor in the VOJ's contribution towards positive student persistence is the choir's connection to the "Black Church." When examining retention issues specific to African American students, Cuyjet (1997) states that universities must reckon with the historical influence of the African American student's religious experience. This position is theoretically consistent with Cross' Theory of Psychological Nigresence (1990), whereby African Americans students may *encounter* a predominately White campus environment, making life as a "minority" evident to them for the first time.

Having left the emotional safety of their homes and a more diverse high school study body, some African American students enter a state of *immersion-emersion,* thereby clinging to the social support systems that have historically provided comfort to

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them as they work towards a state of *internalization.* Historical sources of comfort include the Black Church and the music of the Black Church - gospel music.

In support of Nigresence Theory, the atmosphere at VOJ is enhanced by the fact that most of the activities occur in a Black Church, under the direction of an African American preacher. In the African American community, leadership, emotional support, and a family-like atmosphere are fairly consistent expectations of African American parishioners. This is consistent with the 2001 study by Thompson and McRae that was referenced earlier in the literature review.

Participants in the Thompson and McRae study felt a sense of integration with each other and described themselves as being part a "family" – a term that was repeatedly used by VOJ members to describe their relationship with their peers and the musical leadership. The Thompson and McRae study concludes by defining African American worship as the "tie that binds us" – a sentiment of integration that was repeatedly experienced by members of the VOJ. This means that choristers involved with the VOJ were able to capture many of the similar Black Church sentiments that have sustained the African American community for hundreds of years.

An additional advantage of the VOJ's connection with a Black Church is that students have an intrinsic desire to stay at the university on the weekends. In the previously referenced freshman climate study, researchers Furr and Elling (2002) desired to identify significant differences in African American students who were retained by the institution as compared to their non-persisting peers. One of several salient factors in their findings was that students who persisted at the university were more likely to remain at the institution on the weekends, thereby enhancing opportunities for social integration.

Because of the nature of the organization, VOJ members have consistent and stable weekend obligations to support Sunday morning worship and weekend traveling engagements. This means that the choristers fully understand that in joining this particular organization, their presence at the university is desired (and needed) on most weekends. Therefore, their emotional attachment to the choir must be strong enough to override any desires that they may have to leave campus every weekend.

The Furr and Elling study fails to identify what specific social integration activities occurred in the weekend lives of the persisting students. This is significant in that the types of activities (behaviors) that a student engages on the weekends can effect persistence. The study conducted by this researcher identifies one consistent weekend activity the benefits persistence by uniting the extracurricular life of the university, African American spirituality, and social integration into a significant and stable support network for the choristers.

Table 10

Summary of Studies and Similarly Identified Themes

GOAL OF THE STUDY /RESEARCHER(S)	COMMON FINDINGS	THEORETICAL PLATFORM
Highlight the importance of social networks for new students/Wolcox et al.,	The need for campus based support systems for new students	Retention Theory – The need for early social integration
An evaluation of first year programs to assist with Continuous Improvement/Woosley et al.,	Students need to develop friends early in the freshman year experience to enhance opportunities for persistence	Retention Theory – The need for early social integration among new students
To challenge the notion that students who leave an institution due so in	Student departure from an institution is often due to non-academic reasons	Retention Theory - the need to establish significant social

response to poor academic performance/Rummel et al,		connections at the institution; Nigresence Theory – assisting African American students in working towards internalization
To identify retention barriers for students of color through chief student affairs officers/Opp	Students of color must feel as though their needs are valued at the institution if they are to be retained; peers tutors/mentors can significantly aid student of color persistence	Retention Theory - students must feel part of a community as a condition of persistence; Nigresence Theory – assisting African American students in working towards internalization
To identify differentiating factors between persisting and non-persisting African American students/Furr and Elling	Students who remain on campus during weekends maintain stronger levels on campus integration	Retention Theory – establishing meaningful communities through social integration; Involvement Theory – investing emotional energy in to the campus experience
An examination of the significance of race in a mentoring relationship/Lee	Ethnicity is less of a factor in the presence of a mentor who genuinely cares about a student's well-being	Retention Theory – establishing a meaningful relationship with the central support systems of the university
Factors that influence the persistence of White students and students of color/Zea et al.,	Students who identified with the institution were more likely to be retained	Retention Theory – social integration into the support systems of the institution; having values that are congruent with the institution
An examination of the importance of religion to African Americans /Thompson and McRae	Those involved in African American worship experiences feel as though they are part of a larger "family"	Nigresence Theory – full acceptance of an African American cultural identity through internalization; Retention Theory – inclusion in a significant community through social integration

Implications of Findings

This study offers the academy several ideas to consider as higher education continues to grapple with the challenges of successfully retaining African American students at PWIs. This study magnifies the crucial role that social integration plays in the persistence of African American students.

If a PWI is truly committed to retaining African American students, their holistic social needs must be addressed. It is far too common for PWIs to recruit African American students to the campus then assume that their basic socialization needs will be absorbed by standard, homogenous student life programming and support services. African American students need venues that will allow them to "let their guard down" and enjoy informal interactions with their peers in an environment that fully embraces the diversity that they bring to the campus.

College gospel choirs are a shining example of an institutional resource that can assist with African American student retention. This particular organization provides students with a forum to interact with peers in a supportive environment. African American students are more likely to "slip through cracks" of institutional retention programs if social connections are not established with significant entities, including peer groups, within the institution.

Another key concept of this study is that institutions must acknowledge the significance of African American spirituality when attempting to establish a comfortable environment for students. The Black Church has been a historical and influential icon for many African Americans from slavery onward. If an African American student comes to campus and is forced to shed his or her expressed spiritual identity, it is unrealistic to

believe that he or she will be able to thrive after being stripped of a core component of his or her emotional well being. In response, the college gospel choir provides a support mechanism for students to indulge in higher education pursuits without sacrificing their spirituality.

Another key idea that this study presents is the significant role that African American student organizations play in the retention of African American students at PWIs. Organizations like college gospel choirs, humanize a potentially hostile and overwhelming campus social orientation process by breaking the institution down into more emotionally appealing fragments. Student members of these organizations interact both formally and informally to mentor each other, share survival strategies, provide emotional support, and engage each other socially. In the absence of these critical social integration activities, persistence becomes even more challenging.

A final idea that should emerge from this study is the significant role that African American faculty and staff play in the retention of African American students. When African Americans are employed at a PWI, they serve as visible role models for students to identify with. They are hired by the institution to perform a very specific function. However, they often make a stronger impact via the additional responsibilities that they assume external to their formally assigned roles. For example, Pastor Johnson's role as a university faculty member provides him with an opportunity to impact students in a very formal way. However, his role as a choir director and pastor have clearly impacted countless numbers of students in a more intimate, life-changing manner.

In response to the ideas presented in this study, this researcher makes several recommendations with hopes that the academy will gain a better understanding of the

challenges of African American student persistence and augment practices to aggressively respond to the needs of this marginalized population.

In support of Astin's Student Involvement Theory, this researcher recommends that universities make an intentional effort to provide institutional support to African American student organizations. These organizations play a critical role in African American student social integration. Therefore, they should not be subject to the ebbs and flows of changing student leadership, inconsistent club advisement, and competing interests for student government funding. This researcher recommends that institutional funding be earmarked for multicultural student organizations and that staff be assigned to proactively address social integration issues. Proactive measures include periodic campus climate assessments so that longitudinal data can be continuously reassessed.

In support of Cross' Theory of Psychological Nigresence, this researcher recommends that institutions attempt to cultivate venues for African American student spiritual expression. Whether it be hosting worship services on campus or ensuring transportation to area services, African American students who practice their faith need forums to maintain the spiritual components of their existence. In addition, if a college gospel choir does not exist on a campus, opportunities should be explored to create such an entity. A college gospel choir that is supported by the university will serve a valuable role in assisting the institution in addressing African American student spiritual needs.

In support of Tinto's concept of social integration with significant facets of the university, this researcher recommends that academic institutions seek to obtain a workforce that is (at a minimum) demographically representative of the student body. These individuals should be encouraged to interact informally with students and not be

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penalized for the additional responsibilities that are absorbed in response to the institutions lack of a more representative work force.

Again in support of Tinto's concept of social integration with significant facets of the university, this researcher recommends that the process of orienting African American students to the university be an intentional activity. In addition to the acclimation challenges that are common to most incoming students, African American students must simultaneously prepare for the struggles of being an ethnic minority at a PWI. Opportunities to interact with multicultural student organizations and significant campus employees (of all races) should be part of an ongoing orientation process. The student leadership of all African American student organizations should be present at such an activities so that new students personally receive an invitation from student leaders to socially integrate into the various clubs and organizations.

Suggestions and Recommendations

In concluding this study, it is recommended that future researchers compare the levels of social integration experienced by students in other African American student organizations with the level of socialization reported by students involved with a college gospel choir. In this study, gospel choir participants spoke very passionately about their involvement and commitment to this specific type of organization. If these passionate sentiments are not universal to all African American student organizations, future research efforts could extrapolate the factors necessary to enhance the social integration already found within these organizations so that opportunities for persistence are enhanced. Not all students will be intrinsically attracted to a college gospel choir.

Therefore, the academy must look to continuously enhance social integration opportunities within existing organizations.

If such a study were pursued, this researcher would again recommend qualitative inquiry using individual interviews and focus groups. However, it is also recommended that a standardized instrument relative to social integration be administered so that the qualitative responses can be compared between gospel choir participants and non-gospel choir participants. The findings from this current study should serve as the basis for a proposal for this future study.

Another consideration for future research would be the study of a college gospel choir with less immediate ties to a Black Church. Philosophically speaking, separating gospel music from the Black Church would seem absolutely impossible to do. However, the reality is that many PWIs are located in communities that do not host a stable Black Church. Therefore, qualitative data would be beneficial to bridge the gap between this study and a study involving a college gospel choir with less immediate geographical ties to a Black Church. This additional research will provide PWIs with the necessary data to address some of the shortfalls in African American student social integration. If such a study were conducted, this researcher recommends utilizing this current study's research questions and methodology so that the results can be easily compared.

Finally, this researcher suggests that a similar study be conducted with a gospel choir that is lead solely by students. In this study, the choir director and musician proved to be very influential to the student choristers. In addition, their roles as African American clergy even further elevated their status with the students. However, it would be interesting to find out in what ways, if any, the choir's dynamics would change if the

choir leadership were all students. Again, if such a study were conducted, this researcher recommends repeating the current study utilizing the same research questions and methodology so that the results can be easily compared.

Conclusion

This study examined the perceived effect of gospel participation on African American student persistence. To some members of the academy, the college gospel choir will always be just another student life offering. However, this study challenges institutions to recognize the college gospel choir's role in creating a more comfortable environment for African American students.

Of the African American focused student organizations on a college campus, the college gospel choir stands on a platform girded by a vast history of cultural, religious, and musical significance. Gospel music was birthed through the horrors of slavery, nursed by the resiliency of the Black Church, and reared through the oppression of the civil rights movement. And now, hundreds of years later, this researcher has concluded that college gospel choirs can play a significant role in assisting African American students with persistence through to degree completion at a predominately White university.

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(Individual Interview Invitation Letter – On Indiana University of PA Letterhead)

Dear Voices of Joy Member,

My name is Kahan Sablo. I am a doctoral candidate at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, pursuing a Doctor of Education degree in Administration and Leadership Studies. I am writing to thank you for initially agreeing to participate in an interview in support of my dissertation research entitled, *The Perceived Effects of Gospel Choir Participation on the Persistence of African American Students at a Predominately White Institution.* As one who has over two decades of experience working with college gospel choirs as a singer, choral director, and musician, I am very excited about the opportunity to talk with you about your experiences and perceptions as a member of the Voices of Joy.

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceived effects of gospel choir participation on the retention of African American students attending a Predominately White Institution (PWI). Utilizing the social integration component of Vincent Tinto's retention theory, this study will explore whether or not African American students who participate in a college gospel choir at a PWI perceive themselves as maintaining stronger ties to the campus community, thereby decreasing feelings of marginality and aiding in their retention.

This interview will take approximately a half hour of your time. I will also require a very brief follow up meeting with you to verify that I have accurately transcribed the content of our interview. Interviews will be conducted at a time and place that is most convenient for you. Per our previous conversation, we have confirmed our meeting time and location to be:

DATE	TIME	LOCATION
Insert date	Insert Time	Insert Location

The data collected will be maintained confidentially. Your name will never be divulged nor associated with findings in any way. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants who take part in this study. The information obtained in this study may be published in academic journals or presented at conferences, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

Your input is critical to the collection of data. However, your participation remains strictly voluntary. Indiana University of Pennsylvania supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (724-357-7730). There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. You are free to withdraw at any time and may do so by contacting me at the phone number, e-mail, or address below. Your decision will not result in loss of

benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Participation or non-participation in this study will not affect your academic standing or reputation at the University.

Please complete and return one copy of the attached voluntary consent form in the enclosed, stamped envelope, or bring it with you to the interview session. Keep the extra, unsigned copy for your own records.

A summary of the findings from this study will be made available to you upon request. If you have any questions or require any additional information, please feel free to contact me via cell phone at 814-449-1454 or via email at ksablo@edinboro.edu. If you choose not to participate, please return the uncompleted consent form in the enclosed envelope. Your time and cooperation are highly valued and deeply appreciated.

Sincerely,

Kahan Sablo   Dr. Wenfan Yan
Principal Investigator   Faculty Sponsor - Indiana University
414 Hillcrest Drive   Davis Hall
Edinboro, PA 16412   Indiana, PA 15705
(814) 449-1454   (724) 357-2400
ksablo@edinboro.edu   wyan@iup.edu

Dear Voices of Joy Member,

My name is Kahan Sablo. I am a doctoral candidate at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, pursuing a Doctor of Education degree in Administration and Leadership Studies. I am writing to thank you for initially agreeing to participate in a focus group in support of my dissertation research entitled, *The Perceived Effects of Gospel Choir Participation on the Persistence of African American Students at a Predominately White Institution.* As one who has over two decades of experience working with college gospel choirs as a singer, choral director, and musician, I am very excited about the opportunity to talk with you about your experiences and perceptions as a member of the Voices of Joy.

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This focus group will take approximately a half hour of your time. I will also require a very brief follow up meeting with you to verify that I have accurately transcribed the content of our focus group session. Per our previous conversation, we have confirmed our meeting time and location to be:

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Please complete and return one copy of the attached informed consent form in the enclosed, stamped envelope, or bring it with you to the interview session. Keep the extra, unsigned copy for your own records.

A summary of the findings from this study will be made available to you upon request. If you have any questions or require any additional information, please feel free to contact me via cell phone at 814-449-1454 or via email at ksablo@edinboro.edu. If you choose not to participate, please return the uncompleted consent form in the enclosed envelope. Your time and cooperation are highly valued and deeply appreciated.

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ksablo@edinboro.edu   wyan@iup.edu

APPENDIX C
Informed Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed in support of my dissertation research entitled, The Perceived Effects of Gospel Choir Participation on the Persistence of African American Students at a Predominately White Institution.

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceived effects of gospel choir participation on the retention of African American students attending a Predominately White Institution (PWI). Utilizing the social integration component of Vincent Tinto's retention theory, this study will explore whether or not African American students who participate in a college gospel choir at a PWI perceive themselves as maintaining stronger ties to the campus community, thereby decreasing feelings of marginality and aiding in their retention.

This interview will take approximately a half hour of your time. I will also require a very brief follow up meeting with you to verify that I have accurately transcribed the content of our interview.
The data collected will be maintained confidentially. Your name will never be divulged nor associated with findings in any way. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants who take part in this study. The information obtained in this study may be published in academic journals or presented at conferences, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

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Please complete and return this informed consent in the enclosed, stamped envelope, or bring it with you to the interview session. Keep the extra, unsigned copy for your own records. A summary of the findings from this study will be made available to you upon request. If you have any questions or require any additional information, please feel free to contact me via cell phone at 814-449-1454 or via email at ksablo@edinboro.edu. If you choose not to participate, please return the uncompleted consent form in the enclosed envelope. Your time and cooperation are highly valued and deeply appreciated.

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(814) 449-1454   (724) 357-2400
ksablo@edinboro.edu   wyan@iup.edu

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I have read and understand the information on the form and I consent to volunteer
to be a participant in this study. I understand that my responses are confidential
and that I have a right to withdraw at any time. I also understand that the
interview will be audio-taped. I have received an unsigned copy of this Informed
Consent Form to keep in my possession.

NAME_____SIGNATURE_____

PHONE_____   DATE_____

E-MAIL_____   ADDRESS_____

BEST DAY, TIME, METHOD TO REACH
YOU_____

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the
potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participation in this study,
have answered any questions raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

INVESTIGATOR'S
SIGNATURE/DATE_____

APPENDIX D
INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1.) What made you join the Voices of Joy (VOJ) and what does it mean for you to be a member of this organization?

2.) Please tell me about the room/setting of VOJ practices and engagements, and any meaning that this has for you.

3.) Please tell me about your experiences as a member of the VOJ.

4.) Please describe any feelings or emotions that you experience when you are with the VOJ, and what do these feelings mean to you?

5.) In your opinion, do African American students feel lonely and/or isolated on campus? If so, what are some of the reasons why they may feel this way? Does participation in the VOJ help combat these feelings of marginalization? Please explain.

6.) Has the VOJ served a role in helping you to become more socially integrated into campus life at IUP? Please explain.

7.) Tell me about your relationship with the other members of the VOJ.

8.) Do you see students and staff from the VOJ outside of rehearsals and events? If so, tell me more about those situations.

9.) Tell me about your relationship with the musical staff of the VOJ.

10.) What role, if any, has the VOJ had in helping you to remain in school? Please explain.

11.) Describe what it is that makes you come back to the VOJ each week?

12.) What would your college experience be like if you were not involved in the VOJ?

APPENDIX E
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS – STUDENTS

1.) What made you join the Voices of Joy (VOJ) and what does it mean for you to be a member of this organization?

2.) Please tell me about the room/setting of VOJ practices and engagements, and any meaning that this has for you.

3.) Please tell me about your experiences as a member of the VOJ.

4.) Please describe any feelings or emotions that you experience when you are with the VOJ, and what do these feelings mean to you?

5.) In your opinion, do African American students feel lonely and/or isolated on campus? If so, what are some of the reasons why they may feel this way? Does participation in the VOJ help combat these feelings of marginalization? Please explain.

6.) Has the VOJ served a role in helping you to become more socially integrated into campus life at IUP? Please explain.

7.) Tell me about your relationship with the other members of the VOJ.

8.) Do you see students and staff from the VOJ outside of rehearsals and events? If so, tell me more about those situations.

9.) Tell me about your relationship with the musical staff of the VOJ.

10.) What role, if any, has the VOJ had in helping you to remain in school? Please explain.

11.) Describe what it is that makes you come back to the VOJ each week?

12.) What would your college experience be like if you were not involved in the VOJ?

APPENDIX F
FOUCS GROUP QUESTIONS - CHOIR STAFF

1.) Please tell me what made you become involved with the VOJ, and what does working with this organization mean to you?

2.) Please tell me about the room/setting of VOJ practices and engagements, and any meaning that this has for you.

3.) Please tell me about your experiences as a musical staff member for the VOJ.

4.) Please describe any feelings or emotions that you experience when you are with the VOJ, and what do these feelings mean to you?

5.) In your opinion, do African American students feel lonely and/or isolated on campus? If so, what are some of the reasons why they may feel this way? Does participation in the VOJ help combat these feelings of marginalization? Please explain.

6.) Has the VOJ served a role in helping students become more socially integrated into campus life at IUP? Please explain.

7.) Tell me about your relationship with the students in the VOJ.

8.) Do you see students from the VOJ outside of rehearsals and events? If so, tell me more about those situations.

9.) Tell me about the relationship among the musical staff members in the VOJ.

10.) What role, if any, do you think the VOJ has had in helping students remain in school? Please explain.

11.) Describe what it is that makes you continue to work with the VOJ each week?

12.) What would the college experience for these students be like if they were not involved in the VOJ?