Still I Rise

You may write me down in history
   With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
   But still, like dust, I'll rise.

   Does my sassiness upset you?
   Why are you beset with gloom?
   'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
       Pumping in my living room.

   Just like moons and like suns,
       With the certainty of tides,
   Just like hopes springing high,
       Still I'll rise.

   Did you want to see me broken?
   Bowed head and lowered eyes?
   Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
       Weakened by my soulful cries.

   Does my haughtiness offend you?
   Don't you take it awful hard
   'Cause I laugh like I got gold mines
       Diggin' in my own back yard.

   You may shoot me with your words,
   You may cut me with your eyes,
   You may kill me with your hatefulness,
       But still, like air, I'll rise.

   Does my sexiness upset you?
   Does it come as a surprise
   That I dance like I've got diamonds
       At the meeting of my thighs?

   Out of the huts of history's shame
       I rise
   Up from a past that's rooted in pain
       I rise
   I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
       Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

   Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
       I rise
   Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
       I rise
   Bringing the gifts my ancestors gave,
       I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
       I rise
       I rise
       I rise.

STILL...THEY RISE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF RESILIENCE IN FIRST GENERATION AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

D’Andra Mull, M.A.

*****

The Ohio State University
2007

Dissertation Committee: Dr. Tatiana Suspitsyna, Advisor
Dr. Leonard Baird
Dr. Antoinette Miranda

Approved by

Advisor
Graduate Program in Education
ABSTRACT

The issue of the disproportionate number of African American students in the k-12 arena who fall short in their educational pursuits has been heavily discussed by educators who desire to uncover the reason for the disparity. Yet, most research on African American students merely provides a quantitative description of their shortcomings, and fails to provide comprehensive information that addresses causes for attrition and academic deficiency. Moreover, there is minimal literature and research that focuses on resiliency in African American undergraduate college students, and particularly first generation individuals, which is a great cause for concern as retention rates for the group fall far below those of the majority cohort. This notion is what fueled my desire to contribute to the landscape of literature that speaks to the impact of resilience on both personal sustainability and academic achievement, particularly among students who have persisted through a number of different situations, settings, and experiences.

The purpose of this study was to explore and familiarize researchers and educators with the life experiences of selected first generation African American college students who have successfully completed three or more years of undergraduate studies, in spite of negative and detrimental factors and situations that appeared throughout their lifetime journeys. The study also shines
light on how some students make meaning of their life’s experiences and recognizes how different events have been of influence on their voyage to and now in, higher education. It is important to note that this study is phenomenological in nature, and thus, posed no theory at its inception, but sought to reveal the lived experiences of the participants, due to the reality that few studies have centered on African American college students and their stories of survival and success, particularly in their higher education endeavors. Therefore, the study was approached through a phenomenological analysis of the data gathered through lengthy interviews with the participants. This study highlights how these students have utilized the protective factors of spirituality, educational institutions, the view of success as obligatory to the family and community, and self-regulation in their onward journey to educational attainment, each of which have enabled them to remain strong and focused even as a number of obstacles became apparent. Lastly, I compose strategies that serve to provide colleges and universities, and other vested parties with valuable information that serve to aid in the development of strategies, programs and initiatives that can be of impact on the retention rates for African American students.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Jeremiah 29:11

To God. I have truly learned that with Him, all things are possible. I am grateful for Him always carrying me.

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VITA

November 3, 1978..............................................Born - Cleveland, Ohio

2002.................................................................B.A Political Science
& Criminal Justice,
Kent State University

2004.................................................................M.A. Higher, Adult, &
Lifelong Education,
Michigan State
University

2004-2005.........................................................Graduate Research
Associate, Student
Affairs Assessment,
The Ohio State
University

2005 - Present....................................................Graduate Administrative
Associate, Office of the
Vice President for Student
Affairs, The Ohio State
University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Education

Minor Field: African American Studies
Minor Field: Women’s Studies
Dedicated to my family and friends who have always believed in my ability to rise.

“The love of a family is life’s greatest blessing”
-Anonymous

“A friend hears the song in my heart and sings it to me when my memory fails” –Anonymous

“...But still like dust, I’ll rise...
I rise
I rise
I rise
I rise”
-Maya Angelou
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of the Problem</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations and Assumptions</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Chapters</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Context</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Resiliency</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Models of Resilience</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Protective Factors</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective Factors for African Americans</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Characteristics</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Characteristics</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Characteristics</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who Are First Generation College Students?</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Preparation</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Support Systems</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# 3. METHODOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodological Overview</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Qualitative Research?</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenology</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why A Phenomenological Approach?</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Method: Interviewing</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admission of Personal Interest</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewing</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of Data Collection Sites</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Sampling</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection of Subjects</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot Study</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Size</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Interviews</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recording and Transcription of Interviews</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods to Enhance the Quality of Data Collection</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Notes</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Debriefing</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member Checking</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transferability</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# 4. FINDINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction of Participants</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Profile of Participants</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shon: The Incandescent</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amaya: The Chameleon</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tre: The Trailblazer</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramone: The Architect</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor: The Matriarch</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie: The Phoenix</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle: The Visionary</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 183

5. COLLECTIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL THEMES EMERGING ANALYSES OF
THE PARTICIPANTS

Fueled Through Faith ................................................................. 186
Education as a Safe Haven ....................................................... 192
Obligation of Success ............................................................... 196
Self-Regulation ........................................................................... 200
Conclusion: Fight or Flight? ....................................................... 203

6. SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, &
RECOMMENDATIONS .............................................................................. 206
Implications ....................................................................................... 208
Recommendations ............................................................................ 209
  Creation of a Supportive Environment ........................................ 209
  Listening to the Voices of African American Students ............. 214
  Climate ............................................................................................... 215
  Culturally Relevant Programs, Courses, and Initiatives .......... 217
  Mentoring Programs ....................................................................... 218
  Faculty, Staff, & Student Development Programs .................. 219

Conclusion ......................................................................................... 221

REFERENCES ............................................................................................... 223

APPENDIXES
A. Sample Interview Guide ............................................................. 241
B. Informed Consent for Participation ........................................... 243
C. Recruitment Letter to Faculty and Staff .................................. 244
D. Demographic Survey for Selection of Respondents ................. 245
E. Glossary of Terms ....................................................................... 247
F. Recruitment Letter to Students ............................................... 253
G. Risk Factors Depicted in the Data .......................................... 251
H. Protective Factors Depicted in the Data ................................. 254
I. Continual Themes Expressed by Participants ......................... 257
CHAPTER 1:  
The Problem 

INTRODUCTION  

The State of First Generation African American College Students: To Be Or Not To Be A Graduate? 

RESILIENCY  

Throughout the past fifty years, the increase in resilience research has generated information about the traits, characteristics, and behaviors a person may own or exercise that play a role in his or her ability to rebound or persist through difficult conditions. Moreover, defining resilience has been at the crux of the expansion as many researchers and theorists have added their own definitions to the consortium. Thus, the first question that one must ask is: what exactly is resilience? Further, what does resilience imply? And how does one accomplish the task of becoming resilient? In the beginning stages, classifying resilience focused on the deficit model (Gee, 1996) and at-risk persons (Riehl, 1994). Yet over the past two decades, resilience research and definitions have shifted to a strength-based model, particularly in the fields of education and psychology (Maluccio, 2002). In 1994, Masten declared, "resilience refers to a pattern over time,
characterized by good eventual adaptation despite developmental risk, acute stressors, or chronic adversities." Subsequently, Gordon (1995, p. 14) defined resilience in this manner: "Resilience is the ability to thrive, mature, and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances. These circumstances may include biological abnormalities or environmental obstacles.” Further, the adverse circumstances may be chronic and consistent or severe and infrequent. In addition, resilience refers to avoiding the problems associated with being vulnerable, therefore, increasing the likelihood of success in spite of risk and circumstance. Ultimately, resilience is noted as a comprehensive event that includes personal and environmental factors that are merged to create competency despite adversity (Masten, 1994) which is typical in the lives of a number of African American students.

It is important to note that each of the aforementioned definitions can be used to describe and provide a framework through which one can better understand the term “resilience” as it is applied to the African American youth population being discussed. The term “resilience,” although fairly understudied in the realm of African American youth, has long sustained itself in fields
such as health and psychiatry (Fuller, McGraw & Goodyear, 2002), and thus, has resulted in a plethora of research and studies devoted to it exploration. The term and concept has emerged as a key term in educational realms, particularly when researchers aim to provide a rationale for why many students succeed despite the odds levied against them. Moreover, resilience refers to the practice of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic incidents, and avoiding the negative pathway linked to risks (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). A key element of resilience is the presence of both risks and protective factors that help bring about a positive outcome or lessen or elude a negative outcome (Khalil, 2003), dependent upon how the student chooses to react to a situation or dilemma, which is notably a monumental decision to be made in the lives of many African American youth.

There are a number of children who have proven to be resilient in the face of crisis, and African American children comprise a large part of this group, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Yet, in spite of the fact that resiliency research has increased dramatically, thus far, minimal studies have centered on how African American college students and their needs, as
they have been capable of survival in the midst of harsh conditions, and subsequently become thriving adults, particularly as the group encounters both individual and institutional racism on many levels while in pursuit of higher learning. Nettles et al (2000) examined resilience through the framework of at-risk adolescents and defined resilience as demonstrating academic, emotional, and social aptitude in spite of adversity and stress factors. Miller (1999) who focuses on resiliency through the distinct lens of African American youth whose “distinguishing racial and environmental conditions” habitually go unnoted in research, views resiliency as the “positive pole,” despite destructive environmental situations. Most importantly, as suggested by Zunz, Turner, & Norman (1993), resiliency is the “ability to bounce back, recover or form a successful adaptation in the face of obstacles and adversity” while utilizing “protective factors,” which are the positive balance to risk factors, and thus, is the notion of resiliency employed to guide this current study.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As much literature and research notes, African American youth have been and remain at a larger risk for a plethora of personal, social and environmental tribulation, including single parenting, academic issues, poverty, and
negative environmental influences (Winfield, 1994; Floyd, 1996; Miller, 1999; Broh, 2002). Albeit African American are advancing both educationally and economically when compared to all other periods in the history of the United States, the troubles that persist within the Black community can not and should not be ignored, particularly, as is the designation of this study, for African American in pursuit of higher education. For many, the pursuit of an undergraduate education never even begins; for others, they fall short of victory as trials and tribulations arise. However, many remain resilient in their pursuit, and ultimately, the experiences of those who toil on will be discussed here.

Resiliency possesses an association with success (Miller, 1999). Nevertheless, by society’s standards, many African Americans who toil to be resilient are viewed as at-risk, as they are constantly being judged by the environment from which they hail, rather than by the success they have achieved in spite of their surroundings. Ultimately, the fact that the group emanates from such environments results in their appearing as susceptible to failure in higher learning settings, as pressures from social inequality and racial discrimination also come into play (Floyd, 1996). As Linda Winfield (1994) maintains,
resilience suggests an individual’s response to risk factors; this is clearly the case with disadvantaged African American youth. Where many students fall short in higher education pursuits, particularly those who are both first generation students and of African American descent, there also exists a diverse population of students who succeed when faced with the same obstacles as their peers, thus leading to their labeling as successful, and moreover, resilient. Notably, while a significant quantity of literature on African American college students focuses on risks factors (Ogbu, 1974; Werner & Smith, 1982; Safyer, 1994), far fewer studies have addressed dynamics that facilitate resilience, both of a personal and academic nature, among those students who do manage to succeed academically (Winfield, 1994; Floyd, 1996; Miller, 1999). Thus, this study aims to provide insight into the lives of successful African American students who have beaten the odds and therefore, can see the light at the end of the tunnel as graduation is present just around the corner. It is important to note that there are some studies that focus on resilience among the group, but very few have indicated how to eliminate the dilemma of attrition, particularly in the academic realm. Even fewer studies have been conducted in the mode of qualitative research which indicates that
few voices of African American students have truly been heard (Beardslee, 1989; Bowman & Howard, 1985; Floyd, 1996). Thus, as this study is conducted through a phenomenological lens, it seeks to investigate how these thriving African American students perceive academic and personal resilience as connected to their own achievement as I venture to draw out the voices of the students who have maintained excellence and persisted in their personal and educational endeavors. Secondly, the study explains how these students persist in spite of disparaging circumstances, and most importantly, make meaning of their life’s experiences. Additionally, this study seeks to increase the body of resilience literature, particularly relative to the study of African American students by drawing attention to the positive portrait of the group through an examination of factors that have been noted as being significant in their journeys toward success, because as Miller (1999) notes, the manner is which African American youth are able to continue on and flourish into adulthood “requires more attention.” Lastly I, together with the participants, compose strategies that serve to provide colleges and universities, and other vested parties with valuable information that will enable them to develop
programs and initiatives that will impact retention rates for African American students.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

As research and educators illustrate, the disconcerting state of African American youth remains a focal point for educators and communities across the nation, particularly as long overdue attention is given to the apparent achievement gap present when compared to other youth populations (Ogbu, 2003). This phenomenon is not only noticeable in the k-12 arena, but is also present as researchers bring to light issues of attrition for the minority group within the collegiate setting. Notably, it is important to recognize the disparaging social and economic conditions that impinge on the group. Taxing life experiences as well as distracting environmental pressures, which are frequently referred to as risk factors, appear to be present in the lives of a number of youth. In many cases, these individuals are likely to encounter violence, hunger, abuse, and numerous other adversities (Safyer, 1994). Further, many members of the group hail from backgrounds of systemic oppression (Ogbu, 1974), unequal educational opportunities (Jordan and Nettles, 2000), and lower socioeconomic positions (Broh, 2002). However, it is equally important to study and recognize how a number of
youth succeed in spite of the tremendous odds levied against them, chiefly as a result of protective factors, thus resulting in their being deemed resilient. Yet, the latter is often not explored in research, as many studies focus on the attrition of African Americans in higher education, and very few concentrate on the those who persist, despite pressing circumstances. Further, the majority of current research on African American students is limited in discussions of how the impact of students’ life encounters, from the students’ perception, influence their capacity to realize victory in higher education.

Statistics from The Condition of Education 2005, assembled by the U.S. Department of Education, substantiate the discrepancies that exist in the educational attainment of African American students when compared to White students. The divide between African American and White students in pursuit of higher education continues to exist in the United States. Sadly, the percentage of African American students who go on to educational pursuits beyond secondary school falls far behind that of their White peers (http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2005094); in 1994, the numbers were evident of the gap between Black and White students in college aims: 49.6% of African American students versus 69.2% of White students finished
one or more years of college, during the same duration of time. In that same year, 16.2% of Black students versus 29.7% of White students completed four or more years of colleges, although neither group is necessarily indicative of the total percentage earning an undergraduate degree (http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/nativetrends/index.asp)

However, the statistics shown only two years later, and up to 2005 serve to illuminate the great divide in degrees completed between the groups: in 1996, African American represented a mere 7.9%, while White students comprised 77.8% of bachelor’s degree recipients. In 2002, African American students comprised 9% compared to 74.2% of White students completing similar academic programs (http://nces.ed.gov/das/epubs/2003165/path.asp). In 2005, the number of African American students completing bachelor’s degrees when compared to White students contribute to illustrate a great disparity, as African Americans comprised only 10.6%, while and Whites made up 75.1% of all baccalaureate degree recipients, (http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=72). Notably, the problem between academic degree attainment between African American and White students lends grounds for the researcher’s notion that the current trend of educational achievement of Black students is a cause for concern, and
moreover, an issue that educators must address if they truly seek to educate all students, and help reverse the trend of high attrition in higher education pursuits.  

PURPOSE FOR THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore and familiarize researchers and educators with the life experiences of selected first generation African American college students who have successfully completed three or more years of undergraduate studies, in spite of impeding factors and situations that appeared throughout their lifetime journeys. Foremost, increasing the knowledge resources about factors that impact resilience among Black students is crucial to the academy for a number of reasons. First, strengthening the knowledge resources may well aid in the advancement of intervention stratagems that could play a part in the number of students retained by the university. Secondly, an increase in research could also lead to the ability of the institution to better understand the often-invisible population, as voices, rather than statistics.

It is important to note that this study is phenomenological in nature, and thus, poses no theory at its inception, but rather seeks to reveal the lived experiences of the participants. As phenomenological principles function as general guidelines or outlines, as a
researcher, I developed a plan of thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying and reporting the findings of the data (Kvale, 1996), which allowed me to accurately and adequately bring forth the voices of the students in the research, which was especially suited to the understanding the phenomenon of resilience (Polkinghorne, 1989). A further intent is to engage these students in the expansion literature and research that seeks to explain resilience as educators aim to learn from African American students about their assessment of their life’s experiences related to their success in higher education; this is especially important for those institutions who experience high levels of attrition among its African American student population. Furthermore, it seems imperative for me to provide current voices on behalf of the African American student constituency as I attempt to unveil their experiences in a manner that can impact the educational arena’s ability to be more accountable, receptive, and proactive in meeting the needs of all its students.

SIGNIFICANCE

A considerable facet of this study lies in the researcher’s premise that by utilizing African American students as subjects, educational institutions can gain
valuable insight on how colleges and universities, families, and communities alike can address the needs of this, as well as other, marginalized groups. It is important to note and recognize that a number of institutions may not be aware of the needs of their students simply because they fail to recognize the correlation between a student’s life events and academic functioning and its ultimate impact on college success. A number of marginalized students enter the academy with sub-par academic preparation and great worries of failure, while others give the impression of being prepared, however, the prospect of failure weighs heavy in their hearts. Notably, a number of buoyant African American students may possess strong states of mind that have served them well in their primary and secondary academic pursuits. Yet, when these same students are transported into the college environment, even the most stalwart of them are tested by the individual and institutional racisms, as well as prejudices and stereotypes that saturate many colleges and universities within the United States of America. Often, these students feel unsupported and dismissed by the members of the university community in which they are seeking to be educated (Broh, 2002), which results in their
greater danger of failure as they are challenged further to effectively adjust to their surroundings.

Undoubtedly, institutions seeking to truly integrate and educate African American students must first discover ways by which the group feels treasured and supported in the community (Jordan & Nettles, 2000). The students must recognize the environment as one that fosters development and a community of allies, and as one vested in their breaking free from the chains of oppression. Further, in order for many students to thrive, they must first see the task of education as being shared by themselves and the university community. Thus, as Freire (1970) maintains, “in problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (p. 64).

In this approach to teaching and learning, education begins with the notion that everyone is expected to succeed, as all are vested and stand to gain from the success of the students. Hence, students and teachers not only learn from each other, they also begin to understand each other (p. 54). Moreover, in this environment, students possess the occasion to reveal their life’s
journey in a manner that can benefit their own learning, as well as the learning and teaching of those seeking to educate the individual.

If educators and institutions can comprehend the connection between African American students’ life events and academic success, they can begin to expand opportunities for the students to prosper in the college realm, as well as improve the overall quality of life for the student cohort. This comprehension of such a connection is important as research has made apparent the impact of academic success on a student’s overall quality of life (Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999). As the African American community is one in which successes and failures are seen as belonging to the community (Jordan and Nettles, 2000), when one student reports success and happiness with his environment, particularly in regard to his being truly welcomed and accepted into the population, this message is often communicated to others in the community. However, the same is true when a student is discontented with the environment, which may be of detriment to the institution’s ability to both retain and attract other African Americans. Thus, it is through this framework that one can visualize the impact of a student’s success on the larger community, as it is important that the environment function in a
manner that supports students, regardless of the background from which they hail.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In conducting an investigation of the experiences of first generation African American college students, I attempt to answer the following research questions. Each question asked is each reflective of my desire to discover mechanisms by which to increase African American student success and retention. Further, the questions were designed to delve into how students perceive their own sense of resiliency and how this self-consciousness contributes to their achievements in higher education. They also functioned to aid in the use of a phenomenological study as employed through the use of interviews for a data collection method. These questions guided my inquiries, and the development of my interview guides:

1.) How do highly resilient first generation African American college students make meaning of their life’s experience and to what, or who do they credit their persistence?

2.) What can educators and institutions of higher education learn from these students that may enable
us to create an educational environment where more marginalized students can also succeed?

DEFINITION OF THE TERMS

For the purpose of this study significant terms that illuminate the research questions, are as follows:

- **Academic success** - The completion of high school and continued postsecondary education for the duration of greater than 3 years, with no periods of absence from the university during the regular academic year (Masten et al, 1999).

- **African American** - Utilized interchangeably with Black, it references those persons who are born in the United States and who are classified by self identification or the identification of the government as being such, and may also believe their ancestors to be of African descent.

- **Protective factors** - Defined as influences that modify, reorganize or rework a person's response to an environmental hazard that predisposes an individual to a harmful outcome (Rutter, 1990).

- **Resiliency** - The ability to rebound from or recover from obstacles, setbacks, and potentially detrimental events, particularly under demanding situations, in both
academic and personal endeavors (Zunz, Turner, & Norman, 1993).

- Risk factors – Conditions or elements that are associated with a higher probability of negative outcomes, such as poor relationships with parents and members of the community, limited access to financial resources, sub-par educational environments, engaging in risky behaviors, and negative peer influences. (Masten, Best and Garmezy, 1990).

- Successful – The notion of prevailing over adversity and living a productive life and gaining employment that is both economically sustaining and personally gratifying. (Wang and Gordon, 1994).

DELIMITATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

This study is limited to the experiences of seven African American students selected exclusively for this research. Thus, it does not assume that all first generation African American students’ perspectives are comparable to those of the students who participated in this study, but rather seeks to provide the experiences of these participants in an attempt to provide institutions of higher education with a greater understanding of the experiences faced by some students. However, as there exists very little resiliency research that concentrates specifically on African American
college students, it is expected that this study can serve as a site for higher education officials to truly note the issues faced by first generation African American college students as they attempt to combat attrition rates, and improve campus climate for all who inhabit their campuses.

The intention of the investigation was not to supply a basis for theory advancement, nor to offer statistical information to infer to a larger populace. Simply put, the aim of this study is to examine how students view their life experiences, both good and bad, as relative to their decision to plow ahead toward degree completion, rather than abandon their pursuits when obstacles arose. Further, as the study is conducted through a phenomenological lens, the small number of participants, which normally range from five to ten individuals in such an investigation (Tesch, 1990), was ideal for the experience under observation; this is a common trait of qualitative research (Workman, 1995). Therefore, instead of attempting to generalize findings to a more general populace, this study focuses its attention and efforts on the profundity of information obtained from a small group of contributors not necessarily conventional or illustrative of a larger populace (Workman, 1995). Through the employment of interview questions that sought to discover, phenomenologically, how each student makes meaning of their
life encounters, I acknowledge the manifold jeopardies of race and class experienced by these African American students, pay great attention to the viewpoint of the participants, and provide the chance for each student to elucidate his or her own reality.

Additionally, inherent limitations exist when conversing about vulnerable subjects in settings where there is a perception of a power imbalance. Being a first generation African American college student myself, I am not unaware that the participant’s knowledge of my possessing an advanced degree, and nearing completion of a doctoral degree could potentially lead them to not fully disclose information for fear of judgment and being pitied, and ultimately, tone down their responses in order to avoid being stigmatized as being one who is seeking sympathy. Thus, the honesty and genuineness of the participants was an assumption. Because I am an African American female who has faced a number of challenges addressed within inside the study, there is a potential for prejudiced findings and outcomes, as is possible in most qualitative research (Merriam, 1998).

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

The study of the lived experiences of resilient first generation African American college students is composed of the following chapters:
Chapter 1 consists of an introduction of the major interests of the investigation, background data, the theoretical framework, statement of the problem being studied, purpose and importance of the investigation, chief research queries, assumptions, limitations and delimitations, and explanation of terms.

Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the research and literature related to resilience, and more specifically, the resilience of African Americans. A discussion of the bodies of knowledge on resilient, protective factors, characteristics, and self-regulation of African American youth is included in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 presents a detailed overview of the qualitative methodological lens through which the study was conducted. I also outline the procedures utilized in my pilot study and individual interviews, and give detailed attention to the selection of participants, methods of data collection and data analysis, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking and transferability, and I also review the ethical procedures employed throughout the process.

Chapter 4 draws attention to the results of the data collection, as I employ narratives made available through the individual interview sessions to communicate the accounts of the participants. The chapter also illuminates the themes
that emerged from the lived experiences of the individuals, as found throughout the evolution of the study.

Chapter 5 includes the conclusions and implications of the investigation. Here, I encapsulate and confer the findings of the study, implications for institutions of higher education, and suggestions for subsequent research.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I present a review of the literature that is associated with the chief research questions of this study. I begin with an examination of the phenomenon of resiliency as it is utilized by researchers to describe youth who have succeeded despite the negativity that manifests within their lives particularly in African American students, and assess the merits of the research. Next, I examine literature that focuses on first generation college students. Then, I look at the protective factors that have been noted as being of importance in an African American student’s life, despite the risk factors that exist for the group. Next, I turn my focus to the concept of self-regulation, as there is a strong relationship between self-regulation and resilience, particularly as it correlates with to the participants within this study. Finally, I identify the gaps in the resiliency literature base, particularly as it relates to African American students.
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From slavery to segregation to the current oppressions that many African Americans face, the group can be noted as having survived and remained resilient throughout each of these conditions. Life in the current century does not include the traditional image of slavery; however, institutional and systemic barriers have replaced the physical chains that were previously utilized as a structure by which to separate the races (Ogbu, 1974). As Hall and Allen (1989) contend:

The history of Black people in this country reveals contradictions regarding the ideals that form the society’s core...From the beginning, Blacks were defined as non persons without constitutional rights. As a result, African Americans have been forced to continuously struggle to not only obtain basic constitutional rights but to regain and define their personhood as well. (p. 172)

Due to this legacy of repression of African Americans, history exposes that marginalized peopled, and in this case Blacks, even after they were freed from slavery received sub-par educations, were discriminated against in employment venues, and lacked economic power; undoubtedly, the effects of such conditions still rears an ugly head as we now convene in the 21st century. Thus, as the environment mandated, the population had to create mechanisms by which to survive and thrive in the world. Notably, the concept of resilience in
African American people can be traced back as far as the days of slavery, when despite being forced to labor for sixteen hours a day, the group still survived as they utilized protective factors as a means by which to do so. And even though the education of Blacks was not a formal process, it is important to note that African Americans viewed the education of its young as a primary focus, despite being slaves (Dubois, 1961). Thus, as time progressed, the theme of resilience did not disappear, as more African Americans became educated, even while fearing that their lives would be taken for doing so. Albeit many classes were conducted during the few hours when Blacks were allowed to rest, the group remained focused in its approach to teaching students to be more than laborers, and take them beyond the mentality of serving as free labor.

Today, as many in the community still carry forth this way of thinking, it is crucial that institutions of higher learning join in this task; being responsive to the sagas and needs of Black students is of the utmost importance if there is a desire to more accurately reveal and authenticate the experiences of oppressed populations. As higher education institutions carry a substantial portion of the duty for finding successful methods of educating all of its students, educators must start to truly comprehend the experiences and
the backgrounds of the student population it has allowed entry into its educational setting (Ladson-Billings, 1994). To be effective in its approaches, the institution must not simply seek to discover what causes the attrition of its students, but it must also look to find the reasons for students remaining resilient in their journeys, because such a discovery could provide critical information that universities can use to strengthen the Black student experience (Ogbu, 1974), and provide a greater understanding of how many students remain resilient.

UNDERSTANDING RESILIENCY

The notion of resilience has surfaced and developed into a popular research matter as a direct product of initial research examining at-risk populations (Garmezy, 1986). Overall, resilience has been characterized as the facility to overcome stress, disturbances, and impediments while effectively adapting and surviving. In spite of this all-purpose definition, operationalizing the notion of resilience has been challenging as the term itself has been afforded varied meanings in different investigations. For instance, in 1984, Garmezy, Masten, and Tellegen outfitted resilience as "manifestations of competence in children despite exposure to stressful events." In 1985, Rutter defined resilience as facing "... stress at a time and in a way that allows self-
confidence and social competence to increase through mastery and appropriate responsibility." In 1994, Masten declared, "resilience refers to a pattern over time, characterized by good eventual adaptation despite developmental risk, acute stressors, or chronic adversities." Subsequently, Gordon (1995) defined resilience in this manner: "Resilience is the ability to thrive, mature, and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances...these circumstances may include biological abnormalities or environmental obstacles" (p. 14). Resilience has also been defined as a cause, personality characteristic, a process and a result (Glantz & Johnson, 1999). Further, the adverse circumstances may be chronic and consistent or severe and infrequent. In addition, resilience refers to avoiding the problems associated with being vulnerable, therefore, increasing the likelihood of success in spite of risk and circumstance.

It is important to note that each of the aforementioned definitions can truly be used to describe and provide a framework through which one can better understand the term “resilience” as it is applied to the African American youth population being discussed. The term “resilience," although fairly understudied in the realm of African American youth, has long sustained itself in fields such as health and psychiatry (Fuller, McGraw & Goodyear, 2002), and thus, has
resulted in a plethora of research and studies devoted to it exploration. The term and concept also has emerged as a key term in educational realms, particularly when researchers aim to provide a rationale for why many students succeed despite the odds levied against them, even dating back as far as slavery and the Civil Rights Movement (Dubois, 1961).

Researchers have long asserted that resilience is the ability to recover from the most unsettling of circumstances, and is not limited to one singular event, but a multiple occurrence of tumultuous circumstances. Moreover, resilience refers to the practice of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic incidents, and avoiding the negative pathway linked to risks (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). A key element of resilience is the presence of both risks and supportive factors that either help bring about a positive outcome or lessen or elude a negative outcome (Khalil, 2003), which is notably present in the lives of many African American youth. Further, resiliency presents a connotation of success, in that it describes one’s arrival at success, rather than failure when faced with negativity.

As a psychological concept, resilience offers an integrative notion for analyzing personal and institutional assets that can be refined and assembled to decrease the
outcome of personal susceptibilities, danger, and environmental hardships. Resilience is not the result of a solitary occurrence, but rather of constant interfacing between an individual and the facets of his or her environment (Garmezy 1991). Thus, a number of African American youth, particularly those from lower socioeconomic roots, experience a sub-par quality of life, poverty and poor health care, as well as reside in districts with elevated crime rates; they also come from families where a number of members are either underemployed or unemployed (Ogbu, 1974). However, in spite of these adversities, many youth exhibit resilience as they beat the odds and surmount the adversities they encounter.

By definition, resilient children are those who develop into proficient, knowledgeable adults, and soar above their dilemmas to shatter the succession of disadvantage (Wang and Gordon, 1994). Resilience is a concept developed through studies of progressive paths that mitigate adversities and systems that support recovery from severe life distress (Garmezy, 1991). As Masten and Coatsworth (1995) note, resilience can be viewed as competence despite substantial opposition to achievement and growth; such is truly the case for a number of African American youth and adolescents of lower socioeconomic status.
It is important to understand that resilience is not the outcome of a solitary event, but of constant dealings between a person and the varied attributes of his/her surroundings. The heart of resilience theory is that instead of focusing on deficits within the target population, it instead converges on its strengths. Moreover, resiliency theory lends validity to the notion that, while environmental difficulties and strain can lead to behavioral and psychological problems among children (Luthar & Zigler, 1991), there are indeed, those who overcome adversity to become stable adults (Safyer, 1994). Children who thrive in the midst of these risks are deemed resilient when they are able to achieve success in three marked realms: self-esteem, pro-social behavior and/or academic achievement (Masten et al., 1995, 1999).

Resiliency may encompass a variety of aptitudes or attributes. Often noted as the “positive pole” (Rutter, 1987, p 316), the ability to "thrive, mature, and increase competence" (Gordon, 1995, p. 239), "unusually good adaptation" (Beardslee, 1989, p. 267), and the ability to positively adapt despite destructive environmental conditions (Garmezy, 1991), resiliency is clearly a broadly defined concept. However, the definition set forth by Zunz, Turner, & Norman (1993), seem to best capture the essence of the varied definitions: “resilience is the ability to bounce
back, recover, or form a successful adaptation in the face of obstacles and adversity” (p. (170). A number of African Americans clearly demonstrate resilience in that they, in the midst of risk and difficulty, work hard to disprove much of the literature and stereotypes that depict the negativity that ultimately could result due to the risk factors present in their lives. Instead, they rise above expectations and emerge victorious, personally, socially and academically.

It is with that notion in mind that I now aim to provide an overview of a number of characteristics noted in African American youth who are striving to break the cycle that threatens to define them for the duration of their lives, and thus, truly be deemed resilient. The phenomenon is initially illustrated through an outline of various models of resilience as encountered by many youth, as well as the protective factors and characteristics that research have unearthed as being prevalent in the lives of the population.

**MODELS OF RESILIENCE**

A number of models have been constructed and aimed at conceptualizing resilience. Flach (1988) regarded resilience as a progression and cultivated the “life-cycle” model through which, he notes, a person progresses through eight stages, known as bifurcation (key points) throughout their life. Each of these points Flach deduces, reflect moments of
tremendous change in the life cycle. These include: birth, childhood, adolescence, young singular adulthood, young marriage, parenthood, middle age, and aging. In his model, Flach surmises that each stage has an explicit set of tests, responsibilities, characteristics, and circumstances that oblige a person to adjust in order to cope successfully with environmental stressors. He concludes that development and maturity allow the person to progress from one stage and on to the next, which in turn, causes stress with the individual. He does note, however, that the stress produced, readies the person for the subsequent level of growth.

Kinard (1998) hypothesized that three common modes or resilience found in the literature: (a) resilience as proficient operation in the face of continual life pressures (b) resilience as rebounding from distressing incidents, and (c) resilience as positive outcomes in spite of elements such as destitution and contact with high-risk surroundings.

Glantz and Johnson (1999) then scrutinized Kinard’s (1998) three notions of resilience and proposed that studies of resilience should noticeably distinguish the mode of resilience being investigated; for instance, if resilience is found as a student comes into contact with a stressing academic experience, resilience should be noted as academic resilience. In situations where issues involving one’s family
become apparent, resilience should be deemed family resilience. The pair maintained that survival skills and abilities should also be taken into account in cultivating models of resiliency. They noted that individuals have a tendency to organize their coping reactions into three marked realms: (a) problem-centered coping, which aims to settle life stressor by searching for information and finding options; (b) appraisal-centered coping, which necessitates defining, unraveling, and comprehending given circumstances or affairs; and (c) emotion-focused coping, which entails trying to handle emotional response to stressors by controlling one’s actions, irritation and anger, and acknowledging negative conditions.

In another study, Ickovics and Park (1998) deduced that a large amount of literature in the area of psychology concerning resilience has centered on negative factors and environmental conditions as related to pathological progressions. They noted that when conducting their own research, they found minimal studies that concentrated on the dynamics that aid in positive outcomes and healthy performances, especially among Black Americans, thus again supporting the impression that research on resilience emphasizes deficiencies instead of positive influences in resilience.
DEFINITION OF PROTECTIVE FACTORS

For African Americans in particular, resilience is far from a new phenomenon. In fact, many would argue that resilience for the race was achieved through racial pride, community unification, spirituality, and ingenuity in the face of oppression (Floyd, 1996). In terms of education, when blacks were not allowed to be educated alongside whites, and were also given sub-par educational tools and venues, resilience still clearly shined through. Historically, foundations for African American people have been linked to having a strong value for knowledge and education, particularly as the population’s past and present struggles remain an issue of contention and unrest within the community. Undoubtedly, many of the educational accomplishments of African Americans came at a great price, with great endurance and resilience, and most importantly, with protective factors that served to enhance the buffer zone between negative elements present in the environment and success in the varied facets of life. The same holds true for African American adolescents in search of academic achievement; these youth have remained resilient due in part to the protective factors that made the journey more bearable (Asamen, 1989), and thus, now make up a population of
students that seek higher learning and overall success, regardless of life’s impediments.

Defined, protective factors are the conditions or influences which restructure the risk factors and promote the characteristics of resiliency (Anthony, 1987). They are characteristics, variables and/or circumstances existing in individuals or groups that augment resiliency, enhance resistance to threats, and protect against the development of turmoil or unfavorable conclusions (Masten, Best and Garmezy, 1990). Protective factors are “influences that modify, ameliorate or alter a person's response to some environmental hazard that predisposes [that person] to a maladaptive outcome” (Rutter, 1990). In contrast to risk factors, protective factors are generally viewed as serving in a counteracting function (by directly diminishing risk) or a shield function (by interacting with hazards or outcomes) (Cicchetti and Toth, 1998; Freitas and Downey, 1998; Pollard, Hawkins and Arthur, 1999), and only operating when a risk is present. A number of researchers have adopted the latter view, defining protective factors as “buffering” variables that interact with risk to transform or diminish the predictive relationship between risk factors and outcomes (Fraser et al. 1999, Hogue and Liddle 1999, Kalil and Kunz 1999, Pollard et al. 1999). Cowan et al. (1996) suggested
that resilient persons play on protective factors to negate the damaging impact of risk, which has been noted in numerous research on African American students (Gordon, 1995; Lee et al, 1991; Wang and Gordon, 1994). Thus, protective factors can serve as a means to an end for a number of students, who otherwise, might succumb to the risk factors that pervade the environment.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

Whereas risk factors are those conditions that are associated with a higher likelihood of negative outcomes, dropping out of school, low self-regulation, low expectations for success, poor family and community cohesion, and poor parental support (Werner & Smith, 1982; Clark, 1983; Bernard, 1991; Garmezy, 1991; Costa & Turbin, 1995), protective factors serve to counteract the impact of such traumatic circumstances. Particularly related to a student’s success, the affect of both protective and risk factors have been studied to determine the role of each in a student’s ability to persist. Thus, scholars have collected extensive data and analyzed a great amount of research to expose the blend of dynamics that give rise to high academic achievement.

These researchers have ascertained a number of factors that contribute to students' educational accomplishments (Broh, 2002, Jordan & Nettles, 2000; Cooper, Valentine, Nye,
& Lindsay, 1999). Educational attainment has long been deemed suggestive of resilience among youth, and protective factors in the African American community have been heralded as a primary factor positively influencing academic achievement (Stevenson, 1994; Floyd, 1996; Garmezy, 1991).

A number of protective factors that positively impact academic achievement have been both suggested and studied in terms of African American youth. In this study the protective factors that most consistently emerged during analysis fell into three categories (Garmezy, 1985; Werner, 1989; Rutter, 1990) which focused on (1) individual characteristics such as locus of control and self-regulation (Rouse, 2001), spirituality through faith in a higher power (Newlin, 2002) and (2) adaptation to change (Garmezy, 1983), (3) family characteristics such as structure, parental factors, and extended family, (Avenevoli et al, 1999; Bowers and Myers, 1999; Chase-Lansdale et al, 1999); and (4) community characteristics such as positive peer relationships, school and teachers (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Garmezy, 1991; Werner and Smith, 1982; Masten, 1994).

All three categories were deemed as imperative to the growth and development of resilient adolescents, and moreover, wholly necessary in the aim for academic achievement (Baker, Wang and Walberg, 1994). Therefore, in
the next section, I aim to show the difference made in academic achievement is immense when African American students utilize protective factors in their aim for resilience.

INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

Albeit the national depiction suggests the unbalanced failure of African American youth when compared to other ethnic groups, there are a number of black adolescents who are truly achieving academic success (Gordon, 1995). Thus, their success is related greatly to a number of individual characteristics that resilient African American children have exhibited, including social competence, problem solving proficiency, sense of autonomy (Buzzell, 1992), strong racial identity (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001), high level of engagement and sense of individual action, and adaptive characteristics (Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1998), to name a few. Each of these characteristics has been noted as being highly influential in a resilient adolescent’s ability to rebound from and conquer adverse conditions and high risk environments.

In regard to academic achievement, the individual characteristics and protective factors exhibited in resilient youth prove to be strengthening in academic performance; for instance, a study conducted by Schools and Families Educating
Children (SAFE Children) noted that the higher a student’s self esteem, sense of self efficacy, ability to adapt to various situations, and perceptions of social support from adults and peers, the better the student performed academically (Tolan, Gorman-Smith & Henry, 2005). Further, a study conducted by Asamen (1989), found that individual characteristics of students, such as social competence and internal locus of control were each viable characteristics of resilient African American students. Each of the listed protective factors were a positive influence in the academic achievement of black students and crucial to their resilience, even when faced with a harsh environment, weakened family support, institutional racism and a number of other risk factor present in their every day walks of life (Jones & Carter, 1996; Allen-Meares, 1999; Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002).

Supporting evidence of a positive correlation between students’ social behavior and academic achievement stems from several genres of research. A number of comparative studies have confirmed that inclinations of resilient children to be pro-social, well-mannered, aware of one’s social responsibility and self-disciplined are linked positively to intellectual outcomes and academic success (DiPerna & Elliot, 1999). While the aforementioned study encompass a variety of
ethnic children groups, the same can be equally applied to African American youth and adolescents, as noted by Clark (1991).

When defining the characteristics in African American youth, social competence is illustrated through the youth’s responsiveness to a variety of situations and environments, including the ability to draw out positive responses from others; the capability to move between different cultures; compassion; interactive abilities; and a sense of humor (Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1994). A 1993 study conducted by Giordano found a direct correlation between social competence and academic achievement among African American adolescents, suggesting that social competence truly does exist as a protective factor for the group. In a study conducted by Malecki and Elliott (2002), a positive correlation was noted between social skills of African Americans and levels of academic achievement, and further, suggests that social skills may potentially serve as academic enablers.

Problem-solving skills encompass the ability to plan or cultivate alternative solutions in discouraging circumstances and to think critically, creatively, and reflectively (Bernard, 1993). A sense of autonomy implies that the adolescent has impulse control, a positive sense of independence and a positive belief in the future (Bernard,
In regard to racial identity, a 1985 study conducted by Bowman and Howard found that resiliency was noted in African American youth who had been “given messages emphasizing group affiliation, pride and awareness of social inequity.” Further, African American youth with a strong connection and understanding of their heritage were also noted to be more resilient than those who can not boast of the same connection (Stevenson, 1994), and higher achievement academically.

It is also characteristic of high achieving, resilient African American adolescents to exhibit a “high level of engagement and sense of personal agency” (Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1998); these youth tend to engage in a number of activities and stay true to the belief that they themselves control their lives (Lee, et al, 1991). Moreover, it is characteristic for the group to pursue personal developmental and nurturing relationships and environments that champion their evolution (Lee, Winfield & Wilson, 1991). In their research involving a sample of eighth graders from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the researchers identified the protective factors of personal engagement and strong sense of self worth as vividly present in high-achieving African-American students. Further, the results indicated that the characteristics of the schools
that students attend, in addition to the individual actions of students correlated immensely to their academic performance, which the researcher’s utilized as a method to explain achievement differences between high- and low-achieving African American students.

Individual characteristics of resilient African American adolescents all have one commonality: they all encompass the youth’s ability to use what he or she has both within and environmentally, to be of positive influence in his or life. It is wholly acknowledged that the aforementioned list provides only a fleeting glance into the numerous individual characteristics exhibited by resilient students, as there are a number of other elements that are present that greatly influence resilience. As African American students seek to emerge as victorious in both their personal and academic endeavors, they must continually find both coping and surviving mechanisms. Both emerge in a number of ways, and ultimately grow into protective factors for the population, which also serve to remediate the achievement gap present in the educational arena (Swanson & Spencer, 1991). Indeed, the achievement gap is a complex problem, but success has been apparent, as literature, research and achievement among African American youth and adolescents have shown.
FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

Family life has been declared as having both positive and negative effects on a student's academic success depending on the atmosphere at home (Jordan et al., 2000), and it is wholly acknowledged that mothers, fathers, and other family members are a child's first educators. Arguably, these family members cultivate, train, and provide rites of passage to many of the world's resources. The family supports its offspring's growth and development by providing the necessities in life such as food, shelter, and clothing. In the youth's household, his or her parents' opinions and actions, whether supportive or demeaning, often affect intellectual outcomes. Additionally, maternal support is positively linked to higher grades among secondary school adolescents (Kenny, et al., 2002). As the providers, family members establish and unite youth with the larger society and create and provide opportunities for their offspring to develop proficiency and aptitude in learning; families continually seek ways to support healthy development, both physically and intellectually.

Parents of resilient high achieving students offer emotional support from infancy through adolescence (Murphy & Moriarty, 1976), are concerned with their child's education (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994), and ensure their offspring
take part in regular chores, and extracurricular activities (Clark, 1983; Murphy & Moriarty, 1976; Werner, 1989). It is very probable that in the lives of resilient children daily, routine actions become educational or learning occurrences through which students increase their intellectual competence (Clark, 1983). These families display organization (Clark, 1983), comprehensible boundaries, rules, and discipline for their young (Werner and Smith, 1982). Further, Rutter's (1990) research found that a positive parent to child relationship, family cohesion and structure, and affection protect children against adversity later in life and also enhance academic achievement.

Through their inquiry, Masten, Morison, Pelligrini, & Tellegen, (1990) found that families that hold high expectations for children, and make use of steady correction and rules often had offspring that produced better academic results when compared to households that lacked structure. Moreover, research in family involvement has established that parents play an important role in their child's academic success and shows a direct correlation between family engagement in a student’s life and heightened academic attainment (Bernard 1991).

In his qualitative study, Clark (1983) explains the facets of African-American family life that have an influence
on children's academic achievement, including active involvement, encouragement and support, and discipline. The study also details a number of aspects, including family organization, interaction, and cohesiveness that contribute to high attainment among African American children. Most importantly, Clark illustrates the viability of the family as one of the greatest protective factors present in resilient African American children.

Notably, the role of the family in African American student resilience and academic achievement is crucial for student success, because a great number of obstacles students encounter cannot be attended to without the close involvement of the family (Werner and Smith, 1982). It is without question that family unity (Murphy & Moriarty, 1976) and a solid home environment (Werner, 1989) relates strongly to competence and resilience among African American children, and wholly impact academic achievement in a positive manner (Masten, et al, 1999). Many children depend on their loved one for motivation and support, and as the next chapter illustrates, for others this support is coupled and enhanced by individuals and forces in the community, who often step in when the family cannot be of assistance to their offspring.
CLASSROOM AND COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS

Children in danger of academic shortcomings are noted in every classroom, and teachers and schools clearly make a difference in student academic outcomes (Edmonds, 1979). Indeed, educational resilience must be promoted in communities and schools that hold a high number of African American students if educators wish to adequately prepare students to compete in the larger society (Safyer, 1994) and increase academic gains (Wang & Gordon, 1994). In fact, a 1994 conducted by Wang, Freiberg, & Waxman, suggests that a coherent pattern of efficient organizational procedures and behavioral rhythms in inner-city schools greatly increases academic achievement among lower socioeconomic students.

These findings are largely similar to the existing literature on effective schools (Wang & Gordon, 1994; Safyer, 1994; Edmonds, 1979; Masten, et al, 1990). For example, the research notes a sizeable disparity between inner-city schools that were more and less successful in advancing academic achievement. Students in the more effective schools regularly use more time working autonomously, educators used more time interfacing with students, and students expressed more positive views of their schools. The students observed work more optimistically in their schoolwork and peer
relationships, viewed teachers as having high hopes for them, and possessed higher ambition and achievement drive.

In addition, students in effective inner-city schools felt more involved in school, believed their teachers were more supportive, and felt classroom rules were made clear to them. In another study, Anderson and Walberg (1994) found that Chicago schools with higher academic success had high involvement of the educators and the overall climate within those schools was one in which academic achievement was a clear aim.

In fostering resilience, the teacher’s role as a protective factor must also not be undervalued. Varied research has made clear the importance of teachers setting high expectations and standards (Alva, 1989; Werner, 1984) in order to positively impact academic achievement. The value of teacher input in the lives of students is great, as Werner (1990) found in her study that the impact of preschool and primary teachers often has have a perpetual effect on students. Particularly for students of lower socioeconomic status, teachers have emerged as great tools of support for youth and adolescents facing difficult life conditions (Werner & Smith, 1982). Moreover, when intimate interaction among teachers and students are constant, the students' academic and social endeavors benefit (Lee, Bryk, & Smith,
1993) and serve as great protective factors in the lives of resilient children. Students with encouraging educators are less likely to undergo varied academic shortfalls such as sub-par academic performance, removal from school and repeating the same academic grade level (Crosnoe and Elder, 2004). Students who feel more at ease in their school environment report greater positive outcomes than those who feel no cohesion (Floyd, 1996), and teachers who provide comfort, support and encouragement for students serve as a factor through which student increase their academic achievement.

Peers also are of great impact on a student’s academic achievement and attitude in the school setting. After the family, peers are often noted to be the most significant foundation of support and reinforcement for lower socioeconomic status adolescents as they seek validation, love and sense of belonging (Kenny, et al, 2002). For resilient children, the influence of a peer with the same mindset, goals and background is crucial to their academic achievement, because they recognize that they are not alone in their struggle (Giordano, et al, 1993). Further, peers are of great influence on resiliency and a students’ sense of academic competence and outlook toward education (Anderson, 1990).
A peer group’s opinion of school is a great predictor of cohort members’ grades, achievement exam scores, importance placed on being a high-quality student, and sense of competence (Asamen, 1989). Research has noted that ultimately, if a student’s peers in a high-risk environment serve as a system of support, the increase to student success is immense (Clark, 1983), as members of the group tend to emulate others, and one the behavior are positive, success and achievement increase.

Communities in which lower socioeconomic African American students live also serve as protective factors in academic achievement. As much as community authorities can serve as positive role models (Cowen & Work, 1988), they can also be of positive influence in the classroom. Supportive communities provide opportunities for youth and adolescents to engage in civic pursuits in significant manners. Further, serving as a means by which students can gain access to more opportunities and providing them with opportunities to increase expertise and knowledge, communities also increase a student’s sense of self worth and competence, which then can be transferred to the academic environment (Jordan & Nettles, 2000).

Often, the accessibility and collaboration among community units and organizations act as protective factors
for youth and help alleviate the strain of adversities such as poverty, weakened family system and high crime environments (Gutman, et al, 2002). Thus, when lower socioeconomic students become involved in community environments where consistent collective and cultural norms are communicated, a protective factor is created (Masten, 1990). In summation, protective communities encourage educational resilience and achievement through the introduction and incorporation of a variety of outlets and resources for youth and adolescents (Safyer, 1994). Just like each of the aforesaid protective factors, community organizations serve as a means by which students that are at a disadvantage can see the light at the end of the tunnel, recognize that there is a way out of their current predicament, and most importantly, remain resilient despite the odds.

**WHO ARE FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS?**

The theme of resiliency as it relates to first generation college students has garnered much literary attention over the past thirty years (Adachi, 1979, as cited in Billson and Terry, 1982; Tinto, 1993; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin 1998; Riehl, 1994; Terenzini et al., 2002), and it is important to note that there exist a number of definitions of what classifies one to be a first generation college student.
Adachi (as cited in Billson and Terry, 1982) is recognized as one of the first investigators to classify the expression “first generation college students” for the sake of educational functions, particularly driven by his quest to develop terms by which the federal government would allocate funds and determine eligibility for a student’s participation in federal TRIO programs (authorized through the Higher Education Act of 1965). He defined first-generation college students as "students from families with [no more than one parent] who had graduated from college" (as cited in Billson & Terry, 1982). For some researchers, first generation students are those whose parents never received college degrees (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Billson & Terry, 1982; Hicks, 2002). For others, a first generation college student is one who is the absolute first member of his immediate family to attend college, which includes siblings (McConnell, 2000). Billson and Terry (1982) denoted a first generation college student as one whose parents or guardians have never attended a college or university at any point in his or her life. Notably, the definitions of what classifies one to be a first generation college students are many; for the purposes of this study, the definition employed by the United States Department of Education (2001), and in keeping with the majority of literature focused on the group, will be
utilized: one whose parents do not possess more than a high school education (http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001153.pdf), which undoubtedly, results in a student being classified as the educational pioneer in the family lineage.

Demographics

First generation college students tend to have distinct characteristics that separate them from those whose parents have earned college degrees. Comprising approximately 31% of students who began postsecondary studies in 1995-1996 (Warburton et al., 2001), researchers found that first generation students are more likely to be female (Terenzini et al., 2002; Terenzini et al, 1996), of African American or Hispanic heritage (Tinto, 1993), and are often older than traditional students (Terenzini et al., 2002). The literature also reveals that first generation students frequently have dependents to care for and are more likely to be married than those who are not first generation students (Terenzini et al., 2002). Additionally, the group is more likely to delay enrolling in college directly after high school when compared to students who are not first generation scholars (Warburton et al., 2001). Moreover, when evaluated against students who are not first generation students, the group is more likely to be employed full-time and are more
apt to attend school on a part-time basis (Warburton et al., 2001).

First generation college students are also routinely members of low-income families (Warburton et al., 2001) and are more likely to live off-campus during their college career (Billson & Terry, 1982). First generation college students also continue in their academic pursuits and graduate in smaller numbers that those who are not first generation students (Warburton et al., 2001), which is a phenomenon educators have been seeking to address and remediate in the academic setting, and one in which this study seeks to provide insight in regard to mechanisms by which to reverse the trend.

Characteristics

In denoting the characteristics of first generation college students, much of the existing literature tends to center on the assistance they have as they transition from the high school arena to the college setting, personal persistence, and academic and family characteristics (Billson & Terry, 1982; Tinto, 1987; Terenzini et al, 2002). It is important to note that when many first generation students succeed in transitioning to college, the reality of being under or unprepared for the journey often becomes apparent, as students begin to feel the stress and pressure of the
environment (Terenzini et al., 1996), which sends some students into survival mode, while it sends other packing. As the group often enters the college arena with limited resources and knowledge in regard to how to survive, a number of distinctive features that can be viewed as risk factors become apparent. For instance, a national study completed by Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1996) revealed a number of characteristics of first generation college students. The study found that when compared to non-first generation students, the group often takes longer to complete undergraduate studies, exhibit poorer study skills, dedicate fewer hours to studying, have a lower expectation for success (Terenzini et al., 1996), often lack financial resources and support in their journeys (Tinto, 1987), and encounter isolation in the college setting (Bartels, 1995), each of which can hinder success and resiliency among the population.

**Academic Preparation.** Research also reveals that first generation college students are less prepared academically when compared to those who are not first generation students (Riehl, 1994; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991; Terenzini et al, 1996), and face a number of educational, environmental, and cultural transitions when entering the collegiate setting (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). To begin: many first
generation students come from academic backgrounds that render them inadequately prepared for college coursework, and many are required to enroll in remedial courses. Moreover, the group is more likely to demonstrate deficiencies in math, reading and critical thinking skills when compared to students who parents possessed college degrees and this often leads to students being placed in remedial courses (Terenzini et al., 1996). In turn, the inferior academic classification often results in low self-perceptions, as well as feelings of anger (Hayes, 1999), and weakened efforts to persist. Additionally, for a number of first generation students, when faced with such academic handicaps, their duration to degree completion is prolonged, as well as results in student’s feeling of academic deficiency (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991; Hagedorn et al., 1997).

School Support Systems. Studies performed by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2001) reveal that first generation students are at a disadvantage in regard to access to information about college life and the path it takes to get there, as well as the institution itself, which they correlate to the lack of examples first generation students have of college persistence. One such finding presented in the literature reveals that for many first generation students, the lack of individuals who are
able to offer insight or guidance into both the avenues by which to get to college, as well as life in the university setting, are limited and can result in a student choosing not to enroll, rather than attempt to navigate the journey alone (Billson & Terry, 1982; Terenzini et al., 1996). For students within the group who do receive insight and direction into their college dreams, it is often gained through teachers and counselors rather than family members, family’s lack of exposure to and familiarity with the collegiate environment (Billson & Terry, 1982; Terenzini et al., 1996). In supporting the significance of teachers and school officials in the lives of first generation college students, Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1996) found that the group was apt to receive more support from the aforementioned population when compared to their families. Terenzini et al. (1996) also found that first generation students enrolled in college were more apt to report the receipt of praise and support from friends and peers in their college studies, which positively impacted resiliency and persistence among the group.

Family Support Systems. While much literature notes the importance and positive impact of teacher and peers in the lives of first generation college students, it is just as important to note that the family can be of great influence
in the lives of first generation college students, even those who are uninformed in regard to what a student will experience during their college years. For instance, in their study of the group, Horn and Chen (1998), found support from family members in the pursuit of an undergraduate degree to be of great impact in the ability of first generation students to persist and remain resilient, even when the support was more through the lens of encouragement rather than information or financial assistance (Horn & Chen, 1998).

In another study, Billson and Terry (1982) ascertained that the majority of parents of first generation college students were reasonably supportive. In a study focused on African American students, Gurin and Epps (1975) found that the support of family members significantly influenced the perseverance of the group. In another study of persistence in minority students in particular, Rendon, Jalomo and Nora (2000) found that not only did the support the group received from their parents increase confidence in students, it was a great positive factor in their ability to remain focused in their aims.

Notably, the role of a family support system in the lives and successes of first generation college students is well acknowledged. However, it is equally important to note how an unsupportive family can hinder the academic progress
of a student as well as weigh heavily on a student in his or her academic endeavors, as for many students, the level of family support necessary in persistence is not always given (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991; Billson & Terry, 1982; Terenzini et al., 2002). A number of first generation college students encounter attitudes of resentment and hostility from family members who lack knowledge of the trials and tribulations of college, and/or those who openly voice the opinion that they judge the student to be elitist simply because he or she is pursuing a college degree (Terenzini et al., 2002). This in turn, results in a number of first generation college students having to operate in two worlds, or choose one over the other (Hayes, 1997). In some cases, the student is unable or unwilling to choose education when faced with hostility from the family, which results in attrition (Tinto, 1987). In other instances, members of the group found a proper balance, and thus, are able to feel validated, persisted and gained support in their academic quest (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2004).

Psychological Perception. Beyond demographics, academic preparation, school, and family support systems, it is important to take notice of how first generation students are perceived psychologically in the literature. When compared to non-first generation students, the group is often viewed
as less psychologically prepared (Terenzini et al., 1996), have lower self-efficacy beliefs (Hellman & Harbeck, 1997), lower self-esteem (York-Anderson and Bowman, 1991), and may perhaps lack direction and guidance in establishing educational and career goals (Rendon, 1995). Each of these factors, when coupled with other risk factors such as weak family support, weak educational backgrounds and a plethora of other obstacles faced by first generation college students, can weaken the student’s ability to persist, and thus, lead to their falling short of degree completion, which is the case for some within the group. However it is also critical to recognize that there are a number of others who persist in their journeys and move on to earn their degrees become the first generation of their family to do so.

Though first generation college students are faced with numerous trials, stereotypes and barriers in their aim for degree completion, a number of those within the population are resilient and persist, as illustrated by the students in my study. Even when some face limited family support, sub-par academic backgrounds, limited financial resources and a number of other potential impediments to their academic success, they stay the course and remain victorious. Thus, while they may be disadvantage in their beginnings, their degree completion serves to tell a completely different
story, and most importantly, illustrate the true power of perseverance even in the face of risk.

**SELF-REGULATION AND SELF-REGULATED LEARNING**

To provide a framework for the understanding of self-regulation and self-regulated learning, particularly relative to resilience, it is first important to present working definitions of both as they have been conceptualized in the field. According to Bandura (1977), self-regulation refers to having power over one’s own behavior as distinguished through three components: self-observation (intentional attention to particular facets of one's own actions), self-judgment (evaluating one's present growth toward a goal by means of a standard, and self-responses (making calculated response to judgments of one’s own accomplishments). Self-regulation can be roughly defined as one's capacity to apply control over one's actions (Tuckman, 1990), as it is often linked with cognitive monitoring, and correlates to various types of mental behaviors that an individual may trigger to organize and direct his/her own thoughts process. Through the process of self-regulation, one utilizes practices that stimulate and maintain thoughts and actions in order to attain goals (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997), as self-regulation refers to taking charge of one’s own learning by managing judgment skills. Zimmerman (2000) maintains that self-
regulation is a methodical effort to direct thoughts, stances, and actions, toward the realization of one's ambitions. He also notes two essential elements of self-regulation as goal setting and self-evaluation, both of which are crucial to one’s ability to self-regulate (Zimmerman, 1990). This definition is also supported by Brooks (1997) and Tuckman (1994), who maintain that self-regulation is active and goal directed, resulting from self control of actions, motivation, and cognition. Winne, (1995) reports that it (self-regulation) is one’s ability to understand and control their learning and subsequent outcomes.

Zimmerman’s research (1989; 1997; 2000) closely studies the concept of self-regulation, particularly as it relates to the behavior, actions and scholarship of students (self-regulated learning). Through his extensive research on the students, Zimmerman (2002) found that self-regulation occurs not only in the performance but also in the planning and assessment stages of a process. Thus, Zimmerman and Pons (1986) discuss self-regulation as the process through which learners individually initiate and sustain behaviors and cognition methodically geared toward the achievement of learning goals. Zimmerman (1989) proposes that self-regulation of learning can be defined as, or determined by, the degree to which students are “motivationally,
metacognitively and behaviourally involved in their own learning process” (p. 329), and self-regulated learning is determined by individual, environmental, and behavioral events such as personal controls (students’ wisdom and aspirations), behavioral influences (self-scrutiny, self-judgment, and self-reaction), as well as environmental influences (verbal persuasion and modeling). Additionally, Corno and Mandinach (1983) assert that self-regulated learning is the intentional preparation and monitoring of the cognitive and affective processes involved in carrying out educational responsibilities, a concept that is reflective in much of the literature studied.

Zimmerman (1989) defines self-regulated learning stratagems as actions and development intended for the acquisition of information or skill that involve action, intent, and purposeful perceptions by learners. Self-regulated learners are noted as having a view of academic learning as a proactive activity that requires self-derived motivational and behavioral practices (Zimmerman, 1989). As Schunk (1990) surmises, to achieve their goals, self-regulated learners set personal aspirations, perform purposefully, scrutinize their evolution, and acclimatize their method; moreover, self-regulated learners believe that
above all, they are responsible for their own learning. Additionally as Zimmerman (1998) explains:

self-regulated learners are individuals whose "view of academic learning is something they do for themselves rather than as something that is done to or for them. They believe academic learning is a proactive activity, requiring self-initiated motivational and behavioral processes as well as metacognitive ones." (p. 1)

He surmises that learners evolve through numerous stages as they aim to become self-regulated; these stages include observation, emulation, and self control, and ultimately, arrive at self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2002). Simply put, learners must initially examine a prototype attempting tactical, self-regulated behavior, and then make an attempt to emulate the abilities noted. After attempts have been made, learners must then exhibit the expertise autonomously within given circumstances, and ultimately, gain the aptitude to adapt the learned skills to various environments and situations. This model also underlies Zimmerman’s (1990, 1998, 2002) proposal of a three-component, recurring model of self-regulation that encompasses forethought, performance/volitional control, and self-reflection.
According to Zimmerman, forethought composes cognitive courses of action as goal settings, self-efficacy values and strategic preparation. Through this model, Zimmerman interprets forethought as the inclusion of goal setting, selection of strategy and methodology, the assessment of self-efficacy, the assessment of mastery or performance goal orientation and the appraisal of interest. Sub-practices of performance control include the focusing of attention, self-teaching and self-observation of development. In the final stage of the SRL model, Zimmerman maintains that self-reflection includes self-assessment against a standard or goal, acknowledgment to ability or effort, and self-reaction and modification, essentially self-evaluation, attributions, and adaptivity.

It is important to note that in the models and his ongoing research Zimmerman easily distinguishes inexperienced from proficient self-regulated learners. For instance, in the forethought phase inexperienced self-regulators have a tendency to set vague and unattached educational goals. Inexpert self-regulators also have a propensity for low levels of academic self-efficacy and curiosity in the assignment. In the performance phase, inexperienced self-regulators fail to stay attentive to their original design and are not successful in monitoring their own growth. In the
self-reflection phase, inexperienced self-regulators are more prone to avoid self-evaluation as judged against adept self-regulators. Moreover, when inexperienced self-regulators do make self-evaluations, they are more likely to be pessimistic. As a final point, inexperienced self-regulators are more apt to credit their presentation to aptitude related reasons, whereas, proficient self-regulators are more liable to associate their successes and shortcomings to use of tactics and amount of preparation.

SELF-REGULATION AND RESILIENCE

Notably, there have been several models that aim to provide a framework for analyzing self-regulated learning (Corno and Mandinach, 1983; Bandura, 1977). In my own analysis of the models and my current investigation into the study of resilience, I have noted that a strong relationship exists between the models proposed by Barry Zimmerman (1990, 1998, & 2002) and resilience, particularly as it relates to students of lower socioeconomic status. For starters, self-regulated learning is “not a mental ability, such as intelligence, or an academic skill, such as reading proficiency; rather, it is the self-directive process through which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998).
Additionally, self-regulated learning is the intentional arrangement and examining of the cognitive and emotional processes involved in completing academic tasks (Corno and Mandinach, 1983), and a process through which learners set individual objectives, operate purposefully, scrutinize their advancement, and modify their methodology (Zimmerman, 2002). Simply put, self-regulated learning is a by-product of drive, despite other factors that may or may not be present.

Resilience is the ability to prosper, advance, and amplify competence in the face of adverse conditions (Gordon & Coscarelli, 1996); proficiency in spite of challenges to achievement or growth (Masten and Coatsworth, 1995), and the ability to cultivate strengths (Silliman, 1994). Ultimately, both self-regulation and resilience focuses on motivation, drive, and locus of control, whether from individual or environmental factors (Bandura, 1977; Gordon, 1985).

Further, self-regulation refers to taking charge of one’s own learning by managing judgment skills (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997), while resilience theory notes that one takes charge of his or her learning by managing the environment in which s/he lives through the employment of protective factors (Gordon and Coscarelli, 1996). Additionally, as Tuckman (1990) surmises, self-regulation is noted through one’s capacity to apply control over his/her actions; likewise, resilience is
the ability to stand strong and apply control over oneself, even if there are elements of instability present (Luthar & Zigler, 1991).

In Zimmerman’s models, the notion of forethought, performance/volitional control, and self-reflection are all present. For resiliency theory, the same is true. Both models are outcome based, and Masten (1995) further explains the existing definition of resilience as an outcome measure where patterns are scrutinized reflecting the process of, faculty for, or product of successful adaptation notwithstanding challenging or hostile conditions. In both models, students must be aware of themselves and their environment (self-esteem, self-concept, and self-observation), recognize that they have a choice in what happens, and also reflect on the impact of their own actions (Zimmerman, 2000; Luthar & Ziglar, 1991). The implication of each of the aforementioned on resilience is that resilient students must in some manner be self-regulated learners, as they must have a desire to succeed despite the obstacles or circumstances present (Rutter, 1985), and exhibit the will and skill to stay the course.

Zimmerman’s concepts and models of self-regulated learning also relate to the topic of resiliency in that both are motivational theories that note the presence of
individual capabilities that permit students to be independent learners and to thrive academically (Wang & Lindvall, 1984; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986; Wang, Haertel and Walberg, 1994). Further, Zimmerman’s models correlate to resilience theory in that ultimately, self-regulation emerges in both paradigms as a salient characteristic that enables students to achieve academically.

By many definitions, resilient learners are indeed, self-regulated learners. Zimmerman’s model of self-regulated learning clearly illustrates that for both groups, possessing the ability to prepare one’s own learning, taking the needed avenues to learn, providing self-feedback, and keeping motivation high (Zimmerman and Schunk, 1989) are all characteristics present in both self-regulated learners and resilient students. Additionally, Zimmerman’s concepts of self-regulation mandate the process of observation, emulation, self control, and ultimately, require the arrival at self regulation. Resiliency theory requires that learners take note of the environment, decide which behaviors must be emulated in order to achieve success, practice self control in the presence of negative influence, and ultimately achieve academic success (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1998). In both views, learners must initially examine a prototype attempting tactical, self-regulated behavior, and then make an attempt
to emulate the abilities noted in the success they wish to achieve.

By no stretch of the imagination, a solid relationship between Zimmerman’s concepts and models of self-regulation and resilience in learners exists. Both are theories of motivation, requiring that learners are self directed, contend with self-efficacy beliefs, and both are quite multifaceted in terms of the learners encompassed. Moreover, both self-regulation and resilience theory deem that students develop responsibility for their own scholarship, and recognize that they are empowered due to their own works and deeds (Masten, 1994). For both self-regulated and resilient learners, one thing is clear: both require motivation in order to achieve success academically, because in the end, one’s own effort, ambition and application of self will be of the utmost influence in the journey toward success. As Zimmerman (1989) maintains, self-regulated learning approaches are events and processes focused on gathering information or expertise that involve agency, purpose, and instrumentality discernment by learners. For resilient learners, choosing to detach from environmental factors that are harmful and seek out protective factors to strengthen them are each mechanisms that involve agency, purpose, and
discernment; indeed self-regulation has strong ties to resiliency in learners as one truly supports the other.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while resilience is definitely present in the lives of many African Americans, it is important to note that there are a number of risks factors that may be present in the lives of students who are simply seeking a different way of life than what they have known throughout their lives. However, it is equally important to take notice of the linking of individual, family and community resources as they serve as great protective factors for students in pursuit of academic achievement. Moreover, self-regulation emerges to position itself as a coping mechanism for a number of individuals, particularly as they realize that they can direct the course of their lives through their own action. Ultimately, both self-regulation and resilience focuses on motivation, drive, and locus of control, whether from individual or environmental factors, and both have a relationship with risk and protective factors. Thus, it is noted that indeed, students' achievement is related to school, family, community support and the interlocking influences of these support systems (Sanders, 1998; Sanders & Herting, 2000; Steward et al., 1998), as well as one's own self-regulation and desire to achieve.
For a student to truly be resilient and obtain academic achievement there must be protective mechanisms in place that aim to make the journey both easier and more bearable. Protective mechanisms within the family, classroom, school, and community can foster educational resilience by buffering and reducing the adversities children face, and providing opportunities for learning and healthy development (Werner & Smith, 1982). While the achievement gap for African American students is a complex problem, there are truly mechanisms that serve to bridge the gap and increase success and achievement among the population. Due to poverty, crime, weak educational systems and the like, it is apparent that lower socioeconomic students will face a number of obstacles that other children may never even begin to endure. However, for many students, individual behaviors, families, classrooms, schools, and communities emerge as mechanisms to protect against adversity, enhance learning, and develop competencies. Most importantly, through each of these avenues, coupled with self regulation, students can still rise and achieve goals their ancestors only dreamed of, and ultimately, leave a legacy of achievement for others to emulate.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

The few existing investigations on the phenomenon of resilience in first generation African American college students (Bowman and Howard, 1985; Clark, 1983; Connell et al., 1994) primarily utilize quantitative methods, which can be problematic for family and institutions seeking to gain a better understanding of the phenomenology of the population of resilient students. That being said, I the researcher, utilize the methodology of qualitative research in an attempt to provide voices, rather than statistics, which shed light on the subject matter. To comprehend the correlation between success in higher education and African American students’ experiences with resiliency, it is essential to hear candidly from the individuals what meanings they attribute to their experiences, as this knowledge may provide higher education faculty, personnel and professionals with a better understanding of the strengths, foundations and characteristics of resilient African American college
students. In turn, this increased understanding may also set in motion the advancement of academic success, resiliency, and a better relationship between the students and those working in institutions of higher education. Because it is my belief that educators and institutions of higher education can gain from learning directly from African American students about their lived experiences and how they meaning of them, a qualitative research approach, through a phenomenological lens, was employed.

**METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW**

**WHY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?**

Qualitative research literature emphasizes that the phenomenon under investigation is best comprehended through an exploratory process necessitating direct interfacing with the subjects so that their standpoints are reflected in the data (Kvale, 1996). Essentially, qualitative research makes the attempt to understand a human or community predicament derived through the creation of a detailed holistic portrait, produced from words, with comprehensive findings from participants (Creswell, 1994). Qualitative interviews are dialogues in which the investigator leads the participant through a widespread conversation and draws out much information about the subject of significance, and then follows up on the participant’s answers for the remainder of
the conversation (Kvale, 1996); the purpose for conducting such interviewing is to examine what occurred, why it occurred, and what it represents. This method is exceptionally helpful in constructing detailed data, and has great significance for scrutinizing multifaceted and sensitive topics.

Further, qualitative research is fitting for the study of resilience in African American college students, particularly as I seek to unearth how they make meaning of their experiences. Additionally, as the research is approached through the lens of “knowledge as conversation” (Kvale, 1996, p. 19), this qualitative study will also serve to give voice to a population that is often silenced due to stereotypes, prejudices, and socioeconomic statuses. In electing to research persons of color and those traditionally beyond the realm of research authority (Stanfield, 1994), I have listened carefully to people who are habitually less visible than others of a higher social position. Qualitative approaches, when performed with understanding and self-reflection, endeavor to steer clear of replicating the power relationships found in conventional society, and also, mainstream research. Through utilizing a qualitative research approach, the focus on drawing out narratives of lived experiences was at the crux. I truly utilized the discourse
of the individuals I interviewed; through taking the time to hear their stories, I aimed to make evident my personal sense of responsibility to the participants of the inquiry. Most notably, the heart of this study was the personal and comprehensive narratives articulated exclusively by the individual participants.

As a member of the population under study, as well as a member of the university community and society, along with my role as a researcher, I was very well aware of the inclination to “marginalize and exclude ethnically diverse interpretation of reality and styles of knowing in relation to mainstream normative knowledge creation and reproduction” (Hill Collins, 1988, p. 180). Thus, selecting a qualitative approach was the first measure in avoiding such a propensity in this study. This decision was also a measure aimed at providing an opportunity for the participants to be accurately represented in research, as it seeks to provide them with an outlet to have their voices heard. Ultimately, the purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine the occurrence of resilience from an ethnic and socio-economical standpoint – the subjective analysis of the study’s participants. The aim is to cultivate a deeper comprehension of the experiences and viewpoints of a marginalized cohort of students. By utilizing qualitative research methods, this
investigation is capable of constructing descriptions of multifaceted phenomena that are currently under explored in the literature.

**PHENOMENOLOGY**

The deliberate use of phenomenological methods in this research serves to illuminate factors contributing to the resilience of each of the participants, particularly as interpreted by the individuals. In regard to the paradigm, Eaton (2006) explains phenomenology as the conscious encounters of everyday life and the depiction of phenomenon as a person experiences them. He further explicates phenomenology as the meaning that people are said to believe, determine, assess, experience, perceive, recall, and physically encounter. Thus, in the study of phenomena, the center of attention is on the significance it holds for the participant (Moustakas, 1994). Above all, it is important to observe that phenomenology does not propose a specific direction of philosophy; rather, it names a likelihood that still exists today in that it asserts the possibility of beings, through thinking, to make meaning of their worlds.

Phenomenological research shares familiar traits with other qualitative methodologies including ethnography and hermeneutics. Given that it illustrates, instead of explains, and commences without a hypothesis or predetermined
outcome (Husserl, 1900), phenomenology is used to uncover a happening. Relevant to this investigation, phenomenological methods are especially successful in uncovering events, experiences, and assessments of individuals from a personal standpoint that may very well oppose normative suppositions and universal theory (Groenwald, 2004). Phenomenology is interested in the study of experience from the viewpoint of the individual while drawing attention to obvious beliefs and norms.

Phenomenology, in isolation, is a branch of philosophy, owing its origin to the works of Kant and Hegel, although the German philosopher Edmund Husserl is often credited with the advancement of the philosophical approach during the mid 1890s (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The phenomenological movement first emerged as a descriptive philosophical approach to dispute the analytic and deductive philosophies (Chamberlin, 1974); thus, for Husserl, phenomenology was an avenue by which to investigate the organization of consciousness that enables the apprehension of an empirical world (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000). He rejected the notion that objects in the outer world subsist autonomously and that data about objects is trustworthy, as he was convinced that phenomenology was derived wholly from the pure essence of the experience.
Analytical approaches in philosophy presume that one must initially work out or accept a philosophical position and then progresses to determine its implications in practice. Ultimately, the aim of phenomenology as submitted by Husserl, was employed to study human phenomena without considering questions of their origins, their objective reality, or even their appearances. However, in turning to the modern conceptualization of phenomenology, existential phenomenologists depart from the Husserlian concentration on the descriptive view of cognition to, in its place, focus on featuring the world as “lived experiences” (van Manen, 2002). Therefore, as noted in areas such as the social sciences, the aim of phenomenology is to study how human phenomena are qualified in consciousness, in cognitive and perceptual acts, as well as how they may be esteemed or valued aesthetically (Edie, 1962). Through this lens, and as conveyed by Schutz (1962, 1964, 1967, 1970), Husserl’s philosophical scheme is turned toward the manners in which ordinary individual members of the society go about their everyday living; phenomenology is directly oriented to the world, and seeks to understand how persons create meaning and a knowledge of the world, upon which our thoughts about the world are founded. Schutz (1970) maintains that meaning is inter-subjective because we become familiar with the world by means of and in
the company of others. Therefore, whatever meaning we produce has its branches in human actions (Merleau-Ponty, 2002), the central task of social phenomenology is to reveal the joint interactions among the processes of human action, conditional structuring, and reality creation (Schutz, 1964). Before assuming that any feature is a causal factor, phenomenology observes all dimensions as constitutive of others. Hence, the charge of phenomenology is to make apparent the continual web or “reflexivity” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000).

Over the decades, utilizing Husserl’s work as the origin of phenomenology, a number of philosophers have offered their meaning of phenomenology, yet it was the work of Martin Heidegger, a philosopher who in his approach, deviated from Husserl’s approach to phenomenology, that changed the structure of 20th century philosophy ultimately, provides the angle for this current research. As the founder of the hermeneutic paradigm, which focuses on the study of text, Heidegger placed weight on language as the means by which the question of being could be unfolded, and on the words of the text. Hermeneutics is viewed as the science of interpreting the printed word, to find what the text in fact, meant, this approach is crucial in completing the present study, as I
sought to bring forth the lived experiences of the research participants through a thorough analysis of their interviews.

It was Heidegger’s study that moved phenomenology beyond Husserl in that it substituted the investigation of the relationship between Dasein (being in the world; human existence) and ontology or Being (Sein; in itself), with the previous notion of the intentional configuration of consciousness and subjectivity, whereas individuals encounter the world by bracketing out their experiences (Mooney & Dermot, eds., 2002). Husserl surmised that phenomenology is a discipline of consciousness rather than pragmatism; however, in his 1927 work titled Being and Time, Heidegger held that individuals encounter the world in concerned meaning which are connected in situations, and are propelled onward from those conditions. Being and Time brought forth a holistic epistemology in that it notes hermeneutics to be an examination into the sincerest conditions for symbolic communication and culture (Mooney and Dermot, eds., 2002). The result is a vigorous assessment directed against the standard of objectivity, as phenomenology is based on subjectivity, whereas the interpretations and occurrences are centered on one’s point of view, rather than a single reality, as is suggested in objectivity.
Heidegger asserted that an individual has only one solitary thought, which he or she continually toils to express (Mooney & Dermot, 2002), as he did not believe in the existence of objectivity in phenomenology. He proposed that the thought, or subject matter, is sought after in the method in which it becomes visible, or is hidden in the contemporary experience. Furthermore, Heidegger rebuffed long-established approaches to the query of Being as having misconstrued the nature of beings by viewing them as ‘things’ that merely are, and as ‘reality,’ rather than individuals composed of their experiences (Mooney & Dermot, 2002). Thus, Heidegger maintained that an individual’s understanding develops or perishes as maintained by the lives he or she is leading, and by the type of cultural environment he or she inhabits.

In simple terms, phenomenology is the study of lived experiences, or conscious phenomena (Atkinson, 1972). It seeks to make explicit the implicit structure and meaning of human journeys, as it is the search for “essences” that cannot be illustrated through plain observation. Phenomenology is the science of fundamental structures of both experience and structure (Atkinson, 1972), and focuses on neither the subject nor object of experience, but rather, on the point of contact at which “being and consciousness collide” (Edie, 1962, p. 19). Fundamentally, the mission of
phenomenology is to get directly to the unpolluted and unfettered revelation of what an experience truly is. This experience is viewed as the manner in which everyday people take part in the world, taking its existence for granted, assuming its neutrality, and completing tasks in as if they were preordained (Aho, 1988).

Culture, dialect, and common sense are practiced as objective attributes of the larger world that is learned by individuals throughout their lives (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000). Individuals are exposed to guided social experiences and aim for a meaningful existence in an inevitable world, as they are characterized by a mode of consciousness that has a tendency to classify sense data. In phenomenological conditions, human beings take part in the world in terms of “typifications,” or shared constructs (Schutz, 1970). These typifications deem it possible for persons to account rationally for experiences, depicting various things and incidents as recognizable as a given object or event (Schutz, 1970), and once internalized, have a tendency to settle below the full level of conscious awareness. Therefore, the foundation of a person’s knowledge of meaning and accomplishment is hidden from even the individual him/herself, and it is the aim of phenomenology (through the
lens of lived experiences), to bring forth the untapped information that is brewing inside of individuals.

As a social science approach, phenomenological paradigm utilizes naturalistic query to “inductively and holistically understand human experience in context settings” (Patton, 1990, p. 37). This paradigm takes into account and values the study of phenomena within its natural backdrop and mandates that “research interaction...take place with the entity-in-context for fullest understanding” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Phenomenology views the researcher as the data collection instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and relies on a qualitative methodology in order to capture the larger embodiment of the individual lived experience, rather than generalizations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Phenomenology utilizes inductive data analysis in order to provide a better understanding of how influences interact and illuminate the interrelated realities and occurrences of both the researcher and the participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, the phenomenological model makes apparent the assumption that “the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit” (Patton, 1990, p. 78).

**WHY A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH?**

The employment of the phenomenological approach in this investigation is to shed light on detail and to discover
phenomena through the respondents in a given situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In reality, the phenomenological approach seeks to gather heavy narratives which represent the viewpoints and experiences of the subjects under study through initiatory, qualitative procedures such as interviews and discussions (Whitt, 1991). The approach of phenomenology gathers data on what has some bearing on individuals within a particular phase, event, or time and how they are understood by those persons. Philosophically, phenomenological methods are rooted in an archetype of an individual’s knowledge and subjectivity, and of its own accord, are authoritative vehicles by which to establish reality in search of justice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Thus, the lens of phenomenology provides the proper vehicle by which to unveil, and moreover give voice to, the lived experiences of the participants under study.

DATA COLLECTION METHOD: INTERVIEWING

ADMISSION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

In a phenomenological investigation, it is of the utmost importance that to disclose personal interest in the phenomenon under study in order to provide an indication of the distinctive relationship between the investigator and the investigation. By revealing such interest, the reader gains entry to a greater understanding of the investigator.
Moreover, it permits the reader to be cognizant of potential biases of the researcher.

As I am an African American female who has truly seen my own share of adversity having grown up under difficult conditions, I hoped to discover answers to inquiries I myself, have asked several times. As I emerged to become the first member of my family to receive an undergraduate degree, and subsequently, an advanced degree, the reality that I have completed goals that no other member of my family has, was grounds for puzzlement. I also share this honor with a number of peers from my youth, all of whom grew up under the same conditions of duress, and whom also hailed from families where their parents and siblings did not attain college degrees. Thus, when asked about my secret to success, and how I and many of my peers succeeded, I realized that I too, was searching for that very answer. Further, having worked with African American students at both the secondary and postsecondary levels, I have had a great deal of contact with students hailing from similar circumstances. I found that many students succeeded in spite of the trials encountered throughout their personal and professional growth. I would later learn that ultimately, the phenomenology depicted by the participants would hold many answers to my questions, as finally, I could understand what had been in front of me all
along: the presence of resiliency in the face of many negative circumstances and factors. As I listened to the voices of the students interviewed, I could finally see how persistence does indeed, pay off and result in great gains.

As I proceeded to interview the students, I became fully immersed in the study as I listened to the varied tales of triumph and tragedy. One consistent question remained in my head throughout the promise: how do they do it? And as the interviews commenced, I learned the answer to my question, as discussed in a subsequent chapter. I was both sympathetic and passionate in regard to the experiences shared by the students, yet I was careful not to interject my own experiences and beliefs into the conversation, other than to disclose information that served to contextualize my experiences. These included my informing the respondents of my status as a first generation college student, as well as stating that I experienced a fair share of situations that would deem me resilient according to the literature. However, I did not share exact instances of those experiences, as I did not desire to cripple the participants or shape the conversation; therefore I carefully bracketed out my own experiences by strategically keeping the interviews focused on the experiences of the respondents, rather than my own story.
It is important to note that completely bracketing out my own experiences was of great magnitude to the study, particularly as I desired to center objectively on the lived experiences of each individual, and moreover, on the subject of resilience. Bracketing out is of great importance in increasing the validity of the study as it requires that one not be concerned with the explanation of what the phenomenon may be, but must be focused wholly on the narratives depicted by individuals in order to give voice to the participants being studied (Moran, 2002). Thus, when interviewing each person, and in the analysis of the data, I was careful to acknowledge, identify and suspend my own biases, assumptions and understandings, while capturing and allowing the voices to speak for themselves on the phenomenon.

**INTERVIEWING**

Interviewing is one of the most common methods for collecting data in qualitative research; used as a means by which members can provide wealthy, contextual descriptions of proceedings (Seidman, 1998), interviews have been used extensively for data collection among all the fields of the social sciences and in educational research. Moreover, in phenomenological investigations, the interview operates for the express purpose of investigating and assembling empirical narrative data or chronicles that may function as a resource
for the expansion of a more in-depth and detailed comprehension of a human experience. Thus, I opted to use interviewing in my approach in order to allow for participants to give voice to the opinions and experiences from which they derive. Conversations are an ancient form of gaining knowledge (Kvale, 1996) and have long existed as a means by which to connect people and share experiences. In the 1980s, there was a considerable growth in using interviewing as a method for educational research and now it is generally agreed that interviewing is a significant mode of data collection, as it is a technique that is largely used to expand an understanding of the principal reasons and driving forces for people’s attitudes, preferences or actions (Patton, 1990). In an interview conversation, a researcher seeks to listen to how people convey the interactions and experiences of their lived world (Kvale, 1996), hears them expressed their perceptions of the world through their own words and seeks to become familiar with the participant’s life through what the individual conveys.

There are a number of interview methods including structured interview, survey interview, counseling interview, diary interview, life history interview, ethnographic interview, informal/unstructured interview, and conversations (Hitchcock, 1989, 79). Moreover, other researchers group
them into four kinds, including the structured, unstructured, non-directive, and focused interview (Cohen & Minion 1994, p. 273). Most recently interviews have been sorted into three categories of non-structured, semi-structured, and structured (Patton, 1990), which encompasses each of the aforementioned. For the study of phenomenological study of resilience, I used unstructured interviews in order to allow for the participants to divulge their lived experiences, rather than inundate the respondents with leading questions that could have stifled conversation and the flow of information. Unlike structured and survey interviews, the questions in unstructured interviews are not standardized in nature, even if the researcher performs numerous interviews on the same topic (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), which allows for the phenomenology of the experience to emerge.

In the case of qualitative research, interviews are typified by elongated inquisitions and open-ended questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and at the most basic level, interviews are conversations (Kvale, 1996). During the interview process, I sought to gain understanding by encouraging interviewees to explain their world in their own words, through the employment of detailed descriptions of their triumph, trials, and/or concerns on the topic of resilience. Kvale (1996) characterizes qualitative research
interviews as efforts to understand the world from the subjects' position, to make known the meaning of peoples' experiences, and to discover their lived world separate from scientific reason. Research interviews promote the capturing of respondents' perceptions in their own words, a very advantageous approach in qualitative data collection. This approached allowed the researcher to communicate the significance of the experience from the respondent’s point of view. Ultimately, in qualitative research, the job of the qualitative interviewer is to present a structure through which people can respond in a way that comprehensively embodies their point of view on a given subject, situation, or experience, which in this case, centered on the topic of resilience.

When compared to other data collection methods, qualitative interviews should emerge as the primary avenue through which participants’ voices are heard. The employment of interviews as a data collection technique commences with the postulation that the contributors’ perceptions are significant and capable of being made known. Furthermore, an interview is used in data collection when the purpose is to elicit rich, comprehensive material that can be applied during analysis (Lofland & Lofland, 1995), with the intent being to reveal a phenomenon or results grounded in the
voices of interview participants. Such was the case in this investigation, as the researcher sought to unveil the student voices through the phenomenological interviewing process.

**SELECTION OF DATA COLLECTION SITES**

To complete this study, three large Midwestern universities were selected as sites for data collection. Each university is a predominately White institution (PWI), and housed in the Midwest, as geographical proximity was a practical consideration when selecting sites. By and large, my rationale for choosing to investigate African American students in these academic institutions was encapsulated by my recognition that each university’s African American student population included a distinct populace of first generation African American college students among its ranks, as was discovered through a review of the composition of each institution’s demographic profile of its student body. And while the universities possess some similarities, it is important to note that I strategically chose the three institutions due to their variations in African American student populations, even in light of the first generation student status. Thus, each of the criteria for selection of the research sites was utilized to increase the diversity of participants in the study so that a wider student perspective and experience could be detailed and shared through the
investigation. For example, while all three institutions feature large undergraduate student populations, they each host a relatively small number of African American students, particularly when compared to a number of similar institutions in the geographic region. Another criterion for my selecting the universities was informed by the discovery that the diversity of attracted and admitted African American students was demographically different from the other two in the sample, due to several factors. The notion of “selectivity standards” is defined in accordance with criteria established in the 2006 U.S. News and World Report’s College Rankings System (http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/rankings/rankindex_brief.php). First, the diversity of admissions standards relative to level of selectivity varied at each university, as one was “selective” in admissions, the second was “more selective,” and the third was listed as “most selective” by the report. The selectivity classifications are based upon ACT and SAT test scores, grade point average of incoming students, and the acceptance rate or proportion of admitted students versus the number of applicants. Additionally, I chose institutions whereby the African American student rates of undergraduate degree completion were significantly lower than the majority population as well as varied across the institutions.
PARTICIPANT SAMPLING

My initial selection of participants for the study focused on including the following demographics:

1. First generation African American college students.

This criterion was essential for the study, as there exists a limited number of studies and research that focuses on resilience in the aforementioned group, and due to disparities in retention of such students, I believe it to be of the utmost importance to research and the voices of students who do persist in their academic journeys. Additionally, the study of first generation African American college students in particular is important due to the significantly higher rates of attrition when compared to non-first generation groups. Therefore, I specifically selected the unique group of students in my aim to shed light into the world of those African American students who persist and defy the literature that often speaks of the demise of many within the cohort (Adachi, 1979, as cited in Billson and Terry, 1982; Tinto, 1993; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin 1998; Riehl, 1994; Terenzini et al., 2002).

2. At least eighteen years of age and in his or her third year of undergraduate study.
I elected to include only upperclassmen in this study in order to provide voices from students who were more advanced in their academic studies, due to the reality that first generation college students lag behind and persist in smaller numbers when compared to non first generation students, a phenomenon that is even more greatly exacerbated for upper-class students (Warburton et al., 2001). Thus, by gathering data the study is able to speak to the experiences of who students who have persevered to reached upper-classmen status.

3. Subsistence through or were presently living in what they noted as being difficult, stressful, challenging, exigent, or a discouraging state of affairs, as self disclosed.

As the literature reveals, first generation college students come to college with a group of issues, circumstances and conditions unique to their group (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991; Hagedorn et al., 1997; Terenzini et al., 1996). In many cases, students are unable to maintain their academic obligations and choose to withdraw from the institution. However, in spite of risk and dangers, a number of other students are able to persist in their journeys, which characterizes them as resilient. In order to for a student to be deemed resilient, he or she must first come
into contact with risk factors, trauma and perilous conditions, as established by the literature (Jones & Carter, 1996; Allen-Meares, 1999; Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002), which accounted for my establishing such a condition of students included in the study. Moreover, as I seek to unearth explanations of how first generation African American college students persist, it was imperative that I gain entry to a population that could provide accounts of their experiences, which motivated me to interview only students who could speak to such encounters.

4. Continual enrollment for the duration of their academic careers, with the exception of summer quarters/semesters.

This criterion was utilized to account for the student’s persistence within his or her studies, even when faced with risk factors and deterrents, particularly as resilient students are deemed those who have not strayed from their academic quests (Asamen, 1989; Wang, et al., 1998).

5. Current recipient of a federal Pell Grant.

Such a condition was included in this study after a review of literature on first generation African American college students revealed that a large number of members within the group are recipients of the grant, which is awarded based upon substantial financial need and the
inability of the family to provide financial support to the student (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, Warburton et al., 2001), which speaks to the lower socioeconomic status of many within the populace. This criterion served to narrow down potential students for the study, as much resiliency literature defines a key characteristic among resilient African American student to be that of limited financial resources (Ogbu, 1974).

6. Has maintained a grade point average of at least a 2.8.

I elected to utilize the grade point average of 2.8 for student participants due to an evaluation of each of the three research site’s grading scale. At each of the three institutions, a 2.8 grade point average indicates that the student carries at least a B- average, which is consistent with the middling grade point average of undergraduate students on their campus when accounting for at least four terms of classes completed. Thus, I thought it to be important to include students in the sample who at least met average academic performance the averages of the university’s student in order to depict their remaining academically competitive with other students within the university.
7. Consenting participants who would be available for at least a two hour time block for interviewing.

The final criterion by which I selected students to participate in the study centered on the availability of each for at least a two hour block of interview time, as a substantial amount of time is necessitated for in-depth discussions, as the greatest knowledge and information for the study is derived from the interactions (Kvale, 1996).

Essentially, each of the criterion utilized served to narrow down the number of students eligible for the study, as I sought to bring forth the voices of first generation African American college students who had experienced limited financial resources, high academic success, and continued persistence and resilience in their academic journeys, in spite of the factors that could have prohibited their advancement. After establishing the criteria for the study, I then sought approval by The Ohio State University (OSU) Institutional Review Board (IRB).

In order to gain entry to the population I was seeking to investigate, I utilized the approach of snowball sampling, a social science approach for developing a research sample in which study subjects recruit others from within their network (Erickson, 1979). This methodology is utilized for two principal purposes: 1) as an informal means by which to
connect with a target population; and 2) as a more formal means by which to make inferences concerning a population of individuals who have been difficult to identify as the researcher attempts to build up a sampling frame (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). I sought out first generation African American college students who have remained steadfast in their academic pursuits, even after having experienced trauma. Further, as I conducted my research on three campuses where the African American student populations composed a relatively small percentage of the total campus composition, snowball sampling allowed me access to students that may have otherwise been excluded in the study, but became available due to the social networks in which they existed.

While it is important to acknowledge the potential of bias in utilizing such an approach, it must be recognized that I went to great lengths to counteract the potential for such a dynamic; to diminish the bias, I began the snowball sampling with the recommendations of nineteen administrators, staff, and professors involved in various capacities of the university community. Through my emailed letter (Appendix D) detailing the purpose and decisive factors for her study, I asked that the individuals recommend four students who they believed met the criteria established in the letter. The
criteria listed as desirable in potential subjects were: (a) students of African American descent; (b) at least in their third year of undergraduate study; (c) at least eighteen years of age (d) first generation college students; (e) continually enrolled for the duration of their academic careers, with the exception of summer quarters/semesters; (f) had subsisted through or were presently living in what they noted as being difficult, stressful, challenging, exigent, or a discouraging state of affairs, as self disclosed; (g) a current recipient of a federal Pell Grant; (h) has maintained a grade point average of at least a 2.8; and (i) consenting participants who would be available for at least a two-hour time block for interviewing.

Of the nineteen faculty, staff, and administrators, twelve recommended students they believed met any number of the criteria, and through this approach, an email list of 31 participants were obtained, and thus composed the group of prospective participants. I then sent a detailed letter to each of the potential participants (Appendix E) requesting their participation in the study if they met all conditions, and moreover, their list of four other African American students who they believed might fit the criteria for the study. Using this approach of nineteen (twelve of whom participated in forwarding names) faculty, administrators and
staff as the foundation for the sampling, and through condensing the quantity of suggestions from each person to four, I sought to reduce the potential of bias within the sample. The bias was also reduced by extending the sample framework to incorporate referrals of African American students within each institution, which was also capped at four.

I then proceeded to email each of the 31 prospective participants, and received responses from 12. Of the twelve who responded, one stated his/her unavailability to meet during the specified timeframe, and two noted they were not first generation college students, but still wished to participate. I expressed my appreciation for all three being willing to participate, but informed them that could not include them in my study due to their circumstances. Thus, I was left with a sample of nine, which I then decreased to seven, a number which is further explained below.

PROTECTION OF SUBJECTS

Approval to conduct research was granted on August 3, 2006. All procedures mandated by the Ohio State University Institutional Review Board were recognized and followed in the collection of data for this study.
PILOT STUDY

Notably, there are a number of methods of investigation utilized in qualitative research. For the objective of this investigation, I gathered data through the course of individual interviews in order to provide the “rich first-person narratives that form the heart” (Sabo, 1990, p. 63). However, before I initiated dialogue with the research participants, I conducted an informal pilot interview with three classmates, as part of a class project. The pilot test was designed to be an introductory investigation of how African American students assign meaning to their experiences, particularly relative to the phenomenon of resilience. Additionally, a pilot study serves as a means of enhancing the quality of collection, in that it allows an opportunity for the researcher to improve upon his or her interviewing skills.

To formulate potential questions for the pilot study, I began with a review of literature focused on first generation college students, resilience, and persistence among African American students (Asamen, 1989; Ickovics and Park, 1998; Terenzini et al., 1996). This approach was particularly helpful in that it allowed me to discover what defines both a first generation and resilient student, as well note a number of risk and protective factors that have been discovered in
the lives of African American students. The review of the literature also enabled me to develop questions that sought to draw out how students make meaning of their experiences, as well as articulate them to others.

Each of the classmates involved in the pilot study interviews were African Americans who were first generation college students, and reared in environments they described as both hostile and problematical in nature. I requested that each person complete a background questionnaire (including age, year in school, status as a first generation college student, and whether they experienced difficult situations in their academic pursuits) in order to make certain that they had similar backgrounds with the students I was seeking to study. After they completed the questionnaire, I collected data through the use of semi-structured interviews. This information was documented both through the employment of field notes and with the verbal consent of each participant. I then wrote a detailed description of my findings and the themes derived from the interviews, which I then gave to each participant. The participants then returned the documents to me with their thoughts, and clarifications on things said during the interview. Through a pilot study with the aforementioned, several propositions were made to enrich the questions, and
subsequently, helped to formulate my initial questions for the participants in the study.

The semi-structured questions employed for the preliminary interviews were identical for all three participants. Following those interviews, I modified some of the initial questions somewhat as a result of the contributions I received from the three persons, and most notably, to move from semi-structured to open-ended questions. Additionally, as I commenced through the process of interviewing the respondents, the questions were again to some extent, altered as I continued to be open to change as the investigated process progressed. The questions were conceived to reflect particularized variations in the participants’ replies throughout the interview process because, as noted by Merriam (1988), “qualitative research assumes there are multiple realities – that the world is not an objective thing out there, but a function of personal interaction and perception” (p. 17). Thus, I continually adapted my research methodology so that I was able to allow for participants to fully reflect on their experiences.

SAMPLE SIZE

For this study, the sample size was calculated based upon the number of African American students enrolled at each institution. Initially, I endeavored to include three
participants from each of the prospective institutions, but reduced the sample from three to two at two of the universities, as their numbers for African American student were approximately one-third less than enrolled at the third university. This was done in an attempt to prevent an over-representation from any one university in the study and I removed one student from each of the schools with smaller African American populations by eliminating those who were heading into their third year of college. Utilizing this approach left me with students heading into their fourth and fifth years of their academic careers. Thus, the sample size for the study was capped at seven, which is well within the parameter of subjects necessary for a qualitative study (Patton, 1990).

**INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS**

I requested that each person complete a background questionnaire which included (previously mentioned) established research criteria. Once students completed the initial questionnaires and I established who was eligible to participate in the study, I began the process of making contact with each individual. All of the seven participants were initially communicated via email; however, once they each agreed to allow for contact by phone, I did so. During the telephone exchange, I explained the nature and purpose of
the study to each individual, and again, asked each if they would be available for a two hour time slot. Upon receipt of affirmative replies, I scheduled a meeting for a time and location that was convenient for the subject, and as reflective of qualitative methods, set to occur in locations of natural social settings that allowed for interactive dialogue (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The interview sites ranged from a private meeting room in the library, to several interviews being conducted at the participant’s residence. In two instances, I picked up students from their homes and conducted the interviews at my own, as I was informed that it would be easier to do so, due to the fact that the students had young children that would make the interview noisy if conducted at their residences. On each occasion, I called the participant one day in advance to remind them of the interview.

When I met the participant, I again described the purpose of the study, my curiosity with the topic area and the rationale for the consent form (Appendix B). After asking the participants if they had any questions I asked the participants if they would willingly and verbally give consent. As each obliged, I reminded them that the interview would be tape recorded, and that they were free to stop at any point at which they wanted. To further protect the
participants, I requested that each select a pseudonym for the duration of the interview.

I proceeded to interview each participant utilizing an open-ended interview approach, because as Tierney (1991) notes, “the researcher develops a protocol of general questions that need to be covered; however, the researcher is free to move in any direction that appears interesting and rich in data” (p. 9). Thus, this approach allowed me and the students the opportunity to investigate topics that were not diametrically related to the preliminary inquiries. The interviews ranged in length from fifty eight minutes to one hour and forty nine minutes.

RECORDING AND TRANSCRIPTION OF INTERVIEWS

The phenomenological process of interviewing the participant was composed of a number of key elements that are utilized in the analysis of data. To begin, through the process of transcription, I sought to begin identifying significant proclamations or phrases of the individuals studied that spoke to and captured the meaning of the phenomenon of resiliency. This process was crucial to the findings of the final report, because it ultimately created the foundation on which the entire study is based. This process was also quite extensive, as it required that I truly become married to the data (James-Brown, 1995) so that each
significant proclamation was brought to the surface. Within two weeks of each interview session, the tape recorded data was transcribed by a third party. I then listened to the recorded interview and tracked the typed transcript to make certain its accuracy. Next, I composed a preliminary investigation of the interview. I analyzed the participants’ responses and summarized their thoughts and ideas as I comprehended them. Within a two week period, I then returned the transcript, along with my thoughts and analysis, to each participant, which provided each respondent with the opportunity to return to the topics that were discussed, and offer any additional feedback or clarification they deemed appropriate.

Data Analysis

The implementation and analysis of phenomenological research has been addressed in a number of books, journals and articles, including Tesch (1994), Giorgi (1994) and Moustakas (1994); duly, there is general agreement in regard to how to proceed in the conduction of both research and analysis (Oiler, 1986). It is imperative that an awareness of the philosophical perspective behind the approach be available and utilized, in order to conduct a quality study. It is also important that a researcher have a clear understanding of the procedures for the conduction of a
phenomenological study in order to ensure that he or she can analyze the data in a method that will clearly bring out the voices and lived experiences of the participants. There were a number of steps that I followed when completing the present phenomenological study. These steps included thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying and reporting the findings of the data (Kvale, 1996). Following Moustakas (1994), I identified an essential phenomenon to study and then proceeded to study the phenomenon of resilience by a review of the literature on the subject, which particular attention being given to African American students. Next, I derived two central research questions that were structured to capture the meaning of the phenomenon: How do highly resilient first generation African American college students make meaning of the life’s experiences? And secondly, what can educators and institutions of higher education learn from these students that might serve to allow for the creation of an educational environment in which a greater number of marginalized students can be successful? With these questions in mind, I then began the process of data collection, commencing with the initial employment of a pilot study, which served to provide me with an opportunity to rethink and revamp my approach to the subject matter, and particularly, my methods
of drawing out information from the participants. After the data was collected, I moved into the data analysis phase of the investigation.

Following the identification of the significant statements present in the data corpus, I began to reduce the 237 pages of interview transcription data into units and themes (Moustakas, 1994). During this course of action, I underwent a quest to find overlapping themes and testimonials that were continually acknowledged by interviewees, decided how to group the themes and proceeded to describe the meaning of the proclamation for the individual. During this process, I also revisited my research data to ensure that I accurately accounted for the lived experiences noted by the participants.

After I reduced and grouped the research into units and themes, I then scrutinized the context in which the participants reported experiencing the meaning themes or units that emerged from the data. The themes discovered ranged from some students feeling unsupported and even misguided by parents, community members and educators, to the feeling of isolation in the university setting; the students also reported the influence of poverty in their lives, as well as the lack of positive role models. The absence of parental figures, as well as perceptions of low-self-efficacy
also emerged. Other students discussed their sense of the obligation to succeed as being a grand factor in their lives, and others acknowledged the impact of extracurricular activities in their college journeys. Overall, 127 themes emerged throughout the research; while many were only brought up by one student, or only appeared once, note their existence in the data must be acknowledged.

When conducting the analysis of the phenomenological data, I identified not only what the participants reported experiencing, or the textual experience (Moustakas, 1994), as well as the background, circumstances, and/or the situation in which they encountered the experiences, which is also known as the structural experience (Moustakas, 1994). I performed this task in my analysis and wholly recognized that both the structural and textual experiences are key to the analysis of the data in that they provided me with a means to more accurately put into context the experiences of the participants. Thus, the data was carefully mulled, searched, and deconstructed so that the analysis of the experiences of the participants spoke to the heart or essence of the phenomenon of resilience and most importantly, accurately reflected the themes discovered during the research (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Additionally, upon recognizing the great number of themes in the data, as well as the situations
and circumstances in which the students experienced the occurrences, I proceeded to reduce the data into six groups: personal, family, academic, economic, environmental, and institutional factors as a mechanism by which to organize and analyze the data. By utilizing such an approach, I was able to bring forth four final, dominant and overarching themes of resiliency that surfaced across the respondent group and began the process of unveiling the findings in chapter five of this investigation: fuel through faith, education as a safe haven, the obligation of success, and self-regulation. Each of the themes was derived from the 117 preliminary themes noted by the respondents as they sought to make meaning of their lived experiences.

METHODS TO ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF DATA COLLECTION

When utilizing interviews for data collection, I employed methods to increase the quality of data collection, as well as increase the trustworthiness of the research. There are several methods that I utilized to aid in these endeavors including field notes, peer debriefing, member checking, transferability, and ethics. Each technique, recognized in the world of qualitative data collection, enabled me to “gain a more holistic view” (Morse, 1994, p. 215) of the phenomenon of resilience as described by each research participant.
FIELD NOTES

The use of field notes are a key feature in the research processes of many qualitative researchers (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Therefore, throughout the interviews process, I collected such notes for each respondent, after gaining permission from each individual to do so, in an effort to enhance and expand the quality of the data gathered. In taking field notes, I was able to keep track of themes and conversation pieces that I wished to probe more deeply or needed clarification on, as well as to keep track of difference instances of emotion shared by the students. I also used the field notes as a means by which to describe the body language of the respondents, which I could not capture through tape recorded data of the sessions. When students significantly raised or lowered their voices during the interview, I detailed the instances in my notes. My field notes also allowed me to interpret and analyze the text later in the process (Bernard, 1994), which was helpful in my ability to better understand statements made by the participants. The field notes were also critical to the interview process because they helped me capture my own thoughts and perceptions of the students and the information shared.
When I completed each interview, I immediately began a write-up of the information and themes that most stood out in my mind, as well as what I observed and experienced throughout the interview process in terms of the behaviors, expressions, and varied emotions shared by the students. I made note of the questions that seemed to bring the greatest discomfort to the participants, as well as the events they described as bringing them the most joy. I detailed the experiences that the body language of the students revealed as being heavy in their spirits; I was careful to record catch phrases that respondents used to explain their journeys. Even before I looked at the transcribed interviews, my field notes enabled me to see a great variety in themes that emerged. At the end of writing up field notes for the last interview, I found that I had taken more than 40 pages of field notes. Consequently, as I began to listen to the tapes and review the transcribed data, I could reflect back to the notes as a means by which to provide a lens for both viewing and analyzing the interview data.

**PEER DEBRIEFING**

Peer debriefing was yet another measure I used as a means by which to enhance the quality of data collected. As Denzin (1994) explains, “credibility is increased through peer debriefing” (p. 513); I employed the aid of two peer
debriefers as I conducted my investigation. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 308) describe peer debriefing as "a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind." In this investigation, I met with two unbiased peers (i.e., persons who were agreeable to ask inquisitive questions, yet who were not contributors in the locale where the inquiry was being performed) who then probed the methods, emerging deductions, and predispositions of my analysis. This technique was used as a way to keep myself honest by having a neutral party call attention to the implications of what I was doing.

We conversed on numerous occasions as I performed the various interviews about issues that developed in regard to the student’s inquiring about the likelihood of university members being able to identify them through the research as well as one student’s desire to not be seen as a victim. It is important to note that I did not share the detailed transcripts of the interviews with anyone, not even my peer debriefers, yet I imparted a number of my evolving research themes to both persons in order to obtain honest feedback on my analyses. Each debriefer’s suggestions, particularly with guarding the confidentiality of my research participants,
proved beneficial to the researcher during the research’s progression.

**MEMBER CHECKING**

The member check... is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility. If the investigator is to be able to purport that his or her reconstructions are recognizable to audience members as adequate representations of their own (and multiple) realities, it is essential that they be given the opportunity to react to them. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314)

Through the process of member checking the data record, interpretations and findings were examined by the each individual who provided the data. I performed member checks throughout the course of data collection by delivering copies of the transcripts with my interpretation and notion of themes that emerged to each of the interviewed participants. Further, I met with each participant to go over the coding, and allowed the participants to clarify thoughts and themes of the data. Once the participants validated or negated the perceptions illustrated in the report, I was able to enhance the data to most accurately reflect the experiences of the students. Thus, the measure of data collections served as a means by which I added accuracy and wealth to the final
report and most importantly ensured that the students’ experiences were accurately depicted in the study, Kuzel and Like, (1991).

TRANSFERABILITY

In qualitative research, the issue of transferability is best described by Lincoln and Guba who assert that:

The naturalist cannot specify the external validity of an inquiry; he or she can only provide the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility. ...It is, in summary, not the naturalist’s task to provide an index of transferability; it is his or her responsibility to provide the data base that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers. (1989, p. 316, italics are in original text)

The qualities of qualitative research renders it impossible to precisely identify beforehand the degree to which the outcomes of how one study completed at a given time and in a given context will be transferable to others. Therefore, in this investigation, I cautiously outlined the composition of the investigation, inclusive of “descriptions of the time,
place, context, and culture” (James-Brown, 1995, p. 90), through thick descriptions of the phenomenon and factors present in the study, which permits the potential of readers of the study to draw inferences and make connections as he or she seeks to discover instances applicable to their given context or environment, yet does not purport that all findings in the study are generalizable to all first generation college students.

ETHICS

By acquiring Human Subjects approval through The Ohio State University Internal Review Board to commence with this study, potential concerns in regard to the risk to the student participants were eradicated. My investigation was approved by the board, as well as by my dissertation committee; the letter to each participant was inclusive of the rationale and intent directing the study, as well as the potential role of each person. The participants were also asked for their informed consent to the verbal list of requests imparted by myself, and their consent was audio-taped as confirmation; participants were not asked to provide a signed informed consent form in order to further protect their identity. Each participant was notified of how the information would be disclosed, and were informed that the data would be kept for a period of five years, at which
point, the researcher would destroy all interview data, including audio tapes.

All interviews were conducted in private settings, in which only I and the subject were present, as a measure by which to reduce or eliminate the potential for others to uncover the identities of the respondents. Participants were notified of their right to stop their interview, withdraw at any time, or alter any portion of the transcript without interference on my part. Each participant provided a pseudonym which they maintained for the duration and write-up of the study. These measures of caution were taken to prevent the disclosure of particular identifiable information as it is acknowledged that the release of such information may have adverse consequences for a research participant, and I aimed to negate the potential for harm or duress due to participation in the study.

SUMMARY

Each of the aforementioned techniques is a measure that can be utilized by researchers in their aim to enhance the quality of data collection. While it is acknowledged that all research has an agenda (James-Brown, 1995), there are also ways by which to ensure that biases and agenda do not corrode the research; I utilized the employment of methods such as the field notes, peer debriefing and member checking
to work toward that end. And when interviewing, I continually sought out ways to put into place safeguards that enhanced the trustworthiness of my research, which is crucial in the field of qualitative research due to the reality that it is often substituted as a gauge of validity and reliability in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1989). As a result of through my carefully constructed and completed phenomenological analysis of the interviews, I seek to contribute to the field, and most importantly, allow the research to serve as an accurate account of the stories as revealed by the participants.

CONCLUSION

Notably, phenomenology and interview have a rich history in that they each serve to make known the voices of persons studied in research. Interviewing as a data collection technique has long sustained itself in the field of qualitative research; there are many methods that are employed to aid in the enhancement of data collection so that the voices of those who may experience a phenomenon are clearly heard. Phenomenology has been instrumental in meeting this end, in that it helps to seek out the meaning that lives in the voices and experiences of those studied. Further, when a researcher seeks to analyze data, both phenomenology and interviews emerge as key to the approach by
providing a framework from which the research can investigate data and note themes, as well as patterns and occurrences that aid in a greater understanding of the research and its participants. Ultimately, one can both design and implement a study of lived experience using interviews as a source of data; after all, those interviews provide researchers with a primary opportunity to recognize the wealth of experiences that reside in the hearts and souls of individuals.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

“….I always think: If it is to be, it’s up to ME.”

Amaya

The aim of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of resilience as detailed by first generation African American college students. Utilizing a collection of personal narratives spoken in their individual voices, the participants recounted their lives and experiences as they pursued their educational goals. Their accounts began during their time spent in primary school, and continue through their current positions as upperclassmen in college. This story-telling was achieved through their own observations of their steadfastness and success in their academic and personal pursuits despite negative influences that permeated their environments. Thus, this investigation reinforces current resiliency studies which identify a population of students who were reared in extremely challenging environments, yet somehow remain resilient in their academic and personal pursuits. The participants included in this study are resilient in that their traumatic lives, beginning
with childhood, did not lead to a disastrous end. Unlike many of their peers, parents, and fellow classmates, each student took the road less traveled and persists in his/her quest for higher education. In this segment, I provide a portrait of each student, which was gathered by way of their own voices, as derived from the interview. This picture includes the student’s recollection of varied experiences of his/her life, including cultural, psychological, social, and educational encounters, as well as risk and protective factors that were of influence in the lives of each individual. In the second part of this section, I provide evidence of the phenomenon of resilience in each students and how they describe it as being integral in their varied life successes and thus, why I have chosen to identify each one by means by the phenomenology of his or her experience: (1) Shon, “The Incandescent;” (2) Amaya, “The Chameleon;” (3) Tre, “The Trailblazer;” (4) Ramone, “The Architect;” (5) Taylor, “The Matriarch;” (6) Marie, “The Phoenix;” and (7) Gabrielle, “The Visionary.”

It is acknowledged that not every first generation African American student is represented in the seven voices heard in this study; however, it is equally important to recognize the value of each student’s encounter as a valid portrait of their own experiences, and moreover, their
significance in providing a voice to members of an often silenced population. Further, there were several themes uncovered during the investigation that illustrate an overlap in the coping mechanisms, protective factors, and support systems that each student used to persist in their journeys. Thus, by taking note and carefully scrutinizing what these resilient students have revealed, educational institutions and educators can begin the process of uncovering parallels and patterns in the lives of the aforementioned group, and potentially launch programs and processes that aim to provide a greater network of support for the marginalized cohort.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The seven participants of this study amiably offered their time, energy and testimonies to aid in the completion of this study. Ranging in age from 21 to 23, they represented three different institutions of higher learning. Each participant represented a different field of study including architecture, accounting, secondary education, dual major in pre-medicine and biology, dual major in African American studies and political science, criminal justice, and engineering. Three of the participants were fourth-year students, three were fifth year students, and the final participant was enrolled in a joint bachelor-to-masters degree program. The names listed throughout the research
reflect the pseudonym chosen by each student as the protection of their identity was of the utmost importance to me. Their articulation of their lived experiences and encounters with trauma, as well as the impact of varied protective factors serve as the crux of this analysis. Below is a portrait of each student, which serves to provide insight into the phenomenology of resilience as has emerged throughout their checkered chronicles.

PARTICIPANT #1

THE INCANDESCENT: SHON’S STORY

"THIS IS WHY I’M HOT"

I began the interview process with Shon, a fourth year student majoring in Political Science and African American Studies. I agreed to meet with Shon on campus, because as an athlete, his time was pretty tight, and meeting on campus would allow him adequate time to get to practice. I immediately noticed that he seemed very confident in himself, and the subsequent interview would prove me right. Shon is the oldest of 5 children, and as he notes “the man of the house.” Shon was raised solely by his mother; among the siblings, there were three different fathers, none of whom lived with the family. Shon’s mother works in the fast food industry which often meant that the children were left alone while she worked. Further, Shon expressed the fact that his
mother only worked at the restaurant because she was no longer eligible to receive cash assistance from the government, and could not collect child support because none of the children’s fathers were listed on their birth certificates. Shon also informed the researcher that his father had been imprisoned for the last nine years, and prior to that, had only come around once every few years. A high school athlete, Shon was a three sport star (basketball, football, and track), which resulted in his being awarded an athletic scholarship. However, Shon also pointed out the fact that he was only partially on athletic scholarship, as he’d also received a large amount of money from an academic scholarship, after scoring a 30 on the ACT. Having graduated number three in his class and being offered numerous academic scholarships at various colleges, Shon insisted that he’d always known that he was destined for success, both academically and in his perspective career as an attorney, but was not ready to let go of the fame of being an athlete, which is why he opted to continue to play basketball. Yet, he lists his motivation in the sport as being driven by the love for the game, which he notes as being simply that—a game. Shon is quick to point out his greatest drive and
ambition lies in his academic pursuits as he knows that his odds of success are much greater educationally versus athletically:

The funny thing is that while most of my teammates are hooping (playing basketball) because they want to go to the league, I play because I love the game, and I love the ladies (Laughs). No seriously, it’s something about knowing that people love you that motivates you when you on the court. But on the real, I know that if I broke my leg tomorrow, those same folk would not give a damn about me. So uh, that’s why I decided a long time ago that I would become a lawyer; that’s the way I’ll succeed. God gave me a brain for a reason, and I use it (Laughs). Yeah, I know y’all think that athletes don’t have a clue about school, but I’m not the typical jock...and this is why I’m hot. **Shon; 21-year-old African American male; 4th year dual major in African American Studies and Political Science; college athlete**

Throughout the study, Shon makes it very clear that he has encountered a number of roadblocks and threats to his success, including attempts by an uncle and two cousins to enter the world of drug dealing, peers who dropped out of school and ridiculed him for staying enrolled, a mother who still battles a severe drug addiction, and lack of positive male role models. However, he also notes that much of his resilience comes from knowing that he must be an image of success for a number of persons, and in particular, for his siblings. Shon also goes on to share his experiences as being the man of the house and consummate role model and
burden of responsibility for his two younger sisters and two younger brothers, a role which he says he now accepts:

There is no man in my house beside me; I’m all they have. And seriously, most of the time, I’m the only adult because my mom is too busy doing her own thing. I set the tone...My little sisters will let men treat them a certain way because of how they’ve seen me treat women. And I refuse to let that image be negative. My brothers are looking for me to give them another example beside my cousins who drive old schools (early model cars with a variety of modern features that are expensive to install) which they bought with drug money. I am the only good male role model any of them know. I gotta let them see me make it without the fast life to get me through. They (brothers and sisters) go to some of the worst schools in the city, just like I did. And so when they complain about the teachers not caring, I tell them if I made it through that system, they can too. There are no excuses (Pause).

Failure is not an option. So I make them work harder and study more because I know that they don’t learn everything they need to know. All of us are smart kids, and I will make sure that they all go to college (Pause). Even if I have to find a way to pay for it myself. I know in my heart that my mother doesn’t have a clue about how to inspire my brothers and sisters to want more because she doesn’t want much for herself. So it’s up to me to make them rise to the occasion. And I know with God’s help, that is possible. Just look at how He brought me through. **Shon; 21-year-old African American male; 4th year dual major in African American Studies and Political Science; college athlete**

In response to the query of how he makes it through, both academically and as an athlete, in spite of the pressures and issues at home, Shon offered me insight on how
he recognizes his charge of being a strong Black man, as well as the inspiration for others in their own journeys:

You know what? I accepted the fact a long time ago that I was called and born to lead; that’s what God ordained for me. And I am not afraid of that calling. My brothers and sisters are looking to me for all the answers, and if I don’t have them, then they’ll find somebody else (Pause). And where we from, I’m scared of the answers they will find. I don’t want my sisters to be mothers at 15 like our mom was. I don’t want my brothers to father children and then walk away for the responsibility of raising a child. I want to be there when they each walk the stage at high school graduation and at college. And daily, I ask God to make sure that I meet each of my own goals so that I can help my kids, because that’s what I look at my brothers and sisters like, reach their goals, too. I am a strong black man, regardless of what society tries to make people think. I’m that man that has a plan and works it. Coach always tells us to play hard, smart and together (Pause). And that’s how I play in life. (Pause) Hard, smart, and together. (Laughs) I’m polished.

Shon; 21-year-old African American male; 4th year dual major in African American Studies and Political Science; college athlete

Upon being asked about other influences in his life, both negative and positive, Shon offered this perspective, which denotes his taking what many symbolize as a source of destruction and demoralization for African Americans and uses it for good:

People always make it seem like rap music is the root of all evil; to me, rap music has provided me a chance to see other people struggle and make it through. I never had the ‘hood’ dream of being a rapper. Instead, I listen to what they say, I hear their struggles, and I see myself in it. Tupac,
for instance (Pause). That brother was deep. When he talks about his mother’s drug addiction, the problem with teen pregnancy, and um, just tryna make it, I feel him. When I talk about rap motivating, I’m not talking about these asses who rap about rims and gold chains (Laughs). I’m talking about those who realize that the rap game is a way to reach your community and they um, um, try to do so. Look at Common, Talib Kweli, and The Roots. That’s what rap should be about (Pause). Motivating our people to aim for more, and uh, and see how bad things really are. That’s why I keep saying ‘this is why I’m hot’ (Laughs). It’s from a rap song, not the best rap song, but to me, I am hot because I know who I am, where I’m goin’, and how I’m gone (going to) get there (Pause). And not just for me, but for the other four people who I know got my back, and expect me to lead them to the light. God’s gonna make sure that I make it, as long as I make the right choices. And that’s it; I choose to make the right moves, regardless of what looks fast and easy. It’s like Jay Z said. No lie, just know I chose my own fate I drove by the fork in the road and went straight. Shon; 21-year-old African American male; 4th year dual major in African American Studies and Political Science; college athlete

Shon illustrates his acceptance of his destiny and his lot in life, but most importantly, illustrates the phenomenon of success in spite of circumstance. Overall, Shon revealed that he accepts his role as a leader and example for others to follow, as well as acknowledges his academic gifts as he progresses in life. Having mentioned his coach as being of influence, I asked Shon how he viewed the overall university climate, particularly in regard to what it is like to be an African American student at the university. Shon noted:
Um, wow. That’s a deep question. Let’s see (Pause). Honestly? (I nod yes). It’s like they expect me to be dumb, because I’m a Black athlete. For instance, my professors always seem surprised when I say some intelligent in class (Pause). Not in my African American studies classes, but in my political science classes. Like last term when I started talking about the November gubernatorial race. It was like my professor couldn’t believe I knew anything about the election. And (laughter) I was thinking, hey dumb ass, I am a poli sci major (Laughter). And then he says, you’re a very articulate young man. And I knew that what he really wanted to say was you’re a very articulate BLACK man (raises fingers to symbolize quotation marks). And I say that because every other person in the course speaks just as well, or better than I do. And um, he’s never said a thing about them being articulate. But they also happen to be White, so it’s like their being articulate is an expectation, while mine is an exception...And as an African American it’s hard to function in a place where you know you ain’t wanted. But we do it anyway. Me and my friends talk about it all the time; about how we kinda got our own college here. We go here, but we don’t fit here. But we do it anyway. Shon; 21-year-old African American male; 4th year dual major in African American Studies and Political Science; college athlete

Shon reveals yet another experience that points to the university climate as being hostile, in that instead of expecting all students including African Americans to persist, there exist a covert and sometimes overt expression of skepticism for the ability of Black student to succeed. He details an experience that exposes the theme of expectation of failure:

Whew. (Laughter). I could go on all day. (Pause). Let’s see (Pause). Oh yeah! I
remember when I first came to (the university) and the teacher was going down the roll. He started to talk about how we should all take our educations seriously and not be a waste of space. Now, this is in an honor’s seminar, mind you. Later on, as we were leaving, I stopped up to ask him about his office hours because that what an older student told me I should do. He looked my straight in the eye and asked you will still be here next quarter, won’t you? I looked directly back at him and asked why wouldn’t I? He turned red and started giving me some bull about how many students drop out. Finally, I just said, okay, I understand, but I really just want to know when your office hours are…. Yeah, what’s even crazier is that he felt like he could question me in a way that he didn’t question his other students. That hurt, but it also made me realize that no matter what my academic credentials were, some people still couldn’t see pass my black face. So yeah, that pissed me off…but I still got my shine on. I made it, even though people don’t think Black athletes graduate. I’m so close to it, it’s already mine.

Shon; 21-year-old African American male; 4th year dual major in African American Studies and Political Science; college athlete

Throughout the phenomenological unraveling of Shon’s experiences, even in those in which he revealed the expectation of his failure by others, the theme of resilience continually emerged, each of which lent merit to my labeling him as “The Incandescent,” which defines Shon’s rise to the occasion while under very oppressive and searing circumstances. The American Heritage Dictionary (2007) denotes incandescence as (1) the release of obvious light as a result of being heated, (2) dazzling or bright (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/incandescent). In
Shon’s case, incandescence symbolizes his shining both academically and athletically, as well as his strong sense of self worth and which is distinguished by devoted passion and strength, as noted through his steadfastness in guiding and his siblings down a different path than what they currently witness, as well as his strong will and desire to love his siblings as God has loved him. Having lived through a number of the risk factors noted in the lives of African Americans, including the expectation of failure, Shon continues on his journey of success, not only academically, but also by helping to shape the lives of others who will come after him, developing his sense of identity as a Black man, and carving out paths that ultimately, points him in the right direction.

PARTICIPANT #2

THE CHAMELEON: AMAYA’S STORY

“She told me I would be just like my mother; I had to prove her wrong”

Amaya’s story is yet another one that speaks to the resolve of a student remaining resilient despite obstacles that littered the path of life. I could immediately see that Amaya was a ‘people person’ and her bright eyes and bubbly personality showed none of the pain that her story would later reveal. There was a particular confidence and wisdom about her that I’d rarely seen in individuals of her age, and
she immediately appeared comfortable in the research setting. When I asked her why she chose to participate in the study, she revealed that for the first time in her life, she felt comfortable revealing to the world how she became to be the woman that I was viewing. She laughed when she told me that she was probably most comfortable because she was using a pseudonym, but she really felt that someone might gain inspiration from her story, because she believed if she could make it, anyone could. Thus, my journey into her lived experiences began with Amaya revealing that her story would be composed of a series of events and people in her life, as she had spent time in the foster care system before being adopted at the age of twelve. She noted that she was the third born child out of a group of six siblings; her birth mother was a drug addict for as long as she could recall which led to the state’s removal of all children from her mother’s care when she was eight years old. This removal was a result of the children being raised in substandard housing conditions, poor parenting by the mother, and the mother’s severe drug addiction. From there, Amaya would spend the next four years in three different foster homes and one group home. Amaya revealed that she believed that she knew who her biological father was until she donated blood at age 18 and discovered her blood type to be A, although both her
biological mother’s and father’s were type O (She learned their blood type when she made contact with both individuals after she reached age 18, and needed the information for health reasons). Amaya noted that she was labeled as talented and gifted at an early age, which resulted in her placement in programs for gifted children in predominately White schools outside of her home school. When asked to recount some early experiences of stress in her life, Amaya offered this example:

I remember one particular encounter when I was in kindergarten. Do you remember the little square tables that we had to sit at back then? (I nod yes and she laughs). Well, anyway, I’m sitting at the table coloring with a new set of crayons I received as a gift, probably from some program for poor people (laughs). So the little White girl across from me reaches over and snatches the crayon. Of course, I snatched it back. Hell, you didn’t get new crayons very often when you lived like we did (laughs). So I had to reclaim my property, shoot! After I took it back, the teacher came over and asked the little girl why she was crying. She told her that I’d taken the crayon from her; the teacher then took ALL the crayons from me and gave them to the other girl. I immediately started crying and told her that they were my crayons! She never even bothered to ask the White girl if they were my crayons. And then she told me that lying was not acceptable, and I needed to stop stealing before I ended up just like my mother. To this day, I remember feeling like shit and sooo ashamed, but at the same time, something in me snapped. I stopped crying, looked her straight in the eyes and told her I will NEVER be like my mom. It’s sad, because a six year old should never have to hear such messages, but at the same time, I really credit her for putting a permanent sense of
defiance in my spirit. And from that day, I knew that regardless of who my mother was, I would not be like her. Even today, I carry her words in my head every time someone doubts my ability or looks at me as less-than due to my race, background or gender. And you know what? That bitch never did return my crayons! (Laughs).

Amaya; 22-year-old female, 5th year criminal justice major

Through this experience, Amaya reveals the theme of the desire to disprove, particularly as she learns the harsh reality of what it means to be guilty by association, as she is being judged by the shortcomings of her mother. She reveals her belief that she bears the burden of having to work harder and smarter than others, yet also reveals an acceptance of her plight as she uses it to fuel, rather than distinguish her dreams and aspirations. This theme continued to emerge in her depiction of her experiences, even in her present role as an African American student on a predominately White campus.

When asked about how she views her role as an African American student seeking higher education, Amaya notes that she recognizes that there are many people who initially doubted her ability to succeed, due to her experiencing so much trauma early in life. Thus, the theme of silencing the voices of doubt radiated throughout our conversation as she offered more examples of knowing that others were skeptical of her ability to succeed, simply because she looked like “
an average, poor Black woman without much hope” (Amaya’s words). She laughed as she told me that exterior doubt is a great source of motivation in her aim for success. As she puts it, where many students are deterred by the stress and skepticism created by others, she believes that it serves as God’s way of ensuring that everyone has a testimony:

You see, I believe that your test is your testimony, and your misery is your ministry. And boy, do I have a story to tell! (Laughs). When I first walked on campus, I remember them telling us to look to our lefts, and look to our rights. Next, the workshop leader says, at least half of you won’t be here next year. I remember thinking, it’s sad that these students that I’m sitting next to won’t be returning. It never even crossed my mind that I would be one of those students, because I always think that I can do anything. Besides, this was my way out. So um, when I arrived on campus, I immediately thought of myself as a graduate because I was ready to adapt to the environment and do what was necessary in order to succeed. Getting a college degree was a requirement, not an option for me. I worked hard to earn a full academic scholarship that guaranteed me five years of funding, so how could I not make it? As long as God okayed it, I knew I’d be okay, too. But I’ve always said that if I am ever in a position to tell students that some will succeed and some won’t I’d never tell them in the way that she did, because I honestly believe that a lot of those students lost hope on that same day. A lot of them didn’t come back the next year. I think to some, it was an invitation and an excuse to fail, because in their minds, people were already expecting them to. **Amaya; 22-year-old female, 5th year criminal justice major**

Here, Amaya reveals an important element of her resilience as she makes it clear that whenever someone
discusses the potential for failure among her ethnic group, she never internalizes the messages of negativity, although she recognizes that others do. Her journey would continue to reveal instances in which she illustrates her strength to go against the grain and aim high, when compared to not only her college peers, but also her siblings.

Upon the researcher inquiring about Amaya’s siblings, Amaya reported that out of her birth siblings one older sister had 7 children by the age of 26, and the other dropped out of the community college after one semester. She also noted that the sister that is two years younger than her has four children, graduated high school, yet did not go to college and depends on the state for financial support. Her oldest younger brother is currently enrolled in college and is expected to graduate in less than a year. Her youngest brother is currently in jail for breaking and entering, and never graduated from high school. Claude Steele (1992) proposes the notion that the populace is habituated to see the deficiencies in African Americans, and the response gained from this participant supported this statement. When asked what she believed contributed to the different paths of her siblings, Amaya stated:

I believe that each of us took a different path due to our self esteem, environment, parenting [each was raised by a different family, except
the oldest younger brother, who was adopted into the same family as Amaya, and just the will to go on. For me, I refused to ever even consider living in conditions we experienced in our childhood. As a matter of fact, about a year after we were removed from my mother’s custody, the state started to return us one by one, to her care. They made her find better housing, but it was still in the worst of neighborhoods. My oldest sister was about 16 at that time, and she went to live with her father because she had a baby and the new house wasn’t big enough for all of us. My next sister was returned about two months later. A little while after that, my case worker called my foster mother and told her that I would be returning home in two weeks. I was in the room with her when he called and when she (foster mother) told me, I started crying and saying no and asked to speak to my caseworker. He seemed surprised and asked me why I was crying, why I didn’t want to go back home. I told him that if he sent me back, he was sending me there to die. To this day, I don’t know why I said that, but in my heart, I felt like he was giving me a death sentence. He said okay, he would talk to the judge about holding off on returning me, and would call me soon to tell me what the judge decided. Three weeks later, he called to tell me that my sister had been removed from my mother’s care after they had been informed that my mother was making her prostitute her body so that my mother could get drugs. To this day, all I can think about is how God works, because I could have been in the same situation, but I was spared. I think that it was at that moment that I accepted Christ as my Savior, because I realized that He’d been saving me for my entire life. (Pause). And He still does. For my two sisters, I don’t think they ever formed a relationship with God, which hurt them as they went through such trauma. My oldest sister, I think she is a direct reflection of my mother. All of her children were taken from her, too. It’s like she was okay with the cycle. And my sister that was made to have sex to support my mother’s addiction, I just think that she let life get the best of her. They each fell victim
to the low expectations of others and as a result, are exactly what the statistics made them out to be. Amaya; 22-year-old female, 5th year criminal justice major

Amaya went on to share her own perceptions and experiences with her other siblings, which continues to lend support to Steeles (1992) recognition as society being trained to see the deficiencies of African Americans:

My younger sister actually came to live with me last year because I saw that she was headed down the same as my older sister. She was adopted by a very nice family, but I really think that she couldn’t get used to the fact that no one was completely doting on her anymore. Yeah, she was my mother’s favorite and got her way with everything, so when she got to a place where there were rules, she couldn’t stand it. She used to beat up her adoptive mother, so eventually she was arrested when she was fifteen and made to live in a group home for violent females until she turned eighteen. She did not finish school while she was in there, so when she was released, I had her come live with me so that she could finish high school. She did and I helped her get enrolled in community college. (Pause). But then she got pregnant, never began her classes, and moved to Lorain with her baby’s daddy. She never did go on to college, depends on welfare to survive with her now four kids, and is satisfied with her life. She even told me that her case worker commented on the fact that she is exactly where some people expect her to be, after having gone through so many stages in life. And that hurts me because she is so smart and better than what the system believes her to be. (Pause). She just got comfortable at the bottom and doesn’t mind staying there. Amaya; 22-year-old female, 5th year criminal justice major
Here, Amaya illustrates the harm that often results from a self-fulfilling prophecy. While she chose the path that took her far from the lives lived by her family, she details an important trait in many African Americans' thinking, as some believe themselves to amount to nothing more than where they come from. However, she also notes that when influenced by the right sources, the difference in achievement and self-efficacy beliefs are tremendous. In regard to one brother, Amaya recalls:

Now my brother that’s a year younger than her, he is my pride and joy. He was raised with me, and I expect great things from him. We were the only two placed together and I know in my heart that God knew that we needed each other. The adoptive mother we were raised by only wanted us for the check that came with us, and we knew that. So we were treated like second class citizens in that house, so I always made sure that my brother knew how much I loved him. I became his mother. I used to buy him clothes and stuff with the money I earned babysitting and made sure that he always got to school. When I saw people, including our adopted brother, trying to negatively influence him, I stepped in. (Laughs). He still teases me because I used to make him read the dictionary so that he would learn new words. But I also received a letter of congratulations from his high school guidance counselor who told me that my brother had scored very highly on the writing portion of the ACT, which he said my brother told him was a result of me pushing him to always do his best academically. The counselor also revealed to me that my brother told him that I am the only mother he has ever known. He was accepted into (the college) three years ago, and had been enrolled full time ever since. And that
makes everything I do worthwhile; just knowing that my brother saw that I wanted him to have a better life than what we’d always known. Amaya; 22-year-old female, 5th year criminal justice major

Researchers have deduced that another protective factor ascribed to resilient students is the availability of caring adult who cultivate faith, encouragement, and a sense of accountability in the lives of students (Werner & Smith, 1992). The interview with Amaya helped to confirm such a deduction, both as she has been of influence in her brother’s life, and as others have made an impact in hers. When asked about the influences of others in her resilience, Amaya disclosed her view that her adoptive mother was apathetic about her going on to college, and in fact, did not offer any support in the process, yet it was the influence of another adult that impacted her positively:

She could not have cared less if we went to school; as a matter of fact, I once decided to take a whole week off in the eighth grade just to see if she would allow it. She never once asked me why I wasn’t going to school. And that scared the hell out of me. I mean seriously, who just allows their child to make such a decision? But I knew then that if it was to be, it was up to me. So I got up the next week and returned to school, that much more determined to succeed. My guidance counselor called me into the office and asked me about my absences, and I told him I’d been sick. He looked me straight in the eye and said you are one of the brightest students I’ve ever worked with. Don’t let yourself down. From that day, I never missed another day of school, not for the next five years. Him holding me
accountable more than made up for the fact that my mother didn’t care. It made me more accountable to myself and I stayed on the honor roll for the rest of junior high and high school. I always think about what the next step needs to be; how I have to operate. And I always remember that there was at least one adult who was supporting me; I still keep in contact with (him). And to this day, I still act and perform in a way where I never let myself down. **Amaya; 22-year-old female, 5th year criminal justice major**

Amaya’s experiences with varied adults revealed her resilience even when faced with the reality that those who were supposed to support her the most, disappointed her. However, she also illustrates how she utilized a protective factor to offset a risk element, as she turned to other adults for support, guidance, and encouragement. She also revealed how she tried this same approach at the university level, but often felt as though no one provided guidance like that she received from her high school counselor, which she admits, was a big disappointment to her. Amaya revealed the hostility she encountered from the university, which she said was somewhat disheartening, considering the fact that she hoped that it would be a place of comfort. She particularly noted the concept of ‘lip service’ by a number of members in the university community, as they purport the desire to help and create an inclusive environment, yet when the going gets tough, the ‘support’ is gone, also. She discusses the fact
that the university creates false networks for Black students, as she discovered early in her academic journey.

Having been a participant in a program where minority students came to school a week earlier than other students in order to build a sense of community, Amaya initially felt that the university was a place where she would be afforded the opportunity to fit and become involved campus life. Yet, she was disheartened when she recognized her invisibility to the majority population on campus only one week later:

I remember going to into my first week of class thinking I’m ready for this. Um, it was crazy though because when I got into my class, and because I think especially because I was in the honor’s college, I was the only Black girl in there and it kinda disturbed me, because I’d just spent all that time getting to know the other Black students on campus, and now, I was on my own. I am a very friendly person, (laughs) I was voted nicest person to know in high school. But when I tried to talk to some of the students as the (term) went on, I realized that maybe some of them just didn’t know how to talk to a Black person because they seemed uncomfortable. And in one of my classes, the professor never called on me, which pissed me off. Maybe he couldn’t pronounce me name (laughs). But I don’t know, it just seemed like I was foreign to them, even though I was raised in the same state as most of them. So I got involved with a lot of activities outside of the classroom and made sure that I stayed in touch with people who wanted me to be around. And I’m not just talkin’ about Black people because I got involved in my hall council, intramurals, and a lot of other stuff, too. I just made sure that I created and found places to feel comfortable because I felt like the university withdrew the lifeboat immediately after the (weeklong orientation for minority
Amaya; 22-year-old female, 5th year student

Amaya’s experience reflects alienation within the university setting, which was thematic for a number of the students within the study, but she also discusses her coping mechanism and resilience in the face of such conditions. Outside of the classroom, she recalls that she was constantly reminded of how, as she puts it “most White people look at black people” as she shares another experience in which she went to the health center to get birth control and was immediately reminded that she too, was viewed as a weak link within the community setting, and symbolically invisible to some who were supposed to help her along her journey:

...So I go to the student health center one time to get some birth control pills and my annual women’s exam. Normally, I saw (name of nurse), but this time, I saw the gynecologist who was an older white man. When I first walked in, he looked up with a smile on his face, but soon frowned. I thought it was weird but I sat down in the chair anyway. He kept looking down at my chart and told me that he wanted me to get tested for s.t.d’s while I was there. I asked why and he told me that college students have a high number of s.t.d’s in college and I should know that Black students make up a lot of the cases. And he said that he was glad that I was on birth control so at least I wouldn’t be pregnant like a lot of ‘other’ people. To me, I took it like he wanted to say Black people. So, anyway, he kept looking down and says ‘but unless you want to be another person who catches AIDS, you need to use protection because your birth control won’t help if you have AIDS. So just get the tests.’ He still never looked up at me. So I got mad as
hell, I mean for real mad as hell. And so I said really loud, number one, you don’t know a thing about me. If you looked at my chart instead of thinking I have sex because I’m Black, you would know that I take the pills to regulate my period and reduce my bad ass cramps. I had been on birth control since I was 16 because of how bad my cramps were, not because I was sexually active. And then I told him, I don’t even have sex, but even if I did you still don’t need to talk to me like I’m shit or somethin.’ So you can keep that ignorance to yourself. And I got up and walked out. I never went back there, and just went to Planned Parenthood after that. I mean, it was crazy that even though I was in college and in the honor’s college at that, he still looked at me like I was nothing. And the hurt the hell out of me. **Amaya; 22-year-old female, 5th year criminal justice major**

Essentially, just as was the case with Shon, the theme of resilience due to life’s varied experiences even when faced with invisibility and prejudice, has emerged in the life of Amaya, as seen through academic, social and cultural lenses. Moreover, unlike a number of her siblings and even her peers, Amaya refused to let fear, negativity, stereotypes, or negative self-fulfilling prophecies stand in her way as she navigated through life, and now, nears her dream of receiving a college degree. Further, Amaya credits her relationships with her peers as playing a large role in academic success also:

I had a group of five friends from the seventh grade when I was adopted through now. All five of us are in college, and all five had full rides (scholarships). We kept each other going, because four of us are the first in families to
attend college; we all played sports together, studied together, went on college tours together, and fought together when we had to. (Laughs). We filled out our financial aid stuff together, and helped each other move to our different universities. We laughed and we cried together….we were what you call a sister circle. And to this day, when something happens to me, good or bad, they are the first ones who know. I thank God for putting friends in my life to replace the family I never really had. **Amaya; 22-year-old female, 5th year criminal justice major**

Ultimately, Amaya was labeled “The Chameleon” due to her strong ability to change as necessary, adapt to her environment, as characteristic of the chameleon, recognize when both are necessary. In describing varied situations in her life, Amaya revealed that oftentimes, she just instinctively knew when a change was necessary or critical to her survival. For instance, when she discusses her innate sense to resist being-placed with her birth mother, which turned out to be in her best interest, or when she realized that it was time to become a mother to her brother, as no one else was present in that role, Amaya like the chameleon, is controlled by her emotions, which she uses to her advantage as she progresses throughout the varied phases of her life, and thus, remains resilient against the negative elements that make themselves known in her voyage.
PARTICIPANT #3

THE TRAILBLAZER: TRE’S STORY

“MY FAMILY IS EXPECTING ME TO SUCCEED, SO FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION...I GOTTA KEEP IT MOVIN.’”

Tre’s story of resilience is different in that unlike most of the other students in the study, Tre was reared in a two parent home. A fifth year student majoring in pre-medicine and biology, Tre’s story of his lived experiences included his revealing that both of his parents were drug addicts, who often allowed drug dealers to deal out of their home. Further, being raised in a housing project presented another challenge, as the neighborhood was often visited by police, and was home to a number of shootouts during Tre’s youth. Tre recounted losing a friend during the eighth grade, due to such a shooting. He also spoke of the lack of positive male role models in his life, and his often being left to care for his three siblings when his parents would not return home for days at a time. Tre also revealed that as an honor’s student, he originally thought that he would be ridiculed for his receipt of good grades and academic honors, but he soon found that for most people in his neighborhood, he shined as an example of what it really means to be resilient. In fact, when reflecting on his educational
journey, Tre noted that often times, the negativity in the community inspired him to do better:

There were many times when I would stay at school for extra hours, particularly when I knew that my grandmother had my brother and sisters, just so that I could avoid going home to be with two crackheads. It was either that, or go home and have my father tell me about how much money I could be making if I sold drugs. For real (Laughs), I never even had an interest in biology until I realized that the biology club stayed at school the longest. So, when it wasn’t football season, I was in biology club. And I originally wanted to be a dentist, but being in the club helped me to discover that I really like science, and I decided to try my hand in pre-medicine when I got to college. Tre; 22-year-old male, 5th year pre-medicine and biology major

Thus, at a mere 22 years old, Tre has seen how his use of protective factors has allowed his experiences to come full circle; he recently applied to a three medical programs and was accepted to two. At each, he was offered scholarship and fellowship money, which serves to make the journey easier. In response to my question of which program he would be likely to attend, Tre noted that it was more than likely that he would attend the one closest to home, in order to regularly be in contact with his siblings, as he feared for them being left alone with his parents and thus, denotes how he carries the burden of responsibility for others:

...Yeah, I’ll probably stay near here because I want to continue to show them (siblings) a better way of life. Even when I played football, I would make them come and watch every practice and attend every
game, just so that I could make sure they were safe and out of harm’s way. Now, my little brother is playing, and both my sisters think they know more than me about the game (Laughs). And while most people wouldn’t think much about it, I know that for them, they see me as their hero, and I don’t want to be so far away from them that they can no longer see me as that. **Tre; 22-year-old male, 5th year pre-medicine and biology major**

Though it has been challenging, Tre experiences have resulted in his accepting his responsibility, while maintaining high academic honors in school, partly because he knows that his family is counting on him to give them hope, and partly because, as he explains, he has been angered by the people who doubted him. Further, he notes that because of his size and race, he has been continually pegged as an athlete, which brings its own set of negative attention. He recounts various experiences in pre-medicine and biology courses, where was forced to prove that he is smart, and ultimately not a dumb jock. He referred to the term “culture shock” on the part of his professors and classmates, as it became apparent that he was not their expectation of what a pre-medicine student would be and labeled even before he has been given the opportunity to reveal who he truly is, both as an individual and as a scholar:

One of the professors told the class that all students get treated the same, regardless of whether they played a sport. And ahm, this fool was looking at me and the other black dude in the class. I know he was looking at us because we
were sitting right next to each other. (Laugh), I admit, we did it all the time, it was like we had to stick together or something. So anyway, at first I was lookin’ around all confused, tryna figure out what the hell he was talking about. Then it dawned on me that he assumed that I was a football player. (Laugh) The funny thing was that I was gonna go to school to play football, but when (a university offered me an academic scholarship, I just took that. So I raised my hand and asked him what he meant. He said that he knew the OSU had certain expectations for their athletes, but he had certain expectations for all students. So I said that’s fine, because I hope that athletes know that THEY (quotation marks) are also students like the rest of us (quotation marks). He just kinda sat there. Then he cleared his throat and went back to his lesson. No apology, clarification, nothing. And me and the White dude next to me just started laughing, because everybody knew what he had done. And the other black dude was mad as hell.

**Tre; 22-year-old male, 5th year pre-medicine and biology major**

Tre’s knowledge of the stereotypes attached to being an athlete, and in his case being presumed as such created to what he called, a hostile climate in the institution. He said he also was careful not to reveal to people that he was from the projects, as he wanted to avoid the additional label as a thug, which he believed would occur. Tre used the anger and frustration he felt due to the stereotypes and stigmas to increase his commitment and dedication in his academic endeavors. Tre notes that he made sure to spend an adequate amount of time studying, even if that meant forgoing parties and other social events to meet this end. Considering his
experiences on remaining resilient in his aim to become a doctor, Tre offers the following insight in regard to what motivates and sustains his efforts:

I’m the first person in my family to go to college. Everybody is counting on me to finish. (Laugh) Partly because they think that going to college will automatically make me rich, but also because my grandmother always said that I would be a doctor because I like science. And I plan to become one. So, it’s like, I’m not gone let these people run me up outta here. Shit, I don’t have much to go back to, so I’m definitely not gonna quit. I know that they don’t expect me to make it, particularly in my major, but I live and succeed for me and my family. And yeah, that’s what I mean when I say I keep it moving. I don’t let what they think stop me. I got better things to do than let them make me a statistic. So I keep it movin’; yup, I just keep it movin’. Tre, 22-year-old male, 5th year pre-medicine and biology major

In surmising how he views his life’s experience as he has remained resilient, Tre noted that as he looks back, he realizes how a number of his peers, in the same environment, did not make it through. He recounted seeing so many of his peers end up in jail; he recounted his father being sent away for a year while he was in junior high school. He recognizes that his life’s experiences have unveiled to him the reality that while many started the race alongside him, very few crossed the finish line. Moreover, Tre acknowledges the existence of culture in his experiences, particularly as the burden of his social classification became apparent:
...It definitely made me recognize the black man’s burden. It’s like, I have to three steps ahead in order to be equal in the race. I can’t afford to slip up, because that’s what some people want me to do. And I have to say, I have had some great experiences, both in life and in college, but not because others wanted me to, but because I found ways to survive. I made friends with people who look like me, and those who didn’t look like me but still wanted to help. I am going to medical school, that’s a fact. (Laughs) I accept the fact that I have work to do and like my preacher says, a duty to leave things better than I found them. And I’m alright with that. Shit, I have no choice. **Tre; 22-year-old male, 5th year pre-medicine and biology major**

Despite being faced with prejudice, stereotypes and risk factors, as well as the Black Man’s Burden of continually being viewed as aggressive and threatening, the phenomenology of Tre’s experiences reveals that he has developed mechanisms for dealing with the varied stressors which in turn strengthened him and increased his desire to keep his eye on the prize, and therefore, warrants him the title of “The Trailblazer.” As the first member of his family to graduate from high school and subsequently, attend college, Tre is constructing a path and blueprint of accomplishment that each sibling is watching and learning from. Further, he was able to clearly articulate how and why he believed himself to be resilient and self-regulated in his endeavors, which shows his ability to navigate through life’s obstacle, and as he puts it, forgo the fork in the road and go straight. Most
importantly, he has been able to succeed and advance, and as he intended, serve as an example for his siblings who are surely expecting him to assemble a path by which they can follow.

PARTICIPANT #4

THE ARCHITECT: RAMONE’S STORY

“My mother told me that once you start something, you don’t quit. And that’s the foundation on which I stand.”

Ramone is yet another student of which the phenomenology of resilience emerged. Ramone has just recently completed the undergraduate portion of his studies, and is now enrolled in the masters and secondary section of the architecture program. As 21 years of age he comes from a family of modest means, but, as he puts it, one in which the value of education was heavily noted. Ramone’s parents divorced when he was in the sixth grade, and he spoke very minimally of his father throughout the duration of the interview. When asked to what factors he attributed his resilience in his academic pursuits, Ramone was quick to credit both God and his mother with instilling values and ethics in him that serve him well in academia. Specifically, when I asked him why he chose architecture as a major, Ramone offered this account of his decision:

You know what, for real, I think, I think it’s my mom. Like, people ask me that question, like,
why’d you pick architecture? I think, for real, my mom, like when I was younger, like ‘cause she used to brag about me. ‘Cause you know I was smart and everything. She’d like, you know, if she would have said doctor, I might be a doctor right now, you know what I’m saying. Yeah, she made me believe I could be whatever. And uh, she was right, because, I now have one degree and I’m finishing up with the other one right now.

Ramone; 21-year-old male, 4+1 program; architecture major

It became quite evident during the course of the interview that Ramone esteemed his mother as his rock, or strongest and most constant supporter; faith also seemed to play a large role in his resilience and his full-steam-ahead approach to life and in particular, his educational goals:

Um, (pause) one of them was most definitely like my faith in God, like, basically like going to church. And then, uh, studying and knowing like who I was spiritually. I think that kind of helped with, with like everything. Like, all aspects of my life, to just give me the confidence to know that whatever the problem is or whatever the situation is, like I can overcome it. Yeah, um, like when I was in class, I remember praying during the times when I knew the professor was trippin and not grading me right, and um, when I get into situations that I know are not good for me. Um, I make and I’m sustained by faith. (Pause). Definitely by faith.

Ramone; 21-year-old male, 4+1 program; architecture major

Even in light of choosing and succeeding in his architecture major, Ramone was quick to point of the presence of risk factors he encountered along the way, including his
belief that he was being treated unfairly in his courses, due to his different perspective as a result of his cultural reality:

... there’s a lot of politics in architecture. Like, about some students, how they, you know, they don’t work as hard but they still make the grade, or you know what I’m saying. Then, I work just as hard. And it always seemed like that, that the work that I did was different, no matter what I did, like....I think, I think it’s a cultural thing. Like I think it’s just because, you know, I’m Black and culturally I was raised a certain way. And then like my perception of things is just, is just different from what White people perceive things to be. So, I mean, not that one is better than the other, but like, when I present most of my projects, they didn’t understand like, where I was coming from or anything. Even though I worked just as hard and then...... But I think it’s just like, like, the way I, the way I look at stuff and the way I articulate and explain things is just different. It’s just two different ways of doing it. So I guess, from where you’re at, that they just don’t understand it. But there were certain times, like, let me see, I think it was the second year that this one particular student that was in my section, he, uh, he, he had presented, at the end of the year we present our projects and explain the process and how our project, uh, how we thought about it. But uh, the jury, which are the people that we presented to and they critiqued our project, they um, they were asking him some questions, and he couldn’t really explain like the process and how he got to it. Like, his was more abstract, and it didn’t make sense to me. But when he got in front of the jury, who were real architects and not like these professors in the college, he couldn’t explain it. And I was just sitting there thinking like, I can explain all the questions that they are asking me and, like, he couldn’t explain any of them. But um, I remember, like, finding out the next semester that he had gotten a B for the
semester for studio, and I had gotten a C. And I was just pissed and disgusted, but it’s, I mean that’s always the case though...Ramone; 21-year-old male, 4+1 program; architecture major

Other risks factors revealed by Ramone included interactions with peers who failed to make wise decisions, yet Ramone speaks of how he used their experiences to inform his own:

......Some of my, some of my male friends, that did like, stupid shit when they was, when they was my age, and they told me about it, because I didn’t want to disappoint my mom, so I stayed away from that drama. So, you know what I’m saying, I just learned from, some of the stuff I learned, I learned not through my experiences, through somebody else’s experiences. So, I didn’t have to, you know, go down that path and get into more trouble than I needed to. I don’t know, making decisions, like, most of the time I don’t make them by myself, I usually ask, like, consult God, my mom, or somebody older than me and then decide what’s going to be best for me. Ramone; 21-year-old male, 4+1 program; architecture major

Ramone’s interview also revealed that he had feelings of self doubt of his ability, due to a feeling of isolation as the only African American in the architecture program, as well as believing that professors were simply waiting for him to drop out. He offers this perception of his experiences as a minority in the program including his eventual acknowledgement of equal ability when compared to his classmates:

I don’t know, just the way, the way like the politics is set up, in, in my program. Like, it feels like I don’t, like, because it feels like I don’t fit in, and I definitely don’t look like
them. It feels...like I used to jump on my friend like, you know, any minute they’re going to send me a letter like, I’m sorry, uh, we made a mistake. You’re not supposed to be in this program. Uh, we don’t know how you’ve been in here for three years. But, I mean, that’s, that’s just the way I feel. Like, I kinda feel like I’m an outsider, like, like most of the time. Yeah, I mean, ‘cause, ‘cause I used to think, like, um, I used to have this feeling like I kinda snuck in and, um, like I’m not doing as much work as they’re doing, or. So, that might be, that might be the reason, like, why that they’re just getting a better grade than I am. But, I mean, and then, I don’t, I don’t think that way no more. I know I work just as hard, if not even harder, um, on my projects. I put a lot of uh, time and effort into these projects. I make sure that my stuff is tight, and um (Pause) I work to be better than, not just competing with them. Ramone; 21-year-old male, 4+1 program; architecture major

Ramone’s story reveals that he manages to draw strength from feelings of inferiority, as he uses negative pressures to his advantage, particularly as he pursues his academic resilience. And in response to my question of other sources of strength and inspiration that he relies on, Ramone revealed that his familial bond played a large role in his successes, as his mother instilled the value of family in him and siblings at a very young age:

And, I have, I have a very strong relationship with my family. Family is very important to me. My mother always told us that families stick together, and that’s what we do. Even though I’m here, I go home to see them a lot; I go to my little brother’s games and stuff, and I do a lot of stuff with my sisters too. And I know that they are happy for me and um, support me, so that
makes it better, too. Every time I told them I was ready to change from the program, they reassured me that I would be okay. And they were right, huh. Ramone; 21-year-old male, 4+1 program; architecture major

Rightfully labeled “The Architect,” Ramone through the use of various resources, has constructed a virtual reality and model of resilience that has allowed him to succeed where many of his peers and other African American classmates, have failed. As Ramone’s life journey has been positively and significantly influence by the support of his mother and siblings, his faith in God, and his restructuring of his feelings of self-doubt into a framework by which he worked even harder in his pursuits, Ramone’s finished product has been by a true design of resilience by use of protective factors and the refusal to accept setbacks as ultimate failure. Even when he viewed the university setting as hostile, he internalized the feelings of discrimination and prejudice in such a way only fueled his resolve and desire to succeed, rather than hinder his success. As resilience has been characterized as the facility to overcome stress, disturbances, and impediments while effectively adapting and surviving, it is evident that even when faced with fear, self doubt and structural nuances, Ramone found the will within himself to persevere, and bounce back from what could have been any number of abysmal experiences.
PARTICIPANT #5

THE Matriach: Taylor’s Story

“I HAVE NOTHING TO GO BACK TO, SO I HAVE TO MAKE IT...FOR ME AND MY CHILD.”

Taylor’s life is yet another story that unveils the phenomenology of resilience in first generation African American college students. Taylor is a 21-year-old woman who was the first person to respond to my request for research participants. When I asked her why she elected to participate, her reply was simple:

In my 21 years, no one has ever asked me my story. They always look at me and shake their heads because I am a young mother, or they look at me with pity in their eyes. I hate both things. I don’t want their pity, I want them to point me in directions that will help me and my child have a better life. As for their pity and disgust, they can keep that shit. Taylor; 21-year-old female, 4th year engineering major

She also reported that she was thrilled that someone was interested in finding out how she made it through a life riddled with tragedy, abuse, neglect, homelessness, poverty, low self-esteem, academic alienation, and drug addicted parents. Further, she revealed that sometimes she asked herself the very question of how she made it through, and was hoping that the research would help her to discover the answers she was seeking. I could tell that she truly wanted to know how, in spite of life itself she’d made it to her
current position of being within only one term of graduating from college. In response to my request that she tell me about her family, Taylor reported:

We moved around frequently when I was a kid...it was just me, my mom and my baby sister because my father went to jail when I was about nine or ten, I think. He was caught selling drugs and received a 15 year sentence. My mother had always depended on him, so when he went to jail, her life fell apart. Um, it was (pause) crazy. We went from living in this nice apartment to living in the projects in less than two months. And my mother started doing drugs, which ah, only made things worse. We got kicked out of our apartment and had to live with different ones of her friends for about a year. And then for a while we just slept wherever we could. She starting beating me and my sister, and one time when she was whooping my sister, I got up and beat her ass. She wasn’t very big by that point because she was doing so many drugs, so all she could do was scream. When I got off of her, she called me a ugly bitch, and left out the door. She was gone for two days, which scared the hell out of us. Eventually, she stopped coming home for days at a time. One day, she just did not come back at all. So I packed up me and my sister’s stuff, and we got on a bus to go live with my grandmother, who my mother had not told what was going on. When we arrived, my grandmother looked surprised, and I knew it was because she could see that we were desperate. (Long pause). When we told her that we had no clue where ma was, she starting crying and praying. From then on we lived with her....we wouldn’t find out for about six months that um, my mom was in jail. I was glad, because all that time, I thought she was dead. Taylor; 21-year-old female, 4th year engineering major

Taylor goes on to talk about how she got a job babysitting after school to help her grandmother who was ill,
and on a fixed income. She said she also braided hair for
the neighborhood kids, which was a good source of money.
Taylor said she learned first hand the significance of
setting an example for her younger sister, who she revealed,
was extremely angry at being abandoned by her mother and
father, and acted out to show her resentment:

It was like you could look in her eyes and see
her anger, which I knew was really pain and
insecurity. She was getting into so much trouble
at school that my grandmother told us that she
was going to send us to live with my uncle and
his wife if she didn’t act right. I know that my
grandma loves us, but she was already sick, and
my sister’s acting up wasn’t helping. My sister
starting crying like a crazy woman. My
grandmother and I asked her what was wrong and
she said that she was tired of people leaving
her, and that she was sorry for running everybody
away. At one point, she even asked me if it was
her fault that Mommy and Daddy were in jail, and
that’s when I realized that she was acting up
because she blamed herself for my parents’
shortcomings. I told her hell no, those fools
made some bad choices and they had to pay for
them. Yea…I remember, uh, me and my grandmother
hugging and crying with her for like a hour after
that, but from that day on we also knew that we
had to stick together. And my grandmother told me
that I needed to show her how to succeed, because
she (grandmother) wouldn’t live forever. So
that’s still what I try to do, even now.
(Laughs), yup, and every time I won an award, she
was there clapping the loudest. I remember when
I was given the valedictorian speech at my high
school graduation I looked out into the crowd,
and I swear, she looked like she was prouder of
me than I was of myself. Taylor; 21-year-old
female, 4th year engineering major

161
For Taylor, being a role model for her younger sister is of critical importance and even greater inspiration, particularly as her grandmother has now passed away and Taylor is all her sister has left. She wholly recognizes the importance of offering praise, support and guidance to her sibling, as way to make her see her worth. When I asked her to elaborate on the importance of helping her sister see her self worth, Taylor notes that in her own experiences, the lack thereof became a risk factor with serious implications:

When we were with my parents, my mom would always talk about how pretty my (sister was), but she would only call me her 'smart baby.' And while she probably thought that was a compliment, it made me feel ugly. Yeah, smart, but ugly. So as I grew up, I tried to be the smartest wallflower you can imagine, but I hid in big clothes and behind sports. I’ve always been good at math and science, so I was selected to participate in a pre-college program that gets scholarships for women and minorities who want to go into engineering. I was the only student from my high school, which pretty much alienated me from everyone in the program. But for real, I loved that program because it gave me something else to think about, not about my parents. And when I was designing projects, I didn’t even worry about my sister. And in my senior year, I met my (daughter’s father), who told me I was beautiful. I would later realize that I am attractive (laughs), but him telling me I was all the confirmation I needed when he asked me to have sex with him. He was my first real boyfriend and I wanted to share that (virginity) with him, but I didn’t expect to get a baby out of it, damn. (Pause) Now don’t get me wrong I love my child to death, but I know that I should not have been a mother at such a young age. And I was worried to death about how my sister would view me after
that. I mean, uh, I now know that I had sex because he was the first man that I thought loved me and thought—or at least said—I was pretty. And I don’t want her to fall into the same trap. So I continually tell her how beautiful she is, and I have my boyfriend serve as a role model for what a real man should be. He is a great father and he treats my little sister like she’s his. She’s thirteen now, and I want her to know just how valuable she is, and to always treasure herself. **Taylor; 21-year-old female, 4th year engineering major**

Though Taylor has rebounded and emerged victorious from her experience of low self-esteem, she illustrates her commitment to making sure that her sister never experiences the trauma and feelings of inferiority she once did. When asked what she now thinks propels her to stay the course, Taylor responded that her sense of responsibility for her sister and her child, her promise to her grandmother, her academic scholarship, and her lack of having a place to call home all serve as motivators. The fact that her child’s father is still in the picture also serves as a protective factor, because Taylor also mentioned how some of her classmates and peers are struggling to raise their children alone. She also recounts her experience of being homeless and depending on others for shelter as being instrumental in her remaining resilient:

I swear, to this day, there has been no worse feeling in my life than not having anywhere to go to sleep at night. I remember some nights coming home from school, meeting my mother in front of
the corner store, and going from house to house (her mother’s friends’ homes) pretending that we were visiting. In reality, we were trying to waste time so that eventually someone would tell us to just spend the night because it was too late and too dark to walk home. I remember praying to God that he just give us somewhere to live, because I was so tired of not knowing where we would go next. That was only a little bit before my mother left for good and He sent us to my grandmother’s house. I’ve never stopped depending on God to answer my prayers from that day to this one. And He’s always come through, even when I didn’t deserve His blessings. I have nothing to go back to, so I have to make it, for me and my child. And also my sister because in my eyes she is my baby, too. Taylor; 21-year-old female, 4th year engineering major

For Taylor, the recognition of responsibility, as well as acknowledging her past, has been instrumental in her ability to overcome trauma, and thus integral in her being noted as “The Matriarch.” She knows that she is not only accountable for herself, but also for the two lives that she must mold. As the head of household, even at the young age of 21, Taylor recognize that her resilience serves as a means to an end, and moreover, as an example of what it means to recognize one’s strength as they aim for success, even when factors seem to be working in heavy opposition. Thus, if it is accurate that resilience refers to the exercise of overcoming the harmful effects of risk exposure, coping effectively with traumatic events, and avoiding the negative
pathway associated with risks (Fergus and Zimmerman, 2005), Taylor has truly mastered each feat.

PARTICIPANT #6

THE PHOENIX: MARIE’S STORY

“I DON’T WANT TO CHEAT THE WOMAN I MUST FACE IN THE MIRROR”

Marie is a 23 single mother who I spent considerable time getting to know initially through email. This was primarily because during the week, she worked and went to school, and when she was home on weekends, she was tending to her 3-year-old son, who she labels a “handful.” In our initial conversation, Marie informed me that she was a single mother, a secondary education major, and worked part-time at the university’s library. She also told me that she really wanted to participate in the study, but would not be able to do so until the end of her summer term classes, which I informed her would not be a problem. When we finally scheduled a date and time to meet, she asked if I would mind meeting at my house, because she guaranteed me that her son would not bode well with sitting quietly for the two hours I asked her to block off. I happily obliged, and even arranged to pick her up. When we met, I could see that she was tired, but at the same time, happy to participate in the study. I began telling her about my interest in the subject of resilience, and also gave her information about my own
background of growing up as a student who would have qualified for the study. She then told me that she was raised in a housing project, was the oldest of 5 children, and was born when her mother was only fifteen years of age. She also informed me that her mother did not know who her father was, as a result of promiscuity, and she revealed that not knowing who her father had been a source of pain for her entire life. When asked about experiences that she believed confirmed her being a resilient person, she noted that:

My peers were definitely my biggest source of support because we all came from broken homes and had to make it on our own. But I don’t think any of them had it as bad as me. For starters, just growing up with a mother who did nothing but criticize me was reason enough to want to give up. But I eventually found out that it was because she was ashamed that she had no clue who my father was. And because she had a child every 1 to 2 years after I was born, I think that she think she missed out on her childhood, and tried to make up for it later. And um, you know, her behavior came at the expense of my missing school to watch my brothers and sisters when she didn’t come home. And there were times where she didn’t let me go to school because she had, as she put it, things to do. And she even criticized me for spending so much time reading and doing homework. So when I went to school, I loved it because there, I was just a kid, too. That’s crazy, huh?

Marie; 23-year old female, 5th year secondary education major

Marie went on to discuss the stigma that came along with having a mother who was known in the neighborhood as a whore, as well as being forced to raise her siblings. However, she
did note that she did not mind the latter, as she would rather have them influenced by her instead of their mother. Marie also recounts being angry at the world and at one point, deciding that life was not worth living:

One time, my mother came home high or drunk, shit, I don’t know which one (laughs) and tells me that she going to Columbus with her boyfriend for a week, so she needs me to watch the kids. I starting crying because it was the week of our schools knowledge bowl, and I had earned the right to participate. She told me to shut the hell up because she had been making sacrifices for me her entire life, so it was time for me to make some. And then she packed some stuff and left. At that point, I went to the roof of our building and stood at the edge, looking down. Inside I was already dead. And I admit, I really wanted to jump. (Pause). But then I heard some of my brother’s and sister’s voices coming from our apartment downstairs, and I knew that if I jumped, it would be like taking them with me. I was their mother, even though I’d never even had sex. But the guilt of even thinking of killing myself and leaving them to deal with her was enough to pull me off that roof. I prayed to God then that He would help me to make it. And I felt life come back into me; I got up, wiped my tears, went downstairs, and acted like nothing had happened, but I knew that a storm was coming. And I knew that God would bring me through it, just He got me down from that roof. Marie; 23-year old female, 5th year secondary education major

When asked how she views that experience now, Marie, after a deep pause reports:

I now know that I cheated death and at the same time, discovered why I needed to live. I have to be an example to others, and I knew that God was looking out for me. (Pause). That’s why I was still here. And um, Not just for me and my
brothers and sisters, but my cousins and the other little kids in the neighborhood look up to me. I’ve always been smart and school has always come naturally, but my situation at home threatened to take my opportunities away. So finally, a week later when my mother returned, I told her that I was not staying home anymore, and she would have to find somebody to take care of her kids. I was missing about 15 days of school each year, and even though I was getting at least a 3.6 each semester, I had too many absences to be listed on the honor roll. So it was kinda like all my work was in vain. That same week, I remember the counselor calling me into the office and telling me that if I missed any more days of school, she would report me for truancy, which meant that I would be expelled and my dream of graduating with honors and going on to college would cease to exist. I was so mad at my mom that I went home and went the hell off. (Laughs quietly). I told her that it wasn’t my fault that she had five kids, and she needed to be a mother instead of trying to act like their sister. I told her that I was not going to be like her, a welfare mom who didn’t know who fathered most of her kids, because I was gettin’ the hell out of there as soon as I turned eighteen in three years. I told her that her, or nobody else was going to stop me from going to college. I think that she saw the rage in my face. I wanted her to hit me because I knew that if she did, I would try my best to break her jaw. She just looked at me for a while. (Pause). Then she got up and walked out. Marie; 23-year old female, 5th year secondary education major

Although Marie’s recount of the reality that she might be locked out of her college dreams starts out as what can be taken as a risk factor, she then reveals how the moment changed her view of a lot of things, and thus, made her that much more determined to achieve success:
...She came home later that night and asked to talk to me. I reluctantly faced her in the kitchen and she took one look at me and started to cry. She apologized for so many things that night, she even apologized for not knowing who my father was. She told me that she hated herself for what she was. (Pause). But she also told me something that made me have sympathy for her. (Clears throat) She told me that my grandmother’s husband had molested her for a number of years, and when she told my grandmother, my granny called her a lying bitch and told her to get out. She let my mom come home, but she never asked her boyfriend to leave. Finally, I understood why my mother would never let us spend the night at my grandma’s and why she always showed such hatred for my grandma’s (now) husband. She wouldn’t even let us call him Granddaddy, and now I knew why. When my mom moved back in, she said he kept doing it to her. Finally, my mother told me that she got him to stop by telling him that she would call the police the next time he touched her. He stopped, but my mother told me that she hated herself after that. And she started giving herself to men because she didn’t feel like she was worth much. She also told me that for the first time, on today, she realized that she was being to me, who her mother was to her: a selfish, poor excuse of a woman. And she told me that if I would let her, she wanted to make things right with me, because she didn’t want me to be like her. She wanted me to be proud at the woman staring back at me in the mirror, and she wanted me to take advantage of my opportunities. That was the first time since I was a little girl that I looked at her as a mother, and not a disgrace. I also realized how much I loved my mommy, regardless of how she acted. We cried together and prayed together. The next week, she signed up for g.e.d. classes and the she got it (her g.e.d.), and went to (community) college and got a degree as a paralegal. I remember sitting at graduation and thinking, if my mother can come back and be successful after all she been through, who am I not to succeed? That was also my first year in college, and I know that seeing
her complete her degree inspired me even more to get my own. **Marie; 23-year old female, 5th year secondary education major**

When asked about her relationship with her mother now, Marie smiled and told me:

I could not ask for a better mother, and I am proud of the way she is raising my brothers and sisters. Before, she would let them do whatever they wanted. Now, they have rules, curfews, and guidance. She’s a mother, now by nature AND by nurture. And when I got pregnant during my freshmen year of college, she cried with me, but she never once told me she was disappointed. I told her that I was gonna take a year off and save up some money to support us. She told me hell no, there was no way that I would take time off. My baby would be born in the summer, so she said there was no need to sit out the following fall. In fact, she told me that she would help me raise my child every step of the way. And she has. She keeps my son during the week so that I can work and go to school. She drops him off at daycare before work and picks him up afterward. And she never asks for a dime. (Laughs). She jokes that that’s because she owes me several years of free babysitting anyway. And every time I pick him up, she tells me how proud she is of me, and how much she loves me. Every time, it’s the best thing someone has ever said to me. **Marie; 23-year old female, 5th year secondary education major**

When asked how she looks back on the experience with her mother, Marie offers this perspective:

I have no hard feelings about how my relationship with my mother once was. Like I said before, I felt sorry for her. It also taught me that you never know a person’s story until they tell it to you. Just like now. My friends (the ones in college) always tell me that they envy my relationship with my mother, but they have no idea what it was like for fifteen years. We’ve
come a long way, and I am glad that she is my mom. She taught me that sometimes it takes someone else to expose you in order for you to finally look at yourself for who you are. And then it’s up to you to figure out if wanna fight or take flight. And in many ways, she exposed me when she exposed herself, because I don’t know that I would have stayed in school after having a baby if she hadn’t been there to cheer me on. I don’t run from myself. (Pause). I stay and fight because I know that I can make it. I’ve been through enough to know that now. I won’t cheat the woman in the mirror, and I won’t disappoint my mommy. Marie; 23-year old female, 5th year secondary education major

Rightfully so, the resilient Marie has been labeled “The Phoenix” due to her close encounter with suicide, and onward to her regeneration when she fell into her weakest moment. As the phoenix is said to rise from the ashes Marie proved to be ‘immortal,’ and further, used her tears (her talk with God and her plea that He come into her life), as does the phoenix to heal the wounds and broken spirit of her life. By and large, Marie’s interview revealed that even when faced with a series of risk factors, she too, had the will and drive to remain resilient, and the courage to rise again, and advance to near completion of her undergraduate degree. Her experiences are as supported by Wang and Gordon (1994), descriptive of resilient children who develop into skillful, educated individuals, and overcome their predicaments to shatter the succession of disadvantage, and in many cases enable others to do the same; ultimately, the
phenomenological analysis of Marie revealed that on her way to success she has invited her mother along for the ride, and in turn, this creates a better environment for each of her siblings, herself, and her mother and she expects to see each of them accomplish great things as they too, denote what it means to be resilient.

PARTICIPANT #7

THE VISIONARY: GABRIELLE’S STORY

“I DON’T WANT TO LIVE LIKE MY PARENTS...I DON’T WANT THAT FOR ME...”

Gabrielle can be described as an attractive, shy, and personable young woman. At 21 years of age, and at the time of the study, she was preparing for graduation, which could occur in the term in which the interview was conducted. An accounting major, Gabrielle was also granted admission into a prestigious collegiate scholars program, which helps her to research graduate programs and learn more about research, as well as provides substantial financial support and additional resources to assist her in the process. Further, Gabrielle will be applying to graduate programs within the next few months, and hopes to begin her graduate studies by fall 2007. Gabrielle was raised in a two parent household and has one younger sibling. While Gabrielle recognizes the value of being reared in a two parent home, she also points out that
there were a few separations between her parents throughout her formative years. The interview began with my asking Gabrielle to provide me with her definition of resilience. She responded with the following:

Hm...let’s see. (Pause). To me, resilience means that I could have quit a long time ago, but something inside of me tells me that I can’t. It basically means that I can go on, even when things get crazy, because I am able to. It means that I don’t want to be like so many other students who started college at the same time as me but, three years later, are no longer here. Um, I guess it really means that when the going gets tough, the tough get going. Gabrielle; 21-year old female; 4th year accounting major

When asked to reflect on her journey and provide information on which factors presented themselves as risks to her resilience and things she might have changed on her journey, Gabrielle offers this insight:

There was a time when I wasn’t really comfortable with who I was...I had low self esteem and I think it was because I had a poor body image. And, um, well in the beginning of my college career, I can honestly say that I was a follower. I um, I had my own personality, but I was afraid to show it because I was overweight, and I thought that nobody liked me. I didn’t think that I was good enough for anything. So I kind of, like, clinged on to my friends and their ideas. So if I could go back, I would be more outgoing and I would make decisions for myself instead of latching on to one of my friends and what they wanted to do at a particular time, because I think that would have um, saved up a little bit of trouble for me down the road. But then also, if I wouldn’t have been a follower, I wouldn’t the importance of being a leader now. And I wouldn’t know, I guess, how important it is to actually just be
yourself and let people see the real you. So I don’t know. If I, I, I don’t know, maybe I wouldn’t wanna go back. I don’t know, that’s a tough question. (giggle) That’s a real tough question. Because I wanna go back because, it’s like, you do stuff because you don’t really, you know, you just, you feel insecure, and you don’t think your ideals are good enough. You don’t feel like anybody likes you and then you see somebody who you think is prettier than you, who more people like, and you’re like, I’m going to follow them and see what they’re doing. And then you just sit there towards the end, well like that probably wasn’t a good idea. And you learn from it, but you still wish you, I don’t know. Next question (giggle). Gabrielle; 21-year old female; 4th year accounting major

Here, Gabrielle expresses the influence of peer pressure in her life, but also the fact that she has learned tremendously from her experiences. While she speaks of maybe wanting to go back and change things, she also recognizes each encounter as being of importance in her journey. Now, as a student who is nearing degree completion, she realizes that she did not let her own insecurities or the opinions and behaviors of others stop her; instead, she uses each element to explain why she now places so much value on the fact that she is a leader, because at one point, she simply chose to follow. Even though that appears as a risk factor, it shows that for some students, negative experiences are crucial in the creation of positive outcomes. As Gabrielle continues to unravel her journey, she goes on to discuss another risk factor that became present on her journey and almost
resulting in her enrollment at a community college rather than a four-year university, but discusses how again, protective factors emerge from the dilemma:

...(pause) It was hard in the beginning, because I didn’t know if I was going to have enough money to stay in college. And then I also thought that I may have to go to a lower college, like a community college, instead of a state college, which was very disappointing. But in the end, I ended up getting some grants and some scholarships, and that’s one of the reasons why I became I resident assistant. So that I could have more money to fund my college experience. Yeah, funding, that was a major thing. Even though my parents worked my whole life, they were not able to save up much money for me to go to college. So I knew that would be an issue. But luckily I got some grant money and me and my parents took out loans. But money was still tight, so I had to become an RA (resident assistant) to help make ends meet. But it helped me out in a lot of ways. Gabrielle; 21-year old female; 4th year accounting major

Hearing the reference to being a resident assistant and how it has helped in a number of ways, I asked Gabrielle to elaborate on this:

I didn’t want to become an RA at first, but then there were so many good things about it. Like the fact that I was shy, that I needed to become more outgoing and talk to people. I know that I had some self esteem issues and I was afraid to do a lot of talking. But because I was responsible for maintaining a community environment on the floor, I had to open up. And uh, I think about it this way: if I hadn’t become an RA and would not have had the opportunity to meet most of the people that I’ve met. But the main reason was I needed the money for school because they pay for you room and for your food.
But then also, like I said, I was very shy and I was tired of being shy, I guess. And, when you are an RA, you are forced to be out there. You can’t hide. Somebody is always going to ask you a question. You’ll always have to get up and speak in front of a big group. And I had, I was so afraid of public speaking. So that was another way to kind of overcome my fears.

Gabrielle; 21-year old female; 4th year accounting major

As the interview progressed I asked Gabrielle to further discuss her belief that she should go to a community college instead of a four year college she replied, she revealed that knowing that she had the intelligence, along with the support of her family is what heavily influenced her decision:

I thought at (community college) mainly because it was close to home and cheaper than coming here (present university). And so I felt like, since I wanted to go to college so badly, then maybe I should just go there. But I knew that I was smarter than that, and if I went there, it was just because I wanted to be safe and make sure that I went somewhere. And plus, my parents wanted me to go to a four year school, so we found a way to make it happen. Even though they didn’t have the money for me to go, they found a way to send me; it’s like they refuse to not see me in college (Laughs). Gabrielle; 21-year old female; 4th year accounting major

I asked Gabrielle to say more about what she meant when she said they found a way to send her, and further, how that plays into her persistence:

We took out loans and would have taken out as many as necessary. Um, I think that they would have...our family is, they are doers. So, we would have had some kind of something. We would have had like cookouts and sold food, we would have
sold clothes, we would have sold cars. They wanted me to go to college. I’m the first one in the immediate family to get an education. And it was very important to me, it was very important to them. So we would have made a way. It would have been hard, but I would have been in college.

**Gabrielle; 21-year old female; 4th year accounting major**

Upon hearing about the drive of her family to make sure that she received a college education, I asked Gabrielle how what role she feels her family plays in her remaining resilient, and she noted a few explanations that support research on the ability of the family to positively impact a student’s resilience and drive in education and life:

My family is my biggest support system, particularly my mom. Um, I talk to my mother a lot. I talk to her almost every, everyday. As a matter of fact, if I don’t talk to her for a day, she’ll like, freak out and she’ll call my phone like ten times and she’ll think something has happened to me. So my mom, and she’s a very religious and spiritual person. So I know, my whole my family is. So I know they have prayer groups on Thursday, always wake me up on prayers on Thursdays. And I go to church here also myself and try to get to know God better. So I would say it’s a combination of God, my mom, and just me and my personal beliefs. Knowing that I don’t want to have to; like I know everyone has to struggle at some point and time, but I really don’t want to be like my dad and have no retirement funds set up. And just have to work two jobs for the rest of my life. So I would say those are the big factors that helped get me through college. **Gabrielle; 21-year old female; 4th year accounting major**

Upon Gabrielle’s assertion that she didn’t want to end up like her father, I asked her what exactly that meant, since
she’d previously revealed that he worked two jobs and always provided for the family. However, her reply gave me great insight into another motivating factor in her resilience, which speaks to her recognition of the lack of financial resources being of grave danger to survival and advancement, but also reveals her determination to avoid such quandaries:

But, I would say (pause) just knowing how proud I would make my family to be the first one to graduate, and be able to live better than they do. Just seeing, like, my dad, like, he’s always had two jobs. And there’s something wrong with his, um, he doesn’t have like a retirement fund or a 401K. So when he retires, it’s still going to be hard for him. He still might have to have like a part time job or he’ll be trying to live off my mom. And it’s just, I don’t want to struggle with that, when I get older. I don’t want that for me.  

Gabrielle; 21-year old female; 4th year accounting major

The interview also revealed Gabrielle’s view that a collegiate scholar’s program was influential in resolve to succeed, and helped her to see her options for education which exceeded far beyond the baccalaureate degree. She credits the program with pointing her in the right direction and helping her to view higher education in a new light as well as increased her resilience and confidence in her academic endeavors:

Um, the (scholars) Program is kind of like a family. They taught me so much about graduate school, like, I feel dumb, because if I wasn’t in the program, I wouldn’t know anything about the GMAT, which is the test you have to take to get
into business school. I wouldn’t know anything. I wouldn’t know, been able to travel, and to talk to some of the recruiters at some of the schools. Um, they teach you a lot about how to do research, which is very important in grad school. Also you get to network with a lot of people, um, public speaking. Just everything. You feel like you have a connection. You do everything with this small group of people and they’re really just there to help you get into grad school. They, they show you the way to go, they give you all the resources you need, they write you letters of recommendation. They basically show you the way. If I wasn’t in that program, it would be very hard for me to get into grad school. Or I might not have even wanted to pursue going to grad school. And now I’m determined to do more than get my bachelor’s degree; I now intend to go on for my master’s and maybe even a Ph.D. Gabrielle; 21-year old female; 4th year accounting major

While Gabrielle acknowledges how some aspects of the university have been instrumental in her success she points to others than have at times, made her question her own intelligence, and moreover, her ‘right’ to be there. She also details how she often feels like she is expected to be the voice of her race, which in itself, adds to the pressures of remaining resilient:

At a predominately White school, sometimes it’s hard being the only African-American in the class because if we’re learning about something in the class, and there is one African-American in the text book, they’ll (the professor) always point to me and ask me the question and they think that I know everything about every single black person in the world and the class look at me as the focus for the whole group, which I don’t think is very fair...It makes me feel, like, stupid, because if I don’t know the answer, they well,
that’s your person, those are your people, why don’t you know the answer? Or they just, I feel like everybody is looking at me. So if I do something wrong, they’re going to say, well all Black people do this, or if I do something right, they’ll make, they might be like that’s just a lucky guess, or something like that. I know that they look at me like I am every Black person in the world. So I try to change how I know some of them think about us. But do I fit? I don’t really think I do…with some people, I feel like I don’t belong sometimes.

Essentially, Gabrielle is unveiling her experience of carrying the “Black (wo)Man’s Burden” in that she expected to be the voice of her race, and not allowed to simply be herself when in the academic setting. Further, she has taken on the burden in that she consistently works hard in order to give others a positive view of African Americans, rather than have them think of Black people in a negative light. My interview with Gabrielle also unveiled a notion commonly depicted among resilient persons: the belief in addition to serving as a positive example of Black people, she can also reach heights never realized by others in her own family, which increases her determination and resolve in her academic journey:

It (determination) comes a lot from my family, but it also mostly from me. Like I don’t want to be mediocre. I don’t want to have a regular job. I don’t want to be a townie or a local and just, (pause) not waste my life but I know that I have so much potential and that there’s other stuff that I could do. Like, (pause) I used to want to be a doctor, because I always wanted to help
people. But accounting was just better for me, I really like numbers. I really like working with math and things like that. And there were definitely some road and I even reconsidered whether I really wanted to be an accountant. Um, also, like some road blocks, accounting is not easy. So, in some of my classes, like when I got into my junior level, I got a few C’s in some of my accounting courses, and that was very discouraging for me because I graduated sixth in my class at high school, I had a 3.8. So coming to college and getting C’s in actual class, it just kind of stressed me out. Thought maybe I should change my major back to regular business. Because that was easy, it was easier than just regular accounting. But I just had to stop and think, accounting was what I wanted to do. And that’s where I want to go. And I can’t just quit it just because I get a C. Well, um, it’s basically the choice that I had to make, like am I going to be a punk and change my major and do something that I really don’t want to do, just because I got C’s. And then like, um, the funny thing that I was thinking about was, um, Albert Einstein, he wasn’t always seen as a genius. So, you have to start from somewhere. And basically what I did, I tried to re-evaluate myself and my position and basically what I did, I started working harder, and my grades did improve. Some, um, some of them stayed the same, but most of ’em did improve. And I started talking to my teachers more. I tried to re-evaluate myself and my study habits. I made changes and I held myself accountable for improving. And I just kept going. Now, I will graduate with honors in December. Gabrielle; 21-year old female; 4th year accounting major

Finally, I asked Gabrielle why she forges ahead, when she looks around her and realizes that the student population, particularly those of African American descent, has thinned out dramatically during the course of her college career. After taking a long, thoughtful pause, she told me:
...just knowing the fact that, I also have a little sister, as I said before. And just maybe, now, she really doesn’t want to go college, but maybe her seeing me in college, or something. Maybe she can know that she can do the same thing. Most of all, I don’t want to disappoint myself. (Pause). And I don’t want to disappoint my family. Um, yeah, my family, they’re already taking their days off. And calling everybody around to come see me. My friends; everybody. And just the fact that I’ve accomplished something for me. Even though I talk a lot about my family, this is for me. I spent the time working towards my goal and I’m finally going to be done. So, I think that’s really important to me. I achieved what I set out to accomplish, road blocks and all. And I don’t want to be like my parents, not knowing how and if I can ever really retire...I don’t want that for me.”

Gabrielle; 21-year old female; 4th year accounting major

It is noted that a visionary is an individual of extraordinarily intense forethought and Gabrielle, through her expression of her experiences in succeeding against the odds, as well as deciding long while back that she would not follow in her parents footsteps, nor would she succumb to the view posed by others as African American as falling short in both life and in education. As she makes apparent, Gabrielle recognizes the harm and imminent danger in not planning for the future, and by remaining resilient, is creating stepping stones by which to avoid the plight that her father will surely face upon retirement. As the visionary, she also sees how the work she does today will impact her people, her community, and even the people who see African Americans as
foreigners and/or failures in society. Moreover, she also has constructed a vision for success as a means by which to inspire her sister, which denotes her ambition to be a catalyst for change in the lives of others. Notably, Gabrielle recognizes the role of her family in contributing positively to her resilience and academic achievement as she was able to a great number of obstacles encountered due to the close connection and support of her family. Accordingly, in her role as the visionary, Gabrielle has proceeded to plan ahead for the future, while also taking the time to embrace and acknowledge the system of supported provided by those who wish to see her succeed, as well as her own determination to do so.

**CONCLUSION**

Each student painted a convincing portrait of what it means to be resilient. As a key component of resilience is the existence of both risks and protective factors that either lead to a positive outcome or lessen or dodge a negative result (Khalil, 2003), the phenomenon is clearly present in the lives of the student participating in this investigation. Many of the students noted personal factors in their desire and ability to persevere; others concentrated on the influence of parents and peers in their journeys. Still others noted the higher education institution as being
of either negative or positive (and in some cases, both) in their lives, while yet others spoke of the community’s role in their being resilient, despite severe trauma and circumstances. Thus, as a psychological paradigm, resilience offers an integrative structure for analyzing personal, community and institutional assets that can be cultivated and amassed to decrease the outcomes of vulnerability, danger, and hardships experienced by first generation African American college students. The next chapter will concentrate on unveiling the emerging themes illustrated through the students’ experiences, particularly to provide a clearer picture of themes that became apparent in multiple participants’ recollection of their lived experiences.
"...when things get the roughest, I always ask God to either lighten my load or strengthen my back. And He hasn’t failed me yet."
- Taylor

The interviews created data in the areas of personal and academic success and persistence, family dynamics, campus climate and environment, social support, the influence of peers, and the students’ strategies and coping mechanisms when they encountered risk factors. I coded numerous themes throughout the data analysis process, and each theme is listed in appendix F, along with the participant’s personal demographics.

The further analysis of the individual interviews in this sample of seven highly resilient, first generation African American college students revealed four overwhelmingly overarching, significant and prevailing interpretive themes that illustrate the experience of resilience in their ability to forge ahead, even during those times when it seemed as though all was lost. These insightful
themes and protective factors, represented in the following exemplars are: (1) fuel through faith; (2) education as safe haven; (3) obligation of success; and (4) self-regulation. Moreover, encapsulated in each of these salient themes are notions of the right to succeed, the refusal to fail, and resilience as a riposte to life, which emerged across the sample, and which can be characterized at the student’s having a **Fight, not Flight** approach to each predicament encountered in their lives. I will revisit this foundational code at a later time in this chapter, but first desire to provide insight on the four principal codes, are (highly correlated to and ultimately,) embedded in the foundational code.

**FUELED THROUGH FAITH**

[God] was right there in the midst of them. He wasn’t way off up in the sky. He was a-seeing everybody and a-listening to every word and a-promising to let His love come down. *Spoken by ex-slave Simon Brown* (William John Faulkner, 1977, p. 54)

The theme of **FAITH IN A HIGHER POWER**, through both God and spirituality, emerged as an integral theme in regard to 6 of the 7 students making sense of how they have been most heavily supported in their quest to avoid becoming a statistic. This central finding substantiate what is already alluded to in a number of studies on African American
culture, which is the importance of spirituality in the ability of the group to remain resilient (Boyd-Franklin & Lockwood, 1999). For six of the students, their very belief in the Higher Power enabled them to overcome a number of situations that may have meant their demise, if not for their faith. One participant, Shon, acknowledged the fact that his grandmother made sure that he developed a relationship with God because she believed that God never fails, even when those you love the most, do:

You know what? I accepted the fact a long time ago that I was called and born to lead; that’s what God ordained for me. And I am not afraid of that calling….God’s gonna make sure that I make it, as long as I make the right choices. And that’s it; I choose to make the right moves, regardless of what looks fast and easy. **Shon; 21-year-old African American male; 4th year dual major in African American Studies and Political Science; college athlete**

The theme of God continued to emerge as I interviewed additional students. In Amaya’s words, her relationship with God serves as her catalyst for success even though she no longer lives in the condition of poverty and despair she once knew. She discusses how her experiences have made her a better person, strengthened her faith and relationship with God, and enabled her to attend college, and subsequently reveal her story to me, because she is now a victor. She continues on to discuss how God made His present known,
within her spirit when she learned that the courts had
decided that it was time for her to return home and live with
her mother, who Amaya still believed to be incompetent as a
parent. She describes how her siblings were to be placed
back in the care of her mother, a process that occurred one
by one, and commenced with an older sister. However she
provides a narrative that describes how she was almost
returned to her mother’s care by the state, yet begged her
social worker not to send her home, for fear of going back to
the same conditions of poverty, neglect, and abuse previously
experienced. Upon negotiating with the social worker, he
arranged for a delay in her return to her mother’s care, a
move which she believed to be in her best interest, as her
sister was removed from her mother’s care shortly after Amaya
was to be sent home. The cause for the removal was due to
her mother making her sister prostitute so that Amaya’s
mother could receive drugs from a dealer. Amaya sums up the
experience as one that potentially, saved her life:

To this day, all I can think about is how God
works, because I could have been in the same
situation, but I was spared. I think that it was
at that moment that I accepted Christ as my Savior,
because I realized that He’d been saving me for my
entire life… (Pause). And He still does. Amaya;
22-year-old female, 5th year criminal justice major
The rhetoric of using “Faith for Fuel” would continue to unravel throughout the various stories shared by the majority of the students:

Um, (pause) one of them was most definitely like my faith in God, like, basically like going to church. And then, uh, studying and knowing like who I was spiritually...Yeah, um, like when I was in class, I remember praying during the times when I knew the professor was trippin and not grading me right, and um, when I get into situations that I know are not good for me. Um, I make and I’m sustained by faith. (Pause). Definitely by faith. Ramone; 21-year-old male, 4+1 program; architecture major; “The Architect.”

This theme was again echoed by another participant seeking to make meaning of her experiences. Taylor revealed her experiences of moving from place to place with her mother and sister after her father was jailed for the distribution of drugs. She discusses her consistent prayers to God that He gives her and family somewhere to live. After she and her sister were abandoned by her mother, she states that God answered her prayer by sending them to live with her grandmother:

I’ve never stopped depending on God to answer my prayers from that day to this one. And He’s always come through, even when I didn’t deserve His blessings. Taylor; 21-year-old female, 4th year engineering major; “The Matriarch.”

Marie, who became a mother at the age of 19, shares yet another experience in giving God control and trusting in him to see her through, after her mother made Marie assume the
role of parenting her younger brothers and sisters. Marie describes how the devastation of the reality that she was expected to forgo her education to perform the task of parenting nearly drove her to suicide, yet resulted in her belief that God stepped in to save her:

And I knew that God would bring me through it, just He got me down from that roof...I now know that I cheated death and at the same time, discovered why I needed to live. I have to be an example to others, and I knew that God was looking out for me. (Pause). That’s why I was still here. Marie; 23-year old female, 5th year secondary education major; “The Phoenix.”

Gabrielle too, would point to God as a source of her strength, particularly as she hails from a very spiritual family that always encouraged her to form a relationship with God:

So my mom, and she’s a very religious and spiritual person. So I know, my whole my family is. So I know they have prayer groups on Thursday, and always bring me up for prayers on Thursdays. And I go to church here also myself and try to get to know God better. So I would say it’s a combination of God, my mom, and just me and my personal beliefs. (On how she makes it through the trials she encounters now in her academic pursuits). Gabrielle; 21-year old female; 4th year accounting major; “The Visionary.”

In the theme “Fuel by Faith,” it is important that the difference between religion and spirituality be noted, as while the majority of the students noted God as the source of their strength, they did so through the lens of a personal
relationship with God, rather than simply the church as a vehicle, which is often the notion expressed in numerous literature on African Americans and spiritually (e.g., Taylor, Chatters and Levin, 2004). Rather, as noted by Mattis (2002), religion diverges from spirituality in that religion is the “degree to which individuals adhere to the prescribed beliefs and practices of an organized religion” (310), and spirituality, particularly in African Americans is:

- faith in an omnipotent, transcendent force;
- experienced internally and/or externally as caring interconnectedness with others, God, or a higher power;
- manifested as empowering transformation of and liberating consolation for life’s adversities;
- and thereby inspiring fortified belief in and reliance on the benevolent source of unlimited potential.

(Newlin et al, 2002, p. 65)

While the church may be of influence in the lives of each student represented above, it is the relationship itself with God that the students cherished the most, as they revealed that oftentimes the knowledge of His love and protection is what enabled them to carry on. Ultimately, the theme of faith and spirituality presented itself to be of cultural relevance in the lives of this group of first generation African American students, and helped to shed light on how a protective factor can outshine a risk factor when viewed
through the right lens, or as in the case, when one believes in his heart that a brighter day is coming.

**EDUCATION AS A SAFE HAVEN**

Another prominent theme noted through the data was that of education as a safe haven, as a number of students revealed that even though they encountered a number of prejudices, stereotypes and roadblocks through their educational pursuits, they inherently recognized that proper schooling and academic success was of the utmost importance in their ability to compete in society. Thus, many of them sought refuge in institutions of higher learning, although some felt disappointed in the lack of support and outreach provided by educators and administrators. Additionally, as research has made known the effect of academic success on a student’s complete quality of life (e.g., Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999), the fact that each student comprehends the importance of their academic persistence, even when faced with isolation in the setting, is worth noting. Yet, another prevalent theme that emerges from within the concept of education as a safe haven is that for many of these students, school, whether it were primary, secondary, or in their current college settings, enables them to escape from the negative environments that many described within their homes and communities. As it is distinctive of high achieving,
resilient African American adolescents to exhibit a “high level of engagement and sense of personal agency” (Wang, Haertel and Walberg, 1998); the students made sure to stay involved in a number of activities that were sure to keep them away from home and the realities of life. Through the pursuit of cultivating relationships with peers, counselors and teachers and their immersion in environments that support their development (Lee, Winfield and Wilson, 1991), each student sought to remain steadfast in his or her pursuit of excellence. For Amaya, the experience of being told that more than half of the African American students she enrolled with would not return the following year, she details how immediately she felt sympathy for those students who would not persist, yet she never even entertained the possibility that she would exit the university. In her view, “getting a college degree was a requirement, not an option,” for her. However, she would also disclose that the following year, she discovered that a number of her African American failed to return, which she noted as being depressing to her, even though she persisted in her own endeavors, because it brought forth the reality of the true problem of attrition among Black students.

In its influence as a place in which students could explore options that they never knew existed, many
educational bodies also gave the students a choice to avoid the pressures of the street, as well as, in many cases, the pressure from those who were supposed to act in the student’s best interest. Tre spoke of how he would often stay late at school to avoid going home and being forced to deal with two drug addicted parents, one of which (his father) pressured him to sell drugs. However, Tre noted the positive impact of his decision to become more involved in school activities, particularly as he became interested in going to medical school after spending a great amount of time in the school’s biology club.

To others, the educational system served as an escape from the reality of knowing that both parents had fallen victim to the streets, and thus, not even available to be in the student’s life. Yet, it also provided one student with an opportunity that would eventually result in her receipt of a full academic scholarship to college. For Taylor, her participation in her school’s math and science program was influential in her counselor nominating her for a pre-college math and science programs that focused on increasing the number of first generation students of color, and particularly women, in the math and science fields. Her participation in the program would eventually lead to her being awarded a full academic scholarship, and influenced
Taylor’s view of the educational institution as a positive influence in her life.

For yet another student, education as a safe haven meant that unlike the home environment in which she was expected to be a parent, she could simply be a child again:

And there were times where she didn’t let me go to school because she had, as she put it, things to do. And she even criticized me for spending so much time reading and doing homework. So when I went to school, I loved it because there, I was just a kid, too. That’s crazy, huh? Marie; 23-year old female, 5th year secondary education major

The theme of the educational institution as a safe haven resounded in the lives of students, and serves as a reiteration of Wang, Freiberg, & Waxman’s (1994) study that pointed out the importance of the educational arena in helping to create an environment that differs drastically from that found in the homes of many inner-city children. Not only does taking a positive role in the lives of students increase the number of protective factors in their lives, but it also enhances the school’s ability to effectively educate its students (Masten et al, 1990). The phenomenological approach reveals that while many are quick to dismiss the schools and university from their role of nurturing its students, for a number of individual, it may very well be the only place in which they can be celebrated for their
achievements, and ultimately, see that life is much more than projects, poverty and disappointment they often find in the places they call home.

OBLIGATION TO SUCCEED

“My family is expecting me to succeed, so failure is not an option...I gotta keep it movin’.”  . *Tre; 22-year-old male, 5th year pre-medicine and biology major*

The experiences, as imparted by the students, also revealed an overwhelming theme of the obligation to succeed, due to the fact that the students all felt that their failure would not only impact their lives, but also the lives of their siblings, children and loved ones who looked to them for support, guidance, and most of all, hope. The roles range from one student who became a mother to her younger sister after the imprisonment of her parents and the death of her grandmother, to another student who was left to raise his four siblings after his parents fell victim to drug addiction, to yet another student who became a mother during her first year of college. All seven of the participants recognized and received the calling to be the example, and stay the course. For Shon, the reality that he was the man of the house, and thereby the role model for his younger siblings contributed to his view of success as obligatory to both himself and those he knew were looking to him for a path
to follow. He also discusses the societal role of being the image of a man that his sisters will seek out in their relationships with other men, and he remains adamant about how he always treats women right in order to show his sisters how they deserve to be treated. He also discusses how he must constantly compete with his cousins and other young men in the neighborhood for the attention of his younger brothers, as he seeks show them a path that does not include selling drugs. He acknowledges that each of his siblings is being educated in schools that are lacking in academic standards, which requires that he supplement the learning of his siblings with assignments he creates for them. He reveals that there are times when his siblings attempt to skirt their academic duties, and complain about how they are do not know how to do the work; however, as Shon reminds them, they must succeed, because as he puts it, “there are no excuses; failure is not an option.”

For Taylor, one of the two young mothers represented in the study, the decision to continue in both life and her educational endeavors was fueled by the birth of her child, and her role as parent to her younger sister, that she notes as being of the greatest impact in her educational progression: “I have nothing to go back to, so I have to make it, for me and my child. And also my sister because in my
eyes she is my baby, too.” Taylor’s experience revealed that her resilience was stimulated by her sense of duty as she recognized success as mandatory for the sake of herself and her loved ones. Therefore, the facts of her life did not equal failure; it fact they signified that they she would be the one to break the cycle of poverty, low socioeconomic and poor education that had previously permeated her family.

For Marie, the loved one to who she attributes her obligation to succeed was her mother, who she credits with showing her what it means to bounce back, even when it seems as though all is lost. She said due to her mother’s negative history with men, having five children out of wedlock, and failing to complete her high school education, she took a lot of her anger out on Marie. However, one day, after a nearly taking her own life, Marie decided that she could no longer stand the pain her mother was causing and confronted her. The confrontation resulted in Marie telling her mother that she hated her, as well as hated the fact that she (Marie) was being forced to raise her siblings. She became soft spoken as she talked about how the moment became one that changed the relationship between her and her mother. Marie talked about how her mother would cry after the exchange, admit her shortcomings as a parent, and beg Marie to both forgive her and give her a second chance. Marie details how the moment
became the first in which she did not see her mother as a disgrace, and finally, saw her as a mother who had gone through her share of pain in life. Marie gives an account of how her mother told her that she did not want Marie to be like her, and instead, she wanted Marie to be proud, and not fear looking at herself in the mirror. She also discusses how her mother would soon after return to finish her high school studies, enroll in community college, and earn her degree as a paralegal. She said that it was at the graduation of her mother that her view on life would be brightened: “I remember sitting at graduation and thinking, if my mother can come back and be successful after all she been through, who am I NOT to succeed? That was also my first year in college, and I know that seeing her complete her degree inspired me even more to get my own.”

Each of the students, though driven by different forces, noted a major trait of dedication to both themselves and to others as being of influence in their journeys through life. Werner and Smith (1982) assert that the family is of great inspiration in the lives of many students, as assertion by which the phenomenological analysis of the student participants supports. Each participant is seeking to improve his or her quality of life, as well as that of others who they feel responsible for. Undoubtedly, their resilience
is tied to their desire to succeed, and as Ramone notes “knowing that others are counting on it...and so am I.”

**SELF-REGULATION**

You wanna know why I think I survive? Hmm...I would have to say that it’s because I know that I can only depend on me. Yeah, some people want to help me, but if they didn’t I’d still be okay, because I just work hard. That’s just who I am. I prepare for the unexpected. (Pause). I take care of business so that it don’t take care of me. Shon; 21-year-old African American male; 4th year dual major in African American Studies and Political Science; college athlete

Self-regulation emerged as a significant theme for the participants, largely when they described their efforts to maintain academic excellence. According to Bandura (1977), a person is deemed self-regulated when they have power over their actions, particularly when they employ self-observation, self-judgment, and self-responses as they strive to complete a task or goal, and the term is heavily applied to learning in the educational setting; each student revealed a great level of self-regulation in their academic pursuits, which they attributed to their success, particularly in college:

Every day, even if I spent all night partying, I get up and go to class. I spend a lotta time at the library too. I know that as a pre-med major I can’t slip up and not handle my business. And my friends and my girl respect that. And when I don’t get the grade I want, I don’t get mad, I just work harder next time. And I know that I’m smart, that’s why I’m here. So uh, me working hard is so
that I can make sure that I stay here. **Tre; 22-year-old male, 5th year pre-medicine and biology major**

Gabrielle also offers her description of how she exercises control of her actions as she navigates through her academic career:

I just say to myself the things I need to do, I make friends with people who are friendly. And I do my studying, I have study groups. Um, I make sure I talk to the teachers. And I just kind of (pause) don’t worry about it sometimes, because people are going to say what they wanna say. But, oh well. I do what I gotta do. **Gabrielle; 21-year old female; 4th year accounting major**

For Amaya, the task of self-regulation, as she details it, became second nature, but not before she played with fire. She discusses how she once opted not to go the school for an entire week, just to seek if her adoptive mother would allow it. Upon discovering that her mother showed absolutely no disappointment or anger in Amaya’s decision to stay home, Amaya said that the reality of the situation really struck her hard. She describes the experience as one in which she realized that she was the one who should and had to care the most about her education, a recognition that drove her to go back to school the following week. The good that came from the situation, as Amaya notes, was upon her return her counselor immediately called her into his office. She would view the moment as one where she recognized that while her
family did not offer her the most support academically, her
guidance counselor was truly concerned about her success.
After telling her how bright she was and how disappointed he
was in her absences, he then told her that she should not let
herself down; the encounter would contribute to Amaya’s
perfect attendance record for the remainder of her k-12
career. She attributes her success and renewed vision to
knowing that she had some support, felt validated, and most
important her realization that she was capable of high
academic achievement.

Essentially, when faced with the reality that failure
could overcome her, Amaya expresses how she buckled down and
met the challenge head on, which is characteristic of a self-
regulated individual. Rather than accept the fact that
others were okay with her low academic drive, she instead,
chose to meet academic challenges head-on and evolve. Ramone
provides another illustration of self-regulation in the face
of risk:

...I remember getting accepted to [the university],
then I came up here to look at the architecture
program; I got accepted to the architecture
program. Um, I remember coming here and talking,
meeting some of the faculty. And then there was
this one particular person, I don’t even remember
who he was, like, but, I always remembered his,
when, when I met him, I was like ya I’m going to be
an architecture major. He’s like, oh okay. But he
didn’t, he didn’t say anything, like, just out
right, but he was, you know, he kinda looked at me
and he was like, ya you know it’s going to be a lot of work, right? And he kinda looked at me, you know what I’m saying, I might not be able to make it. But, I don’t know. I always remembered that. And that’s, that’s kinda been my motivation up to this point, like, for those people who thought I wasn’t gonna, you know, do whatever I’ve accomplished, or anything. And that’s why I spend so much time in the studio, so that I have my shit together. I know that uh, some people expect me to drop out like the other Black students did, you know, to quit. But nah, I ain’t goin’ nowhere.

Ramone; 21-year-old male, 4+1 program; architecture major

In each instance, the student discusses the employment of strategies that increased their performance in school, as well as motivated them to complete goals and reach new strides. Moreover, self-regulation emerged to lend itself to the ability of the students to persist, break down barriers, and continue to demand excellence of themselves. Overall, their employment of self-regulation as a protective factor provided each individual with yet another significant influence in the journey toward success.

CONCLUSION

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
    I thank whatever gods may be
    For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
    I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
    My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
    Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.
- William Ernest Henley; 1849-1903

FIGHT OR FLIGHT?

FIGHT. In summation of the phenomenology of resilience as it unveiled itself in the lives of the research participants, it is evident that “fight” is what they choose to do, and they are adept to do so as reflected in ‘fuel through faith,’ ‘education as safe haven,’ ‘the obligation of success,’ and ‘self-regulation,’ which were all great factors in their ability to persist, and ultimately, succeed. By acknowledging their inherent right and will to succeed, along with their refusal to fail, and their utilizing resilience as a response to risk, each student can be characterized at the FIGHT, not FLIGHT approach to overcoming obstacles and aiming for success. Each has opted to stay the course, rather than retreat when faced with the choice. Unlike a number of their peers, Shon, Amaya, Tre, Ramone, Taylor, Marie, and Gabrielle has determined that their lived experiences, no matter how traumatic, would motivate and drive them to persevere, and complete educational and individuals goals that no member of their family had yet accomplished. As first generation
African American college students, each recognizes that they are expected to rise from the ashes and blaze a trail which others can follow; they accept the responsibility of helping to close the achievement gap, to rise above racism and oppression, and to achieve goals that their ancestors only dreamed of. Tre, upon being asked how he best describes his journey, raised his head, looked me square in the eyes, and recited the words of William Ernest Hensley:

…..It matters not how strait the gate, how charged with punishment the scroll; I AM the master of my fate, I AM the captain of my soul!  

Tre; 22-year-old male, 5th year pre-medicine and biology major

And indeed, he and each of the other strong, determined, and intelligent African American students in this study, are the masters of their fates and the captains of their souls; their strong will and resilient spirit have deemed just that. Truly, “The Incandescent,” “The Chameleon,” “The Trailblazer,” “The Architect,” “The Matriarch,” “The Phoenix,” and “The Visionary have all emerged victorious, buoyant, and most of all driven in their journeys.
CHAPTER 6
SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY

I launched this study with two questions in mind: how do highly resilient first generation African American college students make meaning of their life’s experience and to what, or who do they credit their persistence? And second, what can we, as educators, learn from these students that may enable us to create an educational environment where more marginalized students can also succeed? In seeking answers to both of these questions, I discovered that these students, despite tragedy, have recognized triumph both personally and in their educational endeavors, due to their strong will, resilient spirit, and determination to defy the odds. The phenomenological analysis undertaken in the two previous chapters may very well serve to answer both of the aforementioned questions. Additionally, the plight to discover these answers are critically necessary to aid in the ability of parents, communities and institutions to be proactive in combating the high attrition rates of first generation African American college students; it is crucial
to reverse the cycle if we are wish to demonstrate that we take the task and privilege of educating all students, regardless of race, class, or environment, seriously.

Each student in this investigation expressed how they conceive of resiliency as it has unraveled in his or her own life and experiences. They talked about the obstacles overcome, the risks encountered, and their recognition of the downward spiral of others who hailed from the same or similar circumstances. They spoke of the challenges they faced from family members, peers, educators, the community, and their own feelings of initial hopelessness as they matured. However, they also recognized and vocalized how they were in charge of their lives and thus, rejected and defied mediocrity. Each individual viewed education as a means by which they terminated the cycles of poverty, abuse and pain they each experienced, and most importantly, as a way by which they rise above the low expectations of others and honor the expectations of themselves. Indeed, the students recognized that success was a journey and not a destination, and they took each moment of the journey and utilized it for fuel, survival, and eventually success.

It is observed that protective factors, whether individual, communal, familial, or educational, can be of the greatest influence in the sustainability of at-risk students
in their journeys. And as noted that has truly been the case of Shon, Amaya, Tre, Ramone, Taylor, Marie, and Gabrielle; all seven are positioned to realize their dream of receiving a college degree within a year of the completion of the study. Indeed, they have each chosen to fight, and not at all, see flight from the academy or life as an option. They have been fueled by faith, utilized education as safe haven, consider themselves obligated to succeed and are self-regulated in their thoughts, actions and behaviors. Even when faced with poverty, negative influences in the home and the community, drug addicted parents, no role models, divorce, low self esteem, teen pregnancy, low expectations of teachers and educators, academic alienation and institutional racism, and hostility in college environment, these first generation African American college students persevere. Now, it is up to educators and institutions to utilize the information gained from these students to impact the experiences and journeys of those who come after them.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The implications of the findings in this study are many. To begin, it provides a portrait of students who are both first generation and African American, two groups that are noted as having high attrition rates. Additionally, it brings forth the experiences of being both unseen and unheard
within the collegiate setting as perceived by the respondents. For some students, they view their experiences within the university as preparation for mediocrity, rather than excellence. For others, the belief that they are expected to assimilate rather than embrace their own culture is a depressing notion. The study also provides a clear lens of the student’s assessment of the climate within colleges and university, as the reveal that they often it find to be both hostile and uninviting. For these first generation African American college students, education fails to be the land of opportunity that they expected, as they are forced to see that many barriers exist to potentially stifle their ability to realize the complete college experiences they were hoping for. Therefore, in light of each of these factors, I will offer recommendations by which to ameliorate or lessen each hazardous conditions and behaviors within the college setting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CREATION OF A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

For many students their home and communities are not places in which they garner the most support, and thus, as researchers suggest (e.g., Safyer, 1999), they turn to schools, colleges, and universities in their search for peace, growth, and a solid foundation for advancement.
opportunities. The task and shortcomings of many families and communities to provide adequate support systems is acknowledged. Yet as many students have survived the most trying of circumstances in these settings, the task of institutions of higher education to make certain that they create and nurture an environment where students do not feel as though they are again, fighting the hardest battles of their lives is made apparent. Consequently, the implication of the reality of the past of their students for higher education institutions is great: from day one they must construct an environment where students can feel at ease, respected, appreciated, and embraced if they wish to retain a greater number of learners. Institutions of higher education must stray away from ignoring the voices and issues of first generation African American college students if the institutions desire to serve as a true protective factor for the group. I recognize that this study makes apparent the fact that a number of African American college students are highly resilient, yet it also divulges the reality that many view the university as a hostile, unsupportive, and even antagonistic environment, which may very well be detrimental to a number of students, particularly those who are not as resilient as the seven individuals that revealed their stories. As one student notes, for many African American
students their reality is one in which they are feeling a great degree of segregation:

I just hope that the professors and administrators find ways to make students feel more integrated. It’s like, we are being educated, but far from integrated. We live in a whole separate world from the rest of the campus. **Shon; 21-year-old African American male; 4th year dual major in African American Studies and Political Science; college athlete**

Students discussed their belief of being disconnected from the university which should raise red flags for university officials, particularly as a commitment to diversity is expressed as a value by many higher education institutions. As one student expressed, the reality of how some African American students make meaning of the university setting is distressing:

Yeah, and I guess that it gets to me because you hear so much about how (the university) is a good school, and is diverse and values students. I came here to get away from the madness at home! (Laughs). But I don’t feel like I belong because the reality is that (the university) is a good school for white students, values diversity only when it makes ‘em look good and caters to white students……I think that they need to recognize that black students are feeling shafted and unsupported and some people just got the hell outta here. **Shon; 21-year-old African American male; 4th year dual major in African American Studies and Political Science; college athlete**

Even for highly resilient students, the journey to stay abreast in what they deem as obviously unwelcoming
environments is difficult as even though they are completing their educational pursuits, they view themselves as strangers in a foreign land, which should not be the case in institutions that prides themselves on excellence, commitment to diversity, education, and the development of each of its students. Thus, the overarching implication of this study is that educational institutions must seek out mechanisms by which to reach and validate each student in order to make a complete education a reality and not simply a vision, and truly enable each student to reach his or her full potential as well as reach their own as a educational institution that is welcoming, supportive and productive for all its students.

Changing structural elements of the system of higher education is far from an easy task, particularly as it requires a commitment from a number of members in the university community. Yet, this research, accompanied by others that also illustrate the disparity in African American college achievement (e.g., The Condition of Higher Education, 2005) suggests that change in both programs and practices are of the utmost importance in helping to close the gap between African American and White student academic success. To meet this aim, higher education institutions must carefully consider and discuss the struggles of African American students in order to devise mechanisms by which to increase
retention and aid all students in becoming acclimated in the university community if they wish to be viewed as contributor in the achievement and resiliency of their students.

Resiliency research substantiates the benefit of protective factors such as self-regulation, community, educational units and family support, and individual characteristics in the high achievement of a number of first generation African American students (e.g., Tolan, Gorman-Smith & Henry, 2005; Kenny, et al, 2002; Murphy and Moriarty, 1976; Anderson and Walberg, 1994; Lee, et al, 1991), although nearly all of the data has implications for primary and secondary educators and institutions. In these studies, researchers propose that members of the educational community offer students support networks, educational opportunities and comfortable environments in which each student can gain the most from his or her educational experiences.

Researchers including myself, encourage educators to make the students feel valued in the settings, create culturally relevant programs and educational material, acknowledge their positive contributions, create a more inclusive climate, and empower students to aim as high as their abilities allow (Stevenson, 1994; Lee, et al, 1991; Swanson and Spencer, 1991). And while most of the suggested remedies are aimed at increasing academic achievement for
students in the k-12 arena, each suggestion holds great promise for effectiveness at the collegiate level, as often most students are still in need of such systems of support. However, educators must first recognize the problem of attrition and not as only the student’s problem, but as also belonging to them because as Leo J. O’Donovan (1997) notes, “when education fails the child, it fails all humanity” (http://www.ushmm.org/lectures/visions/odonovan.html). It is possible for colleges and universities to transform each of these strategies into functional programs and create an encompassing environment for the marginalized population, as well as construct a community in which the group ceases to feel invisible and begins to feel not only empowered but also invited.

LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

The crux of phenomenology is that it serves to reveal the lived experience of a person as he or she makes sense of the world. For many African American students, their phenomenological verbiage reveals the fact that they feel as though they are unheard; however institutions of higher education are one force that can put an end to the trend. As one student states:

If I had someone to talk to at the university, someone who I knew really cared about me, I think that I would be on campus more, you know, be
involved. But to me, it seems like no one cares or even knows how to help me. I do it on my own; but I know that it would be easier if I had someone there to just give me more direction than how to fill out my financial aid. Sometimes you just need someone to listen and let you know they care.

**Taylor; 21-year-old female, 4th year engineering major**

The fact that students often feel they have nowhere to go is a problem that educational institutions can remedy in a number of ways. The first is to create networks of support that students know exist not only to enhance their college experience, but to acknowledge their success along the way, which can be done through the establishment of networks such as support groups specifically for African American students, peer mentoring programs, student retreats, and connections with alumni who may be able to offer advice and support to those who now walk the same path down which they once trekked. Students are making pleas to be heard, and if universities utilize the sounding posts above, they may very well hear a number of students speak, and illuminate the contentment of their experiences, rather than less favorable dialogue.

**CLIMATE**

While transforming the climate of any institution is not a task that occurs overnight, it is possible for the university to begin to acknowledge and repair its image as
one of a hostile climate. African American students have reported culturally insensitive and stereotypical comments being made by not only students, but faculty and staff as well. In many instances, African American students feel they have been asked to speak for their entire race, which brings a great sense of burden and discomfort to the student. Thus, one such approach to the improvement of climate is the hiring of ethnic minority faculty and staff in an effort to show commitment to diversity, while also increasing the representation of minorities in the campus community. This is not to say that the majority culture is unable to provide support for students of color, but students benefit from the presence of minority authority figures on campus, as it often provides them with feeling of support and satisfaction needed to make their educational experience pleasant and rewarding.

It is also imperative that institutions educate and train White faculty in issues relevant to first generation and African American students if higher education wishes to be most successful in providing a comfortable and helpful climate. Students in the study reported being asked to “speak for their race” by White faculty, which suggests that faculty lack both understanding and cultural sensitivity in relating to African American students. On order to reverse this trend, all members of the university must be encouraged
to gain a greater comprehension of all students present in the setting, and not simply those with whom they share a cultural identity.

**CULTURALLY RELEVANT PROGRAMS, COURSES, AND INITIATIVES**

Institutions must also create programs that are culturally relevant to students in order to create a more comfortable environment. This may be done through programs that serve to open dialogue between the university and students, and universities are also encouraged to provide leadership opportunities for African American students in the larger university community. They can also help to establish African American student organizations in order to assist with students’ social integration into the institution, which enhances perseverance in students’ academic quests (Tinto, 1993). In turn, such initiatives and efforts can lead to a student’s feeling of empowerment and increase his or her ability to submit ideas and offer insight that can be of benefit to the larger student population, and particularly African American students.

Another manner by which to improve the educational experiences of African American students is through the inclusion of teachings about ethnic populations within the core curriculum as well as programs and seminars, as is necessary to truly reflect the diversity of the world in
which we live. To many students, the absence of cultural and ethnic representation in texts and teachings symbolize their invisibility, and undercut their historical magnitude in our country’s progress. By including multiple views in the curriculum the opportunity for understanding, education and respect grows and multiple populations gain access to better knowledge of all groups. Moreover, designing programs and seminars that seek to familiarize the majority culture with minority groups is one approach to remedying the dilemma, as often many individuals fail to recognize behaviors in themselves that may lead students to feel ostracized.

MENTORING PROGRAMS

The study brought to light a harsh reality about the lived experiences of the students, in that for most, positive role models and mentors were not available for the students. The lack of such a support system had dire implications for these students, particularly as they look for examples of success to emulate. The lack of direct mentorship has dire consequences for the university, too; when a number of first generation African American college students lack mentoring and support networks as they attempt to navigate the university, attrition rates increase due to their inaccessibility to guidance in the process (Bernard, 1991). However, when students have mentors that offer guidance and
positive reinforcement, academic and social gains are great (Werner & Smith, 1989). Through the creation of mentoring programs for African American students, universities can better equip themselves to meet the need of a greater number of students, as well as serve as a buffer against attrition. Such an effort would deem necessary the support of various members in the university community, including faculty, staff and students, but is not impossible, as some institutions already provide such network of support. Yet, more institutions must also buy into the concept, particularly those experiencing the flight of marginalized students from its ranks.

**FACULTY, STAFF AND STUDENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS**

Staff and student development initiatives are constantly being implemented by various institutions across the nation in an attempt to create cohesiveness among and across the groups. The creation of such programs is beneficial in that they speak to the dedication of higher education agencies in improving communication across the board. A number of such programs contain a diversity component which aims to increase awareness and a greater appreciation for the multiplicity that exists within the community and many have reported success due to their tremendous efforts. One such program is the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) which is
structured to eliminate prejudice, stereotyping, oppression and inter-group tension (http://www.ncbi.org/home/index.cfm). Some institutions currently sponsor NCBI retreats among students and staff in order to increase awareness and understanding of the differences and issues faced in their university’s community, and it is my hope that more institutions follow in electing to engage in training such as these for their constituencies.

No matter what program is created to respond to the crisis climate, it is suggested that the overall reach of such programs include a faculty component to the scope, as most programs overlook the opportunity to incorporate faculty into their programming, but true educational advancement requires that all vested parties be involved in the process of change. The creation of faculty directed diversity awareness and professional development programs would serve as a means by which to truly create educational and institutional reform, as many student groups, notwithstanding African Americans note the lack of contact and familiarity with faculty as being negative element of their college experiences. Therefore, including faculty in community development initiatives could become a crucial step in bridging the gap between the educators and those seeking to be educated. Additionally, research on college students
reveals that solid relationships are fundamental in a student’s success (Astin, 1999), which makes it imperative for colleges and universities to strengthen the connection between students and faculty if they wish to strengthen the university as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The implications for institutions of higher educations are plentiful. In order to improve the educational setting and outcomes for its African American students, it is incumbent on educational institutions to (1) listen to the voices rather than only view statistical data of marginalized students if they truly wish to discover the factors that are a threat to persistence and retention, (2) recognize the climate of the establishment as being chilly and unwelcoming to students and work to reconstruct the environment, (3) develop programming and initiatives that seek to create a true communal learning environment, as well as (4) train faculty and staff in manners that increase their ability to educate all students, regardless of beliefs or preconceived notions of a student’s ability or motivation level, and (5) continually seek out information that informs their ability to retain and not simply recruit students, and (6) create and appreciate culturally relevant experiences as being a crucial component in the overall scheme of life for first generation
African American college students. If these aspects are addressed, it can drastically enhance a student’s sense of comfort, commitment and connectedness to the university, and therefore serve as a motivator for success; additionally and of great importance, a greater number of first generation African American colleges may persist and move on to join the ranks of college graduates across the world.
REFERENCES


Goodall, H. L., Jr. (2000). Writing the new ethnography. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.


Sanders, M. G. & Herting, J. R. (2000). Gender and the effects of school, family and church support on the academic achievement of African-American urban adolescents. In M. G. Sanders (Ed.), Schooling students placed at risk: Research, policy and practice in the
education of poor and minority adolescents (pp. 141-161). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.


APPENDIX A

SAMPLE INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Tell me about yourself.

2. Tell me about relationships with your family.

3. What can you tell me about your educational experiences?

4. Thinking back on your high school experiences, can you tell me how your educational journey has been?

5. Now, reflecting on your tenure as a college student, can you tell me how your educational journey has been?

6. Tell me what courses you took.

7. Tell me if there are any courses that you did not take that you wish you had taken.

8. Tell me about your experiences in the university. How have they impacted you?

9. Tell me what social activities outside of the home and school you partake in

10. Tell me about your friends.

11. Are there experiences that you believe have helped to shape your educational decisions?

12. What has occurred in your life that helped guide your decision to attend college?
13. What, if any, roadblocks became apparent as you continued your education

14. What did you do to get around them?

15. What resources do you rely on in your college persistence?

16. What do you plan to do after you graduate?

17. Tell me about how you make your decisions.

18. Tell me what you have done that makes you feel proud?

19. Tell me what you have done that you may not feel proud of?
INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

*Please check each box below if you consent to the requisites as listed.*

Yes □ No □ I consent to participating in research entitled: Still I Rise: Resilience in African American Undergraduate Students. D’Andra Mull, owner of the said research, under the direction of Dr. Tatiana Suspitsyna, Dissertation Adviser, has explained the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed, and the expected duration of my participation. Possible benefits of the study have been described, as have alternative procedures, if such procedures are applicable and available.

Yes □ No □ I acknowledge that I have had the opportunity to obtain additional information in regard to the study and that any questions I have raised have been answered to my full satisfaction. Furthermore, I understand that I am free to withdraw consent at any time and to discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.

Yes □ No □ I give permission to the researcher to audiotape my interview.

Yes □ No □ Finally, I acknowledge that I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

Date: ____________________________ Signed: ____________________________

(Participant)

Signed: ____________________________

(Principal Investigator or his/her authorized representative)

Signed: ____________________________

(Person authorized to consent for participant, if required)

Witness: ____________________________
APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT LETTER TO FACULTY AND STAFF

August 10, 2006

Dear Sir/Madam:

I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Educational Policy and Leadership at The Ohio State University conducting research under the supervision of Drs. Leonard Baird and Tatiana Suspitsyna on the lived experiences of resilient African American undergraduate students. As African American student retention rates are significantly lower when compared to other student populations, my research seeks to discover potential causes and determinants of resilience in African American students, particularly as institutions of higher education strive to decrease attrition among the group. Due to the diversity of your university’s African American student population, I would welcome the opportunity to speak with you in regard to locating students to participate in my research. Thus, as a valued member of the university community, your assistance in recommending African American students who you believe have overcome adversity in their journey through school may be important to this study. I would appreciate the opportunity to speak with you concerning students who you believe exhibit resilience within the academic setting. The additional criteria on which I would like to select students to interview are included on the attached page.

I plan to conduct this research through interviewing between the hours of 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. and expect to visit your campus during the week of September 1, 2006. However, I would be happy to arrange another time, if you prefer. Your involvement in assisting me in locating participants is entirely voluntary and there are no known or anticipated risks to participation in this study.

If after receiving this letter, you have any questions about this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please feel free to contact me at 614-XXX-XXXX, or Dr. Suspitsyna at 614-XXX-XXXX.

I would like to assure you that this study involves no deception to students, nor will their identities be revealed at any time during the process. However, the final decision in regard to the recommendation of prospective participants is yours. Again, should you have comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you in advance for your interest in this project.

Yours sincerely,

D’Andra Mull
Doctoral Candidate
The Ohio State University
XXX-XXX-XXXX
APPENDIX D

Demographic Survey for Selection of Respondents

Please answer the following questions by marking (x) in the appropriate spaces.

1. Gender _______ Male    _______ Female

2. Age __________

3. Race/Ethnicity

_____ African (native of Africa)
_____ African-American/Black (native of the U.S.A.)
_____ White/European-American
_____ Latino/a or Hispanic
_____ Other

4. Highest Education Level of Parent or Guardian

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Mother</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>_____ Grade School</td>
<td>_____ Grade School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>____ Some High School</td>
<td>____ Some High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>____ High School Diploma</td>
<td>____ High School Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>____ Some College</td>
<td>____ Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>____ Associate Degree</td>
<td>____ Associate Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>____ Bachelor Degree</td>
<td>____ Bachelor Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>____ Advanced/Professional</td>
<td>____ Advanced/Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Are you a current recipient of a federal Pell Grant?
   _____ Yes    _____ No

6. What is your current college class rank?
   _____ Freshman/First Year
   _____ Sophomore/Second Year
   _____ Junior/Third Year
   _____ Senior/Fourth Year
   _____ Senior/Fifth Year
   _____ Other (Please Describe) ______________________________

245
7. Have you ever withdrawn from the university during your undergraduate career?
   _______ Yes   _______ No

8. Do you believe you have persisted in your personal and academic endeavors in spite of the presence of obstacles, setbacks and threatening elements that you experienced?
   _______ Yes   _______ No

8. Do you consent to participation as a respondent in a Studies focused on resiliency, and are you able to dedicate at least two hours of time to the study?
   _______ Yes   _______ No
APPENDIX E

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

• Academic success – The completion of high school and continued postsecondary education for the duration of greater than 3 years, with no periods of absence from the university during the regular academic year (Masten et al, 1999).

• African American – Utilized interchangeably with Black, it references those persons who are born in the United States and who are classified by self identification or the identification of the government as being such, and may also believe their ancestors to be of African descent.

• Protective factors – Defined as influences that modify, reorganize or rework a person's response to an environmental hazard that predisposes an individual to a harmful outcome" (Rutter, 1990).

• Resiliency – The ability to rebound from or recover from obstacles, setbacks, and potentially detrimental events, particularly under demanding situations, in both academic and personal endeavors (Zunz, Turner, & Norman, 1993).
• Risk factors - Conditions or elements that are associated with a higher probability of negative outcomes, such as poor relationships with parents and members of the community, limited access to financial resources, sub-par educational environments, engaging in risky behaviors, and negative peer influences. (Masten, Best and Garmezy, 1990).

• Successful - The notion of prevailing over adversity and living a productive life and gaining employment that is both economically sustaining and personally gratifying. (Wang and Gordon, 1994).
RECRUITMENT LETTER TO STUDENT

September 2, 2006

Dear Student:

I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Educational Policy and Leadership at The Ohio State University conducting research under the supervision of Drs. Leonard Baird and Tatiana Suspitsyna on the lived experiences of resilient African American undergraduate students. I was forwarded your name by __________________ at the Kent State University as you are potentially a student who might contribute significantly to the study. As African American student retention rates are significantly lower when compared to other student populations, my research seeks to discover potential causes and determinants of resilience in African American students, particularly as institutions of higher education strive to decrease attrition among the group. As a valued member of the African American student community, your experiences in the triumph over adversity may be important to this study. I would appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about your experience on this topic; moreover, if there are other students who you believe have similar experiences, I would welcome your assistance with making contact with them, too. On the reverse of this notice, you will find a list of items that are indicative of the student participant I am seeking for my study. Please review the list and mark of all criteria that you believe you meet.

I plan to conduct this research through interviewing between the hours of 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. and expect to visit your campus during the week of September 18, 2006. However, I would be happy to arrange another time, if you prefer. Your involvement in this survey is entirely voluntary and there are no known or anticipated risks to participation in this study. If you agree to participate, the interview should not take more than approximately one hour, with a second potential 30 minute interview to be scheduled for a later date. The questions are quite general (for example, tell me about an obstacle you have overcome in pursuit of an undergraduate degree). However, you may decline answering any questions you feel you do not wish to answer. All information you provide will be considered confidential and will be grouped with responses from other participants. Further, you will not be identified by name in any dissertation, report or publication resulting from this study. The data collected will be kept for a period of 5 years in my locked and secured private home.

If after receiving this letter, you have any questions about this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please feel free to contact me at 614-292-9208, or Dr. Suspitsyna at 614-247-8232.

I would like to assure you that this study involves no deception to you, nor will your identity be revealed at any time during the process. However, the final decision in regard to participating is yours. Again, should you have comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact do not hesitate to contact me.
Thank you in advance for your interest in this project.

Yours sincerely,

D’Andra Mull
Doctoral Candidate
The Ohio State University
614-292-9208
Mull.67@osu.edu
## APPENDIX G

### RISK FACTORS DEPICTED IN THE DATA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes of Personal Risk Factors &amp; Characteristics</th>
<th>Themes of Family Risk Factors &amp; Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angry disposition**</td>
<td>Absent father****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loner*</td>
<td>Burden of responsibility******</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low self esteem **</td>
<td>Drug addicted mother**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low sense of self worth**</td>
<td>Drug addicted mother and father**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor study skills and habits**</td>
<td>Emotional abuse from parents*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of self discipline*</td>
<td>Emotionally detached parents****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazy academic behaviors*</td>
<td>Expectation of failure from others*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor communication skills*</td>
<td>Father in prison**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shy*</td>
<td>Feelings of guilt for leaving siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen pregnancy*</td>
<td>Frequent family relocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother in prison*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latchkey children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low support from family for academic endeavors*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neglect***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never knew father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No male role models**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Older siblings dropping out of school*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical abuse by parents*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Raised by single parent****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Raised by sick grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Truancy from school*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

****Each asterisk beside a given theme denotes the number of respondents that described such an occurrence in his or her life experiences.
Continued........APPENDIX G

RISK FACTORS DEPICTED IN THE DATA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes of Academic Risk Factors &amp; Characteristics</th>
<th>Themes of Economic Risk Factors &amp; Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic alienation****</td>
<td>Awareness of burden of lower socioeconomic status*****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor schooling******</td>
<td>Dependence on student loans*****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few African American college classmates********</td>
<td>Lack of financial resources*****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools with high dropout rates**</td>
<td>Limited financial resources*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low access to academic resources****</td>
<td>Modest income*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised in poverty*****</td>
<td>Responsible for supporting family***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

****Each asterisk beside a given theme denotes the number of respondents that described such an occurrence in his or her life experiences.
## Appendix G

### Risk Factors Depicted in the Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes of Environmental Risk Factors &amp; Characteristics</th>
<th>Themes of Educational Institution Risk Factors &amp; Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drug infested community******</td>
<td>Assimilation by force**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised in a violence ridden housing project or community*****</td>
<td>Awareness of burden of race***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative peer influences***</td>
<td>Burden of reduction to a token*****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised by several foster families*</td>
<td>Hostile Climate******</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of access to information about college opportunities****</td>
<td>Expectation of academic deficiency from others*******</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation within community due to academic achievements<em>3 Physical bullying by peers</em></td>
<td>Negative stereotyping based on race*********</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor community cohesion****</td>
<td>Loss of individual identity****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of drugs by peers***</td>
<td>Racism******</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witness to violence*****</td>
<td>Lack of culturally relevant social outlets****</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

****Each asterisk beside a given theme denotes the number of respondents that described such an occurrence in his or her life experiences.
# APPENDIX H

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS DEPICTED IN THE DATA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes of Personal Protective Factors &amp; Characteristics</th>
<th>Themes of Family Protective Factors &amp; Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to articulate needs****</td>
<td>Consistent routines and discipline**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive****</td>
<td>Desire to be a role model siblings******</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger as a source of motivation**</td>
<td>Evolved relationship with mother*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspiration to a higher status******</td>
<td>Family guidance**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive**</td>
<td>High expectations of family members***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous*****</td>
<td>Mother as the rock*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural sense of self****</td>
<td>Sense of obligation of success to family*****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy****</td>
<td>Sense of obligation of success to siblings*****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectation of success********</td>
<td>Sense of responsibility for siblings******</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith in God*****</td>
<td>Strong family support**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good coping skills*******</td>
<td>Support from extended family**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good problem solving skills******</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good verbal skill****</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help-seeking*****</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal locus of control****</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimistic*****</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personable*****</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rap music*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of themselves as having the ultimate say in their success*****</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusal to become a statistic****</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resiliency******</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-regulation*******</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set goals*******</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong sense of purpose******</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong sense of self worth*****</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of humor***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
***Each asterisk beside a given theme denotes the number of respondents that described such an occurrence in his or her life experiences.
## PROTECTIVE FACTORS DEPICTED IN THE DATA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes of Academic Protective Factors &amp; Characteristics</th>
<th>Themes of Economic Protective Factors &amp; Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to think critically***</td>
<td>Recognition of the impact of poverty*******</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative learning opportunities****</td>
<td>Refusal to struggle like parents*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Counselor*</td>
<td>Refusal to live off the “system”***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honor student****</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive interaction with teachers***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in academic school activities****</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports******</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talented &amp; gifted program***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental involvement in school activities*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sense of belonging***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes of Environmental Protective Factors &amp; Characteristics</th>
<th>Themes of Educational Institution Protective Factors &amp; Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buildup of community and allies*</td>
<td>Academic scholarship*****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive influence and encouragement of peer group****</td>
<td>Involvement in campus life***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of duty to serve as role model for youth in the community****</td>
<td>Pre-College scholars program***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role modeling by community members*</td>
<td>Pre-college orientation programs for minority students****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from the church*</td>
<td>Role as resident assistant*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support from university staff**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

****Each asterisk beside a given theme denotes the number of respondents that described such an occurrence in his or her life experiences.
### APPENDIX I

**Continual Themes Expressed by Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age &amp; Yr. in School</th>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Area of Concentration</th>
<th>Risk Factors</th>
<th>Sources of Resilience/Protective Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shon</td>
<td>21 4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Yr.</td>
<td>“I was born to lead”</td>
<td>Political Science &amp; African American Studies</td>
<td>Poverty&lt;br&gt;Raised by mother&lt;br&gt;Peer influences&lt;br&gt;Father in prison 9 past years&lt;br&gt;No male role models&lt;br&gt;Poor schooling&lt;br&gt;Lack of financial resources&lt;br&gt;Low support from family&lt;br&gt;Drug infested community</td>
<td>Sports&lt;br&gt;Faith in God&lt;br&gt;Rap music&lt;br&gt;Sense of responsibility for siblings&lt;br&gt;Strong sense of self worth&lt;br&gt;Cultural sense of self&lt;br&gt;Self-regulated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amaya</td>
<td>22 5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Yr.</td>
<td>“…..She told me I would be just like my mother. So I had to prove her wrong.”</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Poverty&lt;br&gt;Drug addicted mother&lt;br&gt;Absent father&lt;br&gt;In the foster care system until age 12&lt;br&gt;No male role models&lt;br&gt;Low support from family</td>
<td>Faith in God&lt;br&gt;Talented &amp; gifted program&lt;br&gt;Peer group&lt;br&gt;Sense of obligation to siblings&lt;br&gt;Honor student&lt;br&gt;Self-regulated&lt;br&gt;Sports&lt;br&gt;Participation in school activities&lt;br&gt;High School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tre</td>
<td>22 5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Yr.</td>
<td>“My family is expecting me to succeed, so failure is not an option….I gotta keep it movin.”</td>
<td>Premedicine and Biology</td>
<td>Poverty&lt;br&gt;Raised in housing project&lt;br&gt;Peer influences&lt;br&gt;Raised by two parents*&lt;br&gt;(Drug addiction of both)&lt;br&gt;Drug infested community&lt;br&gt;Low support from family</td>
<td>Sense of obligation to family&lt;br&gt;Sports&lt;br&gt;Honor student&lt;br&gt;Self-regulated&lt;br&gt;Strong sense of self worth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Continual Themes Expressed by Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sibling</th>
<th>College Major</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taylor “The Matriarch”*1 sibling</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4Y</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Poverty, Both parents in prison, Raised by sick grandmother, Low self esteem, Became a parent at 18, Drug infested community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ram one “The Architect”*3 siblings</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.5P</td>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>Academic alienation, Modest income, Parents divorced, Loner, Perception of other’s doubt in his academic ability or “fit” in architecture program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie “The Phoenix”*4 siblings</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5Y</td>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Poverty, Housing project, Single mother household, Never knew her father/no male role models, Became a parent at age 19, Drug infested community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle “The Visionary”*1 sibling</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4Y</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>Low self esteem, Shy, Ridicule by cousins as “nerd”, Lack of financial resources, Lack of access to information about college opportunities, Institutional Climate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*1 sibling

*3 siblings

*4 siblings