African American College Students,
Extracurricular Activities and Motivation

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ABSTRACT
African American college graduation and retention rates are alarmingly low. Factors such as social engagement, student involvement, and academic motivation influence academic achievement for African American male students. This study used in-depth interviews to examine the college experience of African American students at a public four-year university in northern California. The data collected in this study explored the relationship between participation in extracurricular activities, sense of belonging, and academic motivation. The results showed that participation in extracurricular activities helped African American male college students gain a sense of belonging and academic motivation at California State University, Sacramento.

Research shows that college students drop out for a variety of reasons (Bean 1990; Cabrera et al. 1992; Peltier et al. 1999; Tinto 1993). Some of the most common factors that lead students to drop out are background characteristics such as first generation college experience, lower socioeconomic status, and lack of pre-college academic experience. Other factors include the structural characteristics of institutions such as curriculum not reflecting certain students and a lack of interaction with faculty and peers. These characteristics are some of the most common factors that make being successful in college more difficult. Furthermore, studies have shown that race can be a significant predictor of persistence in college (Astin 1997; Murtaugh et al. 1999; Peltier et al. 1999). For example, some studies have indicated that, compared to their white peers, students of color perceive the college environment to be less supportive and are, thus, less likely to persist and graduate (Carey 2004; Pascarella et al. 1996).

The academic achievement of African Americans has been a topic of great concern to many scholars and educators (Allen 1992; Cokley 2000; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Rowley 2000; Sellers et al. 1998; Steele and Aronson 1995). Researchers examining the academic achievement gap between African
American and European American students have shown consistent disparities between these two groups (Gordon 2004; US Department of Education 2009). Specifically, African American college students have a 20% lower college graduation rate than do European American college students (US Department of Education 2009). The rate of African American enrollment in institutions of higher education has increased in the United States from approximately 20% in the 1980s to 30% in the 2000s when compared to the 1970s (Coakley and Moore 2007). Although this increase in enrollment may appear to be a substantial rise in African American academic success, that is not necessarily the case. Because the graduation rate for African American college students is still low at 38% (African-American College Graduation Rates 2002). The growth in minority student enrollment in higher education institutions, along with a low graduation rate and external pressures for institutional accountability for student learning, have made understanding the factors that influence student success in college vital (Bok 2006; Commission of the Future of Higher Education 2006).

In response to disparities in college enrollment and dropout rates, a number of studies have examined factors that may be related to the lower rates of academic success of ethnic minority students compared to their white counterparts (Lau 2003; NCES 2001; Tierney 1999). One factor that may contribute to the low rates of success among ethnic minority groups is a negative perception of campus climate (Gloria 2001). In a study that included nearly 3,000 multiethnic college freshmen, Johnson (2007) found that white students reported a stronger sense of campus belonging than did African American, Latino and Asian students. The results from a study of students attending the University of California showed that African American students reported lower levels of campus belonging than did other ethnic groups (Chatman 2008). Other studies suggest that African Americans have more negative descriptions of campus life, including perceptions of prejudice, discrimination, racial conflict, and marginalization (Ancis 2000; Gossett 1998; Parker 1998; Suarez-Balcazar 2003). “Marginalize” means to relegate or confine to a lower or outer limit or edge and, in this case, it means students feel like they are not being accepted into the college campus community. A positive attitude toward campus climate is associated with academic success. Gloria (1999) found that positive perceptions of social support, cultural congruity and college environment were all associated with persistence among African American college students. In another study, African American students expressed that positive faculty and peer relationships, such as perceptions of trust and openness, contributed to a sense of community (Booker 2007). The students in these studies who did not have such positive faculty and peer relationships reported that they were
not a part of their campus communities. These studies illustrate that being a part of the campus community influences whether or not African American students stay in school and are academically successful. The findings suggest that African American university students may not feel as if they belong on campus and do not have academic success. The low graduation rate that the US Department of Education (2009) reports for African Americans suggests that many of these African American students do not feel involved at their universities. There are a number of reasons why African Americans have a low success rate at institutes of higher education. This study will examine factors related to African American university student experience and academic success.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past 20 years, several theories have been developed to explain the underachievement of African American college students. One theory is the sociological perspective, which focuses on the sociological factors that affect academic achievement among African American college students (Majors and Billson 2001). Theorists who use the sociological perspective believe that the social status of African Americans is the main factor affecting their academic success. The anthropological perspective suggests that anthropological factors influence how well African Americans do in institutes of higher education (Ogbu 1998). Theorists who use this perspective believe that cultural and historical factors such as the forces under which African Americans migrated to the US as well as their treatment in mainstream society are the biggest influences on African American academic success. Psychological factors that influence academic achievement also are used to explain disparities in African American academic experiences by psychologists (Steele 1997). Theorists who use this perspective believe that the settings in which African Americans are situated impact the way they think and feel, and that the setting affects African Americans’ academic success. The present research will use the psychological perspective to examine the students’ sense of belonging to their college or university. In the present study, “sense of belonging” is defined as the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community. Studies have shown that one’s sense of belonging and motivation are factors that can influence college retention and persistence (Tinto 1975; Baumeister and Leary 1995; Elliot 1999). These studies suggest that such factors in African Americans may be a direct reflection of the way they feel about their experiences at universities. Studies have also shown that sense of belonging and motivation can be enhanced by participation in extracurricular activities (Pasacarella 1986; Meza 2009).
Factors Related to Academic Achievement
A number of studies have shown that sense of belonging, student involvement, social adjustment, motivation, and extracurricular activities are factors that can positively affect retention and academic success in college (Tinto 1975; Baumeister and Leary 1995; Elliot 1999). The following sections review these factors and how they impact college retention and academic success.

Sense of Belonging
Research has identified a number of individual and institutional factors related to academic achievement for African Americans students. For example, studies have shown that failing to achieve an adequate sense of belonging can have negative consequences, including poor grades and a higher possibility of dropping out (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Durkheim 1951). Because one's sense of belonging is important, models of college persistence have often included it. “Persistence” is defined as lasting or enduring and, in this case, it is used to describe those who last and endure in college. Integration into the social and academic college environment is one predictor for whether college students are likely to remain in college. A student who is integrated into the college environment is someone who is involved on campus, both socially and academically. Socially involved students are a part of their respective campus communities. Academically involved students are those who use the resources on campus to help them with their course work. Students who fail to meet these criteria are not considered integrated.

Student Involvement
Student involvement and perceptions of integration play an important role in academic persistence (Milem and Berger 1997). A number of studies have found that perceptions of campus climate and campus involvement have an impact on academic outcomes (Farley 2002; Gloria and Ho 2003; Parker 1998). For example, Thompson (2007) examined the campus perceptions of college freshmen and found that student academic success was linked to the feeling of campus belonging. McKinney (2006) studied the impact of developing a classroom community on student attitudes and behaviors, and results indicated that an enhanced sense of community was associated with a variety of positive outcome variables including students’ performance on exams.

Milem and Berger (1999) found that first-year students who reported more involvement also reported higher academic and social integration, as well as more institutional commitment; integration into social networks is associated with institutional commitment and retention. Student involvement and
perceived integration creates a sense of belonging, which suggests that developing a sense of belonging is important to retention (Hausmann et al. 2007). For college students, involvement in meaningful activities outside of their classes is an important transitional step (Kuh et al. 2005). The extracurricular activities in which they participate may help students develop connections with their peers (Yarzedjian et al. 2007).

Social Adjustment
According to Mitra, Van Delinder, and Von Robertson (2005), researchers have suggested that social adjustment is best measured by three aspects: social integration, student adjustment, and student institutional fit. These aspects are incorporated into Tinto’s (1975) model of student retention, which is considered to be one of the most useful models of college student persistence because it explains the various types of student behaviors and decisions that are involved in student departure. This model of student attrition explains what is required of students who stay in school and graduate (Tinto 1975). The researcher suggested that persistence and withdrawal behavior is a longitudinal process that is primarily influenced by how well the student fits into the structure, social and academic life, and goals of the institution (Tinto 1975). His findings also suggest that student experiences have more influence on retention than the characteristics they bring to the university (Tinto 1975). If a college student is not engaged and has a bad first or second year, the chance of that student staying in school is not as high compared to a student who is socially integrated and has positive campus experiences (Tinto 1975).

Tinto based part of his retention model on the theory of anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep (1975; 1987). There are three stages to Van Gennep’s developmental process: separation, transition, and incorporation. Tinto applied these stages to the development of college students in the university community. There must be separation from the previous environment in order to progress through the stages. The transition phase involves adjustment to the new environment. This adjustment could mean taking risks, managing anxiety, and coping with new experiences. The incorporation phase includes full acceptance and integration into the new environment (Boyle 1989). The separation stage is equivalent to departure from the student’s previous community, which basically means leaving home. The student must make mental and physical breaks from the previous community. The transition phase is equivalent to the student’s methods of adjusting to the university community. Methods of adjustment are what the student uses to become integrated into the university community. The incorporation
phase is the outcome of the student’s adjustment and the success of his/her integration efforts.

Motivation
Motivation is also a strong predictor of persistence as shown in several studies (Ames and Ames 1984; Caraway et al. 2003; Dweck 1986; Elliot 1999). Motivation is a key component in retention, but it is not easy to reach certain types of goals. In a study by Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005), the results suggested that students may have trouble setting goals for social integration and yet social integration is a necessary component of a successful college experience. Students with clearly defined academic and social goals typically experience higher academic achievement because these clearly defined goals motivate them to succeed in college.

Stipek (1988) suggests that there are a variety of reasons why individuals may be lacking in motivation. The first reason is that the student does not have a written list of important goals that define success for her or him personally. The second reason is that some people believe that their present goals or activities are wrong for them. Some students’ feelings and emotions about their present activities are generally negative. Another reason Stipek (1988) cited was that some students do not have (or believe they do not have) the ability to do their present activities or obtain their future goals. Some students believe that the satisfaction of achieving their goals seems to be in the distant future or that their present activities are not seen as related to important goals. Students who lack motivation also could have important goals that conflict with each other and have low extrinsic incentives. According to Stipek (1988), some students have personal problems that interfere with their present activities and those personal problems are amplified by current problems such as the economic recession.

Extracurricular Activities and Student Involvement
Interactional factors, or experiences the student has after entering college, include the quality and extent of social interactions and the student’s perception of how well the interactions meet his or her needs (Pasacarella 1986). Forming friendships and social networks, having a support group, participating in extracurricular activities, and interacting with faculty members are interactional factors. Pasacarella (1986) found that students who participated in college orientation had higher levels of persistence and higher grade point averages during their freshman year than those who did not participate. These participating students also were able to successfully integrate into the social system of the university, had increased ability to cope with challenges, and were able to establish relationships with faculty.
Research has shown the correlation between extracurricular activities and academic achievement. McNair Scholar Maria Meza (California State University, Sacramento, 2009) made a comparison between students in the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) and those not associated with this program. Meza’s research showed that CAMP students had a higher rate of participation in extracurricular activities and also had higher GPAs on average than the rest of the Latino students at California State University, Sacramento. A majority of these students who explained that they participated in extracurricular activities also said that participating in those activities had a positive impact on their academic success. Students believed that the extracurricular activities helped with time management and kept them focused in order to keep participating (Meza 2009).

PROBLEM STATEMENT
As the literature review has shown, African American college graduation and retention rates are alarmingly low. Factors such as social engagement, student involvement, and academic motivation influence academic achievement for African American students. The data collected in the present study will be used to examine whether or not African American university students who participate in extracurricular activities are more academically successful compared to those who do not.

HYPOTHESIS
The hypothesis being investigated in this study is: Will extracurricular activities help the retention and persistence of African American students at California State University, Sacramento (Sacramento State).

METHOD
A qualitative approach that employs semi-structured interviewing was used to gain a better understanding of the experiences of African American students’ participation in extracurricular activities. The interview also was used to compare the students’ feelings of belonging and academic motivation.

Qualitative Interview: Process and Selection
The researcher gained approval from the Sacramento State Psychology Department to conduct the research. This study included 15 African American male students enrolled at Sacramento State during the 2009-2010 school year. The 15 students who participated in this study were volunteers who willingly participated in the interview. The recruitment process was as follows: 1) The researcher contacted the student via email. 2) The student
voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. 3) The researcher then proceeded to conduct the interview.

**Participants**
Of the 15 African American participants students, 4 students began attending Sacramento State in the fall of 2006, 6 began attending in the fall of 2007, 4 began attending in the fall of 2008, and 1 began attending in the fall of 2009.

**Qualitative Method**
The qualitative analysis used in this study examined the individual experiences of the African American students in regard to their extracurricular activities. This method was used to examine the students’ feelings of belonging to the university and academic motivation based on how extracurricular activities affect the two items from the participants’ perspective. Extracurricular activities can include student clubs/organizations, student government positions, and collegiate athletics for this study. The students who confirmed they participated in extracurricular activities were asked questions during the interview (Appendix A). The answers to these questions illustrate the ways in which extracurricular activities can be beneficial to African American students’ sense of belonging and academic motivation. The students who confirmed that they did not participate in extracurricular activities were asked a different set of questions during the interview (Appendix B). This set of questions illustrates factors that prevent students from participating in extracurricular activities.

The analysis employed in this study focused on themes generated from the interviews with the 15 participants. The researcher digitally recorded the interviews and also took notes in order to make sure nothing important was omitted. The researcher listened to the recordings, transcribed them, and then attempted to identify themes consistent across the interviews, which were then explored in greater depth.

**RESULTS**
Interviews were conducted in the University Union on the Sacramento State campus on May 17 and May 18, 2010. Figure 1 shows participant responses to the interview questions. The dark bar on the graph represents the ‘yes’ answers and the light bar represents the ‘no’ answers.
Figure 1. Participant responses to interview questions

Figure 2 shows the results for the interview questions that the students were asked about their representation at Sacramento State. Participants were asked to rate the level of representation they felt at the university on a scale from one to ten. The results show that the participants generally feel underrepresented at Sacramento State.

Figure 2. Level of representation felt by participants on their college campus
QUALITATIVE RESULTS
The following are the results of the interviews conducted in this research.

Motivation
When interview participants were asked if they participated in extracurricular activities as defined by the researcher during the interview, participants who answered ‘yes’ were asked a series of open-ended questions, including: Why did you decide to get involved in the activity you are involved, and how does the activity make you feel? Open-ended questions such as this were the most important questions in the study. In general, interview participants answered that extracurricular activities allow them to be more involved in campus life. The following is an example of what was shared by one of the interview participants:

Being a student wasn’t enough. To feel more involved and get the full college experience I feel like you need to join a club or organization on campus. Being in the clubs and orgs that I am in makes me feel like I am a part of something. Being involved has given me responsibility and purpose.

This statement illustrates how involvement in extracurricular activities has increased the participant's motivation to be involved. It also illustrates that the student has gained a purpose or reason to remain at the university due to social support. The student reported feeling a part of the campus community, and does not feel marginalized as reported in other studies of students who do not succeed.

Another student reported similar positive feelings about participating in extracurricular activities:

I got into PRSSA (Public Relations Student Society of America) to make connections for the future. One of my favorite teachers is the coordinator of this club. He has already given me letters of recommendation for the internships I’m going to start this summer. My mom told me it is not what you know all the time, but who you know also.

This statement illustrates that the student has a positive relationship with a faculty member, which has helped during his time at the university. One of the factors that promote academic success and a sense of belonging is positive faculty relationships. Without participating in this club, the participant's college experience may not have turned out as well as he indicates.
Another participant had this to say about his participation in extracurricular activities:

> My grades have actually gotten better since I have joined this organization. Most of my friends are in the same org and they always keep me on my P’s and Q’s….. I always have somebody to keep me headed in the right direction.

Positive peer relationships have been helpful to this participant. The participant indicated that he would not have had the same success had he not been a part of this student organization. This response illustrates the positive affect extracurricular activities can have on a college student.

These interview excerpts are the most representative of how most participants responded to questions about their college experience and extracurricular activities. These excerpts suggest that engagement in extracurricular activities makes African American students feel more involved in their campus community. They also show how a sense of belonging can lead to academic motivation. These findings are similar to what previous studies on extracurricular activities have shown.

**Grades/Graduation**

Students who participated in extracurricular activities were also asked the following questions that pertained to their academics: Have your grades changed since you began your extracurricular activity? If your grades have changed, in what way have they changed? Some participants reported that their grades stayed the same and others reported that their grades had improved since they joined their club or organization, but none of the students reported that their grades dropped after they joined their club or organization. This finding is congruent with previous studies that show participation in extracurricular activities help students achieve academic success.

Interview participants were asked if they felt they would graduate from college. In general, the participants strongly felt that they would be successful and graduate from Sacramento State. When asked why he felt he would graduate from Sacramento State, one of the interview participants said:

> Yes, I have come this far and I can’t stop now. At first I wasn’t sure, but then in talking to fellow students and being around people who go through the same things I do, I started believing in myself a little more, you know?

This statement is an example of how cultural congruity has a positive influence on a student’s college experience. Because the participant is
seeing success, the participant believes in success. With the graduation and retention rates of African American male college students being very low, seeing examples of success does not happen on a large scale for this group. Through participation in extracurricular activities and seeing others succeed, this particular participant gained the motivation to succeed.

When asked the same question, another participant had a similar response, saying:

*I actually already put in my petition to graduate in spring 2011. I feel like I came to college with a goal, and I told myself I wasn’t leaving until I accomplished that goal.*

This participant came into college with a clearly defined goal. Studies have shown that clearly defined goals help students achieve academic success. Studies have also shown that it is sometimes hard to achieve these goals if a student does not feel these goals are obtainable. However, this participant is involved in a student organization that has helped him achieve his goal.

In general, the participants in this study reported feeling like they were going to graduate from college. Previous studies have shown that students with a sense of belonging and motivation have more success in college, and the findings in the present study are similar.

All of the participants except one were involved in extracurricular activities. When asked why he did not participate in any extracurricular activities, the participant explained that he worked full time. The participant also explained that he could not financially afford to not work and that he did not have the time to participate in extracurricular activities. When asked if he felt he would graduate, the participant was very positive in stating that he felt that he would graduate.

**ANALYSIS**

The findings gleaned from this study suggest that the participants had positive feelings about their college experiences. This includes the student who did not participate in extracurricular activities, yet reported that he had positive feelings about his college experience. Students who were involved on campus shared their experiences about extracurricular activities and how those activities impacted their lives.

The interviews furthermore suggest that the students who participated in extracurricular activities felt more involved in their campus community, even though they generally felt underrepresented at Sacramento State. Through their involvement in extracurricular activities, participants gained a sense of
belonging in an environment in which they felt they were underrepresented. Participants have stayed in school and report having strong ambitions to graduate from Sacramento State. Previous studies (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Durkheim 1951) have shown that a sense of belonging is a major factor in retention at universities, similar to the finding in the present study.

Many of the students shared that they were encouraged by their involvement in extracurricular activities and remained successful academically. Participants shared that they met friends in their clubs and organizations who shared similar life experiences and goals. Having people around them who shared the same goals motivated the participants to achieve their goals. Some participants reported that their grades remained steady and others reported that their grades rose after they started participating in extracurricular activities; however, none of the participants reported that their grades dropped. Previous studies have shown that students who participate in extracurricular activities typically have academic success, and the present study had similar results (Meza 2009).

It is important to note that one participant who did not participate in extracurricular activities did well in school despite not being very involved in campus life. During the interview the participant revealed that he had siblings in college and his parents went to college as well. The participant had role models at home who provided examples of success, which helped the student throughout his time in college. This participant had support at home that many of the other participants did not.

LIMITATIONS

The study provided several noteworthy findings. However, it also has several limitations in its examination of college experiences among African Americans. One limitation in the present study is that it is based on a single campus using a small sample. Because the sample for this study is small, the findings would be difficult to compare with student experiences from other universities. Therefore, the results should be viewed with caution. For example, the research done in this study cannot be applied at historically black universities because the feelings of marginalization and the lack of a sense of belonging may not be the same at such universities because the majority of students there are African American as well. Another limitation involves the role of social class and other variables not included in this study but that have been shown to play a role in college experiences. As in the example of the participant who had family members who helped him through college, factors not measured in this study such as socioeconomic
status, educational background, and other personal issues could play a role in academic success for African American college students at Sacramento State.

FUTURE RESEARCH
At the very least, the present study contributes to the growing number of studies that examine African American college experience. Interest in the topic of extracurricular activities and retention in African American male students could lead to further research on the experiences of African American female students. It is necessary to include African American female students in order to see if extracurricular activities benefit all African American college students or if there are other factors that contribute to retention for males versus females. It is also necessary to do similar research at the high school level to see if participation in extracurricular activities plays a role in academic success in young children. If we can reduce feelings of marginalization and the lack of a sense of belonging for young students before they enter college, they might have greater academic success overall. If students at the K-12 levels of education have a means to greater success, it may help retention in the future when they do attend college. Involvement in extracurricular activities at a young age may also help these young students be motivated to go to school at a young age.

This research could also be applied to other minorities to see if they face similar problems or perhaps different ones with retention and graduation rates. This research shows that African Americans generally feel underrepresented at Sacramento State. This study can be used to see if other minorities feel the same way. If they do, then they might have the same feelings of marginalization and lack a sense of belonging similar to African American males at Sacramento State.

The findings in this study can also lead researchers to do future research on other factors that contribute to retention and academic success in African American college students. Studies on life at home, financial status, positive role models, and other forms of engagement should be considered to determine which factors play a role in the African American college experience. All of the participants in this study reported feelings of underrepresentation at Sacramento State; the present results contribute to prior research in this area that shows these feelings of underrepresentation exist on many campuses in the US.
CONCLUSION

The present study shows that African American students participate in extracurricular activities and their participation benefits their college experience at Sacramento State. Based on the interviews with the participants, the analysis shows that participation in extracurricular activities builds a sense of belonging to the student’s campus and increases motivation to succeed academically. These results are important to help African American retention and graduation rates increase. The findings of the present study could influence African Americans to get involved on their campuses to combat feelings of underrepresentation at their institutions. The results from this study can also lead to school administrators doing something to change the demographics at institutes of higher education to combat negative feelings toward campus climates.

Based on the results of this study, the researcher recommends African American students at Sacramento State increase their engagement in extracurricular activities to gain a sense of belonging to their university, which in turn can motivate their academic experience. Involvement in extracurricular activities can help student retention, create academic motivation, and help students with their grades.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: QUESTIONS FOR THOSE WHO PARTICIPATED IN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Name:
Age:
Year:
Major:
Do you receive financial aid?
Did your parents attend college?
Do you have siblings?
Did any of your siblings go to college? If so, are any of your siblings still in college?
Do you feel like you are underrepresented at Sacramento State?
  Rate on a scale from 1-10 the level of representation on campus
Do you participate in any extracurricular activities? If so, what is it?
Why did you decide to get involved in the activity you are involved?
How does the activity make you feel?
Does the extracurricular activity have grade requirements? If so, what is it?
Did you meet any friends while participating in your extracurricular activities?
Does your extracurricular activity make you feel involved at Sacramento State?
Have your grades changed since you began your extracurricular activity? If so, in what way?
Do you feel like you will graduate from Sacramento State? Why?
APPENDIX B: QUESTION FOR THOSE WHO DID NOT PARTICIPATE IN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Name:
Age:
Year:
Major:
Do you receive financial aid?
Did your parents attend college?
Do you have siblings?
Did any of your siblings go to college? If so, are any of your siblings still in college?
Do you feel like you are underrepresented at Sacramento State?
   a. Rate on a scale from 1-10 the level of representation on campus
Is there a reason why you don’t participate in extracurricular activities?
Do you feel like you will graduate from Sacramento State? Why?