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Navigating Challenges: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study of the African American Male Experience at Two-Year Predominantly White Institutions

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was the practice-based experiences of Black males enrolled in predominantly White two-year institutions (PWIs), focusing on the influence of cultural identity, academic pressures, and social integration shaped their educational outcomes. The research addressed the persistent problem of low completion rates among Black males at two-year PWIs and the stress-related barriers that influenced their academic success, sense of belonging, and personal development. The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of Black males in a two-year PWI to identify the challenges they encountered and the strategies they used to support their academic success. Tinto's model of student departure served as the conceptual framework, emphasizing the importance of social integration and belonging in student persistence. This framework aligned with the phenomenological approach by centering participants' interpretations of the challenges they faced throughout their educational journeys. A qualitative phenomenological design was used, employing semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. The study was conducted at a rural PWI selected for its demographic compositions and institutional context. Ten Black male students participated in in-depth interviews, and thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. Findings revealed that participants experienced cultural dissonance and marginalization within the academic environment, often struggling to gain respect from peers and faculty. These experiences contributed to feelings of isolation and limited belonging. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience by seeking peer support, engaging in cultural organizations, and utilizing academic resources. However, systemic barriers, such as limited access to culturally responsive mentorship and counselling continued to hinder their progress. The study's implications underscore the need for PWIs to cultivate inclusive environments that acknowledge and support the diverse backgrounds of their students. Recommendations include strengthening cultural competency training for faculty and expanding targeted support services for Black males. The study contributes to the practice by offering insights that can inform institutional policies aimed at improving equity and fostering meaningful educational experiences for underrepresented student populations.

Keywords: Black Males; Stress; Culture; Challenges; Social Integration

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Abbreviations

PWIs: Predominantly White Two-year Institutions; NCES: National Center for Education Statistics; IRB: Institutional Review Board; MEO: Minority Excellence Organization.

Introduction

The Department of Education reported that Black males have the lowest graduation rates compared to other races and ethnicities at 2-year predominantly White institutions [1]. According to the National Center for Education Statistics [2], the graduation rate for Black males in 2-year institutions is 23% in 2019. Reports have shown that Black African International students enrolled at PWIs feel a high sense of discomfort, or in many instances, do not feel safe in regard to their overall learning environment [3]. Other research has shown that students of color reported being disrespected, ranging from micro aggression to blatant discrimination while either in the classroom, competing in athletics, or seeking assistance or support within their academic environment. In short, Black males that attend PWIs experience barriers that negatively impact their ability to graduate or even be retained [4]. Evans [5] reported that there are barriers that Black male students face who attend 2-year PWIs in which these barriers negatively impact matriculation rates and retention. This is important because a college education has been thought to be the bridge out of poverty [6]. According to Phillips and Lambert-Snodgrass [7], College students who are not retained will not only miss out on benefits college graduates receive but will most likely have negative consequences that individuals who have not attempted college before.

Handy [8] explored Black student's experiences in terms of the challenges they face at PWIs that could lead to not graduating. Recommendation for future research suggested that conducting a study that performs follow-up research with the same participants at the end of their college journey would give a more comprehensive view of the participants overall experience [8]. Chrabaszcz [9] suggested that having more insight concerning the experiences of Black male students and graduation rate could be beneficial in reversing the downward trend in terms of attrition. When diving deeper into Black students, there are multiple studies that are current and can assist in understanding the phenomena in terms of some of the challenges that are present amongst this particular student population. This is a problem that exists within many 2-year institutions in the United States.

The previous research suggested that having more data in the area of Black male students and why they experience these elements at PWIs could elucidate more effective ways to support this demographic of students in terms of their learning environment at these institutions. Vincent Tinto's model of institutional departure theory has been consistently identified when looking at the data that's already available; as well as what other researchers have utilized in providing theoretical framework to interpret data within their research [10]. Recommendations for future research suggested that more research is needed in the same area in concerns with understanding the experiences that impact graduation rates for first generation Black students, newly high school graduates, and/or other ethnic groups.

Cross [11] also made the recommendation to conduct a study at community colleges in northern states as the researcher conducted the study in southern states. If the gap in knowledge is not addressed regarding the problem, the barriers that impact Black males' ability to stay in school or graduate will continue to be a problem. The purpose of my qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Black males at 2-year PWIs regarding strategies that will improve their overall academic success. The study aimed to identify those stressed based barriers that could potentially impact their ability to stay in school or graduate.

Statement of the Problem

The problem was that Black males have the lowest college graduation rate at 2-year PWIs [12]. The National Center for Education Statistics provides statistical data that reflects graduation rates by race/ethnicity. The ranking for highest graduation rate to lowest is as follows: Asian, Pacific Islander, White, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, students of two or more races, and Black. More specifically, in 2019, the graduation rate for Black males in 2-year institutions was 23%. The present information on Black college students who attend 2-year institutions regarding the suggested recommendations for future research allow for this topic to be continued.

Researchers have stated that having more insight concerning the experiences of Black male students and the graduation rate could be beneficial in reversing this downward trend in terms of attrition [9]. This study could possibly not only help Black male students but can potentially provide solutions to help with attrition rates amongst all minority students [13]. The current available literature regarding Black students at 2-year institutions helped frame the problem within the larger context of the topic. When diving deeper into Black students, there were multiple current studies that assisted in understanding the phenomena in terms of some of the challenges present amongst this specific student population [14].

If the problem of Black male students having low graduations rates at PWIs continues, it can have multiple negative consequences. The educational gap regarding

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attainment of Black males in comparison to other minority groups will likely continue to widen. Without potential solutions, institutional reputations could be impacted for failing to create diversity within their study body. Other negative consequences could be that Black males become limited regarding career opportunities do to perpetuating cycles of economic disadvantage, and educational inequality when dealing with the gap that exists concerning retention [15].

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Black males at 2-year PWIs regarding strategies that will improve their overall academic success. The National Center for Education Statistics provides statistical data that reflects graduation rates by race/ethnicity. The ranking for highest graduation rate to lowest is as follows: Asian, Pacific Islander, White, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, students of two of more races, and Black in last. White and Asian students are at 45% and 43%. Hispanic and Black students are at 33% and 25%. More specifically, in 2019, the graduation rate for Black males in 2-year institutions was 23%. The present information on Black college students who attend 2-year institutions regarding the suggested recommendations for future research allowed for this topic to be continued. Using qualitative research allows the researcher to collect data and analyze data using non-numerical data. Non numerical data includes instruments such as audio, video, or text. These instruments are used to understand the participants' perceptions or experiences [16]. Vincent Tinto's model of institutional departure theory has been used in previous research and was the theoretical framework to interpret the data [17]. Tito's model of institutional departure theory provided the framework needed to assist me in my study as it provides insight into the success of students within higher education, specifically PWIs [18]. Concepts such as academic barriers, Black students' sense of belonging, racial identity, and leadership were examined within the study. The present information on Black male college students who attend 2-year PWIs regarding the suggested recommendations for future research allowed for this topic to be continued. Tinto's instructional departure model is the most appropriate. Tinto's theoretical framework will guide the doctoral candidates research regarding looking at academic, social, institutional commitment; as well as other external factors that contribute to the failure or success of Black male students at PWIs.

Definitions of Key Terms

Attrition: An individual who has failed to earn a college degree and is no longer pursuing that degree [19].

Black: Students that self-identify as Black are considered Black [10].

Black African: International student matriculating in the United States however is from an African nation [3]

Community College (2-Year Institutions): Community Colleges are public 2-year institutions that offer associate degrees but not bachelor's degrees [8].

Institutional Departure Theory: Tinto's model of institutional departure is a theoretical framework that aims to explain student persistence and dropout in higher education. Developed by Vincent Tinto, this model focuses on the integration of students into various aspects of the university experience [20].

Minority: Defined as a part of a population thought of as differing from the rest of the population in some characteristics and often subject to differential treatment. Minority was initially used to categorize racial or ethnic differences of persons in our society [8].

Perception: Perception is the act or faculty of apprehending through the senses or the mind; cognition; understanding (Dictionary.com).

Predominantly White Institutions (PWI): Public or private institutions of higher learning in which White students account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment [21].

Retention: Students who remain at an institution of higher education until matriculation is retention [22].

Sense of Belonging: An essential characteristic of student persistence where a student "comes to see themselves as a member of a community of faculty, staff, and other students who value their participation, and that they matter and belong" [23].

White: Students that self-identify as White are considered White [10].

Review of the Literature

Oliver [24] examined the perceptions of first year first-year African American males at HBCUs in comparison to PWIs regarding the barriers they face. Oliver's research analyzed the comparisons in challenges in terms of barriers Black students experience at PWI in contrast to the barriers they did not at HBCUs. The recommendations for future research suggested using different populations of African Americans to better serve the population [24]. Previous research suggests that there is still insight to be gained regarding the population the researcher intends to cover [25]. The purpose of my qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Black males at 2-year PWIs regarding strategies that will improve their overall academic success. The study aimed to identify those stressed based barriers that could potentially impact their ability to stay in school or graduate. In Section 1, the researcher provided in-depth

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discussion about the foundation of the study while covering in detail a review of current studies and literature related to Black males' students experience at PWIs. This includes some of the challenges within Black students social, educational, and physical experiences. This will also include key sources within the literature review that are being utilized to support the problem of the study.

Numerous academic databases were utilized regarding searching for key terms to gather information and sources for the literature. Having scholarly sources that are credible and reliable will elevate the learners' research in terms of using experts' information in the field. Scholarly sources not only help offer or provide quality information but are the foundation of credible research. While developing the literature review, academic databases such as Google Scholar and ProQuest were used to access data. Google Scholar is deemed as a reliable source when using it for academic research. Google Scholar is a search engine that is free regarding usage and was developed by Google to allow individuals to locate scholarly literature. Key words such as predominantly White institutions, Black undergraduate men experiences, Black student's belongingness, and African American experiences were all entered in the search engines to collect information.

Black college students who attend PWIs experience many challenges which include institutional lack of resources which seems to be the most common for Black college students who attend PWIs [21]. Previous research shows that these challenges not only affect the students, but the institutions as well in terms graduation and retention percentages. In previous studies by Allen, Emetu [26], and Crye [21] examined the Black experience in PWIs. Results showed that PWIs are aware of the challenges Black students experience but are looking for more effective ways to establish programs to help Black students be successful [26].

D. Williams [27] examined Black male college student challenges and the results from those challenges in terms of how it could impact their ability to complete their degree or stayed enrolled. Researchers looked at factors such as lack of academic support, social abilities, and student support while attending community college as being some of the potential challenges. Based on the literature that is already available given this topic, there is a plethora of recommendations for future research [28]. There seem to be multiple themes that seem to be consistently showing up regarding this topic and the recommendations for future research. One recommendation is that continued research needs to be conducted on the different programs that supports Black males attending community colleges. Another recommendation was to examine student athletes' challenges based on local students versus international students, as well as transfer students versus first time students [22].

Academic Barriers

Barriers that impact Black students at PWIs are essential in understanding when dealing with creating a better learning atmosphere specific to this population [29]. Institutions who consider these barriers and how they will affect Black students see better academic performance from those students in comparison to the institutions that do not [29]. Some of the barriers that impact Black students at PWIs starts as early as admissions process. This can be seen within the application in concerns with questions that can be deemed as racially biased [30]. In the current research, previous studies have shown that there are multiple barriers for Black males at PWIs. Researchers found that even with these barriers and challenges present, Black students were much more successful when they had the opportunities to take advantage of the institutions academic support systems. Having the systems in place allowed the students to take charge of their own academic decisions with the support of academic advising and the other support services that were available [30].

Another barrier is the transition from community to university [31]. The lack of preparation for Black males at PWIs is another common theme for academic and/or social failures. Reports showed that many Black students felt they were not properly transitioned into the collegiate environment effectively regarding preparation, more so knowing the expectations regarding academic rigor. Participants reported that they had to change their study habits, form study groups, and engage with professors to be successful [32]. Collectively, results suggested that participants would have been more prepared if the PWI they attended at a space they could seek support, even if it is a Black culture center that is available on campus.

Previous research also suggests that to help in the area of creating more support systems for Black students, more specifically male students, is for PWIs to create more a more inclusive learning environment [33]. Having programs that cultivate cultural competence throughout campuses, which include faculty and staff should be an ongoing effort as far as being intentional in their efforts to create a better learning environment. Research shows that having diverse representation can also assist in helping Black male students regarding graduation [34]. This also involves PWIs collaborating with historical black universities and colleges in concerns with sharing ideas and resources in the effort to better serve this specific population regarding the student body [34].

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A Sense of Belonging

It is often reported that Black students at PWIs go through unique challenges such as cultural differences, lack of representation regarding leadership, microaggressions, and racism. These unique challenges can be detrimental to any student's wellbeing concerning academic and social success [35]. All of these challenges affect students of color sense of belonging, in particular Black students [35]. Other studies have reported not only have Black students not felt as if they belonged at the PWI they attend but also experience very hostile campus atmospheres such as racial slights from other students and faculty [36]. It is important for PWIs to be consistent in providing support for students of color so that the feeling of not belonging is not racial based or present [22]. Other researchers have reported that PWI universities have historically detached themselves from Black identities. This has resulted with many Black African international students' senses of social identify being negatively affected. In other cases, Black African international students have reported feeling a sense of isolation within PWIs [3].

The impact of not having a sense of belonging can be very detrimental to the successful completion of a student's program regarding graduation. This is even more present when looking at Black male students at PWIs [37]. The feeling of alienation and isolation can negatively impact that student's mindset when due to racial encounters, which affects their academic success [38]. In a previous study, results showed that 25% Black students felt physically or psychologically violated at their PWIs which influenced their persistence to continue towards graduation or stayed enrolled [39]. Having a sense of belonging has been common throughout this topic of research and results show that more research is needed to get a better understanding of the experiences of Black male students at 2-year PWIs.

Racial Identity

Racial identity is internally imposing. When an individual starts to struggle with racial identity, it can become a complex where they began to internally question how they view themselves, as well as how others view them [40]. Racial identity is made of experiences that are subjective to each individual. Racial identity can also be influenced by multiple factors such as family, friends, and society. Black students at PWIs can start to struggle with their own identity when support systems are not in place that support diversity [41]. Black students who attend PWIs may struggle with racial identity [42]. Some students that are Black will have the motivation to figure out how to assimilate and fit in but could struggle internally in terms of how to successfully do so [42].

In attending PWIs, Black students could encounter racial injustices or discrimination while on campus. These experiences could cause mistrust or the loss of desire to fit in. In some cases, racial identity can be such a struggle that it can cause that individual to develop self-hatred regarding holding negative views about themselves or race [1]. Predominantly White institutions being diligent in the area of better understanding the Black student and how significant the impact of having racial identity issues on campus; can be beneficial for the institution as a whole. The PWIs that support and acknowledge their Black students in concerns with racial identity can establish a positive learning atmosphere in terms of student well-being and academic success [43].

Racial Discrimination

The racial discrimination that exists at colleges and universities has always been a complex issue. According to Shakoor [44], "African American students have faced racial bias and have been marginalized throughout the history of their higher educational experiences as well as personally in their individually encounter" (p. 32). The historic racial bias and discrimination against Blacks have limited this population when dealing with opportunities in higher education as students. Minority are underrepresented regarding leadership and faculty at PWIs which affects many areas of Black students' success. Black students that attend PWIs of higher learning have worse academic outcomes when looking at graduation rates [44]. Minority students face many barriers such as racial discrimination and biases as stated prior. Institutions that have limited support systems to assist Black students with some of these barriers can have a negative impact on those students experience while in higher education (Briscoe, 2022). This can also impact how they view education during future educational endeavors [45].

Ethnic and racial equity when dealing with student's comfort, attending PWIs is still a common theme and a critical issue. This theme needs to be further addressed to possibly assist with attrition and retention rates amongst Black males [4]. Research has also suggested that having more data to address racial discrimination at PWIs can assist in the areas of diversifying the institution. These areas include curriculum, student perception, and the improvement of retention and graduation rates amongst Black student population [35].

First Year Student

First year college students have the largest attrition rate across the United States [46]. Research suggests that Black students are at higher risk of dropping out due to some of the challenges and barriers they face at PWI, such

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as mental health and wellness issues that can affect their academic performance and social lives [21]. Leadership regarding student guidance is essential for students' success when dealing with these areas. Guidance counselors, administration, coaches, and professors must be skilled in the area of assisting students in guiding them in the right direction concerning setting appropriate expectations that will help them graduate [47].

Leadership can be viewed as effective when they hold the student's overall well-being as a priority in terms of how it relates to academic success, which includes their health, and performance in the classroom [48]. Success in the classroom includes ensuring the students are prepared for academic expectations well before they start classes. Post secondary institutions are constantly looking into areas to help increase student retention. Figuring out how to keep retention rates high regarding post-secondary institutions has been a challenge for over a decade [7].

The problem is that there is a fast-growing attrition rate when dealing with first year college students withing the United States; and as a result, the college enrollment population has been declining rapidly. The Department of Education [46] reported that U.S. college enrollment was down 4.4% in 2021 and is projected to decline by 4.9% with the majority of that percentage being first year college student dropouts. With attrition rates being this high for first year college students, it is highly recommended that more research be conducted to examine first year college students' perspectives when dealing with causes of attrition.

Previous research suggests that attrition rates amongst first year college students needs to include the perspectives of the first-year college students, which should include using various first year student populations such as student athletes [13]. As mentioned, Black students who attend PWIs of higher learning face many challenges. Black students not only have to worry about academic barriers, but also racial discrimination, as well as battles with racial identity regarding a finding a sense of belonging [43]. These barriers seem to be consistent amongst Black students that attend 2-year institutions, which ultimately has been the variable in why these students are negatively impacted when dealing with student success. Student success includes graduation, admissions, and retention rates in comparison to non-minority students [4]. There is a lot of information in terms of research on barriers students of color face while attending PWIs, but the information is limited when being applied to first year Black student.

Tinto Institutional Departure Theory

Vincent Tinto highly influenced higher education in understanding academic learning communities and student retention. Tinto made a significant impact on student success and the learning communities regarding student growth and retention. Tinto's research provided great insight into college student dropout rates and the variables associated with keeping students enrolled [17]. He is known as an expert enhancing student outcomes through faculty development, holistic support services (students wellbeing and mental health), and early intervention (providing targeted student support). Tinto's research for improving student retention combines academic, social, and emotional support regarding student success [49].

Tinto's institutional departure is a theoretical framework that covers why students leave their institutions prior to obtaining their degree [50]. Institutional departure theory was first published in 1975 by Tinto and then altered to have more of a focus on the understanding of why students leave college before graduating. Tinto's model states that the departure of students before they leave college is due to a complex process that is influenced by many factors. Students are more likely to persist if they feel integrated into the academic and social systems of the institution [20].

Some of the key components of institutional departure theory or focuses are academic integration, social integration, and iterative process. These components assist institutions of education when dealing with gaining a better understating in the area of student dropout prior to graduation. Multiple studies have applied Tinto's institutional departure theory to gain a better understanding of the phenomena of the Black student experience at PWIs [51]. Applying institutional departure theory to better understand the experiences that impact Black male students attending PWIs regarding my intended study is the most appropriate, based on the previous research that is available.

Academic Integration

Academic integration is an essential component within institutional departure theory. Academic integration of a student happens with that student feels a sense of belonging or attachment to their academic life. Elements that might hinder academic integration include language barriers, cultural adjustment, financial stress, and social isolation. Institutions can establish academic integration by ensuring the student is engaged in their work, as well as the faculty [52]. Examples of this occurring are if the student is consistent in attending classes. Engagement can reflect that students actively participate in classroom discussions or lectures. Utilizing academic support services is another example of academic integration. If the student is communicating with advisors on a regular basis, or seeking help from tutors can show that academic integration is established [49]. Institutions of higher learning can experience lower dropout rates, even more so when looking at the minority student

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body population [49].

Social Integration

Social integration plays a vital role within student success regarding reaching graduation from a college or university. The connections students make outside the classroom in terms of relationships is important when dealing with feeling accepted [53]. The more integrated socially a student might feel, the greater their commitment. This can be applied through friends, connections, or/and interactions, regarding their commitment when dealing with a successful educational journey [54]. Students that can socially integrate successfully contribute to the overall success of the institution through fostering peer collaboration and promoting personal growth. This integration is through interacting and networking with peers from diverse backgrounds. Institutions of higher education can improve their social atmosphere through increasing their community engagement, supporting a multi-cultural and religious learning environment, and having family support systems for students [54]. Institutions creating a strong sense of belonging and social network amongst their students tremendously help in reducing feelings of isolation and/or stress.

Mental health can play a serious factor when dealing with Black students' successful completion of their program at a PWI. The U. S. Department of Education reported that in the 2021 academic school year, over 60% of college students met the criteria for one mental health issue. They also discovered that out of 60%, three-quarters of those students had severe mental psychological problems [46]. Previous research has shown that Black students have been able to thrive in learning conditions that are found at PWIs but also recognize that some of the negative racial environments that are present do have a detrimental impact on the successful completion regarding graduation [24].

Some of the challenges that have been shown to have a significant impact on Black students' mental health who attend PWIs are hostile campus life, cultural alienation, lack of representation, and cultural ignorance [24]. Being exposed to prolonged time periods of discrimination that happen on campus can produce long lasting negative effects regarding the student's mental wellness. Institutions are now rethinking how they approach mental issues amongst students, and establishing resources such as group therapy options, peer counselling, telehealth, and culture of wellness training. Researchers have suggested that mental wellness significantly impacts Black students' success in terms of their academics while attending PWIs. The stress and the negative racial environment, isolation, and discrimination heavily impact those students internal and external well-being [55].

Family Support

Family support has been shown to have a significant impact on college student success [10]. A student's family upbringing and the emotional resilience developed within that student's upbringing can have an effect on the way they handle challenges while in school. These challenges can vary from microaggressions which can have a significant impact on self-esteem and result in a student's frustration. Families who provide comfort and emotional reassurance can be beneficial for students when they face academic or social adversity while in an institution of higher learning. Research suggests that having family encouragement can contribute to academic success and be a key motivator [13]. Family support can also include aunts, uncles, siblings, grandparents, and anyone individuals that are consistently present within the student's academic journey. Family support not only assists students with resilience and purpose but can serve as an emotional safety net and motivation to succeed towards graduation [10]. Previous research has also suggested that when family support is established regarding the student, emotional support, academic encouragement, and guidance can be the backbone in concerns with their academic success and completion of their program [29].

Faculty and Student Connection

The student and faculty connection within higher education and how it correlates with student success is important when understanding retention, even more when speaking about Black males at PWIs [56]. The relationship that is development between faculty and students is essential for student academic achievement. Research states that students who feel supported both in and outside of the classroom have higher rates of academic achievement regarding completion of their degree [57]. Previous research has also shown that institutions that have a learning environment that fosters student and faculty connection, have a significant impact on the students' professional and developmental growth.

This sense of belonging can raise graduation rates in which institutions of higher education can see measurable rises of academic success [3]. Faculty members play a pivotal role in student retention and can have a positive influence that reaches outside of the classroom when dealing with students. Faculty can assist students in navigating challenges, cultural discrepancies, student growth, and direct interaction in terms of direction [58]. Previous research shows, PWIs who have faculty who can connect with Black students, can positively affect those students' self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and academic encouragement [55]. The faculty at PWIs can serve as a positive role model for this population

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of students. Whether they can connect from sharing similar backgrounds, and/or become an individual of mentorship; it can be inspiring for those students [59]. This type of connection and mentorship can be a boost of confidence for Black students which can reflect in their academic achievements [60].

Flexibility in Institutional Leadership

The term leadership has many different meanings. A leader is defined in most cases as a person with an influencing role (formal or informal) on a team who can motivate the group to accomplish team objectives [61]. When looking at stress barriers that Black male's student face during their first year at PWIs, having leadership that is cognitive of the requirements needed to be successful academically could assist those students regarding preparation prior to starting classes. Within the different forms of leadership, the one variable critical to success is the quality of leadership and how that leadership prepares students for success [62]. In its most general form, a leader is any person who takes responsibility when it comes to providing coaching to a student so that they can improve [63]. Leadership development is a major priority for institutions. Business leaders from various domains have used it as part of their leadership style and proven its effectiveness through the overall success of their organizations [64]. In addition, Pearce, et al. [64] closely examined situationally conscious leaders and found that their effective leadership style was the significant factor in generating institutional success. However, more studies focusing on leadership styles may help determine whether this result can be duplicated outside the business sector and have a positive effect within education amongst minorities, even more so Black male students [24].

Having a flexible leadership style provides opportunities for institutional leaders and management to develop multiple ways of increasing follower production. This also includes employee readiness for a diverse student population and individual commitment toward tasks or goals under contemplation [65]. Having flexibility within leadership also allows institutions of higher learning to adopt the style most suitable for the circumstances they are in regarding effectiveness and efficiency [66]. According to Wright [67], leaders may struggle to determine which decision is most appropriate in various circumstances, for one problem may involve multiple issues that need addressing. Therefore, having flexibility within leadership styles when engaging in decision making helps leaders navigate this type of conundrum [67].

There are many different methods regarding follower development at a leader's disposal to achieve team goals or vision [67]. When followers can trust the ideas and strategies, understand the instructions being given, and are witnesses to the effectiveness of the leadership style, they feel more empowered and will exhibit higher levels of self-esteem and motivation to reach their highest potential [13]. Sengupta [68] asserted that leaders, therefore, should be in a constant mode of self-reflection and self-regulation, assessing their decision-making in light of the leadership style they exhibit in a given situation, while striving for the optimal performance of the institution or organization. An understanding of the relationship between leaderships leadership style, together with what type of success is present or correlated with that leader, could provide organizations with the necessary tools and insight to determine whether their current leadership style is in alignment with the institution's overall performance.

As previously mentioned, institutions can benefit from utilizing a flexible style of leadership. When in a place of leadership, there are many different principles to incorporate within the vision for follower commitment, such as promoting diversity, leading by example, and understanding individuals [69]. Leaders must have effective communication skills to influence followers, guide perceptions within the work setting, and build a team-cohesive atmosphere [70]. Effective communication can assist in eliminating gaps that can negatively affect outcomes regarding goal setting and cultivate an atmosphere of trust amongst the team [71].

Research also suggests that having a flexible and diverse leadership style helps keep a group in sync when making strides toward the overall vision [72]. Cote [72] proposed that when a group or team become synchronized, setbacks regarding goals and accountability become easier to navigate when dealing with ownership and feedback to correct what is presently unwanted or hindering the vision of the group. Another benefit of team synchronization is creating an environment in which players commit to each other and the vision. This benefit is useful when a change in strategy is needed throughout an educational institution, in which leadership can implement that change with minimal-to-no pushback.

With communication being a key variable within any style of leadership, it is even more essential when an institution has a diverse population [73]. College institutions are diverse in both students and staff. With higher education being global, students may have different cultural values, which could hinder the process of synchronization because of different expectations [73]. Research suggests that when an institution has students from various backgrounds, effective communication helps in managing the diverse perspectives, as well as creating a positive atmosphere for learning [57]. The research also suggests that having a flexible style of leadership might help guide institutions of learning in this

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area, including how to communicate to improve overall integration [50].

Institutional leadership has the same responsibilities as organizational leaders in terms of employee development; therefore, the concept of having a flexible leadership style can relate to student success when dealing with academics [17]. Researchers suggest that having flexible leadership present can increase employee performance [74]. Leaders should focus on creating a learning and working atmosphere that is conducive to everyone's success in terms of student's academics and faculty-student mentoring relationships [60]. However, creating this kind of environment is difficult given the typical diversity of a PWI and in terms of the resources that are readily available for Black students [75]. Research suggests that the best way to achieve this goal is by being able to demonstrate different leadership behaviors to accomplish a specific vision [75]. Researchers examined the different behaviors associated with flexible leadership and found that it is multi-dimensional in terms of how leaders can influence.

Student Resilience

There are many common themes within the past and present literature regarding Black students at PWIs. These challenges range from minor to major issues when dealing with discriminatory learning environments. It has been a struggle for many colleges and universities to create consistency within their campus in terms of establishing a diverse atmosphere that is multi-culturally accepted [5]. As mentioned, elements such as academic integration, social integration, iteration, and mental health have been significant issues that affect academic performance and social lives of the undergraduate Black students. Previous research suggests that these common themes can make the student feel vulnerable and stressed. This stress can also be detrimental to the socialization amongst their peers and academic performance [76]. The unsuccessful socialization of Black students amongst their peers can cause feelings of inadequacy. Black students report comparing themselves with their peers concerning how they identify [76].

Black students that are attending PWIs have shared that they felt uncomfortable while enrolled; and that there seemed to a harmful nature of stereotypes present during their time of enrollment [21]. Other research has shown that Black students, specifically men, have reported that seeing more men of color in leadership roles on campus would show commitment to diversity. Results also showed that this could be helpful to the present issues on campus regarding providing solutions in this area [8]. In present literature, research that has been conducted at historical PWIs show the same themes concerning sociability. C. Smith [58] conducted a study where the results were very consistent with multiple other studies when dealing with Black students reporting that they feel the inability to assimilate with the student environment. Students also shared that there is a lack of campus institutional support or support systems in place. All of these factors are correlated with a sense of belonging for students. On-campus student support services, peer relationships, and faculty/staff relationships are all connected regarding a college campus atmosphere [77].

Within the previous studies, participants revealed that they had to push past all of the challenges they experienced to be successful at the PWI [78]. Participants shared that same race to race interaction played a significant part of them feeling like they belonged to the institution. Reports also showed that the interaction between the different races also mattered when feeling a sense of belonging. This also had a positive effect regarding the Black students enjoying their time of enrollment [78]. Research emphasizes that leadership implementation based on flexible leadership strategies can optimize and have a positive impact on student success. Such as the same leadership strategies used in the business sector, Academic leaders can apply those same leadership principles to positively impact student academic achievement, especially within PWIs [79].

Design and Method

Using qualitative research allowed the researcher to collect and analyze non-numerical data. Non-numerical data includes instruments such as audio, video or text. These instruments are used to understand the participants' perceptions or experiences [16]. As mentioned previously, the feature I am looking to utilize was obtaining data through the use of interviewing participants (Black students) to obtain understanding of the Black experiences at 2-year PWIs.

Recommendations for future research suggested that more research is needed in the same area in concerns with understanding the experiences that impact graduation rates for first generation Black students, newly high school graduates, and/or other ethnic groups. Cross [11] also made the recommendation to conduct a study at community colleges in northern states as the researcher conducted the study in southern states. In another study, researchers examined Black Male retention in community colleges using a case study as the design. It was recommended that this research should be continued using a different research design, such as qualitative. Previous research has provided the gap in knowledge concerning how the problem has not been addressed regarding the barriers that impact Black males' ability to stay in school or graduate. The purpose of

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my intended qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the experiences that Black males encounter at 2-year institutions concerning the stress-based barriers during their first year at PWIs. More specifically, to identify those stressed based barriers that could potentially impact their ability to stay in school or graduate.

Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

The purpose of my qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Black males at 2-year PWIs regarding strategies that will improve their overall academic success. The study aimed to identify those stressed-based barriers that could potentially impact their ability to stay in school or graduate. The problem was that Black males have the lowest college graduation rate at 2-year PWIs [12]. The study centered on participants' perspectives, offering insight into the colleges and support that shape their educational journeys. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from National University prior to the commencement of data collection.

Section 3 presents the key findings of the study, organized around the emergent themes identified through qualitative analysis of participants' interviews. The emergent themes reflect the narratives and viewpoints gathered in response to the interview questions. The section also examines the implications of these findings within the broader context of Black male students at 2-year PWIs. Finally, it offers recommendations grounded in the data, with attention to both immediate practical applications and directions for future research.

While this study provides valuable insight into the lived experiences of Black male students at PWIs, one limitation could be considered when interpreting the findings. The sample size and recruitment strategy may introduce potential biases. Participants were selected based on availability and willingness to engage in the study, which may reflect a degree of self-selection. Individuals who chose to participate may have held particularly strong perspectives, either affirming or critical, regarding their institutional experiences. Conversely, those who declined participation may have done so due to discomfort, distrust, emotional fatigue, or competing demands, thereby limiting the diversity of the perspective represented. Additionally, because the study was conducted within a single institutional context, the transferability of the findings is inherently constrained. The applicability of these insights should be interpreted within the boundaries of the study's institutional context, recognizing that the experiences described may not fully represent those of Black male students at other PWIs with different cultural climates, institutional structures, or support systems.

Findings

The 10 participants in this study consisted of Black male students who were actively enrolled at the same 2-year PWIs at the time of data collection. All individuals met the inclusion criteria of self-identifying as Black males and being enrolled in associate degree programs at the institution where the majority of the student population is White. Participants ranged in age from late teens to mid-twenties, representing a spectrum of academic standings including first-year, second year and returning students. While specific socioeconomic data were not collected, anecdotal insights during the interviews reflected a range of financial backgrounds, with several participants referencing work obligations, financial aid, and family support as factors influencing their educational persistence.

Each participant engaged in a one-on-one, structured interview conducted in a private, neutral location to ensure confidentiality and comfort. Interviews typically lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent to ensure accuracy and completeness. All recordings were transcribed verbatim using a secure transcription process, and transcripts were reviewed for accuracy prior to analysis. The interviews focused on participants lived experiences navigating academic and social life within PWI environments, including encounters with microaggressions and racial discrimination from faculty, staff, and peers, as well as the psychological and academic implications of these experiences. Participants also described the influence of family, the availability and effectiveness of institutional support, and the personal strategies they employed to persist in their educational journeys.

The demographic group was intentionally selected to provide insight into the nuanced challenges faced by Black males in 2-year PWIs which can often be seen as an underrepresented population in higher education research. Their narratives offer critical perspective on identity, resilience, and institutional climate within these settings [80]. The data collected from the participants revealed several recurring themes. These themes reflect the lived experiences of navigating cultural identity, accessing support, managing academic pressures, and integrating socially within institutional environment.

In qualitative research, establishing trustworthiness is essential to ensure that findings genuinely reflect participants lived experiences. To honor the integrity of their voices, this study aligned with the four criteria outlined by Enworo [81]: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through intentional rapport-building with each participant before and during the interview process. Conversations were held one-on-one in

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private, neutral settings to foster psychological safety and create space for honest reflection. The semi-structured format encouraged participants to share personal narratives related to racialized experiences, academic persistence, and social navigation within the PWI context. Member checking was incorporated by inviting participants to clarify or expand on their responses, ensuring that their perspectives were represented with accuracy and care. These strategies helped cultivate trust and authenticity throughout the data collection process [82].

Transferability was supported by offering rich descriptions of the institutional context, participant demographics, and the challenges they encountered. By detailing the shared identity of participants as Black male students within a 2-year PWI, the study provides contextual depth that allows readers to consider how these insights might apply to similar educational environments. Thematic analysis further illuminated patterns that may resonate with broader populations navigating racialized academic spaces [83]. Dependability was addressed through a clearly documented and replicable research design. Throughout the study, I maintained detailed records, including interview protocols, transcription procedures, coding frameworks, and analytic notes to ensure consistency and transparency. The structure of the interviews and the systematic approach to analysis allowed findings to emerge through a dependable and traceable process. Ongoing feedback from academic mentors added another layer of scrutiny, helping refine both the interpretive lens and methodological rigor.

Confirmability was supported by a reflexive approach to data interpretation. Direct quotations from participants were used to anchor findings in their own words, minimizing researcher imposition and keeping their voices central. An audit trail and reflective memos were maintained throughout the analytic process, documenting how interpretations evolved, and decisions were made. These materials offer a transparent account of the study's progression, allowing others to trace the logic behind the findings and confirm that they were grounded in the data rather than shaped by personal bias or assumption [84].

Analysis of the interview data revealed that participants lived experiences at the 2-year PWI were shaped by recurring patterns related to racialized interactions, academic navigation, institutional support, and personal resilience. As meaning units were transformed into psychologically sensitive statements, clear thematic structures emerged that reflected how participants made sense of their environment and the factors influencing their persistence. The essence of their experiences centered on negotiating cultural identity within predominantly white spaces, managing the emotional and academic impact of discrimination, and seeking support systems that affirmed their belonging. These themes collectively illustrate how participants interpreted their challenges and strengths, offering insight into how their lived experiences directly addressed the study's research questions. For Research Question 1 and Research Question 2, the themes were as follows:

RQ1. What are the lived experiences of Black males at 2-year PWIs? The lived experiences of Black males at 2-year PWIs are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural identity, academic navigation, social integration, and the pursuit of meaningful support. These dimensions surfaced consistently across participant narratives and reflected the challenges and strengths embedded in their daily campus experiences. Through systematic qualitative analysis, the data were coded and organized to highlight recurring patterns and emotionally resonant insights. Together, these themes provide a deeper understanding of how participants made sense of their environment and the factors influencing persistence.

Theme 1: Cultural Identity and Acceptance. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining cultural identity within PWI spaces. This emphasis extended beyond self-expression to include a sense of integrity and resistance. One participant advised incoming students to "be yourself, be comfortable in your own skin, be comfortable in your culture," even when institutional norms made that difficult. He described cultural expression as a constructive act—one that could foster understanding and, potentially, acceptance. Another participant reflected on the role of the minority excellence organization (MEO) in affirming his cultural background and providing a space where identity could be safely expressed.

Theme 2: Support Systems. The necessity of culturally responsive support systems was a recurring theme. Participants identified mentorship and counseling as essential, particularly when those services were provided by individuals who shared or understood their cultural context. Participant 4 explained, "Just having someone Black in that position would be great to talk to … they'd be able to know where we're coming from." The MEO was frequently cited as a valuable resource, offering scholarships, guidance, and a sense of community that helped students navigate institutional challenges.

Theme 3: Academic Challenges and Environment. Academic pressures were described as both structural and psychological. Several participants reported feeling "set up for failure" due to limited access to resources and inconsistent support from administration. Others noted a lack of respect for athletic coaches and mentors who advocated on their behalf. These accounts suggest that institutional barriers,

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both formal and informal, shaped participants' academic experiences and contributed to feelings of marginalization.

Theme 4: Social Dynamics and Integration. Participants described social integration within PWI environments as a persistent challenge. Feelings of being watched, judged, or misunderstood were common. Participant 3 recalled, "It felt like we were being watched every time we walked into school … it got uncomfortable." Despite these dynamics, many emphasized the importance of building community and finding spaces of belonging. Participant 2 described adapting aspects of his cultural expression to make it more accessible to peers, while still maintaining authenticity: "I try to make it more comfortable for them while still being myself … I add something to the side, so they also feel included."

Theme 5: Advice for New Students. Participants offered guidance to incoming Black students, often rooted in personal experience and resilience. Their advice included being proactive in seeking help, engaging with available communities, and staying focused on academic goals. They encouraged new students to embrace their uniqueness and contribute positively to the institutional environment, even when doing so required emotional labor and cultural negotiation. Participants' feedback also highlighted the value of embracing one's uniqueness and maintaining cultural authenticity.

RQ2. What challenges do Black males face in achieving academic success at 2-year PWIs?

The challenges faced by Black males in achieving academic success at 2-year PWIs were identified through a thematic analysis of participant narratives. These challenges reflect recurring patterns across individual experiences. These patterns highlighted the structural and interpersonal barriers and were organized into six primary themes: cultural disconnection, lack of institutional support, academic pressure, social integration, administrative challenges, and time management. Together, these themes illustrate the multifaceted nature of the academic journey for Black males navigating PWIs.

Theme 6: Cultural Disconnection: Participants reported a sense of alienation within PWI environments, which impacted on their ability to engage academically. Being one of the few Black students often led to feelings of being watched or judged, contributing to discomfort and distraction in academic spaces. Participant 6 reflected: My biggest challenge was trying to find the right crowd to fit in … everybody already has their clicks or people just already looking at me as if I'm some kind of … outsider. So just trying to find out where you fit in or figuring out if you just gotta stay to yourself.

Theme 7: Lack of Institutional Support: A significant challenge identified was the absence of adequate institutional support. Participants described feeling "set up for failure" due to limited access to academic resources and culturally responsive support systems. Participant 1, who was also a student-athlete shared: It was just very difficult for us … I had a lot of teammates who ended up failing off … we weren't set up like we were essentially set up for failure for most kids … it took a select few who had good academic routines and habits to really bust their ass to succeed.

Theme 8: Academic Pressure. Participants discussed the stress of maintaining high academic performance while simultaneously navigating cultural and personal challenges. The expectation to excel in environments that may not be welcoming added emotional strain and contributed to feelings of isolation and burnout. Participant 5 described:

Patience is the number one thing … understanding that not everyone sees life the same … I keep telling myself why I'm there … I'm trying to get my degree, trying to go to school for free … reminding myself and being patient and open really helps me stay on task.

Theme 9: Social Integration. Difficulty forming connections within the PWI student body was a recurring theme. Participants emphasized the importance of community-building, noting that social isolation negatively affected their academic focus and motivation. Participant 8 explained: Just getting out more … try not to be in my room as much … try to go out on campus, talk to people … you could build little bonds and those little bonds over time could form into a steady group … something more inclusive.

Theme 10: Administrative Challenges: Negative interactions with faculty and administration were reported by several participants. These included perceptions of unequal treatment, dismissive responses to concerns, and a lack of respect for culturally relevant programming. Participant 1 stated: Counseling would be something … not super therapist-like, but the opportunity to talk to someone who understands … we were the only Black people in town and everyone knew where we were … it's different … knowing you're not alone is the first thing.

Theme 11: Time Management and Balancing Responsibilities: Participants highlighted the challenge of managing academic responsibilities alongside work, family obligations, and other life demands. The cumulative effect of these responsibilities was described as a source of stress that, if not managed effectively, could lead to academic difficulties. This theme was consistently mentioned as a barrier to sustained academic performance.

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RQ3. How do Black males describe their interactions with faculty, staff, and peers at 2-year PWIs?

Participants' narratives revealed a range of experiences in their interactions with faculty, staff, and peers at 2-year PWIs. These interactions were described as mixed, reflecting both supportive and challenging elements shaped by the broader institutional and social context. The analysis demonstrated that these varied experiences contributed to identifiable patterns across the dataset. From this process, six recurring themes emerged.

Theme 12: Negative Perceptions of Faculty Interactions: Several participants reported feeling disrespected or not taken seriously by faculty members. Concerns raised by students were often perceived as overlooked or dismissed. Faculty were described as lacking cultural awareness or understanding of the student's lived experiences, which contributed to strained communication and limited academic support. Participant 9 expressed that he didn't feel that there was a lot of help from administration, and it often felt that administration came across more racist than some of the students.

Theme 13: Mixed Experiences with Staff Support: Interactions with institutional staff were described as varied. While some participants noted that staff members were approachable and made genuine efforts to assist, others reported that staff did not provide adequate support or failed to respond effectively to their needs. Positive staff interactions were acknowledged but not consistently experienced across the institution. Participant 2 stated: I wouldn't have made it as far as I did if I didn't have the faculty that was there to help me. They were there with me step-by-step like even when times were like so gray and it looked like I wasn't gonna pull through.

Theme 14: Social Isolation Among Peers: Participants frequently described feelings of isolation in their interactions with peers. Being one of the few Black students on campus was associated with challenges in forming friendships and building a sense of community. Several participants reported feeling watched or judged by their peers, which contributed to discomfort and limited social engagement. These experiences collectively limited their social engagement and reinforced a sense of separation within the campus environment.

Theme 15: Desire for Connection and Understanding: A strong desire for increased understanding and inclusivity from peers was expressed. Participants indicated that their interactions could improve through more opportunities for cultural exchange and open dialogue. These efforts were viewed as meaningful avenues for fostering stronger interpersonal connections. Participants also believed that such approaches could help reduce social distance and create a more supportive campus environment.

Theme 16: Importance of Mentorship: Mentorship was identified as a critical component of participants' institutional experiences. Participants emphasized the value of mentors who understood their cultural and academic challenges. These relationships were described as essential for navigating the educational environment. They also played a key role in helping students and maintain academic focus and persistence.

Theme 17: Recognition of Efforts by Some Individuals: Despite the challenges reported, some participants acknowledged that certain faculty and staff made meaningful efforts to engage with them positively. These individuals were appreciated for their attempts to understand and support Black students, and their presence was noted as a source of encouragement. Participant 3 shared that: my instructor would try to help me out with homework and things that I had problems with. If I asked a lot of other staff or administration, they would be nice as well. Nothing was bad on their end when it came to support.

Evaluation of the Outcomes

Black males continue to have the lowest college graduation rates at 2-year PWIs. This persistent disparity limits access to economic mobility, personal fulfilment, and broader societal participation. The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Black males at 2-year PWIs regarding strategies that will improve their overall academic success. The study aimed to identify those stressed based barriers that could potentially impact their ability to stay in school or graduate. The findings directly respond to this purpose by offering participant-centered insights into the emotional, social, and structural realities these students navigate. These insights help explain the graduation gap not just through data, but through the voices of those living it.

The thematic analysis of participant narratives revealed recurring themes that reflect the lived experiences and academic challenges of Black males attending 2-year PWIs. These themes were identified through a multi-phase coding process, including open coding to capture initial concepts, group coding concerning grouping related ideas, and selective coding to refine and organize the final thematic structure. The resulting themes and descriptions are presented as descriptive summaries of each in Table 1.

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Interview Question	Giorgi/Tinto Factor	Theoretical Factor Description
What challenges have you faced as a Black male at a PWI?	Navigating the Challenges of Minority Identity in PWI Environments	Captures the emotional and social complexities of being a minority in settings where one is outnumbered. Includes the struggle for inclusion and acceptance while maintaining identity, reflecting both external perceptions and internal responses.
Can you describe any experiences of racial discrimination or microaggressions you've encountered on campus?	The Complexities of Minority Identity in PWI Spaces	Highlights emotional and social challenges, including stereotypes, need for community support, cultural adjustment, and discrimination. Reflects broader societal dynamics within campus life.
How do you feel your cultural identity has been supported or challenged at the institution?	Cultural Identity and Resilience in PWIs	Emphasizes the resilience required to maintain identity amid stereotypes, cultural adjustment, and limited support. Reflects the ongoing struggle for inclusion and belonging.
What role have faculty and staff played in your academic journey?	Faculty/Staff Influence on Academic and Emotional Well-being	Explores how interactions with faculty and administration shape academic progress, emotional support, and overall well-being.
Have you participated in any support programs or organizations for Black males? If so, how effective were they?	The Role and Limitations of Support Programs	Highlights the absence of necessary programs, importance of emotional support, experiences of racism and isolation, and the need for inclusive social and academic spaces.
How do you perceive the campus climate and its impact on your academic success?	Campus Climate and Academic Success	Emphasizes the need for tailored support, mentorship, and cultural education. Shows how campus climate directly affects academic outcomes and inclusion.
What resources or services do you think the institution should provide to better support Black males?	Institutional Support and Student Well-being	Explores how social support, diversity, and institutional resources affect mental health and academic success. Highlights the importance of belonging and adequate support systems.
How has your family influenced your decision to stay in school and pursue your degree?	Family Influence and Institutional Gaps	Reflects how family support fills gaps left by institutional shortcomings. Highlights the motivational role of family amid limited institutional understanding.
What strategies have you used to overcome academic and social challenges at the PWI?	Strategies for Resilience and Adaptation	Captures the diverse strategies students use to navigate challenges, including engagement, support networks, and adaptability.
What advice would you give to other Black males entering a PWI?	Empowerment through Authenticity and Engagement	Encourages self-acceptance, cultural pride, and active participation. Emphasizes authenticity as a strategy for overcoming challenges and fostering understanding.

Table 1: Questions and Theoretical Alignment.

Research Question 1 - Lived Experiences: Cultural Identity, Acceptance, and Belonging

Participants described their experiences as shaped by a tension between affirming their cultural identity and adapting to their institutional norms. When students felt seen and supported, their engagement deepened. When they did not, disconnection followed. Organizations like the minority excellence organization (MEO) provided validation and belonging for some, but that sense of acceptance was not universal. The desire for connection emerged as a central theme. Participants shared that involvement in campus activities helped ease isolation and foster relationships. Their feedback suggests that institutions must move beyond passive tolerance of identity and toward active celebration. Intentional programming that encourages social engagement and community building is essential for student well-being and retention.

These findings align with previous literature, emphasizing the role of cultural affirmation in student persistence. In a previous study, it was argued that culturally responsive campus environments are critical for Black male

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success, particularly in PWI settings [85]. Similarly, Strayhorn [78] reinforced that a sense of belonging is not optional but foundational regarding Black male student success. Within Tinto's framework, these experiences reflect the domain of social integration. When students find spaces that affirm their identity, they are more likely to persist. When those spaces are absent, disengagement becomes more likely.

Research Question 2 – Barriers to Academic Success: Support, Resources, and Climate

When asked about academic success, participants pointed to three key challenges: lack of support systems, limited academic resources, and a difficult campus climate. Their responses made it clear that academic success isn't just about ability. It's about access, affirmation, and environment. Many called for culturally responsive counseling and mentorship. The absence of relatable support structures contributed to emotional strain and academic uncertainty. Participants stressed that having diverse staff and tailored mentorship programs could directly impact persistence. Frustration with limited resources and a perceived lack of institutional investment was a common thread. Some felt the system wasn't designed with their success in mind. Equitable access to tutoring, advising, and culturally relevant programming was missing and when it was present, it wasn't prioritized. Navigating campus culture was another layer of challenge. The emotional labor of existing in PWI spaces was marked by microaggressions or a sense of invisibility and was a recurring barrier. These experiences weren't just uncomfortable; they were exhausting. Recent studies confirm that structural barriers continue to undermine Black male success at PWIs. For instance, recent studies found that the absence of culturally attuned support services contributes to academic disengagement [25]. Similarly, previous research highlights how racialized campus climates erode students' sense of safety and belonging [41]. These findings align with Tinto's model when examining these findings reflect weak academic integration and limited institutional commitment. Without intentional support and investment, students may internalize systemic failures and disengage emotionally, socially, and academically.

Research Question 3 – Interactions: Faculty, Peers, and the Need for Inclusivity

Participants reflected on their interactions with faculty, staff, and peers. While some described faculty and staff as friendly, the need for deeper understanding and mentorship was clear. Surface-level kindness wasn't enough, and participants felt they wanted connection, guidance, and cultural awareness. Peer dynamics were often fraught. Many shared feelings of being watched, judged, or tokenized. These experiences reinforced outsider status and created discomfort in social settings. Some participants withdrew socially, even if they remained academically present. There was also a strong call for inclusivity. Participants wanted more activities and education that reflected their cultural backgrounds. The lack of representation in campus life wasn't just disappointing; it was a missed opportunity for connection.

These findings mimic recent work, which emphasized that inclusive peer and faculty relationships are essential for retention [86]. They also align with the concept of community cultural wealth in terms of institutions must recognize and build upon the cultural assets students bring [87]. As it relates to Tinto's framework, these experiences highlight gaps in social integration and institutional commitment. Without inclusive practices and culturally aware mentorship, students may remain academically present but socially withdrawn, which can be seen as an early sign of departure.

Tinto's institutional departure theory assumes that student's persistence is shaped by three interrelated areas which are academic integration, social integration, and institutional commitment. When students experience disconnection in these areas, their likelihood of departure increases. The study offers a nuanced, context specific application of Tinto's framework. Participants' experience reflects that academic integration hindered by limited resources and lack of culturally responsive support. Social integration was perceived or shaped by feelings of isolation, tokenism, and the search for belonging; and institutional commitment was viewed as conditional or absent when diversity and inclusion are not prioritized.

The alignment between the study's purpose, findings, and Tinto's model underscores the importance of academic support, social belonging, and institutional responsiveness in promoting persistence among Black males at PWIs. The lived experiences also challenge the institutions to go further beyond the surface level inclusion and towards transformative practices that affirm identity, foster connection, and demonstrate a real commitment to equity [85].

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

This study explored the lived experiences, academic challenges, and interpersonal interactions of Black males at 2-year PWIs. The findings reveal patterns that, while context-specific, offer meaningful implications for institutional practice. These implications are drawn directly from participant narratives and feedback; and are interpreted with care regarding accuracy.

Participants reflections underscore the centrality of cultural identity and belonging in shaping their educational experience. The affirmation of one's cultural background,

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whether through student led organizations like the minority excellence organization (Participant 6) or through personal expressions of authenticity (Participant 2) emerged as a stabilizing force. These findings suggest that culturally affirming spaces are not peripheral but foundational to student well-being and engagement, echoing recent studies which emphasize the role of racial identity in persistence and self-efficacy [8].

Academic challenges were frequently linked to the absence of tailored support systems. Participants 1, 3, and 5 described a lack of culturally relevant counseling, limited mentorship, and a broader campus climate that often felt unwelcoming or misaligned with their needs. These accounts point to systemic gaps in institutional responsiveness and highlight the need for more intentional, equity centered support structures. This aligns with previous research when dealing with the assertion that culturally unresponsive environments contribute to diminished academic outcomes for Black male students in community colleges [89].

Interactions with faculty and staff were described as generally positive, with faculty often perceived as friendly and approachable. However, participants expressed a desire for deeper relational engagement. For example, Participant 6 emphasized the need for faculty to advocate for more tailored resources that address the specific needs of minority students. Peer dynamics, in contrast, were more fraught, with several participants describing feelings of isolation and marginalization.

Participant 4 described the learning environment as intimidating, particularly when navigating classroom spaces as one of the only minority students. They reflected on a recurring internal question, "Does my teacher really know me or understand where I come from?" This questioning underscores the emotional complexity of feeling unseen or culturally disconnected within academic settings. These experiences suggest that while institutions may offer surface level support, deeper cultural understanding and inclusive practices are needed to foster genuine connection.

The findings of this study point to several practice-oriented considerations that may enhance the educational experience of Black males at 2-year PWIs. Five recommendations are presented, each rooted in participant narratives and informed by relevant literature to ensure alignment with both lived experience and current studies. First, institutions should sustain culturally affirming student spaces. Participant 6's experience with the minority excellence organization illustrates how such environments foster belonging, pride, and connection. This aligns with Marlow-McCowin [90] work, which emphasized the role of identity-affirming communities in promoting engagement and persistence.

Second, participants expressed a need for culturally responsive counseling and mentorship. Participant 4 called for support that resonates with their lived experience, while Participant 5 highlighted the importance of mentorship in navigating academic challenges. Brooms [91] underscore the value of relational, culturally attuned support in fostering student success. Third, inclusive programming and diversity education emerged as meaningful. Participants described a desire for campus activities that reflect their cultural backgrounds and for efforts to educate the broader student population. Literature suggests that inclusive engagement can reduce isolation and foster mutual respect [92,93].

Fourth, while faculty were generally perceived as approachable, participants hoped for deeper relational engagement. Structured opportunities for mentorship and professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy may strengthen faculty-student relationships [94] out campus climate such as feeling "set up for failure" (Participant 3), point to the need for institutional reflection. Equity audits and mechanisms for elevating student voice may help identify and address systemic barriers. These recommendations are not prescriptive but suggest pathways for institutions to more fully honour the experiences and needs of Black male students. Further inquiry is needed to explore their relevance across varied educational contexts.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study offers insight into the lived experiences of Black males at PWIs that highlights the significance of cultural identity, support systems, and campus climate. Guided by Tinto's model of student departure, which emphasizes the importance of academic and social integration in student persistence, this study also provides insight that reveals areas that future research can assist in expanding understanding. To build on this study, future researchers might examine how Black males negotiate cultural identity in academic spaces where they are underrepresented. Participant 2 emphasized cultural authenticity which suggests a need to explore how students maintain a sense of self while adapting to institutional norms. This line of inquiry could deepen understanding of how identity affirmation intersects with academic and social integration which is also central to Tinto's framework. Support systems also warrant further investigation. Participants described mentorship, culturally responsive counseling, and peer networks as essential to their success, yet access to these resources was uneven. Future studies could evaluate the design and impact of such programs, particularly in relation to persistence and belonging.

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Campus climate emerged as a significant factor in students' sense of inclusion. Participant 3's account of feeling "set up for failure" points to systemic barriers that merit longitudinal study. Researchers might assess how diversity initiatives, student engagement efforts, and faculty development shape outcome over time. This study's scope was limited to one institutional type and demographic group. Future research should expand to include multiple institutions and racially diverse populations, allowing for comparative and intersectional analysis. Mixed methods designs may also enhance future studies by capturing both broad patterns and individual narratives. The next logical step was to move from descriptive inquiry to evaluative and intervention-based research. Rather than solely documenting student experiences, future studies should examine how institutions can respond in ways that are culturally sustaining, relationally attuned, and structurally responsive. Tinto's framework emphasizes that persistence is not simply a matter of individual motivation, but of institutional conditions that support meaningful engagement. Future research could also focus on identifying, implementing, and assessing practices that directly respond to the barriers and opportunities surfaced in this study. By centering student voice and applying equity focused frameworks, future research can contribute to institutional change that supports persistence not only in theory but in practice.

Conclusion

This study explored the educational experiences of Black males at one 2-year PWI, with a focus on how cultural identity, institutional support, and campus climate influence academic persistence. Using Tinto's model of student departure as a guiding framework, the research revealed that students' ability to integrate socially and culturally within their institutions plays a critical role in their success. The study addressed a pressing practice-based concern: Black males continue to graduate at disproportionately low rates from PWIs, a pattern that reflects broader systemic inequities in higher education.

Participants shared narratives of navigating environments that were often culturally unfamiliar or unwelcoming, underscoring the importance of maintaining their identity while seeking meaningful connection. Their reflections pointed to a consistent need for intentional institutional support, particularly through culturally competent counselling, identity-affirming student organizations, and inclusive programming. These findings highlight how experiences of isolation and marginalization can erode students' confidence, sense of belonging, and academic engagement. The implications for practice are clear. Institutions must move beyond symbolic diversity efforts and commit to culturally responsive strategies that affirm identity, foster relational trust, and address structural barriers [80].

Participants called for mentorship programs that reflect their lived realities, diversity training for faculty and staff, and campus spaces that celebrate cultural heritage. These recommendations align with Tinto's assertion that student retention is not solely a matter of individual determination, but of institutional responsibility [51]. To advance equity, colleges must implement practices that attend to both relational and structural dimensions of student experience [95]. Culturally affirming spaces cultivate belonging and pride; mentorship and counselling grounded in cultural understanding support both academic and emotional resilience; inclusive engagement through diversity education and faculty development reduces isolation and fosters mutual respect; and structural reflection, through equity audits and student voice mechanisms enables institutions to identify and address systemic inequities [78,96-124].

Looking ahead, future research should evaluate the effectiveness of cultural sustaining practices, expand to varied institutional contexts, and employ mixed methods to capture both broad patterns and individual depth. The next logical step is intervention-based inquiry, examining how institutions can actively create conditions that support persistence through culturally responsive, relationally attuned, and equity-driven approaches. By addressing these areas, institutions not only improve outcomes for Black males but also cultivate a more inclusive and enriching educational environments for all students.

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