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“Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?” The African American Student Experience with Academic Discourse in a Community College

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“Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?” The African American Student Experience with Academic Discourse in a Community College

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine academic discourse as a factor contributing to the lack of persistence for African American students in community college. The participants for the study consisted of eight students currently enrolled at a midsized community college in Western New York. The participant's experiences revealed four major themes that cut across the entire sample with a consistent pattern of students reporting both benefits and consequences in relation to academic discourse. These included: (a) Break this down please!- which examined how understanding and comprehension of language can be a barrier for African American community college students; (b) The Comfort Zone- demonstrated how students felt a certain level of comfort in classes and situations where they had some familiarity with the words used, the topics covered, and what was being asked of them; (c) Extra Mile vs. Sink or Swim- identified students' beliefs around the propensity for some faculty to go the extra mile to support African American students; and (d) Real Me vs. College Me- was a reoccurring concept throughout the study where students described having dual identities where they had to speak and act differently. Understanding how academic discourse was experienced by this unique population added to the body of literature and equipped institutions of higher education with knowledge to combat academic discourse which may be contributing to the low rates of persistence among African American students in community college. The study also has the potential to create awareness around discourse for students, providing a basis to inform institutional and programmatic best practices.

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“Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?” The African American
Student Experience with Academic Discourse in a Community College

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

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St. John Fisher College

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Dedication

This research is dedicated in loving memory of Thelma E. Mathias, a matriarch, mother, and grandmother, who instilled the importance of education in her family and inspired a love for learning in her beloved granddaughter.

Thank you to my brother, Corey Caldwell, who I have often described as having a personality which is the polar opposite of mine. He received all the creativity and free thinking and I was left with the methodical and grounded contemplation. The two make for a winning combination, as he used his creativity to capture my research with the title, “Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?”

I would also like to thank my parents, family, and friends who encouraged me throughout this journey. A special thanks to my mother, Margaret Caldwell, who taught me leadership characteristics of strength, perseverance, and drive which sustain me in my personal and professional endeavors.

To my beautiful nieces and nephew, Corryn, Tristyn, and Carter, my greatest hope is that this work will make the educational system better for you and provide you with the tools to change the world.

To Dr. Cleverley-Thompson, thank you for your support, guidance, attention to detail, and your unwavering desire to make your first the best! To Dr. Hurny, thank you for helping me refine my research and making the need clear to more than just the “choir”. To Dr. Townsend, thank you being the “choir” and helping me believe in my

research! To Dr. McKinsey-Mabry, my Executive Mentor, colleague, and friend, thank you for supporting me through the process and helping me to trust myself!

African proverb states, “I am because you are”. I am here at the end of my dissertation journey because of every important person in my life- Thank you!

Biographical Sketch

Ebony Caldwell is currently a Project Director and Affirmative Action Coordinator at Monroe Community College. Ms. Caldwell attended Fredonia State and Medaille College and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology in 2002. She also attended Medaille College from 2006 to 2008 and graduated with a Master of Arts in Psychology degree in 2008. She came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2013 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Ms. Caldwell pursued her research in Academic Discourse and the persistence of African American community college students under the direction of Dr. Shannon Cleverley-Thompson and Dr. James Hurny and received the Ed.D. degree in 2015.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine academic discourse as a factor contributing to the lack of persistence for African American students in community college. The participants for the study consisted of eight students currently enrolled at a midsized community college in Western New York. The participant's experiences revealed four major themes that cut across the entire sample with a consistent pattern of students reporting both benefits and consequences in relation to academic discourse. These included: (a) Break this down please!- which examined how understanding and comprehension of language can be a barrier for African American community college students; (b) The Comfort Zone- demonstrated how students felt a certain level of comfort in classes and situations where they had some familiarity with the words used, the topics covered, and what was being asked of them; (c) Extra Mile vs. Sink or Swim- identified students' beliefs around the propensity for some faculty to go the extra mile to support African American students; and (d) Real Me vs. College Me- was a reoccurring concept throughout the study where students described having dual identities where they had to speak and act differently. Understanding how academic discourse was experienced by this unique population added to the body of literature and equipped institutions of higher education with knowledge to combat academic discourse which may be contributing to the low rates of persistence among African American students in community college. The study also has the potential to create awareness around discourse for students, providing a basis to inform institutional and programmatic best practices.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Historically research on student persistence in college has been based on descriptive, demographic, and personal factor models to explain stop out and dropout rates (Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 1999). Due to the national focus on completion, a new importance has framed persistence as a part of the educational process (Peltier et al., 1999). Researching student persistence in higher education institutions is compounded by the differences shown across ethnic groups. This is significant to the community college. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES] (2005), student enrollment in higher education has increased over the last two decades. Due to the open access missions of community colleges, the flood of enrollment has been comprised of students from diverse background, income levels, and characteristics (Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2012).

College students are enrolled in large numbers but somewhere between enrollment and completion some students, specifically African Americans, do not find the full benefit of a college education (Russell & Atwater, 2005). Access is not enough when African American student dropout rates in 2012 were 7.5 % compared to the 4.3% of their White counterparts (NCES, 2013). According to Nakajima et al. (2012), much of the research on student persistence has been explored at the 4-year college level but several researchers have also studied community college student persistence but they have been limited by variables used in comparison. Nakajima et al. (2012) shared several

community college persistence studies that investigated single variables, rather than multiple variables, which would mimic the actual college setting where several variables interact to produce an overall effect. With the attention on demographic or personality factors separately the results have been skewed as much of the weight has been placed on risk factors such as age, financial status, and registration behaviors (Nakajima et al., 2012) These studies (Hawley & Harris, 2005; Robbins, Allen, Casillas, Petersen, & Le, 2006) neglected the environmental factors of student interactions with faculty, student services staff, and peers associated with persistence (Nakajima et al., 2012)

Persistence. Russell and Atwater (2005) propose significant factors to persistence of African American students are academic success, family support, teacher encouragement, intrinsic motivation, and perseverance. More broadly stated Nakajima, Dembo and Mossler (2012) revealed the factors influencing student persistence are numerous and varied for each student and include age, work hours, and financial aid. However, the effects of these factors on persistence seem to diminish when other variables are introduced (Nakajima et al., 2012) The strongest predictors of student persistence have been noted to include cumulative GPA (academic success), full-time enrollment status, and English proficiency (Nakajima et al., 2012) Nakajima et al. (2012) also suggest recent developments show that environmental factors such as student interactions with faculty, advisors, and peers as well as student services to include co-curricular activities and campus resources are associated with student persistence.

Environmental factors as outlined by Wood and Williams (2013) were used to investigate persistence in community colleges and defined as a collective pull of life circumstances that effect academic success. These pull factors included money, familial

responsibilities, unspecified personal reasons, and encouragement from others (Wood & Williams, 2013). A notable takeaway from Wood and Williams's study was that environmental factors often begin prior to student enrollment but the role of college professionals includes the responsibility for curbing the effects of the extant "pull" factors. For example, faculty could make an allowance for students with family responsibilities by establishing a makeup test policy. This policy grants leniency for the students' personal situation but holds them to the class expectations.

According to Arbona and Nora (2007), student persistence studies in 4-year institutions characterized environmental factors simply as students having family responsibilities and working off campus both which affected the student's ability to integrate socially and/or academically. Arbona and Nora referenced the "pull factor" but with slightly different circumstances attached than Woods and Williams (2013). The pull factor pertained to outside influences that circumvented full integration into campus life for students (Arbona & Nora, 2007). For this study, environmental factors that influence persistence for African American community college students revolved around language and how it impacts a student's ability to interact with faculty, staff, and peers. The concept of the pull factor defined as circumstances that previously have been found to pull students away from full integration into campus life (Arbona & Nora, 2007) could also be applicable to academic discourse. The lack of comfort for African American students in a discursive space such as college campus could threaten their full integration.

Institutions of higher education seem to be liberal environments from the outside. However from a historical prospective, American institutions have willingly embraced exclusion for African American (Harvey, 2014). This presents a need to understand the

disparities in persistence for African American students in the community college. If we dissect persistence for this subpopulation we may find components overlooked when researching persistence on a larger scale. Understanding persistence challenges for African Americans in community college could give practitioners a better way to quantify and address the National Completion Agenda. This agenda is comprised of suggested reform by President Obama, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the College Board, and the Lumina (Mullin, 2010).

The National Completion Agenda is a movement aimed at better understanding the issues and challenges of degree completion for community college students (Humphreys, 2012). According to Humphreys, the agenda is rooted in the linkage between educational attainment and success in the global economy. The movement has also driven policies that incentivize these changes and to tie funding to increased completion rates (Humphreys, 2012). The AACC's framework intended to bring this reform to fruition includes a change in focus from access to access and student success (Mullin, 2010). A paradigm shift from access to completion is being urged by federal and state governments (Mullin, 2010). Another change outlined in the agenda is the shift from niche programs serving small populations to programs that effectively address the student learning across populations (Mullin, 2010). The most relevant alteration to this study prescribed by AACC's framework is the shift from an isolated culture to a culture of collaboration (Mullin, 2010). The collaborative culture would exhibit campus-wide projects rather than pocket programs to promote the richest experiences to promote student persistence and completion. This shift could allow for a needed change in

institutions of higher education for a more open and collaborative conducive to promoting persistence for African American students.

Academic discourse. Academic discourse could be an example of an environmental factor that has the potential to influence persistence. Ignorance of “tacit rules,” unvoiced or unspoken laws, of academic discourse exist and result in target population exclusion or an “isolated culture” and often leads to dropouts but is not among the commonly cited reasons (White & Lowenthal, 2011). Burke (1974), theorist of rhetoric, explains academic discourse with the metaphor of “joining the conversation” late. He also posits that, academic discourse has conventions, or rules, about acceptable and expected writing and reading behaviors, which may, to the uninitiated, seem like a secret club handshake designed to keep the novice separated from the expert (Burke, 1974). Burke described the scenario of a guest coming late to a parlor or house party to illustrate academic discourse: The guest is not sure of the conversation that took place before they arrived and subsequently finds it difficult to make meaningful contributions as the conversation continues.

Many African American students are latecomers to the conversation that is higher education. They seem to struggle in transitioning from high school to college, in the classroom, about campus, and walking across the stage. At every stage of their educational journey, there is a common phenomenon of struggle, when compared to White college students that could be explored in the African American community college student experience (White, 2005). John Wesley White (2005) stated African American students’ transition to college is likened to adapting to a foreign culture. The students are entering a culture that has been “modeled upon a White western tradition”

(White, 2005, p. 371). White (2005) postulates that mainstream universities have ignored the importance of the difference in discursive styles and how language and identity are inextricably linked with respect to African American students. Unique language and discursive style presents itself in the K-12 level education but, higher education is a unique discourse community (White, 2005). Discourse communities are defined as a group of people within a given setting, who share a set of understood, basic values and assumptions and ways of communicating; to find success in this community, one must be familiar with theory and practice of the appropriate discourse (White, 2005).

According to White and Lowenthal (2011), a student may have or adopt discourse that allows them to find success in K-12 but such discourse does not translate to success at the college and university level. Although both are formal education settings, each requires a different skill. The compulsory attendance law in New York State requires students from 6-16 to be provided with educational programming (NYSED, 2012). At the college and university level if students are threatened by their lack of academic prowess or experience social alienation some could exit the institution voluntarily or in voluntarily. College is truly different than high school in that some students face new and greater academic demands. To be successful in college a student must have knowledge and application of several academic tools to meet the higher level of functioning required. These tools might include contextual awareness of the college setting, grasp the concept of social networking, and recognize the existence of tacit “codes of power” (White & Lowenthal, 2011). If a student fails to connect with peers or learn and employ the tacit or hidden rules their chances of college success are greatly diminished (White & Lowenthal,

2011). African American student attrition or lack of persistence is closely tied to cultural and social alienation (White & Lowenthal, 2011).

Language can be alienating being defined as “a body of words and systems common to a people who are of the same community or nation, the same geographical area, or the same cultural tradition” (Merriam-Webster, 2005). The acceptance of language varies by the norms set for a given community. Discourse is a subset of language, which relates to spoken or written communication. Academic discourse is a concept that has been studied quite extensively with respect to development, dialect, and discursive styles. There is a need to study this concept more closely when it is placed in a social and historical context and is labeled discourse; a specific form of language bound to a defined social group. There are several types of discourse such as legal discourse, medical discourse, and academic discourse.

An example that helps to describe academic discourse is likening it to legal documents or conversations. For instance, when an individual experiences information portrayed this way, the conversation is referred to as being written or spoken in legalese. This legal discourse makes it difficult for people outside the legal profession to understand or participate in anything surrounding it. A non-attorney finding themselves surrounded by people speaking in legalese may be unable to follow the discourse, despite being an intelligent person. The legalese conventions are tacit rules among lawyers that exclude the non-legal population. Such discourse conventions vary depending on audience, purpose, genre and other factors determined by the discipline and the community.

Academic discourse for the purposes of this study is the ability to understand, practice and relate to a set of communicative processes in academia, such as vocabulary, principles, and behaviors. This ability allows one to join or be excluded from the proverbial conversation. For example, this phenomenon would be revealed by a lack of verbal assertiveness, voluntary participation, and binary agonism- engagement in healthy debate as a learning tool (White & Lowenthal, 2011). In other words, a beginner college student's ability to identify the existence of this phenomenon, and then possess the capacity to either integrate her- or himself into such a discourse in a timely manner, maybe shown to be determinative of whether that college student is swept up into college life, or remains stuck on the outside, looking in. This ability to adapt, particularly for the African American, or non-White student, may translate to how likely she or he is to persist and find the full benefit of a college education. White and Ali-Khan (2013) record students from a case study expressing their fear of speaking in class. The students' unanimously agreed that their discursive style or native voice kept them from participating in class to avoid being negatively judged by their peers (White & Ali-Khan, 2010). The participants stated "I don't have the college-like talk," "I just don't want to [participate]," and "if I was more confident, in how I talk, I would talk more." White and Ali-Khan suggest not having the academic discourse adds to their sense of inferiority and alienation.

Problem Statement

The persistence rate of African American students compared to their White counterparts has been a long standing issue at all levels of education (Russell & Atwater, 2005). This issue is not well documented beyond high school along with any efforts

seeking to close the persistence gap. There are 80 public postsecondary schools in New York State, where fall enrollment for the 2009 - 2010 and 2010 - 2011 yielded 167,705 African American students, 148,802 Hispanic students, and 666,254 White students. These numbers speak to the access and opportunity gaps as significantly more White students are enrolled in public post-secondary schools and these numbers are tied to the persistence of African American students in NYS 2 year public institutions (NCES, 2012).

Academic discourse is in opposition to affirming individualized language or language specific to one person or group. This is evidenced by the resolution of 1972. In 1972 Executive Committee of Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) passed a resolution asserting “Student’s Right to their Own Language” (Zamel & Spack, 2012). The resolution was born out of a growing challenge facing composition and communication teachers on how to support students (Kinloch, 2005). This led to the position statement affirming that teachers must have experiences and/or trainings that would encourage respect for diversity and use of a “student’s own language” (Kinloch, 2005).

The “Students’ Right” policy moved from a resolution to working through the challenges of delivering day to day teaching and learning in the span of eight years. However, in 1980, a climate change was afoot in the United States. Moving from a somewhat liberal and socially conscious view that accepted multiple dialects as expression of national pride in preserving the diverse heritage and cultures represented in our nation to a more conservative environment with a different value placed on social and educational goals (Smitherman, 1995). This pendulum swing, stalled the implementation

of the “Student’s Right” policy. As a result some major questions from this policy are still unanswered. Combating the important issue of multiple dialects and discourse still plaque our educational institutions with implication for our students, particularly African American and other minority students.

Thus the resolution served as a prequel to the question by teachers: If we start with the student’s own language, will academic discourse be reached (Zamel & Spack, 2012), The resolution then called into question the issue of justice and liberation for marginalized people, including but not limited to African American college students (Kinloch, 2012). The purpose of understanding the resolution and its relationship to academic discourses is one of equity and social justice as well as a means to identify and support an existing issue. According to White and Lowenthal (2011), academic discourse is established as an issue in the literature, but few researchers have addressed the impact on students struggling with this transition.

The literature has scrutinized both academic discourse (Brown, 2006; Ogbu, 1995; White & Ali-Khan, 2013; White & Lowenthal, 2011) and the persistence (Nakajima et al., 2012; Peltier et al., 1999; Russell & Atwater, 2005) but independent of one another. With rapidly changing national demographics reflecting increases in African Americans in the overall population, institutions of higher education endeavor to prepare for the development on the horizon (Harvey, 2014). It is important and timely to ascertain ways in which the use of language may be changed such that it is not an insurmountable barrier to education, and to identify measures to leverage possible challenges thereby addressing and circumventing the persistence of African American community college students.

Many reasons have been postulated as the culprit for perpetuating these educational disparities. The major reasons being low academic success as a result of being underprepared, part-time versus full-time enrollment status to accommodate personal responsibilities, and the proficiency in learning and employing academic discourse needed to experience success within the academy (White & Lowenthal, 2011). The later would suggest research around discourse as it relates to the persistence of African American community college students offers an intriguing possibility as an additional culprit. However, this avenue has not been fully explored.

Theoretical Rationale

There are many aspects to understanding the influence of academic discourse on the persistence of African American students in community college. To develop a conceptual framework for this study the researcher has examined two theories related to the major components outlined: academic discourse and the persistence of African American community college students. The main concept to be examined in this study is academic discourse. James Paul Gee's (1990) work in social linguistics has added value to the discussions around discourse with the following designations. First, Discourse ("big D"), a specific form of language bound to a defined social group and used when discussing thinking, acting, and being. This definition implies countless Discourses, such as Discourse of the medical field, Discourse of the legal field, and Discourse of academia. Secondly, discourse ("little d") simply refers to use of language. Gee (1990) links social, historical, and economic facets to how we identify and understand the concept of discourse. Intrinsicly, the framework by Gee recognizes the social and

economic advantages associated with certain groups that play out in the Discourse. Gee's work speaks to the population and the phenomenon being examined in this study.

To better understand academic Discourse and its relevance to this study the researcher draws upon three out of five important points that Gee (1990) asserts is very popular with American and commonplace in European social theory. First, Discourse defines the way a person speaks and behaves, not only to that specific social group but takes a stand against opposing Discourse. Gee's (1990) example states feminist Discourse, is in opposition to the male dominated society but would radically change if all males disappeared. For example, a feminist might postulate male dominance is the root of female oppression. One concept is in opposition to the other and in the absence of males, female oppression would not exist. Secondly, Discourse is rooted in certain objects and concepts and "marginalizes viewpoints and values central to other Discourses" (Gee, 1990, p. 144). For instance, the Discourse used in political arenas is directed at marginalizing the popular views of Democrats or the Republicans.

Finally, "Discourses are intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society" (Gee, 1990, p.144). The dominant Discourse in a society can lead to achievement, money, and power. This Discourse can empower a particular social group to gain advantage over another as the Discourse is standard practice for them. In this instance, American schools are based on a White western culture (White & Lowenthal, 2011) therefore White students are more likely to be versed in academic Discourse and have many opportunities to practice and then employ this Discourse. However, many African American students have far less practice with these discursive

norms and are unaware or resist a powerful means to academic success (White & Lowenthal, 2011).

A further explanation for academic discourse and the persistence of African American students in community college is rooted in the Fairclough's (1995) foundational work on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Broadly speaking, CDA is a type of analysis that primarily explores how power is associated and exercised through language (Van Dijk, 1993). Moreover, CDA is concerned with the written and spoken discursive inequities, abuses of power, and latent social justice issues connected to language (McGregor, 2003).

Fairclough (1992) describes discourse as a mode of action and representation where one's language is acting upon the world and one another depicting one's economic, social, political, or, historical background. According to Fairclough (1992), "critical" implies a tacit association between discourse and its biased outcomes, which also implies a need for intervention. For instance, a professor recognizing that an African American student is not willing to engage in the class discussion, understanding why, and intervening to help the student and their classmates to support the diversity in discursive practices (Fairclough, 1992).

CDA sits on a three dimensional premise: (a) discourse is a form of social practice, (b) formulated by words/text, and (c) the mediating principle of discursive practice (Pinto, 2011). In this framework the linguistic features of text used demonstrates a certain level of dialectical competence in which the other dimensions can be linked. Discursive practice refers to the ability of an individual to produce and distribute words, as well as, consume the words and text used by others. Finally, the social or relational

practice of CDA considers the social and cultural context of one's words/text (Pinto, 2011). Fairclough's framework proposes the interconnection and infusion of all three dimensions and underpinning of CDA is to detangle and explain how the immersion takes place (Pinto, 2011).

Critics of Fairclough have suggested his framework contains considerable overlap (Widdowson, 2008), that it is more of an interpretation approach to discourse rather than a method of analysis (Widdowson, 2008), and that CDA is biased and "in solidarity with the oppressed" and dissent against the oppressor (Meyer, 2001; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001). Despite these criticisms CDA has been viewed as an effective tool to examine the norms of higher education with components such as curriculum and pedagogy (Luke, 1997), CDA has also been useful in exposing facets of discourse from a social and political lens (Widdowson, 1995).

Statement of Purpose

There are two major issues under examination and this study sought to understand the impact of one on the other. First, the persistence for African American students has been a long-standing issue that has been well documented in the literature (Astin, 1993; Cullen, 1972; Tinto, 1987). However, the research is focuses more on 4-year institutions with empirical evidence and theoretical hypotheses, using theories to make educational postulated reasons about what contributes to this problem and/or reasons behind it (Metz, 2003). Second, academic discourse is a concept that has also been studied extensively (Burke, 1974; Gee, 1990; Ogbu, 1995, 2004; White, 2005, 2011, 2013) to understand its process, relation to culture, and the variances in multiple communities, such as K-12 and institutions of higher education.

The study has added to the body of literature by equipping institutions of higher education with the knowledge to combat plausible elements identified as contributing to the persistence rates of African American students in community college. It is important and timely to ascertain if academic discourse presents barriers to education and to identify measures to leverage possible challenges thereby addressing African American persistence in community colleges. This study will add to the body of literature by creating awareness around discourse for students, providing a basis to inform institutional and programmatic support units, leading to the development of best practices to create a cultural sensitivity to the discourse needed for expanded enrollment in community colleges.

Significance of the Study

This study investigated and revealed the potential influence of academic discourse on student persistence rates in community colleges. Results from this study informed higher education policy, procedure, practices, and the National Completion Agenda (Russell, 2011). The national agenda is a movement to refocus America's stance on education and push for an increase in our secondary credentials by 50% over the next decade (Hughes, 2012). The findings of this study led to recommendations to mandate diversity trainings for faculty and staff similar to those of the Title IX: Policies Against Sexual Harassment & Discrimination and Procedures for Enforcement (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). While positioning this study to examine only African American community college students was narrow, the results led to implications and recommendations applicable to a broader audience including pre-kindergarten thru 12th grade educational systems and 4-year colleges and universities with its roots firmly

planted in the link between educational achievement and economic growth (Humphreys, 2012). With broad applicability, the results impact the way institutions of higher education address persistence rates which has plagued the United States higher learning institutions for decades (Humphreys, 2012).

Research Questions

Community colleges are a major and common entry point for African American students and are a logical place to begin the inquiry around the existing persistence. The following research question will guide the examination of the problem within this defined context:

How do African American students, who persist from one semester to the next, experience academic discourse in a community college?

Definitions of Terms

- Academic discourse – the ability to understand, practice, and relate to a set of communicative processes in academia, such as vocabulary, principles, and behaviors (Burke, 1974; Collier & Hicks, 2004; Merriam-Webster, 2014).
- Discourse – written or spoken communication (Merriam-Webster, 2014).
- Discourse Community – a group of people within a given setting, who share a set of understood, basic values and assumptions and ways of communicating (White, 2005).
- Persistence – continued enrollment one or more courses from one semester to the next.
- Persistence rate – measurement of a given student cohort compared to that of another.

- Tacit Rules – unspoken or unvoiced rules that are understood without being express, rules that are implied (White & Lowenthal, 2011).
- Null Curriculum – the discursive practices or academic behaviors needed for full participation in the discourse community which are absent from the high school and college curriculums (White & Ali Khan, 2013).
- Stop out/drop out – to withdraw temporarily from enrollment at a college or university (Merriam-Webster, 2005).
- Register – in language: a variety or level of usage, esp. as determined by social context and characterized by the range of vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax, etc., used by a speaker or writer in particular circumstances (OED Online, 2014).
- Environmental factors – any external variables that may influence student retention (Nakajima et al., 2012)
- Dialect – a variety of language used by a specific group of people and distinguished from other varieties by its grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Godley & Escher, 2012).
- Academic Word Knowledge – one’s entire mental lexicon, or entire body of word knowledge across all content areas (Townsend, Fillippini, Collins, & Biancarosa, 2012).
- Code switching – the ability to alternate between two languages or dialects as needed in a communicative practice.

Chapter Summary

This chapter included a review of the problem, purpose, research questions, significance, and application of this study that sought to understand academic discourse challenges impacting the success of African American students in community colleges. Terms and definitions relevant to subsequent chapters have been provided. The significance of this study has roots and implication for all levels of education, governmental entities, and public and private intuitions of education. Additionally, research on student persistence is fundamental due to the increased enrollment and challenges with completion in colleges and universities in the United States. The new emphasis placed on the value or benefit of a college education speaks to the total educational process (Peltier et al., 1999). The purpose of this study is to examine academic discourse as a factor contributing to the lack of persistence for African American in community college.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Educational disparities have been a consistent challenge for African American college students for many years with pronounced emphasis on the persistence in higher education. This population has lagged behind their counterparts and little progress has been made in the last quarter of a century (Strayhorn, 2008). Persistence in community colleges is of national concern, likewise are the “existing racial and ethnic disparities in college student departure rates” (Museus & Quaye, 2009, p. 68).

This review examines studies that attempt to identify commonly cited reasons for persistence and academic discourse as a barrier for minority students at various levels in their educational career. This literature review will also include studies to understand the student experience related to academic discourse. The relationship between discourse and college success is not among the commonly cited reasons for minority attrition but White (2005) attempts to draw conclusions which this literature review is built on. For the purpose of this literature review, academic discourse (also referred to as academic word knowledge, register, dialect, and Standard English) is defined as the ability to understand, practice and relate to a set of communicative processes in academia, such as vocabulary, principles, and behaviors (Burke, 1974; Collier, 2004; Merriam-Webster, 2005).

Persistence is defined as continuous enrollment in a course or academic semester despite difficulty or opposition (Oxford Dictionary, 2011). This concept has been studied in 2- and 4-year institutions using various theoretical frameworks and factors of influence

(Nakajima et al., 2012) Issues of student persistence are of great concern for higher education institutions across the country (Russell & Atwater, 2005). Overall, there are low rates of college attainment for all students but more troubling are the existing racial and ethnic disparities in college persistence rates and African American college students continue to persist at noticeably lower rates than their counterparts (Museus & Quaye, 2009).

The study will focus on understanding the implications, exploring the tacit rules, and navigating discourse in an academic setting in an attempt to answer the following research question:

How do African American college students, who persist from one semester to the next, experience academic discourse in a community college?

Understanding the Implications of Discourse

In a study with middle school students, Johnson (2014) suggests understanding the role of literacy and space for African American male students with regard to navigating, contending with, and participating in these spaces is integral to academic persistence. Out-of-school spaces in this study refer to a space where students' lived experiences are accepted and where their voice matters. Accordingly, edge-of-school spaces are non-classroom spaces located within school walls where students discover connections with staff surrounding meaningful literacy engagement (Johnson, 2014). A compelling component of this study explored the connections between Stark Middle School (SMS) students "out of school" and academic language and discovered four "edge-of-school" spaces which fostered student development and engagement (Johnson, 2014).

An ethnographic case study was conducted at SMS including six English Language Arts classes in grades 6-8 where Johnson (2014) observed 43 classes for a total of 200 hours. Johnson also collected artifacts and which included student work and teacher's lesson plans as his data collection strategies. The results were reported by a narrative after coding for reoccurring themes and patterns, charted spaces for literacy participation, and described spaces of "meaningful literacy participation" took place (Johnson, 2014). Johnson purports black males fail to receive the language learning integral to academic success and educational entities have the ability to support student language development, validate academic identity, and impact their educational persistence (Johnson, 2014). Johnson also suggests that when language is connected to the lived experiences of black male the "edge-of-school" spaces have the potential to develop the language integral to their success. Johnson's (2014) study indicates that alternative spaces for learning academic discourse are effective for the persistence of African American males. While this study was conducted in at a middle school the results suggest knowledge of discourse is a contributing factor in successful persistence for African American males and alternative spaces for learning might be beneficial in colleges and universities for this population.

Another study at the middle school level examined academic discourse with a quantitative approach. The study by Townsend et al. (2012) of seventh and eighth graders used state basic skills of Reading Comprehension, Math, Social Science, and Science along with vocabulary test to investigate the variance in academic achievement explained by academic word knowledge. Townsend et al. (2012) defined academic word knowledge as one's entire mental lexicon, or entire body of word knowledge across all content areas.

In contrast to the work of Johnson (2014) who studied English only, this study also included bilingual students (Townsend, et al., 2012). A strength of the study was the sample size, which included 339 middle students; 193 7th graders and 146 8th graders, providing the study with a statistically healthy number of subjects and therefore more robust data. Most of the other studies reviewed examined results gleaned from 20 or fewer participants.

The multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) analysis guided the linear regressions. The ANOVA the Vocabulary Subtest of Gates-MacGinitie to assess the subjects' vocabulary skills, and the Academic Word Level of the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) (Schmitt, 2001) was used to measure knowledge of general academic words. The results showed no significant relationships between socioeconomic status (SES) and language background. The MANOVA used the VLT to measure participants' vocabulary knowledge. The Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) (University of Iowa, 2015) was utilized to assess reading comprehension, math, and science, and the State Criterion Reference Test (CRT) (Nevada Department of Education, 2008) to score for reading and math competency. Both of these methods of statistical analysis evidenced significant differences between language and SES.

The results of Townsend et al. (2012) revealed that English only students significantly outperformed language minority students and standard socioeconomic status students outperformed low socioeconomic status students in all measures (state criteria-academic achievement, basic skills, and vocabulary). Overall, language background and socioeconomic status combined explained 11%-22% of and the breadth of academic word knowledge explained 26%-43% of the variance in academic achievement. These

findings support the need for addressing academic word knowledge for language minority and low socioeconomic status students (Townsend et al., 2012). In support of the work of that study, White (2011) highlights the necessity to directly teach African American students tacit rules and language patterns in K-12 as a foundation for persistence in postsecondary endeavors. The results of Townsend et al. (2012) imply that academic discourse is a skill in which competency influences academic progression for students and more pronounced with subsequent barriers such as income, minority, or generational status.

At the high school level, Brown (2006) explored the experiences of minority urban high school students in their first science class to understand their assimilation into the discourse and discursive norms. This study sought to answer the question of “how does the use of science specific classroom discourse frame access issues for traditionally underrepresented population?” (Brown, 2006). Brown’s work has special importance to the study at the core of the present dissertation, as in both cases, student challenges with discourse frame issues of access and persistence to academic success

The 2006 ethnographic study by Brown examined the socialization processes of 29 high school students in grades 9 and 10 enrolled in an introductory Life Science class for the first time and 11th graders with an unsuccessful attempt in the same class previously. The data was collected over a period of one full academic year with semi structured interviews in small group setting. The groups were comprised of only minority students but were diversified by grade and gender. Themes derived from this study were issues of understanding the cultural of science, ways of being a college student, and conflicts with personal identity.

The results of the Brown (2006) study indicate that while students found science “different,” “interesting,” and “challenging” they also believed the use of “hands-on” improved learning and the associated activities were unparalleled and demanded new focus and appreciation (Brown, 2006, p. 105). Brown purports the participants’ use of the term “hands-on” characterized class activities as something they could connect to and supported their understanding of lab concepts. Another notable finding from Brown’s study was students summarized the difference between written discourse in science and other courses as well as the depth of this particular discourse, in words often holding double meanings and containing scientific knowledge. Finally, students experienced challenges in their encounters with science discourse. Brown suggests the participant’s description could be compared to the “natural difficulty experienced when one attempts to learning a new language.” This finding is similar to previous research by White (2005) that suggests the transition to college discourse for African American students’ is particularly difficult due to the cultural implication of language. Their transition to the university has been equated to them adapting to a foreign culture (White, 2005).

Even at the college level, a student’s belief in their ability can also impact the entry into an academic discourse community. Adams (2014) conducted a study using self-efficacy as a lens to examine college student challenges with confidently entering and participating in the academic discourse community. Adams used the knowledge of Beaufort’s five domains (writing process, subject matter, rhetorical, genre, and discourse community) as a barometer for students having the needed skills to be able to write. However, if students have a lack of belief in their abilities or understanding the relevance of academic discourse in multiple settings it will impact their participation in the

community (Adams, 2014). Adam's qualitative case study worked with 4 upperclassmen from a mid-sized university enrolled in advance writing courses. The data collection methods were direct observations of students in the writing courses, weekly interviews with all 4 participants, and physical artifacts of evaluating all student class submissions. The data was analyzed for each individual case and across cases to develop common themes. Adam's selected 1 participant to support the claims of this study.

The emerging themes and conclusions revealed a misunderstanding by students on the value of good writing (Adams, 2014). One participant stated that she wrote to "sound intelligent" and the need to "make the paper long enough" (Adams, 2014, p. 22). Another, theme was students write to get a grade rather than to develop skills that will be useful in various academic areas. For instance, students reported being against writing in classes outside of English, they were opposed to writing in Biology and as a result the students showed "little interest in gaining knowledge they didn't value" (Adams, 2014, p. 22). Lastly, Adams highlighted a common finding that students have insecurities about academic writing and failed to consider their ability to learn the skills needed to enter, participate, and persist in the academic discourse communities of higher education. The limitations of this study were the focus on one participant, the demographics of the case study participants was not reported, and the researcher held the roles of instructor, researcher, and interpreter.

Again at the college level, Pyne and Means (2013) conducted an in-depth case study focusing on one participant from a larger study. Although case studies have a narrow focus they are meant to develop an in-depth description and analysis of a case (Creswell, 2013, 2014). According to Creswell, the illustration of the phenomenon being

studied allows us to draw meaningful conclusions from the data. The study explored first year challenges connected to racial, ethnic, socioeconomic status and its impact on social and academic success in a private predominately White Institution. The larger study included 10 first generation students from multiple higher education institutions, with low-income backgrounds, and was part of a college access program. This larger study focused on the first year struggles and success of the participants. Pyne and Means' case study looked at a Hispanic female from the larger study and highlighted the experience of this participant from the themes drawn from the 3 semi-structured interviews over the course of 1 academic year required of all participants in the larger study.

Consequently, this study concluded three main findings, first the challenges faced by the participant was invisibility which the researcher likened to racial colorblindness- the negation of cultural values, norms, expectations and life experiences of people of color (Pyne & Means, 2013). Pyne and Means postulate that invisibility can be internalized and impact the learning and development needed to persist and find success at the college level. Secondly, they suggest that college programs and courses be designed to respond to the spectrum of academic levels that may exist for a diverse student population (Pyne & Means, 2013). Finally, Pyne and Means state that college access programs have the ability and opportunity to make relationships with faculty and peers central to the college experience to counter act structural and economic inequalities that have become the unquestioned norms.

Pyne and Mean's study suggests the persistence of first year students is challenged by racial and ethnic demographics and have an impact on academic success. To be discussed in a later section, the Shavers and Moore (2014) concept of the

“academic mask” supports the assertion that the internalization of invisibility affects a student’s ability to persist and succeed in higher education.

At the college level it is also imperative to understand the implications of discourse in class discussions when using class participation as pedagogical tool. White and Lowenthal’s (2011) study examines how demands for participation affect minority student’s academic identities and experience. The demographic makeup of the group was one Native American male, one African American female, one Hispanic male, and one Hispanic female. All four undergraduate students were on academic probation (GPA of 2.0 or lower) at a university in Colorado. The study consisted of pre and post interviews focusing on class participation and academic progress, document review of academic work, and journals of student accounts of class participation and their college experience. Data were coded using Spardley’s (1980) Domain, a search for the larger units of cultural knowledge and Componential, systematic search for the attributes associated with cultural categories, models of analysis to present findings.

A finding for White and Lowenthal’s (2011) study was that all students displayed attributes of: (a) significant reluctance to speak in class regardless of knowing participation was included in their overall grade, (b) feeling ill equipped for the language and academic knowledge needed for success in college, (c) fears of saying the wrong thing and being corrected or judged by their peers and the teacher not making it safe to participate, and (c) a common experience among the participants that referenced being called on in class as “getting picked on” and viewing “being forced to speak as a punishment” (White & Lowenthal, 2011).

The results described for White and Lowenthal's (2011) study demonstrate the implications of not understanding discourse as a lack of voluntary class participation and verbal assertiveness (White & Lowenthal, 2011). African American students' chances for persistence and success were diminished by the lack of awareness on the part of faculty and students. The results imply a need to create awareness and for students, faculty, and staff to combat assumption around academic discourse as it relates to academic persistence.

College student ethnicity and socioeconomic status seem to be reoccurring factors in relation to academic discourse. In agreement with Townsend et al. (2012), Syrquin (2006) proposes that ethnicity and socioeconomic status impacts learning how to write or speak in an academic tone for African American students. Syrquin specifically examines how this development affects academic writing for African American college students. In a quantitative linguistic analysis, indirections and paratactic use of "because" were tallied and analyzed for 74 writing samples from 20 African American and 20 White non-Hispanic undergraduate students classified as low to medium socioeconomic status according to Financial Aid records. This analysis used (a) indirections to explain how meaning was constructed and relied on oral speech and (b) the paratactic function of because to help understand its specific function and role played in oral and academic registers and the data was coded (Syrquin, 2006).

Syrquin's (2006) study revealed African American students with well-developed oral communication skills maintain speech patterns that persist in academic writing not appropriate for the academic discourse community (Syrquin, 2006). According to Syrquin, this concept is more prevalent among students of low socioeconomic status.

Syrquin also suggest that the sub-population of low socioeconomic students are more isolated from mainstream language. Conversely, they are more exposed to their home language which can make the transition to academic writing difficult (Syrquin, 2006). Registers or language are culturally and socially situated which naturally influences student writings but this does not translate well to the academic norms (Syrquin, 2006). An additional finding was low socioeconomic African American students participating in this study showed a statistically significant higher use of the word “because” compared to all other participants. This finding suggests that this same sub-population are novice writers and are challenged with insufficient academic language or proficiency unable to use alternative conjunctions or to recognize the overuse of “because” (Syrquin, 2006).

African American students may have “good language” skills but they do not always transfer well to the academic setting. Furthermore, this population’s writings are influenced by their speech and both are believed to violate academic norms (Syrquin, 2006). Overall, a command of academic discourse, written and verbal, should be considered around academic success. The results reveal a call for attention to academic expectations and the possibility of accepting diverse registers or ways of speaking and writing in the academy.

The studies reviewed in this section (Adams 2014; Brown 2006; Johnson, 2014; Pyne & Means, 2013; Syrquin, 2006; Townsend et al., 2012; White, 2011) have outlined: the benefits of alternatives spaces, the variance of academic achievement linked to word knowledge, and the development of academic tone or registers. This calls attention to the fact that language and literacy play a crucial role in students’ integration and successful persistence in college (White & Lowenthal, 2011). These studies imply that African

American students, along with faculty and educational staff need for awareness of hidden or “tacit rules”- unspoken or unvoiced rules can be a barrier to personal and academic success (White & Lowenthal, 2011).

Tacit Rules of Discourse

Many reasons have been postulated for student collegiate attrition, specific to minorities. These reasons in part contribute to minorities having a more difficult transition to college life and with academics than their peers (White & Lowenthal, 2011). These reasons include: (a) inequities in school management, funding, and teacher expectations, (b) student perception that college is a foreign and hostile place, (c) low numbers of African American peers and role models at the college level, and (d) socioeconomic status of minorities compared to White students (White & Lowenthal, 2011). However, this ignores the central role language, literacy, or academic discourse plays in a student’s integration into, persistence through, and success within the academy. The tacit rules of discourse can be knowledge of effective reading strategies, study skills, note taking, or knowing the appropriate language to use in different disciplines or within the college at large, or an overall familiarity with what it takes to be a successful college student.

In a study situated in a high school, hidden rules apply to students’ knowledge of Standard English versus African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and their perspective of when and where to use which to support learning. AAVE is defined as a non-standard form of English, also known as Ebonics or slang. Godley and Escher (2012) framed a mixed-method study to consider such bidialectal use of both Standard English and African American Vernacular English, along with African American student

perspectives to support literacy learning in the educational setting. Dialects are distinguished from one another by the grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation used by a specific group of people (Godley & Escher, 2012).

Godley and Escher (2012) chose participants from an urban high school setting situated in a predominately African American neighborhood in a Midwestern city. The demographics of the high school were as follows: 99% African American students, 100% low socioeconomic status, 31% of 11th graders placed below standards on reading for state assessments, and 69% overall graduation rate (Godley & Escher, 2012). The focus of this study was on a 10th grade class in this high school and employed three years of observations, field notes, and writing samples to determine student's bidialectal status (Godley & Escher, 2012). Additionally, Fifty-one written responses by African American students were collected and analyzed. Godley and Escher also used coding to categorize participant themes. The four themes identified were fear of external judgment, desire for clear communication, maintenance of individual and group identity, and demonstration of respect. Finally, a multinomial logistic regression was conducted to determine the relationship between student beliefs about language and academic achievement (Godley & Escher, 2012).

Godley and Escher's (2012) findings suggested most students in the study were determined to be bidialectal. Secondly, 45% of students of the sample believed only African American Vernacular English should be spoken in class, 35% believed it was appropriate to use both African American Vernacular English and Standard English in class, and 20% submit that only Standard English should be associated with in class environment. Thirdly, the multinomial regression analysis reported statistically

significant relationship between high grade point average and students' belief in using Standard English in class ($p=0.047$). The culmination of these findings suggest that high academic achievers have "cracked the codes of power" and assimilated as necessary to find success compatible with individual and peer groups in mainstream education (Godley & Escher). Overwhelmingly, almost half of the participants display a lack of understanding of the essentialness and benefits of using Standard English as the dialect needed to persist to and in college.

From the lens of only using Standard English, the four themes identified by Godley and Escher's (2012) were: (a) 25% of participants choose not to use African American Vernacular English to avoid a public perception of being "ignorant" or "illiterate"; and (b) 22% of the sample consciously chosen to use Standard English as their dialect out of a desire to be understood and clearly communicate with peers and faculty; (c) 12% of the students expressed their chose of language was a symbol of respect for people outside of their generation and keep African American Vernacular English or slang for conversations with friends and peers; and (d) 20% of the participants related their choice of dialect to maintaining or connecting to personal identities. The study implies there is a standard discourse that must be taught and accepted by African American students to find academic success. Multiple dialects need to be understood by faculty and staff to offer alternative navigation skills.

At the college level, White and Ali-Khan's (2013) case studies illustrated how academic discourse impacts the social and academic success of first generation minority students. White and Ali-Khan's study used the same participants from White's 2011 study of 4 minority, first generation, college freshman; 2 males and 2 females from a

western university in the U.S. White & Ali-Khan examined the role literacy plays in success for minority students at the college level. This study draws on a four-semester case study conducting a multi-level analysis of the data collected. The study included 1-2 hour individual student meetings, reviewing samples of class notes and assignments, informal and formal correspondence with professors, and academic records which revealed academic history, academic standing, demographics and midterm status.

The results highlighted in the study by White and Ali-Khan was a collective experience that college life requires an understanding of or adherence to the ‘rules’ of a distinct “discourse community,” which was noted as an issue for minorities and a privilege for Whites (White & Ali-Khan, 2013). First, the participants were found to have a poor understanding of the discursive practices (reading, writing, and speaking) associated with the discourse community of a university or college. For example, some study participants complained that class readings “were just too much to do and remember it all” which made it apparent the students were not aware of skimming and note-taking techniques. Second, there was no acquaintance with strategies for academic reading, note taking, test taking, and essay writing among the participants. For instance, written test questions were an issue for most participants as they took the implied directions literally. Short answer questions involve extended answers which were not given. Third, cultural codes associated with effective or appropriate communication with professors and peers was unfamiliar to the participants. Finally, there was a sense of compromising their identity that came with assimilating into what was expected for social and academic communication. For example, the participant’s discursive difficulties were not limited to the classroom. The participants recalled how to fit in or have their voices

matter, “you have to show how smart you are” using the designated language of the academy (White & Ali-Khan, 2013).

Overall, the findings from White and Ali-Khan (2013) disclose discourse as part of a “null curriculum”- the discursive practices or academic behaviors needed for full participation in the discourse community which are absent from the high school and college curriculums (White & Ali-Khan, 2013). They also reveal that success is predicated on understanding the “hidden rules” or tacit rules (White & Ali-Khan, 2013, p. 31-32). While this study is limited by only including first generation students in the sample and small sample size, it supports the need for direct instruction regarding academic discourse and discursive practices (Baxter & Holland, 2007) to combat the tacit rules that may affect the persistence of African American college students.

Glenn (2008) offers an explanation of how African American college students use language African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Standard English (SE) to adapt to situations, communicate identity, and react to the language transition needed to interact and adapt to the collegiate environment. Glenn conducted an ethnomethodological examination which is a method of studying linguistic communication. The sample included 10 African Americans: 5 female and 5 male college students that ranged in age from 18-23 years at a large university. The criteria for sampling consisted of African American ethnicity, undergraduate status, participation in activities, and course work. The data collection strategies used in this qualitative study was collected in two phases; observations and personal interviews. Student observations took place in class, at work, and during activities (student clubs, sports, etc.) for a period

of 4 months. One on one interviews were conducted once all observation were completed.

The findings of Shavers and Moore (2014) concluded that the use of African American Vernacular English is often used to communicate African American identity. In Glenn's (2008) study, participants noted a sense of comfort and ease when in the presence of peers or faculty that used African American Vernacular English which promoted a sense of belonging and solidarity. The study also suggests that the use of Standard English by African American students signified alignment with the majority and conversely in certain instances distance from other minorities (Glenn, 2008). This finding is similar to the "disadvantages of the academic mask" in Shavers and Moore (2014) work which highlights the difficulty of code switching and sometimes damaging to one holistic identity and well-being (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Finally, the narrative that accompanies the use of African American Vernacular English by African American students often times hold a negative label, but if non-Standard English is used by other groups the narrative or label is non-existent.

For African American college students who use a non-Standard English, the "label" is a challenge that needs to be met with instructional support for academic growth. For that reason, Baxter and Holland (2007) conducted a quasi-experimental study to assess student writings, attitudes, and awareness of writing in Standard English to address instructional needs of students who use non-Standard English dialect lacking subject-verb agreement. Fifty-four students in remedial English at Borough Manhattan Community College (BMCC) in the spring semester of 2006 were the participants. Four class sections were part of the study; 2 classes were the experimental and 2 classes were

the control group including 30 and 24 participants respectively. The entire sample consisted of 39% of the remedial English courses at BMCC. The student participants were mainly African American (19), Hispanic (16), and Native Caribbean (12).

Three pre-tests, developed by the researcher, were given to the experimental and control group. The first pre-test was a demographic survey to determine the ethnic, racial, and cultural background of students and if English was their first language. The second pre-test was the Workplace Language Skills Assessment Test (WLSAT) adapted from the English Variation Placement Test (EVPT) developed by Reed, Cohen, Baxter, Moore, and Rederick (as cited in Baxter & Holland, 2007, p. 148). It assessed student understanding of non-Standard English in college and student's ability to code switch or use different languages when dictated by the environment or social context. The third pre-test was the Writing Likert Scale (WLS) assessment to evaluate all the student feelings related to writing in the academic context. Finally, the post-test, also an original instrument was the Likert Feedback Scale (LFS) administered to only the experimental group in order to measure student attitudes around the differences in using Standard and non-Standard English (Baxter & Holland, 2007).

The findings for the Workplace Language Skills Assessment Test for the experimental group ($n = 30$) pre-test showed that 60% of the experimental group began with a good understanding of non-standard dialect features such as subject-verb agreement and contrast between Standard English and non-Standard English, as well as demonstrated a strong aptitude to code switch (Baxter & Holland, 2007). The post-test for this same experimental group showed a 30% increase in their awareness of non-Standard English and the ability to code switch as a result of (Baxter & Holland, 2007).

Conversely, Baxter and Holland's control group (n= 24) showed a lower level of awareness of Standard English rules on the pre-test (33%) and a smaller increase (13%) in comparison to the experimental group on the posttest. The results of Baxter and Holland's original Likert Feedback Scale used as a posttest only for the experimental group revealed overall positive attitudes about differences in using Standard versus non-Standard English. Baxter and Holland also postulate the results of the Likert Feedback Scale and the Writing Likert Scale revealed that the contrastive analysis approach, studying the differences between dialects or languages, support the appreciation for the functional value of Standard English and promotes positive feelings about alternative dialects needed for success in the academy.

Collectively, 28% of the participants were identified as the target population-African American students who have low to some awareness of non-standard English and would benefit from addressing these needs through instruction (Baxter & Holland, 2007). The overall findings suggest that deliberate instruction to address dialect and promote code switching is an effective way to support subject-verb agreement of Standard English. Also, addressing non-Standard English language that may affect academic writing is due to low awareness of Standard English rules (Baxter & Holland, 2007) or tacit rules of academic discourse.

Code switching, the ability to alternate between two languages or dialects as needed is a communicative practice is another tacit rule of academic discourse. Boone (2003) conducted an exploration of communicative practices and the impact they have on the educational environment for African American students. The call and response communicative practice defined in this study is a technique used by the professor or

speaker indicating a need for audience support, as well as, the practice of linking subject to students lived experiences. This study was set in a summer session of an introductory speech course for 16 students with 12 regular attendees. Of the 12 participants there were 9 women and 3 men, one young man was of Indian descent and the remaining participants were African American. The students were currently enrolled in a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in rural southeastern United States. The qualitative study implored videotaped classroom interactions and audiotaped one on one interviews with teacher and students.

The most compelling finding of Boone's (2003) study was the use of call and response in the classroom. This technique focused on the class as a whole and helped students to have a safe haven to participate and display understanding. Also, the cultural value of the African-derived communication process, widely recognized for the behavior associated with black gospel oratory, promoted a sense of assimilation allowing African American students to practice verbal assertiveness within the group. Finally, the use of call and response in the classroom values the uniqueness of culture and of students as the call will affect different listeners in different ways, allowing for individuality within the academic structure (Boone, 2003).

Boone's (2003) study indicates the need to teach students in a way they are able to process the importance and connect to the college discourse community. Faculty and staff at the college or university level may not be aware of the experiences of African American students related to discourse challenges and as a result student behaviors can be misinterpreted, ignored, or even worse lead to an increase in attrition rates. Boone (2003) suggests with increased access and minority enrollment without new and effective

interventions to address diversity of discourse in the classroom, we may witness an unfortunate increase in attrition rates. Supporting African American student transition to the college-level discourse will not affect a lower standard for educational success for this group of college students; instead, by recognizing it as a barrier, academic outcomes for African American college students may very well show vast improvement.

Several studies (Baxter & Holland 2007; Boone, 2003; Glenn, 2008; Godley & Escher, 2012; White & Ali-Khan, 2013) support the relationship that exists between academic discourse and success of students. These same studies further establish the need for awareness of the tacit rules regarding language and the academy by faculty, staff, and students. Education strategies to acknowledge the role of academic discourse and “make this implicit hidden curriculum explicit” (White & Lowenthal, 2011) are necessary to assist minority students in navigating discourse.

Navigating Discourse

An intriguing possibility exists with limited research around language and discourse as it relates to the persistence of African American students in a college or university setting. Within this same realm, language and discourse can be a challenge to students as they form multiple levels of their academic identity, individual qualities related to the racial and social context of the campus. Yet, Shavers and Moore (2014), investigated perceptions of African American female doctoral students at predominantly White institutions to understand how their personal experiences influenced their academic persistence and overall wellbeing. The qualitative study consisted of semi-structures interviews, demographic questionnaires, and responses to member checking. Purposeful sampling yielded a total of 15 self-identified African American women from

ages 24-35 years of age in different stages of a doctoral program. The average grade point average of all participants was 3.73/4.0. Approximately half of the participants were first generation college students and all were first generation doctoral students.

From the data collected five themes emerged: (a) academic mask- model student and professional behavior; (b) private self- hiding the true self; (c) other selves- intentionally removing the academic mask; (d) protection of self- the mask used to strategically move through the academic arena; and (e) disadvantages of the academic mask (Shavers & Moore, 2014). The results of Shavers and Moore study state all participants reported wearing the “academic mask” to conquer stereotypes associated with their race and to persist academically. To accomplish these results the participants endured negative impacts on individual well-being, such as psychological and emotional stress, conflicting identities/personas, and the wholeness or balance of life (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Regardless of these negative impacts the participants choose to where the mask because they saw no other alternative to assimilate and persist. The last emerging theme supports the importance of navigating discourse as a means to African American student persistence (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Wearing the “academic mask” equates to being who or what one believes they should be for fear of rejection in a particular setting, in this instance the academic community.

While Shavers and Moore (2014) focus on doctoral students, the challenges of transition to the discourse are similar to that at the community college level. The results imply the “academic mask” must be worn to be a part of the collegiate environment (Shavers & Moore, 2014). An alternative would be to allow African American students to

engage in the environment on their own culture terms with the creative use of pedagogy (Hall & Martin, 2013).

College or university students who are more socially integrated and experience engaging culturally relevant pedagogies are likely to persist (Hall & Martin, 2013). A study by Hall and Martin examined the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on African American student engagement and retention. Culturally relevant pedagogy or culturally responsive teaching is defined as intentionally integrating cultural knowledge, prior experience, and performance styles of diverse students to provide an appropriate and engaging collegiate experience (Gee, 1999; Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The single set case study included 1 African American faculty member and 120 US-born African American students from his 3 English sections offered at an HBCU. The instructor was purposefully selected by the researcher due to the volume of English classes he redesigned with culturally relevant pedagogy. Two African American students from the original student participants (were purposefully selected to be interviewed due to the content of their short-answers on the questionnaire, as well as, two additional students (one male and one female) were identified by the instructor as highly engaged and interviewed as the researcher wanted to find out why they were so engaged (Hall & Martin, 2013). Out of the four students only two were US born African Americans and eligible for Hall and Martin's study. Hall and Martin collected data through classroom observations, review of course syllabi and class assignment, survey questionnaires for all students, and follow up interviews for the two select students.

One conclusion suggested by the data was that pedagogy impacts African American student engagement if the content is culturally and socially relevant, is linked

across disciplines, and is academically rigorous (Hall & Martin, 2013). A second conclusion was that classroom climate determines the engagement of African American students (Hall & Martin, 2013). According to Hall and Martin, a classroom that allows a student's voice to be heard is imperative. Students of color can engage in subject matter that is paralleled to their lived experience (Hall & Martin, 2013). According to Hall and Martin the interviews revealed the students were highly engaged as a result of: (a) the professor's knowledge of the discipline (English) and cultural subject matter, (b) the professor's shared experience and ability to relate it to the class discussions, and (c) how the professor helped "the younger students appreciate the accomplishments of the older generation and connect to their experiences" for instance bridging the gap between Civil Rights and Hip Hop. These students benefit from seeing themselves or their cultural as represented in the institutional environment rather than dominated by White student culture (Hall & Martin, 2013). This study suggests African American students might find less of a language barrier if their home or native dialect was acceptable within the college discourse community.

Aligning personal or lived experiences with how to navigate discourse at the college level has been studied by Hall & Martin (2013) as well as by Brandt (2008). Brandt (2008) explored experiences of Native American women navigating science discourse. The focus of this study was to understand how the Indigenous women connected to and made science discourse meaningful to their personal lives. The 16 month case study took place at a university in Mexico. All four participants were Native American women enrolled in an undergraduate biology program. The data collection methods used was one-on-one interviews, class observations, student science writings,

and institutional artifacts to include university policy statements and departmental outcome assessments.

Contrary to Shavers and Moore (2014) and Hall and Martin (2013), Brandt's (2008) results suggest that participants develop their own discursive spaces where there were none as opposed to passively waiting for spaces to be created for them. Moreover findings indicate, discursive spaces consist of social and physical components. Whether the space is physical or virtual the social component needs to be relational, afford safety, and accentuate the academic and social importance of the group (Brandt, 2008). Additionally, a compelling finding was that campuses have the ability to hinder or facilitate opportunities for discursive spaces through changes in institutional policies and pedagogy (Brandt).

College faculty and staff could benefit from Brandt's (2008) findings by understanding the navigational course needed to be taken by African American students at the community college level. Brandt's (2008) study underlines the journey these students often take in order to navigate a foreign discourse. An understanding of discourse challenges experienced by African American community college students could lead to decreased attrition as new interventions are developed, but if the problem is not recognized or better understood attrition could continue to rise (Brandt, 2008).

African American college students would also be better equipped to navigate discursive spaces when they have the opportunity to benefit from culturally relevant pedagogy (Hall & Martin, 2013) and with direct instruction addressing dialect differences and promoting code switching (Baxter & Holland, 2007). In similar fashion, White's (2005) study examines the relationship of language, discourse, and literacy on minority

student success in college. White postulates that to help the transition of minority students, we cannot overlook their level of academic literacy. While using the same four minority participants described in White's 2011 study, this case study finds students lacking academic literacy can learn it to improve the possibility of academic success (White, 2011).

The data collection strategies used for White's (2005) study was observations of students while the researcher actively worked with the participants as a tutor. The participants completed weekly one-on-one tutoring sessions where data was collected on study skills and academic literacy related to difficulties they were experiencing (White, 2005). Additionally, White used field notes and formal pre/post interviews to capture a full understanding of their student accounts of activities, thoughts, and behaviors. Written work to include test results, class notes, assignment posing challenges were collected for each student (White, 2005). Lastly, the participants in White's study were also required to journal academic difficulties, feelings about their place at the university, class assignments, reactions to academic counseling, and the benefits of participating in the academic probation program. All data was analyzed using Spradley's (1980) Domain and Componential Analysis model. Vignettes, "realistic tales," and all information gathered was used to compile findings (White, 2005).

The principal finding was that academic literacy is associated with induction into the academic community which means, "knowing and using specific academic or study skills in the college environment is highly correlated with academic success" (White, 2005, p. 389). Another finding by White was that the home or native language patterns of minority students often conflict with the language accepted in the academic discourse

community. As a result of this conclusion students may feel alienated and culturally disrespected in a “supposed liberal community” and is a major factor in finding success at the college level (White, 2005). Lastly, this finding suggests learning and deconstructing what’s required for academic literacy allows students to become a full participant in the academic community. A byproduct of this finding is an increase in student confidence and comfort level in an academic environment, components noted to combat minority student attrition (Metz, 2005). The induction into the academic community allows African American students in the community college to experience academic success and persist from one semester to the next.

Research on navigating discourse is not plentiful. This section of the literature review illustrates a gap in the use of asset models when exploring academic discourse in relation to success in an educational environment for target populations. African American students, faculty, and staff in the community college need to be aware of the challenges surrounding academic discourse and persistence. Once the issue is clearly acknowledged faculty and staff can begin to better support students and students can learn and implement skills necessary for success in the academy.

Method review. The methods typically used for this literature review were predominantly qualitative but a few quantitative studies were found. Most studies were short term at 1 year or less (Adams, 2014; Baxter & Holland, 2007; Boone, 2003; Brandt, 2008; Brown, 2006; Glenn, 2008; Pyne & Means, 2013) and a few were longitudinal spanning over 1 to 3years (Godley & Escher, 2012; Johnson, 2014; White & Ali Khan, 2013). It seemed to be common practice for the reviewed studies to collect institutional data on subjects, including but not limited to grades, demographics, generational status,

etc. (Adams, 2014; Brandt, 2008; Johnson, 2014; Shavers & Moore, 2014; White, 2011; White & Ali Khan, 2013). Another notable method was self-reported data, this method was frequently perceived as a study limitation but attempts to guard against it, especially for large sample quantitative studies, were usually noted.

A few studies were part of a larger data set or an ongoing national survey (Johnson, 2014; Pyne & Means, 2013). This indicated the topic or variables were already being examined in part by other entities and would allow opportunities for triangulation and/or a bank of validated measurement tools. An array of measurement instruments or data collection strategies were used in all the studies reviewed. The most significant findings seemed to be indicative of larger sample sizes, clearly defined themes, and multiple scales or collection strategies. The tools listed below were used to assess the several facets of academic discourse on how it manifests itself in African American education:

1. Observations
2. Interviews
3. Questionnaires/Survey
4. Document Review
5. Field Notes
6. Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) (University of Iowa, 2015)
7. Vocabulary Subtest of Gates-MacGinitie and the Academic Word Level of the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) (Schmitt, 2001)
8. Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) (University of Iowa, 2015)
9. State Criterion Reference Test (CRT; Nevada Department of Education, 2008)

10. Workplace Language Skills Assessment Test (WLSAT) (Baxter & Holland, 2007)

Chapter Summary

This review examines research from middle school, high school, and institutions of higher education. The studies reviewed suggest academic discourse is a phenomenon that poses challenges at various levels of education for African American as well as other minority students. The results of this literature review provide evidence for the existence of a gap in research at the community college level, wherein empirical data/evidence-using asset models were utilized. Thus, as a whole, these studies provided a clear avenue to understanding and exploring the persistence of African American students, as well as proof that such research is currently rare and underrepresented in the literature.

In understanding the implications of discourse the notable findings were alternative spaces are an effective means for learning the nuances of academic discourse (Johnson, 2014), feelings of academic inadequacies and fear of judgment can manifest themselves as a lack of class participation (White, 2011), and African American Vernacular English exhibited in verbal and written language is considered to violate academic norms (Syrquin, 2006). The tacit or unspoken rules regarding academic discourse are not formalized instruction, there is need to understand and adhere to the rules (White & Ali Khan, 2013) and by in large first time, fulltime African American students do not understand the essentiality and benefits of using Standard English (Godley & Escher, 2012). Finally, navigating discourse comes with recognizing collegiate success requires a unique skill (White, 2005) and can be achieved by using alternative means to culturally engage divers students with academic rigor promotes

inclusion and persistence in the academy (Hall & Martin, 2013). Collectively, these findings support a relationship between challenges with academic discourse and persistence for African American community college students.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

For many minority students transition to college is likened to adapting to a foreign culture (White, 2005). The students are entering a culture that has been “modeled upon a White western tradition” (White, 2005, p. 371). Many African American students seem to struggle at every stage of their educational journey; there is a common phenomenon that could be explored from the student experience in institutions of higher education. White (2005) defined minority as including African Americans and he postulates that mainstream universities have ignored the importance of the difference in discursive styles and how language and identity are inextricably linked. Unique language and discursive style presents itself in the K-12 education, but higher education is a unique discourse community. White is one of the first to explore the link between African American student persistence and academic discourse but a better understanding is still needed. With rapidly changing national demographics reflecting increases in minorities in the overall population, it seems imperative that institutions of higher education prepare for this change (Harvey, 2014).

The persistence of African American students is an ongoing challenge that is more pronounced at the community college level (Nakajima et al., 2012). This issue of persistence is well documented at the federal, state, and local levels, and as a result, agencies such as American College Testing (ACT) and the Gates and Lumina Foundations, and the U.S. Department of Education, are all seeking to improve

persistence rates among students (Nakajima et al., 2012). Many reasons, such as generational status, low income and socioeconomic status, and under-preparedness have been postulated as the culprit for perpetuating these educational disparities (White & Lowenthal, 2011; Woods & Williams, 2013). The sheer number and variety of possible explanations that have been proposed in the quest to better understand these disparities present an opportunity for additional research to help pinpoint precisely how these disparities might best be understood. An intriguing possibility exists with limited research around language and discourse as it relates to the persistence rate of African American students. Within this same realm, language and discourse can be a challenge to African American college students as they form multiple levels of their academic identity.

Academic discourse for the purposes of this study is the ability to understand, practice and relate to a set of communicative processes in academia, such as vocabulary, principles, and behaviors (Collier & Hicks, 2004; Burke, 1974; Merriam-Webster, 2014). This ability allows one to join or be excluded from the proverbial conversation (Burke, 1974). In other words, a beginner college student's ability to identify the existence of this phenomenon and be able to participate in such discourse in a timely manner may be determinative of whether that student is able to integrate into college life, or remain excluded. This ability to adapt, particularly for African American students, may translate to how likely she or he is to persist from one semester to the next.

The design method for this study was a qualitative design. An interview process and an analytic induction approach were used to capture the experiences of African American community college students. The study was designed to understand the

experiences of African American students with academic discourse and if/how it has influenced college persistence for African American students at the community college level.

The qualitative method focuses on individual experiences and lends itself well to the research study. The analytic induction process is used with deliberate data collection in a particular setting (Erickson, 1985). This study has been structured to answer the prevailing research question: How do African American students, who persist from one semester to the next, experience academic discourse in a community college?

Research Context

The setting for this research study was a community college located in Western New York. The total population for this college is approximately 17,000 students. The college has a 35% minority student population. The faculty body is composed of approximately 1,200 members, with 19% identifying as minority or non-White. The student enrollment make up is comprised of 82% county residents with the majority of incoming students from the major city in the county. Almost half of the incoming student population has no prior college experience, and have the aspiration of transferring to a 4-year institution. However, the graduation, transfer, and persistence rates for the 2010 cohort at this community college is less than 25% in three years' time for first time, full-time, degree seeking students from 2010-2012. Moreover, the rates for graduation, transfer, and persistence were 21% for Whites, 16% for Latinos, and 13% for African Americans. The institution is currently implementing a new early alert system to address student persistence and retention.

Research Participants

The participants of this study included African American first time male and female students from the community college enrolled in the spring 2015 cohort. These students were currently registered for 100 level courses at the college. African American students were identified through acquiring an initial report from the college's Institutional Research (IR) office. The initial report only yielded one eligible, willing participant.

To increase eligible participants the criteria was expanded to include continuing and returning students and the developmental education population, which had been excluded initially as a preconceived limitation of the study. With the expanded criteria, all participants still needed to be students who persisted from fall 2014 to spring 2015 and/or spring 2015 to summer 2015.

Data Collection Procedures

The final IR report was used to send the Request Faculty Distribute Student Invitations (Appendix A) to faculty via email. The request was for faculty to distribute the Student Invitation Letter (Appendix B) to all students in each class by a certain date. The report was also used to contact faculty by email to schedule researcher visits to the classroom to provide an overview of the study in person. These visits were done as an extra recruitment measure to encourage all potential participants. The invitation required potential participants to contact the researcher by phone, email, or in-person to confirm their interest in taking part in the study.

The faculty distributed the invitations and set up class visits with the researcher to give an in-person overview of the study. Participants worked directly with the researcher to schedule their one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The participants had a clear

understanding that the researcher's study would neither positively nor negatively impact their semester grades and/or final grade in the respective classes, as outlined in the participant consent form. Confidentiality of students was kept by de-identifying outcome information and storing all files on an external hard drive in the home office in a locked file cabinet.

Once the students self-identified by reaching out to the researcher and confirmed their interest in participating, a follow-up email (Appendix C) was sent to the student. A brief overview of the research study was shared in the invitation and again with the consent form (Appendix D) to all participants selected for the semi-structured one-on-one interviews. All participants who completed the interview received a \$10 Visa gift card.

Interview protocol. Interviews were conducted with African American community college students to collect and analyze the content of their experience related to the phenomenon of academic discourse. The broad philosophical assumption in this study is that academic discourse does affect persistence at the community college level for African American students. The researcher holds this assumption from personal experiences of working in a similar community college settings with an African American student population. Creswell (2013) states assumptions must be recognized and bracketed out to avoid biases.

The interviews were conducted with a final sample group of eight participants. The interview protocol (Appendix E) was scripted at the beginning and end of each session to include a second overview of the study and review of the consent form. The participants were informed of their rights and confidentiality of the study. Participants' signed consents were collected prior to the interviews.

The interview protocol was developed to elicit how academic discourse has individually influenced the participants' college experience. The interview consists of eight open ended questions based on the research conducted on academic discourse and the characteristics described in the literature. All questions have been intentionally crafted in conversational language to ensure language does not create a barrier for understanding. The researcher consulted with a Research Specialist from St. John Fisher College to convert the questions to conversational language. As an example, the specialist suggested changing the phrase "homogeneous circle" to "circle of friend." Prior to the start of the interview each participant was presented with a consent form. Extensive field notes were kept on a separate template (Appendix F) for each participant to record observations. The field notes were synthesized with the interview transcripts during data analysis.

At the beginning of each interview, a request was made to record all individual interviews for accuracy. Each participant was asked and agreed to being recorded to capture the details of every response. Interviews took place in the researcher's office which was centrally located on campus, to ensure quality of the recording as well as elicit the highest degree of participation from selected participants.

Time blocks for each interview were 90 minutes, leaving 15 minutes on both sides of the actual interview time to guard against tardiness or longer interviews interrupting the schedule. The researcher used active listening techniques such as parroting, probing, and recording verbal and non-verbal responses. The interviews were facilitated to promote conversation on the intended topic using open-ended questions and intentional probes. However, the lack of response to a given question or probe was also collected.

Using the field note template (Appendix F) impressions, inflection, intuitions, and non-verbal behaviors were recorded. All procedures were in accordance with the Participation Solicitation and Data Collection Timeline (Appendix G). Research Flyers (Appendix H) were a last attempt effort to solicit additional participants and were hung in the common areas throughout the campus. Both the Student Invitation Letter and the Research Flyer encouraged students to self-identify and declare their interest in participating with the study by contacting the research to schedule an interview.

Data Analysis

“Qualitative data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 111). The researcher’s organization of all participant interviews and field notes was crucial to the analysis of this study. The recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service to identify and validate individual responses and to guard against interviewer bias. The detriment to using a professional transcription service was the risk of confidentiality to the student participants, but all possible precautions were taken to protect subjects. Such as, using a bonded professional service, sending all recordings and files over a secured network, and first names only, if at all, during the interviews. The transcriptions were checked against the recordings to verify content by the researcher.

For the initial organization of data and development of preliminary themes a modified K-J Method was used. This method is also referred to as Affinity Charts or diagrams and has been used in many industries to organize and group data (Haselden & Algozzine, 2003; Plain, 2007; Winchip, 2001). A five step process was followed to include: (a) label quotes, comments, impressions, and non-verbal behaviors from

interview responses; (b) label themes by noticing common or related quotes, comments, impression, or non-verbals; (c) add text influenced by interview responses to describe themes; (d) make a spatial arrangement to illustrate interdependence, connections, or contradictions between and across themes; and (e) organize information in order to describe a unified experience for all final participants (Hut, 2008). According to Hut, this method allows free and creative thinking and categories to be dictated by the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The qualitative data was first analyzed manually by reviewing the interview transcripts multiple times while highlighting text relevant to the research questions which resulted in a coding chart. Using Erickson's (1985) analytic induction, assertions were developed to support the emerging themes from the codes. Assertions are defined as statements of declaration that emerge from a summary of the possible findings (Erickson, 1985). All assertions were tested, quantified, and supported by evidence identified in the interview transcripts. The analytic induction process focuses on developing and testing assertions to determine if there is enough data to explain and support each (Erickson, 1985). This process allows the research to move from coding to conclusions. For this study analytic induction was used to help test the hypothesis that challenges with academic discourse can be a barrier to persistence for African American community college students. It also provided a systematic way of supporting themes found in the data. In the final process of analyzing and coding the data, the researcher met with the Research Specialist from St. John Fisher College to further clarify the themes and assertions.

Analytic induction is based on six steps: (a) organize data, (b) code the data, (c) develop assertions, (d) compile data for each assertion, (e) test the assertions, and (f) report the findings (Erickson, 1985). First, the raw data was organized in a chart including 24 codes (see Table 3.1). Words and phrases from the interview transcripts, literature, and theories were used to develop the codes. Next, non-verbal expressions from the field notes and quotes from the interview transcripts were inserted into the chart according to the relevant codes. Ideas emerged and were summarized to describe possible findings. After reflecting on the data and reviewing it by individual participants and across the entire sample the assertions were analyzing to support and quantify each one. Then each assertion was tested against the data with supports or contradictions to the findings. Finally, the findings were reported by presenting a summary of the evidence that supports each assertion.

Summary

The study focuses on the influence of academic discourse on the persistence of African American community college students who persist from one semester to the next. The persistence of African American students is an ongoing challenge more pronounced at the community college level (Nakajima , Dembo, & Mossler, 2012). Academic discourse gives African American community college students the ability to adapt and transition to college (White, 2005) and possibly persist from one semester to the next. The literature has examined both academic discourse and persistence but independent of one another. With rapidly changing national demographics reflecting increases in minorities in the overall population, it seems perhaps more imperative now than ever before that institutions of higher education prepare for the development on the horizon

(Harvey, 2014). To intervene now is both important and timely. Academic discourse should not be an insurmountable barrier to education and promoting awareness can help mitigate the challenge of persistence for African American students in the community college.

Table 3.1

Coding Definitions

Code	Definition	Code (cont'd)	Definition (cont'd)
Transition to college	How participants felt they adjusted to first semester of college	“Vibe”	Contributions or ideals accepted/welcomed
Sense of belonging	If participants experienced acceptance on campus	Effect of language	How words make people feel
“Extra mile”	Be helpful/meet people where they are	Stereotyped	Image of or ideas about AA students
“Adapt to you”	Consider whole person and/or open to a better understanding	Community College Discourse	Shared set of understood, basic values, and assumptions and ways of communication
Like or likable	Fond of or approachable	Trajectory: friends	Moving away from old friends
Comfort	At ease with person, language, or situation	Trajectory: surroundings	Changing surroundings
Identity/identify	Having a link or connection	Trajectory: academic habits	Recognizing the need to and developing habits of mind for success
Fear of being judged	Anxiety or dread around negative opinions formed about AA students	Trajectory: academic goals	Setting and moving toward academic success
Experience of being judged	Past involvement or exposure to negative opinions formed about AA students	Marginalization	Deemed unimportant or less than other students
Confidence	Belief in a favorable personal outcome	Resilience/grit	Ability to persist in difficult situations
Connect/relate to people or information	Ability to identify with or establish a link to	Natural language	Communication without filtering with people or in a place of comfort
Code switching	The ability to alternate between two languages or dialects as needed	Understanding/comprehension	Ability to grasp/absorb information

Chapter 4: Results

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how African American college students experience academic discourse. This study also investigated and revealed the potential influence of academic discourse on persistence rates in community colleges for African American students. The study focused on understanding the implications, exploring the tacit rules, and navigating discourse within an academic setting in an attempt to answer the research question: How do African American students, who persist from one semester to the next, experience academic discourse in a community college?

African American students were identified through acquiring a report from the college's Institutional Research office to include African American students, male and female, who were enrolled in two consecutive semesters at the institution demonstrating persistence and academic success. The participants for the study consisted of eight students currently enrolled at a midsized community college in western New York. All participants were African American, with a gender breakdown of three males and five females. One participant was directly enrolled in credit bearing courses, which assumed college readiness. However, every other participant started their college career with developmental education courses which provide foundational skills needed to be college ready. Three out of the eight participants were considered non-traditional aged students and had full time careers prior to enrolling in this community college. Non-traditional, is

defined in this study as students with prior fulltime work experience, full responsibility for dependents, and over thirty years of age. The non-traditional aged students are a large population on community college campuses (Bell, 2012). Therefore, it is important to understand this population with respect to their life experiences and impact of discourse and language development related to the array of experiences they bring with them to college.

The sample of participants included a mix of urban and suburban educational backgrounds within the participant sample. Students from suburban backgrounds tend to have White-dominated educational enculturation and experiences (Heariold-Kinney, 2009), while students with urban backgrounds are more likely to be surrounded by their own peers with similar language and experiences (Booker, 2007). Two participants relocated to the Western New York area before they began their college experience at this institution. These participants may have had a different educational and cultural experience that would influence the context of their interviews. All participants were fully engaged during the interview and all but one could articulate their experiences to answer the semi-structured interview questions given to them. The one exception tended to go off topic or not give answers relevant to the questions asked. This suggested he did not fully understand the nature or discourse of the questions. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and they will be referred to throughout the study as the names listed for each participant described in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Participant Descriptions

Participant Pseudonym	Description	Participant Pseudonym (cont'd)	Description (cont'd)
Isiah	Male, traditional student with mixed heritage	Latrecia	Female student, traditional aged student with a documented learning challenge
Shantel	Female, non- traditional student, single mother of three, and a student worker	Imania	Female, traditional aged student originally from the south, currently living in WNY with her sister
Jamal	Male, traditional aged and Fine Arts major	Sherice	Female, non-traditional aged student who grew up in the suburbs
Kenya	Female, traditional aged student with no sense of belonging but later made connections through her campus job	Roscoe	Male, non-traditional aged veteran seeking a second degree

Qualitative data were collected through eight semi-structured interviews. The interviews were organized and interpreted by individual experiences related to academic discourse. A coding chart with 24 codes (see Table 3.1) was used to organize participant quotes identified in the interviews and transcripts. Four major themes emerged from the coding that cut across the entire sample with a consistent pattern of students reporting both benefits and consequences in relation to academic discourse.

Theme one: The first theme, “Break this down, please!” examined how understanding and comprehension of language can be a barrier for African American community college students. The students described misunderstandings due to word choice, context, or the unwillingness of faculty and staff to take the time to break the content down. Students also chronicled instances where connecting or relating to people or information improved their ability to reach an understanding. The students’

descriptions revealed that when they felt that faculty were nurturing and approachable, it was easier for the students to make the request, “Break this down, please!”

Theme two: “The Comfort Zone” was the second theme that emerged. This theme demonstrated how students felt a certain level of comfort in classes and situations where they had some familiarity with the words used, the topics covered, and what was being asked of them. Students in this study also maintained that comfort was dependent upon who and how they could interact and be perceived by faculty, staff and peers. They asserted that the level of comfort could facilitate or hinder class participation.

Theme three: The third theme, “Extra Mile vs. Sink or Swim,” identified students’ beliefs around the propensity for some faculty to go the extra mile to support African American students. Some faculty ‘actually want you to learn’ where others subscribed to a sink or swim approach. The sink or swim approach was described as some faculty working from a lens of the students either pass or fail, and it is totally up to them. Additionally this theme captured how the students in the study were inclined to go the extra mile which may have contributed to their academic success and persistence.

Theme four: “Real Me vs. College Me,” the final theme, which was a reoccurring concept throughout the study. Students spoke to this theme directly and indirectly during each semi-structured interview. In their response the students demonstrated how they realized a tacit rule (White & Lowenthal, 2011) of community college was to change their language, tone, and behavior in order to find academic success. The students in this study described having dual identities; one being their real self and the other being their college self. The students noted they did have to speak and act differently, they described the difference, and how they felt about it. In the literature

(White, 2005; White & Lowenthal, 2011; White & Ali-Khan, 2013) this is referred to as code.

Data Analysis and Findings

In addressing the research question, the interviews highlighted the varied experiences of African American community college students. The themes were interrelated and juxtaposed positive and the negative student experiences within each theme. The majority of the students expressed having had a difficult or challenging time with transitioning to college in their first semesters. Half of the students went on to say they did not feel a sense of belonging at the college until well after their first or second semester. The experiences of understanding, connecting, and being comfortable with the discourse, as well as, receiving support from faculty and code switching can facilitate or impede academic success and persistence.

Theme one: Break this down, please! In order to isolate barriers to understanding and comprehension for African American students, interview questions were asked about topics such as student experiences with utilizing campus resources, understanding the information or advice provide by faculty and staff, as well as students thoughts and feeling regarding the language used by faculty when explaining things in and out of the classroom. In replying to these questions, African American students in this study seemed to be prone to a lack of understanding when language was unrelated to the students' own experiences versus an ease of understanding when vocabulary was simplified or related to the students' cultural/social experiences. During the interviews, students referred to faculty and staff using big or college words that made it difficult for them to understand the messages or directions being conveyed. For example, Imania a

student who grew up in the south before relocating to Western New York stated “. . . just put it in a way that we all understand . . . But she said it in her own big words, letters, everything . . .” The phrase “break it down” was used numerous times by several participants during their respective interviews which illustrates how doing so leads to better understanding. When thinking about her early math classes, Sherice shared that a teacher needs to “really break that math down, and then once you break it down and explain it to us, it's a lot easier to catch on.” This was reinforced by Imania in stating, “I talk similar at both [home and school]. But I try to more break it down to my parents so they could understand.”

When asked about how faculty, staff, and peers explained things, students commented on how they better understood others when they felt some type of connection to the information or to the person sharing the information. Latrecia, who reported having documented learning challenges, stated faculty were more helpful or nurturing to her once they received her accommodations paper work. As she described, “If the professor is more . . . nurturing to me, and I know they're going to break it down, I'm not going to hesitate to ask, "Okay, explain this to me.” Shantel, similarly voiced her experience of being connected to people and information by sharing that “The faculty that I met, getting a job in the learning center. That actually helped a lot to get to know people and networking myself more, learn how to speak because I'm so used to speaking a certain kind of way.” Both students expressed how the importance of having a connection helped them to better understand the community college discourse and find academic success.

Some students felt if they liked someone or someone liked them was also synonymous with understanding one another. The likeability sometimes dictated that the person had shown themselves to be someone who handled situations in such a way that understanding would be reached even if it took extra measures. Shantel illustrated this point when she said “. . . I look at when I like them, I understand them . . . the type of people that they are, how they carry themselves, and how they handle situations - I like them as a person.” In this example, the student describes how she believes liking someone or someone liking her can also facilitate a better understanding of academic discourse. This understanding also leads to a comfort level in the classroom and across campus.

Theme two: The Comfort Zone. To help discern the concept of the comfort zone students were asked about topics such as their level of class participation and feelings and responses to involuntary participation if/when called on by the instructor. The collective responses indicate that when course materials are relatable to African American community college students’ own experiences, it facilitates participation. Paradoxically, relatable course material can also be a barrier if it is unsettling to participate publicly or engage with the materials.

All students in this study stated that they frequently participate in class discussions when they can relate to the materials being discussed. The students expressed they are in their comfort zone when they are familiar with class materials, when the materials capture their interest, or when the materials are culturally relevant. A striking example of this is seen in Imania’s reaction to the Common Read book. The Common Read is a pilot program that strategically assigned and integrated a book into multiple

classes and programs at the college. The goal of this pilot program is to facilitate interdisciplinary study of a topic and to build community among students by fostering discussion in class and across campus. For this cohort, the Common Read book was *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (Skloot, 2010). This book illustrated the unethical use of an African American woman's cell samples without her consent and highlighted many issues of racism and exploitation of the African American community by medical researchers.

Imania described wanting to participate in class discussions of this book because she knew of Henrietta Lacks' story prior to reading the book in class and felt comfortable and connected to the material being covered. However, she also expressed an unwillingness to engage in some class discussions of the book because the subject matter was personally upsetting. At those times, the material related to her in such a way that participation in group discussions required a vulnerability or caused agitation that was not conducive to the classroom environment. She stated that

[If professor calls on me] I'm just going to tell her I didn't read the material . . . reading that book [Henrietta Lacks], it really makes me . . . angry . . . why did this happen? Why it couldn't be stopped. Sometimes, I won't read the material.

As Imania's description shows, her lack of participation was not because she was unwilling to do the work or disinterested. Rather, at times the content of the book seemed to hit too close to home and was personally upsetting to her.

There was a slight difference in traditional aged versus non-traditional aged participants in their comfort with participating in class discussions. The traditional aged students with less work and life experience participated with hesitation. For example,

Isaiah described his feelings about participation by stating, “I guess I don't feel like speaking up in front of the whole class. I guess that's just like a personal thing. I was never a public speaker, I guess.” Latrecia reported:

“If she calls on me and ask me how do I feel about it or what not, I try to ask her to explain a little more or I don't really get it at that time. So, I participate, but I hold back if I don't know.”

In contrast, the non-traditional aged students, who had prior experience in the workforce and armed forces participated with authority. Sherice illustrated her authority by saying “I always participate in class discussions. Especially if it's something that I'm interested in and I feel I have a view point, and a good one.” Roscoe, another non-traditional aged student, similarly stated “. . . you can share because . . . me being a little older - I know a lot more from time.” Both students stated they usually participate to share their point of view and give the other students the benefit of their wisdom. Overall, students in this study expressed the need for there to be a certain level of comfort before they engaged in class discussions.

Theme three: Extra Mile vs. Sink or Swim. To identify and decipher if there were disparities in the way faculty view and deliver student support, questions were asked on topics such as things that contribute to their college experiences, if they received help on campus, and their beliefs about what could make college transitions easier. Students noted some faculty go the extra mile by understanding and filling the academic discourse gap for African American community college students. More than half the students in this study explicitly recounted how some faculty go the extra mile to help them find success in and out of the classroom. Isaiah shared that he had a math

teacher who went the extra mile to help him really learn the subject matter. This particularly described in terms of the approach to class assignments and testing:

I feel other teachers are kind of just like, “Pass or fail, whatever. It's on you.” But the way she does it, she actually wants you to learn it. Even if you take a test and you mess up on the test, you get a chance to go over and do corrections, and show her what you did wrong and that sort of stuff. I feel like that was really helpful.

Kenya shared her experience in the writing center. Her professor worked in the writing center and helped her not only understand what he was looking for but also what his colleagues might deem as a solid writing assignment. As she described,

I received help in the writing center from . . . my professor . . . he showed us what him and a lot of his peers were looking for. That made me a better writer and because I like to talk more than write. He helped me to express what's in here, what's going to come out here on paper - how to redirect it.

Similarly, African American community college students in this study who persist go the extra mile by taking advantage of academic resources available to them. Most students interviewed shared how they also go the extra mile themselves to find success in their college classes. Shantel shared how when she needed help with her math and the faculty in the lab she was assigned to was not helpful to her so, she sought out a lab assigned to a different math class. In addition to her making extra effort by going to the second lab, the faculty at the second lab accommodated her and was especially helpful. As she described,

The math flex lab - the guy that was in there helped me. He had me come in at a certain time and he would sit down with me and help me with my math. ‘I know

this is not where they told me to come, but do you think that you could help me?’

He said, ‘Come in at this time and I’ll help you’ if I needed any help, so I utilized it.

In this example both the student and the faculty went the extra mile.

However, students in this study expressed how they have experienced the sink or swim approach with some faculty. Several students shared that there were faculty that were not interested in supporting students and/or unapproachable when students are seeking help or when compared to college staff. This was exemplified by Latrecia who described a different experience with staff than with faculty: “For the most part, the staff is really awesome . . . they was just open arms . . . they want to help . . . the tone is just more happier and more inviting than the teachers.” Shantel similarly described some faculty as being unhelpful: “The professor . . . basically put the paper and said, ‘Here. This is what I need you to do and you have a test on it tomorrow.’ I didn’t understand nothing from it.” Both students expressed how they experienced the sink or swim approach from faculty which is vastly different from faculty who go the extra mile.

In contrast, one student tried to understand why a sink or swim approach might be present in college looking at it from the lens of the faculty:

. . . kids that has just got put here and not, say have the tools, they’re not prepared, so that kind of I feel is frustrating for the faculty because they don’t know what to do. They’re coming here expecting to teach kids that’s ready to go forth with their education, but here it is, it’s a setback because some of the kids are not prepared or they come here and not knowing.

It is noteworthy to mention that the ideal scenario for academic success described for students in this study seems to be when both the faculty and the student go the extra mile and meet somewhere on the path to success.

Theme four: Real Me vs. College Me. To find out whether students changed their language, tone, and behavior to assimilate into the community college and why they might do so, the participants were asked to think about the way they speak. While thinking about these questions they were asked if the words they choose and the tone of voice they used would be the same in class as it would be at home or with friends. For further understanding, they were also challenged to think of a time when they may have or thought they should switch the way they talked around different people. The participants were probed to discuss their feelings behind switching their language at school and when they return home.

Defining Code Switching

Code switching is defined as learning the dominant academic discourse (i.e., the kind of speech, writing, and nonverbal communication that defines the college as a discourse community) in the university which requires a shift in a student's learning style or what literacy and linguistics they use (White & Lowenthal, 2011). It is not mandatory for students to change their language in all settings. Rather they consistently use language specific to each community they are in at a given time. This concept is often times spoken of or introduced in negative terms (White & Lowenthal, 2011).

Some of the students in this study reported an understanding and ability to toggle between their natural language and the academic discourse required for success at the

community college level. Shantel, a single mother of three and a student worker on campus, stated,

“Learning how to speak a different kind of way when talking to faculty and knowing how to speak to them without offending because of how I speak when I'm with my friends . . . The words and the terms that I use and stereotypes. I had to learn how to change everything. I can't say that it's as hard as it was at first, but it's still something I still work with.”

Jamal, described code switching as something “totally different” with different people and in different places,

It's totally different . . . When I'm with my friends . . . don't care what my words are like or I care less how it comes out, but when I'm at school, I try to have it more together, because I feel I have more to prove . . .

These students subscribed to code switching as a way to move toward their academic goals and recognized their language was dependent on whether they were exhibiting the real self or their college self which they thought was required for college success. In this study no judgment by the researcher was made on whether code switching is good or bad, participants were simply allowed to share their relevant experiences.

Examples of code switching. In reaction to the interview questions, students in this study found it necessary to change their language, tone, and behavior to achieve academic success. However, some students reported not being comfortable with doing so, as it created a conflict with being their authentic selves. All participants described how they felt the need to and actively changed their language, tone, and behaviors to find

academic success, with one exception. For example, Shantel articulated that no one explicitly told her to change her language but she knew she had to change: “The words and the terms that I use and stereotypes. I had to learn how to change everything . . . it's . . . something I still work with.” Imania also reported these changes were to be understood in different venues and around different people. In explaining how she might change her language, Imania gave an example of how she might switch her language to be understood by different people. When she felt something was good Imani might say “this is so fabulous” and around others the same sentiment would be expressed as “that's so dope.” This example was prefaced by the student proclaiming she would change her language but not who she was!

All participants were directly asked about code switching as the researcher inquired about if they spoke differently and when they chose to do so. Isaiah, Jamal, Roscoe, and Imania hesitated to give a straight answer. However, these students described code switching scenarios and behaviors. For example, Jamal insisted he did not speak differently and in the same breath confesses his language is dependent on the audience he is addressing. As he describes, “Basically I won't speak differently. It depends on who I'm talking to or who's around . . . I'm still going to talk the same But it really isn't different. Conversations is different since I'm in school now . . .” While students described code switching they emphatically declared, “I'm still me.” Imania also hesitated to admit to code switching went on to say, “I'm not going to change who I am . . . but I want you to see where I'm coming from.” Similarly, Jamal stated, “I'm so unorthodoxically different [with different people and in different places], but I'm the same person. It's just, before I jump in and say something, let me get my words together.

It's like censoring.” The participant’s hard declaration and body language suggested they did in fact code switch but were uncomfortable doing so or expressed they could not do so without the risk of losing their authentic self.

The participants illustrated how and when they use code switching to be accepted, understood, or as marginalized learned behaviors. The strength of this assertion is in the fact that code switching was directly addressed in three out of eight interview questions but the subject was broached in almost every question for almost every participant. Collectively, participants stated code switching was not relegated to only cultural instances but to a broader context including educated versus non-educated, professional versus personal, and secular versus religious settings and groups.

Motivations for why students code switch. The African American community college students in this study reported various reasons for why they are motivated to adopt code switching. The reasons reported were unique to each individual participant. Students articulated their experiences with code switching which included the belief that changing their language helped them become successful in the academic environment. For example, Shantel’s motivation for code switching seemed to be based on self-reflection, intrinsic motivation and a strong desire to succeed: “I felt like I had to [change her language- words and terms] to succeed. It was holding me back. It was even affecting my papers so I had to learn how to use different words and different terms and make it work.” Jamal described using code switching for self-improvement: “Everything's different. And talking to a student or professor or family member or anybody else outside of school, it's-- since, once again, I'm reaching a level where I want to better myself . . .” A final example is seen with Imania, she expressed she was motivated to code switch

because “You get into the next step of success. I think you want to learn and succeed in different ways, without talking how you used to talk.” This student also shared that she was from the south and after having a conversation with her professor who pointed out she was using “bad grammar,” this was a revelation for the student but was the impetus for her motivation to code switch.

In contrast to the positive motivations described above, other students described their motivation for code switching as rooted in not wanting to feel uncomfortable in the academic environment and to avoid negative reactions from faculty and peers. For example, Roscoe described his motivation for changing his language and tone as stemming from the environment he found himself in: “I’m a man, an African-American man, so . . . a different tone . . . you never want to look too soft. That could get you in trouble.” Embarrassment can also be a motivating factor in why a student chooses to adopt code switching. Kenya, described an instance where she was walking into class with a friend and attempted to explain why they were late. The professor corrected her language. The student said that “. . . embarrassed me, that was like I would never let nobody get me like that again. So I learned to correct the way I speak.” Motivation for code switching was not always positive but it seemed to always be profound to the student.

How students feel about code switching. The African American college students in this study describe code switching as being programmed, reflexed, or learned behaviors. The students expressed feelings of indifference or apathy, anguish, and inadequacy associated with . . . switching. For example, Isaiah a student of mixed

African American and Hispanic background explained it as being a “Social Chameleon.” He described how he felt apathetic about code switching,

It's been so long, so it's like on a reflex . . . I remember writing about it in sociology for a paper . . . the title was like, Social Chameleons. So it was just kind of like how you adapt in different scenarios.

His body language and subsequent comments implied he may also experience some anguish over how to reconcile self-identity and code switching,

. . . my black father wasn't in the picture. That's why at home I would use . . . my white tone of voice or the language . . . I've been more pulled into black groups than I pulled into white groups. So that's how the language changes . . . at home.

Latrechia a student the Educational Opportunity Program and a member of a women's club on campus indicated she had been taught about the language and image aspects of code switching as early as sixth grade. Again, code switching was introduced through negative reinforcements as the participant recalled her teacher saying, “Turn the nigger button off.” She was hesitant to share this information, as she would have to use the offensive language in which it was given to her. She remembers the phrase being explained as helping the students understand how African American language and behavior is viewed, “When I say turn the nigger button off, I mean turn off the ignorance. Because that's what they assume you're going to act, and this is how you should act.” The previous example along with a more positive experience motivated Latrechia to code switch, however she did hint at some feelings of indifference even in her more “positive” experience,

. . . I think it's just programmed in us . . . My teacher used to explain it to us in high school. It's like there's million dollar words . . . medium words, and then there's penny words. Penny words was explained to us like you sound ignorant . . . And then the million dollar words is the words that get you the job, get you the respect, get you where you need to go.

In contrast, Shantel raised questions about whether code switching was necessary. As a non-traditional aged student who is raising three children, she reflected on the issue by observing her son's behavior. According to her he chooses not to code switch and this made her rethink the necessity of changing language based on the setting. For her this meant considering the possibility of not needing to switch to colloquial language when she is with family and friends. As she observed, "My one son . . . he's so smart. The way he talks and the way he carries himself - he doesn't change . . . He still speaks the same way . . . It makes me think maybe I shouldn't change."

Seven out of eight participants articulated their definition of code switching, acknowledged adoption of the concept, and shared how it makes them feel when the environment or situation dictates the necessity for its practice. There was one exception to this assertion, which assumed the position that some students do not need to code switch or maybe they make a conscious choice not to change their language like Shantel's son. Sherice, a single mom turned empty-nester who returned to college after a two full careers in banking and education, maintains she did not practice code switching and found academic success without doing so. She indicated her language was aligned with the dominant community college Discourse. Sherice also stated, "I was raised in the suburbs, and this is the way I speak. I wasn't raised in the 'hood'." The student's

statement suggests her focus of identity may be different from the other participants. The study participants appeared to toggle between two identities, one which embodied their real self and another which personified their college self, working to find a comfortable fit in the unique discourse of community college for both.

Summary of Results

This study focused on understanding the African American student experience in understanding and navigating academic discourse at a community college. First, the study explored student experiences with academic discourse, language, and code switching. Second, the study investigated the possible impact of academic discourse and community college on persistence rates for African American students, revealing any potential influences of one on the other. The results were outlined in this chapter through analytic induction (Erickson, 1985) of the interview transcripts.

The findings were associated with one another and exemplified contrasting experiences within every theme. Some African American community college students in this study conveyed experiences that described a full understanding and acceptance of academic discourse and its impacts on success while others were only beginning to understand the concept. All participants recounted experiencing the importance of academic discourse as it was ingrained by being exposed to the following instances:

- They felt connected or related to the information when it was broken down for them.
- They were able to observe and practice the discourse in their comfort zone.
- They worked with faculty that practiced the “extra mile” rather than the “sink or swim” approach.

- They held on to their unique identity and culture even when their language did not comfortably fit into the dominant discourse.

In instances where experiences were reportedly negative the importance of the discourse was still learned but mimicked a scar or a stain when recalled by participants. Chapter 5 will contextualize these findings addressing implications and recommendations for community college administrators, faculty, and staff to create awareness and establish best practices in supporting African American community college students to find academic success and persistence.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of African American students in community college with regard to academic discourse and its influence on their persistence. This study described these situations and uncovered the positive and negative personal experiences related to the participants' overall academic success and persistence. The study and its findings focused on the following research question: How do African American students, who persist from first one semester to the next, experience academic discourse in a community college? This chapter will discuss implications of the study, limitations of the study, and recommendations for professional practice and policy, executive leadership, and future research.

Implications of Findings

This research was aimed at understanding how African American students experience academic discourse in a community college. The findings are poised to expand the body of literature on academic discourse, inform educational systems, programs, and policy. The findings from this study offer three implications. First, the findings expand on the empirical literature. Second, the findings have implications for educational systems from K-12 through graduate education programs. Finally, the findings have implications for the "Students' Right to Their Own Language" official policy to expand from theory to practice (Zamel & Spack, 2012).

Literature expansion. The first implication is that this study expands the empirical literature on the impact of academic discourse on African American students. Prior research (White, 2005; White & Lowenthal, 2011; White & Ali-Khan, 2013) included 4-year colleges and mixed demographic groups. In contrast, this study expanded the research to include community college and focused solely on African American students. It is notable that despite these different samples, similar findings were obtained. The triangulation of findings with different research samples brings even stronger confidence to the role of academic discourse in students persisting in college.

This study's findings were aligned with the theoretical framework of social discourse (Gee, 1999), which also expands the literature. Gee differentiated between Discourse ("big D"), language bound to a defined social group, vs. discourse ("little d"), the use of language, reinforces the divisiveness of Discourse in community college. Gee's (1990) assertions related to American/European social theory argues Discourse defines the way a person speaks and behaves. He also postulates, Discourse "marginalizes viewpoints and values central to other Discourses" (Gee, 1990, p. 144) and the dominant Discourse dictates social power and upholds the hierarchical structure of society. Similarly, Critical Discourse Analysis theory addresses the unbalanced power associated with and exercised through language (Fairclough, 1995). The overarching premise related to the imbalance is that linguistic features of written or verbal text are used to label or marginalize. Fairclough (1992) explains "critical" as the tacit association between discourse and its biased outcomes, implying a need for intervention. The participants in the present study affirmed tacit rules that defined language and behaviors that were set by people who were not in touch or familiar with, and at time not respectful of how they

would normally or naturally communicate. For example, when participants were asked how faculty could help make transitions and college discussions easier for African American students some suggested faculty teach to the students that are in front of them rather than who they where they expect the students to be. The participants explained they often felt faculty assumed they were or should be at a certain level and they taught from that lens. Kenya shared, “They [faculty] teach on the level where . . . their people are going to understand . . . If you can't keep up, then why are you here?”

Education systems. The second implication of this study’s findings is associated with educational systems. As early as elementary school, discursive styles are presented to students (White, 2005). Navigating the K-12 system with a limited grasp of the academic discourse may not pose an academic challenge for younger students as other safeguards are in place to support student persistence such as the compulsory attendance (NYSED, 2012) and the No Child Left Behind (Simpson, Lacava, & Graner, 2004) laws. According to White and Lowenthal (2011), the discourse that works in K-12 does not always translate to academic success at the college level. There is a unique discourse in higher education that requires one to have knowledge of its existence and application. A lack of understanding for either can threaten the students’ social and academic integration into the discourse needed to find success (White & Lowenthal, 2011) and ultimately their persistence. The knowledge needed to navigate the unique discourse of community college has been held as a tacit rule and not common knowledge for African American and other minority students (White, 2011). There is a need to explicitly provide awareness and education of various language patterns and tacit rules to carry students through their educational journey. Both White (2011) and Townsend et al. (2012) agreed

academic discourse is a skill that promotes academic progress for students starting college with predetermined barriers such as minority and generational status. The implication from this study is the necessity for African American students to learn the value of adopting and applying academic discourse skills in order to be more college ready and successfully persist in a community college. To further support African American students persist and the development of these skills, community college faculty and staff could gain a better understanding and acknowledge the importance of different discourses used by African American students.

Additionally, some secondary education programs that prepare teachers and faculty for the classroom do not directly address the social and academic impact of language and highlight the importance of student support. Currently, most masters or doctorate programs are devoted to developing a command of their discipline rather than facets of language and student support. Not only are these topics not covered but the socialization and training encouraged in traditional graduate programs minimizes the importance of such topics as student support and understanding language in the classroom and educational area. A small minority of graduate programs actually offers courses that focus on best practices for teaching a specific discipline which may include student support but they are electives rather than a required course (Austin, 2002). Even the course on how to teach traditionally focus on classroom pedagogy (how to lecture, how to lead a discussion) which does not necessarily address understanding language and student support. Unfortunately, there is a culture in higher education that relegates this important work to student affairs professionals and its absence from the classroom is detrimental to African American community college students (Austin, 2002).

Students' right to their own language. The third and final implication for this study's findings is three-fold: (a) the official policy of the "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (Zamel & Spack, 2012); (b) the lack of praxis in the original document; and (c) the cultural shift that stalled its implementation. According to Smitherman (1995), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) was expected to be a collaborating entity for promoting the concept of the students' right to their own language. However, the NCTE decided to write their own version of the policy. There were two prominent differences in the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and the NCTE's content: (a) the NCTE distinguished between written and spoken language with respect to multiple dialects and (b) the time spent on bringing this issue of language to light (Smitherman, 1995). The committees clearly had two different ideas about how to grant students their rights around language and what these rights were.

Although, the CCCC official policy still possessed considerable interest and enthusiasm it fell short in its clarity. The policy left practitioners wondering, "Well, what they want me to do?" regarding teaching English, communication, and composition in accordance with the policy (Smitherman, 1995). The policy was rich in theory but poor in practice, with an implication that is still relevant today- there is currently a need to teach the teachers. Practice is addressed with the findings of this study with respect to socializing the faculty to understand the reasons and needs behind accepting and using multiple dialects. Furthermore, faculty "need explicit teaching materials, lesson plans, and more specific pedagogy" (Smitherman, 1995, p. 24) along with continuous professional development to make the classroom a Comfort Zone for African American and other minority students in the community college.

Limitations

There were four limitations that should be kept in mind when considering the findings of this study. First, the study was limited to one local community college in western New York, which may confine extrapolation of results to other geographic regions in the United States. Second, the participant sample was limited to only African American students. The sample was appropriate for this research study which focused on African American students, the largest minority group enrolled in the community college where the study was conducted. However, it begs the question of how other students experience academic discourse in the community college and if it impacts their persistence. Third, the small sample size was a limitation. There was a total of eight participants which reduces generalizability as other perspectives and experiences may not be reflected in this study. Fourth, this study included an overrepresentation of developmental education students in the participant sample. With this skewed population it makes it difficult to know if experiences would be shared by African American students who did not participate in the developmental education program. Despite the limitations of the study, the findings and conclusions may be transferable to some African American community colleges students in the United States.

Recommendations

The findings of this study lead to recommendations for professional practice and policy, executive leadership, and future research.

Professional practice and policy. There are four areas of professional practice and policy where it is recommended that changes be considered: (a) definition for the role of the faculty; (b) hiring practices; (c) professional development; and (d) assessment.

The first recommendation is for community colleges to redefine the role of a faculty to include student support. According to the participants in this study, some faculty work with students by going the extra mile to support their academic success and persistence in several ways. Faculty may go the extra mile by balancing rigor with understanding, in keeping academic expectations high while taking into account the varied background and experiences of their students. Faculty may also exhibit the extra mile by balancing class structure with compassion. Isiah explained how one faculty had a structured approach to testing and class assignments but displayed compassion by allowing him to make up a test when he missed class for a personal situation. The extra mile can also be demonstrated by faculty balancing challenge with encouragement. It is expected that faculty will challenge every student, but without encouragement African American students might meet a challenge with resistance or be discouraged.

Participants spoke of faculty who go the extra mile as “actually wanting you to learn” the subject matter. They also described how faculty who go the extra mile are willing to meet students where they are academically, socially, and logistically. One faculty was appreciated for working across labs and courses to give support to a student that was not in their class to help that student find success and persist to the next semester.

Conversely, some faculty members are less approachable or invested in students’ academic success. This is made evident to the students by faculty: (a) seeming more interested in course grades rather than student well-being; (b) subscribing to “equal” rather than equitable treatment of all students providing them with the same thing where it works or not; and (c) having little to no appreciation for the rich differences of student

experiences and backgrounds that may impact their academic success and persistence. This sink or swim approach is especially detrimental to community college as the open access mission encourages students at every level to pursue their short or long term goals, certificates, or associate degrees despite their starting point.

Austin's (2002) work on the socialization process in graduate school for aspiring faculty suggests, faculty at the higher education level have little to no direct training in several areas needed for them to be effective in the changing world of higher education, including student support. Some faculty innately possess student support skills and others have no means or desire to acquire them. According to Austin, these skills are needed to effectively assist students in meeting their goals and improve persistence from the classroom. Therefore a recommendation from this research study is to re-define the role of faculty to intentionally address the student support gap.

The difference in the approaches to student support by faculty is salient when the gap is so big. If institutions of higher education ask faculty for input when redefining their role to include student support the change may be more likely to be accepted by all faculty. The role would then include a shared vision for student support, particularly for African American and other minority students. A minimum standard for student support should be included when defining the role of faculty.

The second recommendation for professional practice is regarding hiring practices. The role of the faculty along with institutional expectations for student support should be explicitly stated in the job description. These components need to be highlighted during posting and recruitment in order to attract potential candidates that understand, subscribe, and/or have demonstrated experience with effective students

support specific to African American students. It is also necessary to examine who is conducting the hiring of faculty. Adjunct instructors are a major part of the faculty body in the community college (Christensen, 2008). The people who hold these positions interface with as many students as fulltime faculty or more. To ensure expectations and student outcomes the selection process and criteria should be consistent. The process needs to be developed and implemented to elicit faculty with beliefs of building community around diversity-centered student support.

Hall (2008), a leader in human resource management proposes a strategy that views an institutions' people (human capital) as its most important investment. This begins with investing in new and continuing faculty. Once faculty are hired, targeted and continuous professional development opportunities are critical components for ensuring that faculty have the requisite skills for providing student support. These opportunities should be directed at building skills to carry out the faculty role and reinforce the "new" role designated to teach and support students. Additionally, to foster a "comfortable" classroom environment for African American students and to facilitate participation, it is recommended that professional development be provided on the use and impact of culturally relevant pedagogy. According to Hall and Martin (2013) African American students respond to professors with knowledge of cultural subject matter and those who share their lived experience drawing on it in class discussions.

Based on the findings of this study, professional development is the third recommendation for professional practice. To help faculty understand code-switching and effectively communicate with students who engage in this practice, continuous professional development is central to building these skills. A conclusion drawn from

this study was code switching is needed for academic success and persistence of some African American college students. The role of the community college is to prepare students for academic and career success. Therefore, the college needs to help students develop skills for written and oral expression that facilitate success. Developing these skills empowers the student to choose how they express themselves in different settings. Students may have the appropriate language skill set and choose to use their natural or colloquial language outside the classroom or in their comfort zone with peers. In these types of situations faculty should refrain from judgment or encouraging rejection of the language used by students. Faculty professional development that is aimed at creating awareness of code-switching can help faculty appreciate the richness of different linguistic and grammatical written and verbal styles. Code-switching may sometimes have a negative association for students. However, it has been suggested that educators should help students view code switching in a positive way, as an addition to communication rather than a rejection of one's natural language (White & Lowenthal, 2011).

For example, Michael Eric Dyson (1995, 1997, 2004, 2006) an academic scholar, writer, and hip-hop commentator exhibits the use of academic discourse, slang, scholarly rhetoric, and Ebonics to fully illustrate his topics. This allows the subject matter to translate to different audiences, leaving them in awe of the power of language. Dyson embodies the knowledge and respect for multiple dialects that is desirable for faculty to effectively support diverse students. His style, illustrates an understanding and command of multiple dialects that demonstrates a fundamental respect for the "other" and language other than his own. This fundamental respect could be the foundation for faculty in

building skills to help African American students develop written and oral expression in line with finding success in an academic environment. This foundation could also support faculty in helping African American students maintain and feel comfortable using their natural language when and where appropriate. While not many faculty would be able to mimic the style or exuberance of Dyson with respect to code switching, faculty could use techniques such as parroting, reframing, and active listening to exhibit their genuine interest in the language and experiences of their African American students.

Faculty should be using the Discourse of their discipline with students as this is the language students will need to be successful in academia. The discourse gap lies in when the new terms/language or Discourse is introduced to the students without explanation resulting in many students not understanding the material. For example, using biology or math terms when facilitating class discussions before all students have sufficiently grasped the new vocabulary. Imania, a study participant explained it best by expressing her need to have information put into simplified term, “just put it in a way that we all understand . . . “

The other side to the Discourse is the academic discourse, defined in this study as not only the ability to understand, but to practice and relate to the communicative processes in academia, including not just the vocabulary, but the principles and behaviors. Pedagogical teaching practices that help breakdown and translate academic materials and explanations need to be an intentional part of faculty professional development. There is an opportunity to work with a Faculty Development Office to provide additional tools and resources to develop and disseminate to build skills particularly related to diversity centered support for academic discourse.

Participation and engagement in these particular professional development opportunities could be incentivized or required demonstrating and institutional commitment to the advancement of students and faculty. Also, professional development Learning Communities, where faculty can learn and collaborate as a group on teaching techniques that equalize the academic discourse challenges for African American students. This could build community among faculty based on the critical issue of addressing academic discourse.

Given the results of this study, a change in assessment is the final professional practice and policy recommendation. There is a need to connect the assessment of the classroom environment in higher education institutions to the course evaluation for faculty. This assessment should include measurements that link to broader institutional goals, specifically for how diverse students are supported in the classroom. For example, faculty could consider cultural competency as a topic for discussion in department or division meetings by addressing their awareness of personal cultural competence and how it plays out in their curriculum, class discussions, and student support. The results from these classroom assessments should be shared within the department and across the division to better inform where there are gaps or how to better serve all students to promote transparency and accountability. A committee could be formed at colleges and universities to include a cross section of faculty and administrators that could review this data. The committee could then use the results of the assessments to develop action plans to make classroom environments and curricula more responsive to student experiences and their cultural and historical context.

In conjunction with personal changes in how faculty engage students in discourse, there are also relevant policy changes recommended for faculty assessment tied to the findings of this study. Currently, faculty are evaluated by student feedback surveys at the end of a given course to ascertain the quality of courses and quality of instruction. Student feedback on course quality may include comments on course design, resources used, course rigor, and achievement of outcomes. Quality of instruction comments are anticipated to address instructional method, workload requirements, communication skills, pace, clarity, and pedagogy of instruction. The feedback expected could be an issue for students challenged with academic discourse due to the way questions are posed. As a result, faculty may not be getting relevant feedback to improve course design, content, or instruction. A recommendation from this study would be to convene an ethnically diverse student group to gain a better understanding of how students are interpreting the questions as well as how the results are being used and shared.

Assessment can be a fundamental component for continuous growth and improvement for the outcomes of African American students in community college. Determining measures and key performance indicators in line with the minimum standards would be helpful in measuring classroom and institutional growth regarding student support. To change faculty behavior around student support, the annual review goals and scheduled performance appraisals should be inspected by leadership to align them with student support expectations. Furthermore, the promotion, tenure, merit raises, and rehire/renew contract processes need to be examined to ensure that the desired behaviors are being rewarded. These summative evaluations could be an avenue to link

performance improvements to closing the gap on African American students support results and outcomes.

Executive leadership. There are three leadership models that lend themselves to recommendations based on the findings of this study: (a) Bolman and Deal's (2013) Four Frame Theory; (b) Hall's (2008) Human Capital Strategy; and (c) Kouzes and Posner's (2012) Five Practices.

A successful or effective organization is built upon a clear commitment and clear expectations that align with daily operations. The structural perspective outlined by Bolman and Deal (2013), supposes two assumptions that lend themselves to this study's findings: (a) organizations exist to achieve established goals and objectives; and (b) troubles arise and performance suffers from structural deficits. While each community college is a distinct institution, they do share general goals of access and service (AACCC, 2000). At the individual institutional level daily operations of service and performance are suffering in failing to sufficiently and effectively support the African American students. A recommendation to address the structural frame of the community college is to establish a set of rules or expectations, around African American student support, governing performance of faculty. Setting a minimum standard for student support is an example of an established rule with expectations for performance.

Logically following the organizational structure would be the shared values held by the organization and building a high performance system within it. According to Hall (2008) the culture of an organization is determined by a set of shared values. For this study values might include diversity and student support. Changing culture means changing values and it is necessary to change beliefs and behaviors in order to change

values (Hall, 2008). The recommendations for professional development seek to change beliefs and behaviors. In addition to this recommendation it is imperative that the values of the community college are reviewed, re-established where necessary, and measured to monitor progress of students, faculty, and staff.

Having set measures is a small component for driving high performance and progress. As Hall (2008) explains, there are three critical factors to this equation: (a) strategy and alignment; (b) organizational structure; and (c) appraisal and rewards. These factors coincide with the findings of this study in regards to classroom assessment linking to broader institutional goals, instructional commitment and expectations for student support for African Americans, and connecting professional development to the promotion and tenure process. For leaders in higher education, it is recommended that the institutional strategic plan be derived from a comprehensive exercise conducted with a cross section of students, faculty, staff and administration to create a culture with values and behaviors that lead to high performance.

Two out of five exemplary leadership practices espoused by Kouzes and Posner (2012) are: (a) challenge the process, where leaders strive toward your personal best by stepping outside of established norms; and (b) inspire a shared vision, reaching your personal best as a leader by sharing a vision that makes for a better future. These practices merged together support challenging the status quo of low persistence rates for African American community college students with a vision of “what could be” in supporting these students to achieve the same persistence rates as their peers. African American community college students are an underrepresented population when considering overall enrollment numbers (NCES, 2013). However, this same population is

overrepresented in college dropout and attrition rates (NCES, 2013). When faced with these disparities, it begs the question “are community college leaders (i.e. - faculty staff, and administrators) achieving their personal best and encouraging all do to do the same?” If not, the recommendation associated with this leadership model would be to take bold and swift moves to understand, assist, and advocate for change and continuous improvement. Leaders must be able to understand and question information in such a way that it inspires innovation and generates small wins as movement toward the shared vision of “what could be.”

Future research. As referenced by Hall and Martin (2013), African American students are able to fully engage when they can personally connect to the materials and the faculty with whom they have a shared experience. For instance, when an instructor was able to speak from lived experience and show their connecting to the Civil Rights movement and Hip Hop culture, the African American students were especially engaged (Hall & Martin, 2013). An instructor who can weave a complex web connecting themselves, the subject matter, and students are more likely to reach African American community college students supporting their academic success and persistence. This connection to information and people might also enhance the adoption of academic discourse as students might find fewer challenges with language.

In contrast, African American students in this study implied a reluctance or hesitation to engage with material they connected to when the presenter was someone who did not share the same or similar experiences. Whether their experiences would be different when professors and students share a racial/ethnic identity could not be explored in this study because no participants reported having an African American instructor.

Future research should engage a larger sample, perhaps with targeted recruiting to ensure that the experiences of students in classrooms with faculty who share their identity are represented along with experiences of being in a class with faculty who hold a different identity.

Another opportunity for future research is to recruit a cross sample of all ethnicities to juxtapose experiences. This would add to the body of literature by exploring whether there are different experiences for each ethnic group and could also highlight similarities with barriers or navigation of academic discourse. Additionally, a sample of African American credit bearing population, defined as African American students who were considered college ready upon enrollment, might be an opportunity for research. These students may have had more challenging experiences assimilating into the community college discourse due to the expectations and independent nature of the work in the mainstream.

A final recommendation for future research is to repeat this study with a different method for recruiting or inviting students to participate. Findings for this study reinforced the concept that African American students need connection to people and information to engage. The initial student invitations for this study were delivered by faculty, which the research may or may not have had a relationship with, who delivered the invitation to students who also had no connection to the researcher and sometimes no connection to what was being studied. For example, White students were automatically ineligible due to the focus of the study and some African American students did not understand the purpose of the study. As a result, after a full semester of recruiting only one eligible participant was secured. In order to personalize student invitations and help them connect

or understand the relevance of the study, class visits and student referrals were implemented. Having a direct connection or establishing an indirect connection with students through their peers eventually led to securing an appropriate sample size. Proactively planning to make personal connections with potential participants might enhance recruitment and a comfort level that would facilitate participants sharing more information during the interviews.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a summary of the qualitative study describing implications for professional practice and policy, limitations, and recommendations for further research. The first conclusion noted is the real barrier posed by academic discourse for African American community college and the underpinnings of racism that accompanies it. The second conclusion determined a need for policy change around classroom assessment and how to encompass diversity goals in such measures. The third conclusion declared a need to examine the role of faculty in reference to student support and institutional commitment and expectations for closing the student support gap particularly for African Americans. The fourth and final conclusion noted the community college has a responsibility to provide awareness and education around academic discourse as it relates to African American students' finding academic success and persistence for students as well as faculty.

Additionally, this study outlined and discussed implications on expanding the body of literature, educational systems, and the "Students' Right to Their Own Language" policy. Furthermore, recommendations were provided for professional practice, executive leadership, and future research. Particular attention should be paid to the Comfort Zone

theme regarding connecting African American students to people and information. The researcher retroactively applied this finding to the challenges experienced with recruiting participants for this study. Furthermore, academic and racial biases should be considered by all when working with African American or other marginalized groups.

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Appendix A

Request Faculty Distribute Student Invitations

Distribute Invitations to Potential Participants for the research project titled:

“Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?”

Dear Faculty Member:

You have been identified as a faculty member teaching one of the gateway courses with a critical mass of first time students. As a part of my dissertation as a student in St. John Fisher College’s doctoral program in Executive Leadership, I am conducting interviews as part of a research study to increase my understanding of how the diversity of student language influences their college experiences in a community college environment. This research study has been approved by St. John Fisher and Monroe Community College.

Eligible students must be: African American, first time students, were enrolled at Monroe Community College (MCC) in Fall 2014, and are currently enrolled in one of the gateway 100 level courses. I will verify student eligibility, when students express interest to me about participating in the study.

In order to communicate information about my study to students at MCC, please distribute the enclosed “Student Invitation” to all students in your 100 level courses by Wednesday, April 8, 2015. I would greatly appreciate your help in ensuring students are aware of this opportunity.

All interviews will be completed prior to May 8 to respect student final exam schedules. The goal is to achieve a sample of eight to ten student interviews.

Copies of the “Student Invitation Letter” will be delivered to your department mailbox by Wednesday, April 1st (Subject to change based on SJFC IRB approval). Please feel free to contact me with question via email (ecaldwell4@monroecc.edu) or by telephone at (585) 292-3193 if you have any questions about the study or distributing the “Student Invitation”.

Thank you for supporting this research study!

Sincerely,

Ebony Caldwell

Researcher, Ed.D. Candidate

Appendix B

Student Invitation Letter

Invitation to Potential Participants for the research project titled:

“Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?”

Dear Student:

My name is Ebony Caldwell; I am the Title III Project Director at MCC. I am also a student in the Executive Leadership doctoral program at St. John Fisher College. As a part of my dissertation, I would like to invite you to be a part of my research study being conducted here at MCC.

Students have many different experiences when attending a community college. I am hoping to learn more about individual experiences transitioning to college and what it looks like by interviewing students and discussing their transition to college and how they communicate with faculty, staff, and other students.

Should you choose to participate in this research, you will be expected to participate in a one-to-one recorded interview with me that will take no more than one hour of your time. All participants will be free to change their minds about participation at any time during the process, even after the interview has taken place. If this is the case, your information will be deleted from all records. The research will take place during the Spring 2015 semester and all participants who complete an interview will receive a \$10 Visa gift card.

To be an eligible participant you must meet all three requirements: (1) African American student, (2) enrolled at Monroe Community College (MCC) in Fall 2014 and Spring 2015, AND (3) currently enrolled in a 100 level course.

If you meet all three requirements, please review the following questions:

- Do you have good ideas but sometimes have a hard time using concepts and information from class when explaining them during class participation?
- Do you have a grasp of the course material but rarely if ever speak up or volunteer to participate during class?

- Do you do well on closed-ended questions such as multiple choice and True or False but sometimes struggle with open-ended questions such as short answers and essays?
- Are you eager to succeed but sometimes have a hard time following class lectures and discussions?
- Are you committed to your education but would like a better understanding about how college works?
- Have you thought about or communicated to someone that you are struggling to fit-in in class and/or on campus?
- Do need help but shy away from taking advantage of campus resources, including faculty office hours, Student Life engagement opportunities, Tutoring Centers, etc.?
- Do you often choose a non-speaking role in group projects or presentations?
- Do you choose to speak more to people in your own circle or group of friends rather than talking to other people (ex. - faculty, staff, or peers who are not your friends)?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you would be an ideal candidate to share your college experience for this research study.

The goal is to achieve a sample of eight to ten student interviews. If you are interested in being a research participant, please send an email to ecaldwell@monroecc.edu with the subject line “Caldwell Research Project” and provide me with your name, best time to contact you, a phone number, and your MCC email address. You may also stop by my office 11-227, building 11 across from the Math Learning Center.

Any willing participants should respond by April 17, 2015.

Please contact me with questions via email (ecaldwell@monroecc.edu) or by telephone (585-292-3193) at any time.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Ebony Caldwell

Researcher, Ed.D. Candidate

Appendix C

Student Follow-up Email

Email to participants in the research project titled:

“Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?”

Dear Student:

Thank you for participating in my research study!

I am looking forward to meeting you to discuss your transition to college and how you communicate with faculty, staff, and other students. Below is the information you will need for your interview on _____, 2015.

Time: __:__ AM/PM

Location: Monroe Community College; Room 11-227

Interviewer: Ebony Caldwell, MCC Title III Project Director/Researcher

If you have any questions please don't hesitate to call me at (585) 292-3193.

Thanks and I look forward to seeing you soon!

Take Care,

Ebony Caldwell

Interviewer/Researcher

Appendix D

Consent Form

MONROE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Human Subjects Research Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: **“Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?”**
Researcher: Ebony Caldwell

- ❖ This is a consent form for participation in a research study. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.
 - ❖ Your participation is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part in the study you may leave the study at any time. If you are a student or employee at Monroe Community College your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.
 - ❖ Please review this information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form for your records.
-

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this proposed study is to gain a better understand of the relationship between academic discourse and persistence for African American students attending community college.

Duration of the Study:

This study will take place during the Spring 2015 and Summer 2015 semesters, from January to July 2015.

Participation expectations:

The participants are expected to engage in a one-on-one interview that will take no more than 1 hour. All participants must be 18 years or older to take part in the study. All participants who complete an interview will receive a \$10 Visa gift card.

Confidentiality Provisions and Data disposition:

The interview recordings and transcriptions will not contain the participants' personal identifying information, such as names or student identification numbers. Instead, participant codes will be utilized to represent each student taking part in the study. All documents, files, and recordings will be stored on a secure external hard drive and destroyed upon the conclusion of this study. The researcher will maintain confidentiality of all participants. She will be looking for common themes across all the interviews. If she does use something you say as an example in her report, she will not attach your name to the quote and there will be no way that you can be identified by what you say.

Who can answer questions about the study:

If you have questions about this study, please contact Ebony Caldwell at **(585) 292-3193** or **ecaldwell4@monroecc.edu**.

I have read this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I understand that I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form and I will be given a signed copy of this form.

Print Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Interviewer/Researcher

I have explained the research to the participant before requesting the signature above. There are no blanks in this document. A signed copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

Print Name (person obtaining consent)

Signature (person obtaining consent)

Date

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

All interview questions will be answered by a total of 8-10 participants chosen from a larger group of 24-42 potential participants. The final participants will engage in one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the researcher. The questions have been crafted to ascertain what the student experience has been with academic discourse with regard to persistence in their first year of college from the first to the second semester.

Opening Script: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today- I am interviewing second semester students to talk about your experiences here at MCC. I hope to discuss two main areas: your transition to college and your communication with faculty, staff, and peers. We will talk for about an hour. Everything you share today will be confidential. Even though I know who you are, I will not include your name in my notes. I will be interviewing approximately 10 students. When I write up the results of the interviews, I will mostly be describing common themes that cut across the interviews. If I *do* use a quote to illustrate a point, I will not use your name or include any other identifying information. If I ask you something you do not wish to discuss, let me know and we can move on to the next topic. If you change your mind and decide you want to stop the interview or any part of the study, you are free to do so at any time. Even after the interview is complete, your information can be deleted from the recording.

What you have to say is important to me, so I will be recording our conversation and taking notes. The only people that will hear the recording will be myself and the professional transcription service used to transcribe it. Once I am done with the file I will delete it. Is that okay with you? [If “Yes”, proceed with recording the interview. If “No”, continue without recording.]

Main Questions:

1. Can you describe your first semester at MCC and what it was like for you?

Probe for: What is it like making the switch from high school to college classes?; What kinds of connections, if any, have you made with other students, faculty or staff?; Do you feel a sense of belonging on campus (*Follow up:* If yes, where and why; if not, why and where?)

2. Besides classes, what else contributes to your college experience?

Probe for: Have you gone to any events? Joined clubs? Which ones? Why those?

3. Can you share with me a time you received help on campus, for example at the Writing Center, Math Lab, Financial Aid Office, Counseling Services, or Advising Center?

Probe for: What led you to go there? How comfortable did you feel when you were there? How well did you understand the advice they gave you? Did you get what that person was saying? How have you been able to use the information you get from those meetings?

4. Can you give an example of how your professors talk or explain things and what you think about the way they do it?

Probe for: How about other college staff (advisors, counselors, tutors)? How about classmates? Do you follow along? Do you get lost?

5. Relate to a time when class discussions are a big part of the days' lesson, how much do you participate?

Probe for: How do you decide whether to participate? What happens when if/when the instructor calls on you? What do you do when you have a question or need clarity? (*Follow up:* Who do you ask the question to? And, how do you choose that person?) What makes you comfortable to ask a student or a professor? Why not the professor?

6. Think about the way you speak, the words you choose, and your tone of voice- is the way you speak in class the same way you speak at home or with your friends?

Probe for: Describe the difference to me? Why do you switch the way you talk? Is this something you did before you came to MCC?

7. Can you give me an example of a time you may have or thought you should switch the way you talk around different people?

Probe for: How did it make you feel when you have to switch the way you talk at MCC and/or when you go back home?

8. Please share with me what you believe might be helpful to make transitions and college discussions easier for students at MCC??

Probe for: What can faculty do? What can staff do? How can peers help?

Closing Script: Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience? Do you have any questions for me? You have shared a lot of information and I want to thank you again for taking the time to meet with me today.

Appendix F

Field Notes Template

Participant #: _____

Date/Time: _____

Impressions/ Intuitions (your impressions here – nowhere else)	Non-verbal notes (other behavioral cues)	Notes and Direct Quotes (directly related to what is going on in interaction; what people are saying)

Appendix G

Participant Solicitation and Data Collection Timeline

Tasks	Sources	Steps to Accomplish	Schedule
Request Institutional Research report	Institutional office/database	1. Identify African American students who persisted from Fall 2014 to Spring 2015 and/or Spring 2015 to Summer 2015	Apr-Jul 2015
Distribute Student invitations	Faculty and students	2. Send the “Request Faculty Distribute Student Invitations” to faculty of the identified of African American students who persisted from Fall 2014 to Spring 2015 and/or Spring 2015 to Summer 2015 by email 3. Provide copies of the student initiation letter to all faculty identified in Step 1. 4. Post flyers on community bulletin boards across	Apr-Jul 2015 Apr-Jul 2015 Apr-Jul 2015
Collect contact information and schedule interviews for participants	Researcher and students	5. Schedule interviews 6. Reserve interview locations and recording equipment 7. Follow-up with participants to confirm interview date, time, and location	Apr-Jul 2015 Apr-Jul 2015 Apr-Jul 2015
Collect interview responses	Researcher	8. Conduct interview	Apr-Jul 2015
Participant Incentive	Researcher	9. Distribute \$10 Visa gift card to participants at the end of the interview	Apr-Jul 2015

Used with permission from Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory (MCREL). (1999). Evaluating for success. Comprehensive school reform: An evaluation guide for districts and schools (p. 30). Aurora, CO: MCREL.

Appendix H

Participant Flyer

Volunteers Needed for Research Study

Volunteers are needed to be interviewed about their transition to college and their communication with faculty, staff, and peers. The interview will take approximately one hour to complete. In appreciation of your time, all eligible participants who complete an interview will receive a \$10 Visa card.

To qualify to be a volunteer in the study you need to be:

- 1. African American**
- 2. Enrolled at MCC in **Fall 2014 and Spring 2015****
- 3. Currently enrolled in a 100 level course**

If you meet these qualifications, please contact **Ebony Caldwell** at ecaldwell4@monroecc.edu or (585) 292-3193, to learn more about this research study.