MENTORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF A UNIVERSITY–SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP THROUGH A STUDENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MENTORING INITIATIVE

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ABSTRACT

The participants in this study were 10 African American male college mentors at Indiana State University who participated in the Indiana State University Student African American Male Mentor Program, one school counselor, and two members of the Student African American Brotherhood administration. The study examined potential benefits to mentors, such as an enhanced feeling of connection and motivation, alleviation of feelings of alienation or isolation, counteracting of negative peer impact, and increased attachment to the university. All participants took part in semi-structured interviews and three mentors took part in a focus group. Grounded theory was used to analyze the data and create a description of the experiences and perceptions of the mentors. Several themes emerged from the data collected. The findings were that being a mentor held significant personal meaning for the mentors. Being a mentor did provide the mentors with a sense of belonging to the university. Mentoring also served to help the mentors stand out as role models and helped them create connections to campus leaders. Sharing experiences and making connections with those that were mentored was a valuable experience for the mentors. Black men’s issues, such as lacking role models, feeling stuck and feeling excluded, and acting White, were themes that were discussed extensively by the mentors. Overall, the participants in this study used their role as mentor to serve the younger generation of African American men they were mentoring. The young African American mentors in this study were not hindered by the stereotypes and negative expectations that have historically plagued them.
PREFACE

This study is a retrospective study of the experiences of student mentors in the Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB), which is now called Brotherhood of Successful Scholars (BOSS). The BOSS student organization shares values that are very similar to those of SAAB. In partnership with the SAAB, Indiana State University Foundation expanded and enhanced the Student African American Male Mentors Program (SAAMMP) in hopes of improving student retention rates in local middle and high schools in Vigo County while simultaneously offering a volunteer service opportunity to SAAB members. Through the SAAMMP, undergraduate student members of the Indiana State University SAAB program acted as mentors to middle and high school African American male mentees in local schools who were identified as at risk for dropping out. *At risk* is identified as facing circumstances that impede success.

My interest in the topic of mentoring began in 2003 when I was asked to be a mentor by a local middle school. I was a master’s level graduate student mentoring students at a local middle school in Terre Haute, Indiana. I have also served as a mentor for the Academic Opportunity Program at Indiana State University and completed grant-related research in 2009 for the SAAB on Indiana State University’s campus. This initial work provided the impetus for the study. In contrast with earlier studies in the area that explored the impact of mentoring programs on mentees, this study focused on mentors, their experiences of mentoring, and their opinions about the factors that make a mentoring initiative effective.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, the Indiana State University Foundation partnered with the Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) to expand and enhance the African American Male Mentors Program in order to reduce dropout rates and keep African American local middle and high school mentees in schools in Vigo County. Although the focus of this research study was on mentors’ perceptions of mentoring, high school and college data were provided in regard to dropout rates. The high school data show why mentoring programs for K through 12 students are important, and the college data connect with the potential impact of mentoring programs on college student mentors.

Statement of the Problem

The National Center for Education Statistics (2010) reported that in the state of Indiana, African American students aged 16 to 24 dropped out of high school at a rate of 9%, the highest among all ethno-cultural groups. As shown in Table 1, African Americans have the highest reported dropout rate compared to other ethnic groups.
Table 1

*Public High School Graduates and Dropouts By Race/Ethnicity in Indiana: 2007-2008*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Number of graduates</th>
<th>Dropout rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>51,810</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>5,565</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>2,433</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>844</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60,792</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* From The National Center for Education Statistics, 2010.

During the 2009-2010 school year, there were 62,500 high school graduates in Indiana, with a graduation rate of 84.1% (Indiana Department of Education [IDOE], 2010). According to the IDOE (2010) *State Graduation Report*, 6.4% of the students left school without formally withdrawing. Although much is known about students who decide to drop out, there are very few empirical data that examine the effectiveness of intervention programs such as mentoring initiatives and the experience of mentors in such programs (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). As reported in the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* by Vien (2011), in 2009, 6.5% of all African American students in high school were in Advanced Placement courses, but over the course of the following year, African American students in Advanced Placement courses dropped to 3.8%.

The number of African Americans graduating from colleges and universities is low (Vien, 2011). Although currently African American students are enrolling in college at a higher rate than in the past three years, the national college graduation rate for African American students remains low at 45%. The news is not uniformly bad. More encouraging is the fact that
nationally, in 2009, 19% of African Americans aged 25 to 29 had earned a four-year degree, compared to 11.5% in 1993 (Vien, 2011).

Many reasons exist for the low college graduation rate of African Americans. The racial climate of a university affects dropout rates among African Americans (Vien, 2011). When African American students feel discriminated against, they are more likely to drop out than any other racial group. Poor preparation for college work and less understanding of what is expected in college leaves many African American students feeling frustrated. Another arguable reason put forward for the disproportionate dropout rate of American Americans is that the tradition of higher education may not be valued in African American families, leaving the student without the support needed to be successful (Vien, 2011). Finally, the lack of financial support is a factor that contributes to African American students dropping out of college. Students may drop out to support their families or find that the cost of higher education is more than they bargained for, especially after their first year of college (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2009).

Despite some of these bleak statistics, previous research has shown that mentoring can reduce school dropout rates among African American college and high school students. Mentoring, understood as a committed relationship between a mentor and mentee (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2009), is the focal phenomenon of this study. Mentoring not only impacts school success but also proves valuable to those students who have experienced traumatic and neglectful home lives by giving them someone to reach out to (Stein, Fonagy, Ferguson, & Wisman, 2000). Mentors impact mentees holistically. As reported by Schargel and Smink (2001), mentees who participate in mentoring programs are typically struggling with issues that put their development, success, and health at risk. Mentors not only provide mentees with encouragement to succeed academically but also act as a sounding board for mentees who
often have no one to confide in or trust. Mentors can have a positive emotional, physical, social, and psychological impact on mentees.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this retrospective qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of mentors in a mentoring program, specifically those in the Student African American Male Mentors Program (SAAMMP) run by the SAAB at a medium-sized state university in the Midwest. The main objective was to understand the mentors’ perceptions and experiences of being mentors and the meaning they make out of being mentors. A secondary objective was to investigate whether being a college-aged student mentor for students in public middle and high schools provided mentors with motivation, the sense of belonging, and the sense of mattering that they would need in order to make the decision themselves to stay in college until they graduate.

**Significance of the Study**

Research on student retention in high school and college is important because national standards and high stakes testing are holding schools increasingly accountable for student graduation rates (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). This study is applicable to mentoring programs attempting to target at-risk students. It is also of value to school counselors, educators, institutions of higher learning, and alternative school programs. Most importantly, this study provides insights into the understudied population of mentors and their experiences of mentoring.

**Rationale for the Study**

According to the National Mentoring Partnership (2005) there are five types of mentoring: (a) traditional one-to-one mentoring, (b) group mentoring, (c) team mentoring, (d)
peer mentoring, and (e) e-mentoring or online mentoring. The type of mentoring program used
determines the goals of mentoring, length and frequency of mentoring, and activities in which
mentors and mentees engage. The most effective mentoring programs are those that screen
volunteers. Not everyone who volunteers will meet the program’s or organization’s
requirements, which is why screening potential volunteers is crucial to the success of the
mentoring relationship. Many organizations use a voluntary referral system to aid in matching
mentors and mentees. Betts and Pepe (2006) reported that those who engage in voluntary
mentoring found the volunteer mentoring to be more valuable personally than those who
engaged in mandatory mentoring. Not much research has been done on the topic with regard to
mentoring in educational settings.

Being a mentor has been shown to enhance leadership skills and to serve as a motivator.
Mentors work harder knowing that they serve as role models and are key players in whether or
not their mentee stays in school (Washington State Department of Personnel, 1993). Overall,
being a mentor has positive benefits for the mentor. The benefits are personal as well as
professional and can lead to a sense of increased physical wellness in older adults. Despite these
findings, the number of studies that look into the effects of mentoring on the mentors is
surprisingly low, providing a strong impetus for the present study.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This research provides a better understanding of the experiences of mentors who
participated in the SAAMMP at a medium-sized state university in the Midwest, their
perceptions of what participating in the program meant for them, and their opinions about the
program. Furthermore, it also took into account the perceptions of administrators of the
program. It did not focus on the experiences of mentees.
Theoretical Underpinnings

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory or bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) focuses on the context of child/individual development and places emphasis on the relationships. Primary relationships, such as relationships with educators, are essential for a student’s development. The school environment is where these relationships are more likely to develop and flourish, but if a student feels no connection to his or her school and feels alienated, these essential relationships do not develop. African American male students who lack strong connections to their school environment may lack the nurturing and support that are needed to fully develop knowledge and competencies.

Definition of Terms

**Mentor.** The term mentor is defined by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2009) as a relationship that is supportive and based on trust between a mentor and mentee.

**Dropout.** A dropout is defined as “any student in Grades 7 to 12 who left school before graduation without transferring to another school or institution” (Castellana & Powell, 2000, p. 10).

**Social belonging and sense of mattering.** Social belonging is defined as “seeing oneself as socially connected as a basic human motivation” (MacDonald & Leary, 2005, p. 82). A separate but related term, sense of mattering, is defined as “the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate” (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 165).

**Self-efficacy and alienation.** Self-efficacy is one’s ability to make subjective inferences about one’s own skills and aptitude needed for educational success (Bandura, 1997). Alienation
was described by Miller, Leinhardt, and Zigmond (1988) as students experiencing profound disconnection in all realms of their academic experiences.

**At risk.** The National At-Risk Education Network (2011) defined the term at risk to mean “at risk of dropping out of school or at risk of not succeeding in life due to being raised in unfavorable circumstances” (p. 1).

**What worked.** What worked, which is included in one of the subsidiary research questions in this study, is defined as whether or not the mentors were able to identify and meet the students’ needs, such as providing their mentees with information on how to be successful students and working with them to improve social skills.

Given knowledge about the marginalization of African American males in schools, today African American men are taking it upon themselves to provide much needed supportive relationships to African American mentees. Much research has been done about the impact of mentoring programs on dropout rates and mentees, but no one has yet examined how the experience of mentoring transforms the mentors, and this gap is the main rationale for this study.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The incidence and prevalence of high school and college dropouts is not a new issue. It has been researched extensively without conclusive solutions. Indeed, there does not seem to be any single solution to the problem of students dropping out, but there may be ways to help mitigate the factors that lead students to drop out of school. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009), 1.2 million students do not graduate from high school each year, most of whom are from minority groups. In addition, there is a 15% gap in high school graduation rates between White students and Hispanic and African American students.

Drawing on the IDEO’s report (2010), Table 2 provides the graduation and dropout rates in 2010 for Indiana and Vigo County.
Table 2

Four Year Graduation Rate and Dropout Rate by Race for Indiana and Vigo County, 2009-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Graduation Rate</th>
<th>Dropout Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>Vigo County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>78.1%</td>
<td>68.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>72.3%</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>86.9%</td>
<td>82.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>89.6%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. From The Indiana Department of Education, 2010.

Although gaps in Vigo County data are closing in terms of African American dropout rates, state data indicate that the challenge is far from over. Whole numbers were not reported for high schools in Vigo County; therefore, these numbers may reflect the fact that the data set was small.

Factors Contributing to School Dropout Rates

Many factors appear to contribute to school dropout rates. External factors that may be attributed to the dropout problem include events that happened outside of the school climate, such as home or community life. For the purposes of this study, the focus was on conditions that existed and events that took place within the school building and mentor perceptions.

Disproportionality in Disciplinary Practices

The disproportionate rates of disciplinary action taken against African American learners is not a new phenomenon. This practice has been going on for quite some time and has been consistently documented. African American students continue to face the negative consequences of such practices (Townsend, 2000). An intersection was found between exclusionary discipline
practices and being of low socioeconomic status, male, showing low academic achievement, and being of African American ethnicity (Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982). African American students have been more frequently subjected to exclusionary discipline practices in school such as suspension, expulsion, and corporal punishment (Townsend, 2000). The removal of African American students from the classroom for disciplinary reasons lowers the likelihood of their return to school in general (IDOE, 2009). In an effort to support student success, the IDOE (2009) conducted research on disproportionality in discipline and its correlation to dropout risk. The IDOE stated that African American students receive more disciplinary action than any other group of students. The use of exclusionary discipline was one example of discipline that takes mentees out of the classroom and away from instruction. School dropout is highly correlated with the use of suspension practices, one form of exclusionary discipline.

Some of the negative consequences of disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline include lost opportunities and greater achievement gaps compared to White peers, which are often left for remedial programming in schools to deal with (Oakes, 1994). Another negative effect of exclusionary discipline practices is the taking away of experiences with pro-social behaviors. This often leaves African American students at greater risk for ending up in the legal system (Chobot & Garibaldi, 1982). When more serious disciplinary actions are taken, African Americans are more likely to be taken to the juvenile justice center rather than to be treated at a mental or behavioral health facility. This difference in consequences is crucial when we consider that mental health facilities treat the students’ behaviors while the juvenile center is a stigmatized venue used strictly for punishment. In fact, in 2009 African Americans made up only 10% of Indiana residents under age 18, but they made up an overwhelming 39% of the
population in correctional facilities in Indiana and comprised 25% of the population of dropouts (IDOE, 2009). African American male youth are also more likely to be sentenced as adults.

In 2003 Indiana was ranked nationally as ninth in suspensions and first in expulsions for all students (IDOE, 2009). Ultimately, the outcome of suspension or expulsion is loss of instruction in the classroom for the students being punished. African American students are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than White students. Although the number of in-school suspensions decreased from the 2005-2006 school year to the 2008-2009 school year, the number of out-of-school suspensions increased. Interestingly, when the 2008-2009 data were disaggregated by race, of the 145,901 in-school suspensions 60% were for White students and 40% were for non-White students. Of the 152,702 out-of-school suspensions, 49% were for White students and 51% were for non-White. Overall these data show that when White students are disciplined, they are allowed to stay in school, but when African American students are disciplined, they are more likely to be removed from the school building.

The IDOE (2009) offered several explanations as to why these disparities exist in K through 12 education. The disparities may exist due to school personnel lacking cultural competency, lack of use of different instructional methods, lack of a school culture or climate that is attentive to the students’ needs, lack of consistent behavioral instructional methods across the school districts, and lack of alternatives to suspensions and expulsions. In the sections that follow, several factors that impact dropout rates among high school students are discussed including home–school cultural discontinuity, alienation, sense of belonging, sense of mattering, support, peer influence, and motivation.
Home–School Cultural Discontinuity

Delpit’s (1988) ideas on the culture of power and home-school cultural discontinuity offer crucial insights into reasons for the disenfranchisement of African American students in the United States educational system. Delpit discussed the implicit and explicit rules of power operating within schools. She argued that when looking at why African American students are at risk for dropping out of school, it is imperative to consider that classrooms are dominated by White middle- and upper-class culture, which is the culture of power, the culture of the dominant group. Delpit described the cultural capital possessed by middle- and upper-class White students as including knowledge of the implicit value systems and discourse codes that are required to be successful in the system of education. She described how students from White middle- and upper-class families come to school primed or already knowing the values, language, and rules of the culture of power and how students not from the culture of power lack this knowledge and are labeled as needing remediation. Families from cultural orientations that differ from the culture of power provide knowledge to their children that contrasts with that of the middle and upper classes, and these differences are seen as deficits.

Delpit (1988) argued further that the cultural orientation provided at home in poor and lower class families is not inferior or deficient, just different, and teachers must incorporate learning strategies that are suitable for all children. Often in the school setting, success is dependent upon knowing the rules of the culture of power, and those students lacking such knowledge, mostly low-income or minority students, feel estranged from the teacher and the educational system. For instance, minority children are not familiar with indirect communication styles and questioning, which are strategies teachers often use, given that teachers are most often themselves White and middle class. This leads to miscommunication and often to discipline
referrals for African American students who are attuned to responding to direct behavior requests. In attempts to balance power differentials in the classroom, teachers often use veiled commands, but African American students, unaware of the rules of the classroom culture, see indirect commands as the teacher offering an alternative. When they do not comply, they are often seen as disobeying and labeled as behavior disordered. In addition, students outside the culture of power need to be explicitly taught the rules of the culture of power in order to enable them to be successful. Being indirect with low income and minority students and using veiled commands sets them up for failure.

Similar to Delpit (1988), Boykin and Bailey (2000) were interested in the challenges that African American children from low-income families face when trying to be successful in the educational system. Factors such as cultural orientation, home cultural factors, and learning preferences were examined in relation to motivational and performance outcomes. They investigated the cultural experiences of low-income African American children and how these experiences relate to the students’ preferences for learning. Boykin and Bailey looked at three cultural themes related to African American learning preferences: communalism, movement, and verve. Communalism refers to social interdependence and an orientation toward others as a group rather than focusing on oneself. Movement refers to expressive movement through rhythm and music displayed through interactions with others and speech patterns. Verve refers to physical stimulation, often displayed in African American children through a preference for lively and intense activities.

Boykin and Bailey (2000) found a relationship between learning preferences and experiences of socialization at home. They found that if communal beliefs and behaviors, physical stimulation, and expressive attitudes were promoted in the home environment, students
preferred learning activities and styles that were oriented toward these themes. When communalism, verve, and movement are cultivated at home, these become children’s preferred learning styles and these children prefer learning orientations that endorse such practices. Overall, low-income African American students’ level of achievement and cognitive functioning are enhanced in learning environments where sharing, expressiveness, movement, and varied, high-energy learning strategies are employed in continuity with their home culture.

Following the work of Delpit (1988) and Boykin and Bailey (2000), Tyler et al. (2008) went further, defining cultural discontinuity specifically as “a school-based behavioral process where the cultural value-based learning preferences and practices of many ethnic minority students—those typically originating from home or parental socialization activities—are discontinued at school” (p. 281). Home–school cultural discontinuity results in problems for many ethnic minority students. Teachers’ reactions to minority students who do not exhibit the norms and values of the dominant middle-class culture in schools, or show familiarity with them, may compromise the school performance and psychological well-being of minority students. This happens largely because teachers’ perceptions of how well an ethnic student, such as an African American student, displays Westernized classroom behaviors impacts their perceptions of how successful that student will be (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Cultural discontinuity also occurs when African American students are faced with competing value systems. For example, Tyler et al. (2008) described mainstream Western culture as valuing individualism and competition, which requires minimal social interaction and cooperation and encourages competition among individuals. On the other hand, African Americans value communalism, movement, and verve. In African American culture, valuing the social group over oneself is very important. Also, movement via learning through rhythmic
activity and verve, or learning through physical and sensory stimulation, are highly valued in African American culture but are often discounted in mainstream culture (Boykin & Bailey, 2000). Given the fact that many public schools do not recognize or utilize these African American values, choosing instead to teach from a White, middle class perspective, many African American students are left to face academic difficulties and often failure. Tyler et al. reported that students who experience home–school discontinuity reported feeling higher levels of anger and less self-worth, difficulty with emotional and academic well-being, lower self-efficacy, poor self-esteem, and lower grade point averages.

**Alienation and Factors Related to School Attachment**

Institutional factors, particularly ecological factors of the school, play a big role in why students drop out of school (Kagan, 1990) and must be examined to fully understand the context in which academic failure occurs (Sarason, 1978). Schools create a culture of their own and that culture is continually created within the classrooms. Mentees who become disengaged from school do so for a variety of reasons such as minimal ambition, poor self-esteem, failing grades, disruptive behaviors, weak family structure and support, ethnic or minority status, as well as economic and social factors (Kagan, 1990). What is often overlooked is what is or is not going on within the school building that is impacting a student’s decision to drop out of school.

In fact, some studies have shown that one of the most recurrent and reliable variables that impacts at-risk mentees’ dropout rate was the perception that teachers did not care about them (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Startlingly, research has shown that once a student drops out of school, his or her self-esteem improves (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986). Dropouts saw themselves as less popular or as though they did not fit in, so they removed themselves from the negative environment. This means that there is something happening within the school
environment that is causing some students to feel alienated, which decreases their self-esteem, leading them to want to drop out of school.

Alienation of mentees can take many avenues but one that has been going on for quite some time is the tracking and subsequent driving out of non-mainstream students (Srebnik & Elias, 1993). When the school environment is oppressive and rejecting, students are left feeling unseen and ignored. Students who are tracked or labeled as at-risk are often provided with fewer educational opportunities, categorized into low achieving groups, and directed toward alternative programs that provide them limited options.

For years the phenomenon of school dropout has been studied from the point of view that there is something internal about the students that contributes to a decision to drop out. In fact, students may be dropping out due to a disconnection or disengagement from the school which results when students are alienated by those who work in the school building (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). When students feel alienated they start to lose interest and motivation. When students do not feel socially, valued their behavior changes for the worse, which causes teacher expectations of student success to drop (Larkin & Chabay, 1989; Resnick & Klopfer, 1989).

High school completion is also related to school attachment (Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001). For example, the extent to which students feel attached to their schools can impact whether or not students feel connected to or detached from educational attainment. When students feel detached and disconnected from the schools they attend, they begin to feel that their accomplishments are not meaningful, leading to the desire to drop out.

Mentees must not only feel attached to their school but also to their peers in school. Mentees who do not feel an attachment to peers lack confidence and support and are left feeling alone and isolated (Mouton, Hawkins, McPherson, & Copley, 1996). For mentees at risk of
dropping out, it appears that the relationships these mentees form serve as a mediator between success and dropping out. The amount and quality of school attachments that mentees have becomes a protective factor against dropping out (Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001).

Alienation stems from beyond the students to their caregivers. There are power differences between White middle-class educators and low-income minority families. Caregivers in low-income families have been shown to feel a sense of disconnection from their students’ education and alienated from educational decision making. These factors may further contribute to the dropout problem. In addition, caregivers who lack knowledge of school organization practices feel further alienated. Research shows that many schools in the United States are biased against low-income minority families, despite professional literature reporting that family participation with schooling is highly correlated with student success (Lott, 2001).

**Sense of Belonging and Sense of Mattering**

Risk factors such as fear of failure, lack of confidence, and a dearth of meaningful adult relationships have been found to be contributing factors to dropping out of high school among minority groups (Headden, 1997). In fact, correlational studies have shown students from minority ethnic groups who are socially isolated experience lower academic interest in schools than their majority counterparts (Zirkel, 2004).

The decision to drop out of school does not happen overnight and usually occurs over a period of time (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). In fact there are generally blatant signs of detachment from school that are marked by students feeling a lack of belonging, disdain for school, and lack of connection with their schools. Some at-risk students reported a lack of feelings of enthusiasm and engagement in school while others reported that their teachers provided them with little support and interest (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997).
All human beings have an inborn need to feel as though they belong (F. W. Lee & Ip, 2003). This sense of belonging or connection is crucial for young people who are developing their sense of identity, and it impacts their emotional, social, intellectual, and psychological functioning as well as their academic performance (T. Lee & Breen, 2007). Students are more likely to drop out of school when they do not successfully develop feelings of belonging (Finn, 1989). Students who do not feel a sense of belonging in school feel isolated, discouraged, and unsupported. Not feeling a sense of connection relates to dropout rates in that students are more psychologically motivated to accelerate in school when they feel respected, needed, and supported (Anderman, 2002; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). If teachers provide caring and supportive relationships for their students, these relationships have an impact on students’ feelings of belonging. According to Battistich, Solomon, Watson, and Schaps (1997), students’ well-being and motivation to learn are impacted when learning strategies are student centered and relational approaches are used.

Sense of belonging makes it possible for trust to grow in relationships. Mentees who have trusting relationships with mentors or teachers are more receptive to critical feedback and advanced learning opportunities (Walton & Cohen, 2007). A lack of connection is particularly significant for individuals from minority and marginalized groups because marginalized groups are vulnerable given their history of stigmatized social bonding experiences.

Sense of mattering, which is a construct separate from sense of belonging, is a factor that has been influential in the academic success of African American male mentees. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) defined mattering: “Mattering is the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate” (p.165). Ellison (1952) described mattering in the context of African Americans’ experiences of not being seen, as though they were invisible.
Sense of mattering comes from the concept of marginalization which Park (1928) defines as disregarding or rejecting particular groups based on differences such as race and ethnicity. Schlossberg (1989) explored the theory of marginalization and applied it directly to college students, describing marginalization as feeling as though one does not matter, does not belong and does not have a voice. Having a feeling of interpersonal mattering has been shown to encourage mentees to excel in their educational pursuits. Sense of mattering is even more imperative to the marginalized population of African American men, who are often seen as unmotivated, perceived to not be as engaged, and are expected to fail. When students feel rejected or as if they do not matter and are faced with negative peer influences, their self-confidence diminishes, leaving them more likely to drop out (F. W. Lee & Ip, 2003). In a study examining mattering and its impact on success among nine African American male high school students in a Midwestern city, Tucker, Dixon, and Griddine (2010) noted, “Feeling as if they mattered to others at school likely helped these young men build a strong foundation of self-efficacy and self-confidence from which they have found a sense of purpose and an enduring sense of intrinsic motivation and drive” (p. 141). Therefore, the feeling of mattering was found to be crucial for students’ academic success and remaining engaged with the school. Within the school climate, school counselors, faculty, and staff must take the initiative to acknowledge students.

**Peer Influence**

Peer influence is another factor that has been shown to impact the rate of student dropout from school. Peer influence can take a positive form in that students who feel as though they have a strong social peer support network tend to be able to meet academic challenges (F. W. Lee & Ip, 2003). Conversely, peer rejection plays a role in the decision to drop out (Hymel,
Comfort, Schonert-Reichl, & McDougall, 1996), and low-performing, low-achieving students who do not have friends tend to show higher dropout rates (Kupersmidt & Coie, 1990).

Even though peer rejection plays a role in dropping out of school, it has also been shown that the decision to drop out can occur when students are faced with negative peer influence such as having friends who drop out or participate in defiant behavior (Vitaro, Larocque, Janosz, & Tremblay, 2001). For adolescents their peers are very influential and can provide them with a sense of belonging, support, self-esteem, and self-confidence (F.W. Lee & Ip, 2003). Adolescents are more likely to listen to and make the decisions their peers make. Also, the influence of peer suggestion has an immediate and direct impact on the decision to drop out of school.

**Motivation and Support**

In addition to the influence of home–school cultural discontinuity, sense of mattering, belonging, and attachment to school and peers, a student’s motivation, which is a factor internal to the student, also plays a role in the decision to drop out. In order for mentees to be motivated to stay in school they must feel competent and determined (Vallerand et al., 1997). Teachers, parents, and school personnel have the capacity to support students so that they feel competent in school-related activities.

In a longitudinal study conducted by Lan and Lanthier (2003), students were followed from the eighth grade to the 12th grade, and factors that contributed to dropping out were identified. From the eighth grade to the 10th grade, it was found that there was a dramatic and significant decline in academic performance, perception of and motivation for school, and relationships with teachers. Along with these declines, as students progressed to the 12th grade they reported feeling a greater sense of alienation. Reyes, Gillock, Kobus, and Sanchez (2000)
also found that minority youth perceived decreased school support as they progressed from middle school to high school. For the students in the Lan and Lanthier study, the eighth- to 10th-grade time period seemed to mark the most deterioration in student success. This suggests that there are unique factors that play in the passage from middle to high school that may leave some students vulnerable. Those who are vulnerable may benefit from interventions such as mentors who can help ease the transition for students.

**What Is Working and What Is Not for African American At-Risk Students**

School dropout is a complex phenomenon that will not be fixed by one solution alone. The individual student’s needs must be addressed in a comprehensive manner with multiple approaches. It is clear that at-risk students need individualized attention and a curriculum that is based on building educational and social skills and providing experiential learning.

The Principals’ Partnership (2004) established by the Union Pacific Foundation has identified five elements of successful dropout prevention programs:

1. A school or program should be set up and administered such that everyone in the school building is willing to buy into and work for student success.

2. A school climate should be characterized by safety and orderliness including safeguarding the grounds.

3. A variety of strategies in various combinations should be used to address the entire range of student needs based on factors that alienate students from school.

4. Curricular components should include a mix of academic instruction and experiential learning, concentrated reading and writing activities, basic skills remediation, test-taking skills, self-esteem building, social skills training, parenting skills, and learning content with real world application.
5. A sense of belonging should be encouraged through dealing with the “whole child,” by showing interest and concern in children and their families.

Ineffective practices for dropout prevention have also been identified by the Principals’ Partnership (2004). First, when standards and requirements are raised without overall school improvement or strategies to improve instructional practices, at-risk students are likely to be pushed out of schools. Second, when students are tracked, labeled, and placed in lower ability groups, teachers no longer have high expectations for those students and their learning decreases (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Third, when students are taught basic skills without applying those skills to real work situations, they are being set up to fail. Fourth, when students do get work experiences but are left without individual attention or mentors to help guide their learning, they do not succeed. Finally, another practice that leads students to failure is that often the student who are at-risk do receive early interventions but then are left with no follow up to monitor their progress.

In an attempt to design more comprehensive interventions to serve at-risk students, Sanders and Sanders (1998) proposed anti-dropout interventions that utilize parental, teacher, school counselor, and community involvement. According to these authors, parental involvement is vital to student success. They suggested that the school must work to inform parents; communicate with parents about student progress; invite parents to get involved by arranging informational workshops, planned activities, and open houses; and assist in the development of a council board run by parents. These researchers also recommended that teachers take an active role in student learning as well as gain students’ trust through positive interactions (Sanders & Sanders, 1998). Teachers should notice and celebrate students’ accomplishments, act as role models, and advocate for students. They also recommended that
school counselors use data in order to identify those students at risk of dropping out. School counselors should work with teachers and parents to develop a plan that works for each student, aid students in developing alternative coping strategies, and provide them with mentors.

Sanders and Sanders (1998) also pointed out the value of community involvement to combat the dropout problem. School employees should keep community members up to date on what is going on in the schools through newsletters or fliers that are sent to local community organizations. Community stakeholders should be asked for their input on developing procedures to help with student achievement. Community members should be invited into the school for multicultural and social events. Finally, community members should also be asked to serve on school boards or committees as volunteers to help improve school and work with at-risk mentees.

The National Dropout Prevention Center based at Clemson University under the direction of Smink and Schargel (2009) developed 15 effective strategies for dropout prevention among K through 12 students in rural, suburban, and urban schools. Each strategy was found to be effective when used alone but had a greater impact when used in conjunction with other strategies. The strategies were divided into four domains: basic core strategies, early intervention, making the most of instruction, and making the most of the wider community.

The first domain, basic core strategies, consists of mentoring/tutoring, service learning, alternative schooling, and after-school opportunities (Linton & Smink, 2007; Smink & Schargel, 2009). Mentoring provides mentees with a one-on-one trusting and supportive relationship whereas tutoring consists of helping students focus on specific academic needs. Service learning combines teaching and learning where mentees learn to connect academics to community service. Service learning allows mentees to develop socially, personally, and vocationally, while
alternative schooling is designed for potential dropouts to have different options that can lead them to graduating from high school. After-school programs and summer enhancement programs help students retain information and create interest in different areas.

The second domain, early intervention, consists of early childhood education, family engagement, and early literacy development (Smink & Schargel, 2009). One of the most effective means of dropout prevention is to provide enriching classroom instruction and experiences at an early age. Family involvement in a child’s learning is imperative to that child’s achievement in school. Early literacy development is needed for lower achieving students so they learn the foundations of reading and writing.

The third domain, making the most of instruction, is composed of professional development, active learning, educational technology, and individualized instruction (Smink & Schargel, 2009). In order for students to be successful, teachers need to feel supported. Teachers also need avenues for learning new skills, techniques, and teaching strategies that they can then use to help students stay in school. Teachers who utilize a variety of learning styles and teach different problem solving methods help students achieve, while teachers who use technology in the classroom are better able to address each students’ multiple intelligences, in turn helping students stay in school. Each student should also have an individual learning plan designed to meet his or her need for success.

The final domain is making the most of the wider community, through systemic renewal, school-community collaboration, career and technical education, and the creation of safe schools (B. Lee, Schaefer & Messner-Zidell, 2007; Smink & Schargel, 2009). Systemic renewal is the process of “evaluating goals and objectives related to school policies, practices, and organizational structures as they impact a diverse group of learners” (Smink & Schargel, 2009, p.
When community groups collaborate for students they can provide resources for students to learn and thrive. School-to-work programs teach students the skills they need to survive in the workplace. Creating a safe school results in a non-threatening environment that then enables students to learn positive social and interpersonal skills. There is sufficient evidence to show that schools that have violence prevention plans and teach crisis management and conflict resolution skills are more likely to have successful students (B. Lee et al., 2007; Smink & Schargel, 2009).

**The Role of School Counselors in Combating Dropout**

Many studies have examined the role of school counselors in seeking solutions for underachievement, dropout, and helping at-risk students develop the necessary skills to stay in school. As an illustration, a study conducted by Edmondson and White (1998) assessed a dropout prevention program designed by a school counselor in a rural middle school in Georgia. The program was designed to combine a tutorial program with counseling services. The school counselor in this study assumed that using counseling as well as tutoring would impact the at-risk students’ academic achievement, improve their self-esteem, and positively impact their classroom behavior. The school counselor provided the students with group counseling aimed at raising the students’ self-esteem while also enlisting the help of local college faculty members and students to provide group-tutoring services to students. Edmondson and White included three groups of students in their study. The first group was a control group in which students did not receive tutoring or counseling because they chose not to participate in those programs. The second group consisted of students who only participated in the tutoring program, and the third were students who participated in the tutoring and counseling groups with the school counselor. In the counseling and tutoring group, the school counselor worked on improving student self-
esteem by helping students develop a sense of identity, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and nurturing them. Results indicated that students who participated in counseling and tutoring reported an increase in self-esteem and academic achievement.

Wirth-Bond and Coyne (1991) examined students’ decisions to remain in school following interactions with school counselors who specialized in vocational and career counseling. Students who were at high risk for dropping out were identified and placed in a vocational special needs program run by the school counselor. The school counselor worked with students on completing homework, study skills, problem-solving skills, and communication skills related to the world of work. Students were then given a questionnaire assessing demographic information and asked if they had a favorite school staff member and if that staff member was supportive. The questionnaire also assessed whether the student’s favorite staff member could potentially have an impact on his or her decision to drop out of school. Results showed that compared to all other staff members, the vocational special needs school counselor was rated the highest in terms of understanding the students. The school counselor was also rated as the favorite staff member by a majority of students. Wirth-Bond and Coyne found that those high school students who participated in the vocational special needs program had a low dropout rate of 8.4% despite being considered at-risk students.

It is clear that many factors contribute to a student’s decision to drop out of school including issues related to family and school, lack of community support, and individual factors such as motivation and self-esteem. School counselors who act as advocates can impact environmental factors that enhance student performance, such as having clear expectations, lowering the student–teacher ratio, and changing ways in which students’ performance is assessed (Stanard, 2003). School counselors have the ability to impact policy change that
reduces the likelihood of at-risk students being pushed out of school. For example, often when a student exhibits poor behavior and lack of achievement, the student is left with failing grades, is retained in the grade, or is suspended or expelled.

On a programmatic level, school counselors offer services for at-risk students, such as counseling and preventative education, and programs promoting increased parental involvement. Praport (1993) found that support groups for at-risk students run by counselors are more effective in dropout prevention when they are small in size and when the focus is on social skills, study habits, decision-making skills, time management, stress reduction, and survival skills. Not only do group counseling sessions seem to be effective but individual counseling is also of benefit. In sum, school counselors who approach the problem programmatically and systematically can address these factors in a comprehensive manner across multiple levels.

**Career and Vocational Training to Reduce Dropout Rates**

There are pragmatic concerns, too, that must be taken into account in combating dropout rates. Vocational training is one such pragmatic consideration. In an environment where employment opportunities are currently dismal for job seekers who have advanced degrees, the employment picture is even bleaker for those who have minimal literacy and technological skills. With the rising number of unskilled workers, fewer jobs, and lower minimum wages, a large American underclass (Greenstone & Looney, 2011) is developing. This development may in turn impact the poorest and most disadvantaged of minority students, who are already struggling to survive in what many are considering a current recession.

Opportunities for advancement and prospective earnings are gravely reduced and can have negative effects on the communities in which there are high dropout rates (Jancek, 1999). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) stated that $319 billion was lost nationally in
potential wages solely from the dropouts in 2008. According to Roffman, Rhodes, and Grossman (2002), in contrast to spending millions on re-training dropouts, it only costs about $1000 per child per year to participate in a well-run mentoring program that would reduce or prevent dropout. Therefore, mentoring initiatives that combat the problem of dropouts may lead to a decrease in monetary loss locally as well as nationally.

For those students at risk of dropping out of school, vocational education allows them to develop career goals and increase their knowledge and use of basic skills (Greenstone & Looney, 2011). Vocational training that relates students’ learning to their career plans and goals coupled with simulated work environments in the classroom encourages students to take responsibility for their success. Vocational education programs that focus on realistic job training show students the function and utility of what they are learning. Such programs have been shown to improve students’ self-concept, increase their motivation, improve their interpersonal and life skills, and enhance their attitude toward work.

Recognizing the importance of vocational education, the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (2006) joined together with local employers and developed Career Academies, a program that offers students the opportunity to engage in career-related coursework and real world work experiences. The Career Academies program is a separate system within a school focused on youth who are most at risk for dropping out of school. This program is aimed toward providing students with career-related coursework as well as setting students up with prospective employers and internship placements. This program is aimed at helping students stay in, make progress in, and complete school. Compared to at-risk students not participating in the program, program participants were progressing and graduating at a statistically significant higher rate (Kemple & Snipes, 2000).
Collaborative Efforts that Impact Dropout Prevention

Arons and Schwartz (1993) reported on an inner-city alternative high school that paired teachers with social work interns to identify and work with students who were at risk of dropping out of school. Teachers and social work interns worked together with at-risk students in what was called a family group. A family group was a place where students could meet during their homeroom class at school to receive nonjudgmental support. In these groups students could disclose psychosocial issues that were impacting the student’s success and performance in school. The family groups were intended to empower students and teach them coping skills so they could overcome obstacles hindering their school success. Teachers were able to provide educational materials to the students, while the social workers could attend to the individual student’s interpersonal needs. The students who participated in the family groups were able to become more proficient in their social skills, with the help of positive examples that demonstrated to them how two different individuals with different approaches could work together on problem solving and conflict resolution. The family groups were conducted for an entire academic year and many of the students who participated in the family groups stayed in school.

Similarly, Gunn, Chorney, and Poulsen (2009) showed that students who participated in sharing circles and counseling, which are similar to family groups, reported feeling more emotional support and respect, less isolation, and higher self-esteem, leaving them feeling that their academic environment was more inclusive. In addition, during the sharing circles, cross-cultural awareness initiatives were used by discussing other cultures. These initiatives were meant to aid in students’ self-advocacy and conflict resolution skills. Similarly, the Center for Mental Health in Schools (2007) reported that collaboration between the student, his or her
family, and the community must exist in order to ensure success in school. Not only must all members work together but also there must be behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in order for there to be positive academic outcomes. In addition, learning communities within the school are beneficial to students in that they reduce isolation.

Furthermore, it is important to take into account that students enter the school building with perspectives and worldviews with origins in their family system (Amatea & Brown, 2000). The school environment is also a system and these two systems must function together. Finding equilibrium becomes a challenge when there are stressors in one or both systems. Students may be successful when there is collaboration and open communication between those involved in the school and family systems. Despite the many examples that show that students may be successful when educators and parents from marginalized groups communicate, this recommendation is often not taken into consideration (Lott, 2001). The evidence indicates that rather than placing all the responsibility on students, the use of existing structures and resources within schools benefits students who are at risk of dropping out. School personnel must be willing to assess the school context to see how it is impacting students’ decisions to drop out. In any discussion of interventions to reduce school dropouts, a central concept that deserves sustained attention is mentoring, which is critical to the proposed study. The literature indicates that having strong relationships within the school system is essential to encouraging at-risk students to stay in school, and mentoring can provide the foundation for long lasting and meaningful relationships that keep students connected to their schools.

**Elements of Effective Mentoring Programs**

The aims of mentoring are to ensure student achievement, to provide nurturance, and to pass on values to the next generation, known as generativity (Erikson, 1959). Mentors are able
to pass on life lessons that help their mentees transition into adulthood and help prepare them for life’s journey (Freedman, 1991). For children living in poverty and isolation, supportive mentors help keep hope alive that education, opportunities, and meaningful employment are possible. The most effective mentors are those who want to make a connection with and difference in the lives of young people. Mentors serve as role models for disadvantaged mentees. Mentors help mentees develop character and through life skills training provide them with new experiences. Mentors help instill feelings of competence as well as emotional support.

**Duration and Frequency of Mentoring**

The duration and consistency of mentoring programs is important for the mentoring relationship to be effective (Herrera, 2004; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006). Mentors are responsible for maintaining meeting frequency (Rhodes, Spencer, & Liang, 2009) but regular contact between mentor and mentee has been shown to increase students’ sense of security and attachment to school. Mentoring relationships grow over time, and the greatest benefits have been shown for relationships that last at least one year or longer. Relationships lasting six months or less lead to lower rates of developmental growth in mentees with mentees benefiting the most from mentor-mentee relationships that last at least nine months (Herrera, 2004). Relationship longevity creates trust.

Campbell-Whatley, Algozzine, and Obiakor (1997) stated that involving the total school by getting several members of the school to identify mentees and their progress throughout the mentoring process is imperative. Defining a target population based on suspensions, academic failures, and low attendance rates should be considered, as well as grade level and age groups. Teachers should have input into which curriculum is being presented to mentees, and the curriculum should fit both classroom and mentee needs. An advisory board should be developed
in each school that can collaborate with the mentoring advisors to help plan mentor-student activities. The authors also noted that the mentors should collaborate to identify goals for their mentees in the areas of communication, career skills, attendance, social skills, and behavioral expectations. In addition to these steps, there should be frequent contact between the mentors and mentees, and this should be established early (Campbell-Whatley et al., 1997). Evaluations should be completed on the student-mentor relationship as well as overall program effectiveness. Information gathered before, during, and after the mentor and mentees meet should be used to gauge the success of the program. Campbell-Whatley et al. proposed that data such as participants’ grade point average, number of suspensions per student, student participation in extracurricular activities, and number of mentees promoted and graduated would be useful to collect and evaluate for program effectiveness. Furthermore, ongoing monitoring of the mentoring process is essential to the success of the mentor-mentee relationship. Finally, benefits would accrue for both the mentor and mentee based on engagement in the mentoring relationship.

**Utilizing American School Counseling Association Standards**

Focusing on an African American Male Brotherhood Mentoring program in Chicago schools, Wyatt (2009) found not only GPAs increased for the mentees but also a significant difference was found when it came to changes in the males’ self-concepts. Several elements made this program successful. First of all, the program utilized the American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2004) standards and competencies, and it developed a 30-day curriculum based on those standards. The ASCA standards implemented were academic, personal/social, and career development. Second, the Brotherhood developed weekly topics for discussion. Third, following each mentoring session, the mentor evaluated the mentoring sessions by
journaling about their feelings and which further needs of the mentees could be addressed. In sum, what came through was that mentees should be asked about what they need from mentors and then groups could be developed with the help of professionals that focus on particular identified themes. A purpose needs to be established for the mentoring groups as well as a mission and vision statement. Mentees should then be recruited for the groups and then finally goals, objectives, and activities should be developed for the groups.

**Mentor Training**

In conversations about effective mentoring programs, another area that has received some attention is mentor training. The process of mentor training should be ongoing (Utsey, Howard, & Williams, 2003), starting with educational training covering topics such as how to develop a group experience, working with mentees who have a history of abuse or neglect, as well as dealing with emotional and developmental issues facing African American mentees. In addition, not only is it imperative that mentors be able to express their expectations to the mentees they mentor, they must also be aware of adversities and experiences their mentees have endured as African Americans. Also important is having quarterly training sessions to discuss with advisors the progress of their mentees and obtain advice and guidance on any challenges facing their mentees.

**Group Mentoring**

With regard to research that examines the effectiveness of group mentoring initiatives with African American mentees, Utsey et al. (2003) examined why group mentoring for this population is advantageous over individual, one-on-one approaches. The authors stated that first and foremost, emphasizing self-empowerment and community engagement is important to African American mentees. The second advantage to group mentoring is that the concepts of
group identity, such as community and familial connectedness that are central to the African American community, are emphasized in group mentoring. Also, mentor burnout is alleviated given the facts that the growth of mentees is a shared responsibility and that when one mentor cannot be available, there are others who can continue the mentoring without disappointing the mentees. Within a group mentoring session, cultural issues can also be shared, such as what it is like to grow up with challenges of being an African American adolescent youth. Group mentoring is therapeutic in that it helps members feel a sense of relatedness and collectivism which is in stark contrast to the vulnerabilities these at-risk mentees face on a day to day basis. Group mentoring allows for African American mentees to have access to consistent role models in their lives. Having the role models in these mentees’ lives allows for the development of meaningful interpersonal relationships, healthy recreational activities, leadership skills, and socially acceptable behaviors (Utsey et al., 2003).

**Impact on Population of Interest: African American Male Students**

There are one million individuals in prison who have dropped out of school or college. The majority of them are African or Hispanic American men (Cassel, 2003). But as has been seen, such exclusion of these ethnic groups starts much earlier, in school. Subjecting students to punitive actions for their failure makes them feel as though they are even less likely to succeed (Jordan, McPartland, & Lara, 1999). As documented earlier, African American men are more likely than any other ethnic group to be suspended or expelled from school (Jordan & Lara, 1996). Lunenburg (1999) found that holding a student back from advancing to the next grade level makes the likelihood of dropping out even greater.

The U.S. Census Bureau (1999) reported that there were striking ethnic group-based differences in high school dropout rates. More specifically, White and Asian American students
were much less likely to drop out of high school than were African, Hispanic, and Native American students (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). Male students were more likely to drop out than female students, at a rate of 55% versus 45%, and African American students were more likely to drop out than White students at a rate of 6.4% versus 4.5% (Finnan & Chasin, 2007; Jancek, 1999).

In their study, Walton and Cohen (2007) examined the impact of race, social fit, and achievement on belonging and found that in settings where achievement is measured, marginalized groups lacked self-assurance about the quality of their social bonds. When minority group mentees did not feel as though they belonged in a particular field of study they were more likely to discourage other minority mentees from pursuing that area of study.

On one hand, those who were already victims of negative stereotypes and marginalization anticipated social rejection on the basis of their phenotype (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002; Shelton & Richeson, 2005). On the other hand, when African American college students were conditioned to attribute difficulties in academia to other phenomena besides race and guided to normalize hardships instead of internalizing them, their belief in their potential to succeed increased (Walton & Cohen, 2007). When African American students felt that their skin color was not a contributing factor in failure, they were more likely not to blame themselves and ultimately succeed.

The Target Success Mentor Program was aimed at targeting at-risk mentees in middle school to prevent them from dropping out and to help these students make a successful transition into high school (Jackson & Mathews, 1999). The researchers were interested in targeting at-risk African American male youth identified as having academic and behavioral problems and who came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. At-risk African American male students were
paired for weekly meetings with an African American male mentor from a local university. The results showed that the Target Success Mentor Program was successful in achieving its objective of reducing middle school dropout and enabling a transition to high school for at-risk African American men.

Although mentoring African American males in middle school and high school is imperative for their future success, research has shown that mentoring even into graduate school is beneficial to African American students who often lack a sense of bonding or belonging at the universities they attend, especially when those universities are predominantly White institutions (Watkins, 1998). Many African American students in the study conducted by Watkins (1998) felt that faculty members were nonresponsive and did not show concern for their academic advancement. Watkins found that when it comes to mentoring, White students received more services from faculty members than African American students. It was also found that African American graduate students felt that although their professors were supportive in the classroom, little to no support was given outside the context of class. The opposite was found for White graduate students who reported feeling increased support, and who received positive guidance, which in turn inspired their confidence. Given the findings that African American male students were being marginalized, lacked a sense of connection to school, and were less likely to succeed than other racial groups (Watkins, 1998), mentoring has become an initiative of schools across the country to help reduce the achievement gap for this population of at-risk men.

**The Impact of Mentoring Programs on Mentees and Mentors**

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2009) defined the term mentor as a relationship that is supportive and based on trust. Caring, friendship, and commitment characterize the relationship between a mentor and mentee. The relationship is one in which
mentors provide mentees with support and guidance, so that mentees may develop to their fullest potential and meet the aspirations they have for themselves. Mentoring can take place one-on-one or in a group setting and occurs in many different forms across cultures. The goal of mentoring is for mentors to develop and maintain healthy relationships with their mentees and to interrupt the negative cycles of interactions that may occur between at-risk students and their family and friends.

Given the fact that peers play such an important role in adolescent decision-making, providing at-risk students with mentors would allow them to have a consistently positive role model who would support and encourage them to make decisions that would benefit them academically. Mentors could serve to strengthen adolescent peer systems and provide mentees with skills to succeed in school. As noted by F. W. Lee and Ip (2003), students need mentoring programs that can help them develop a value system, learn positive behaviors, and provide them with support. In order to succeed, at-risk students need more than the standard assistance that teachers can provide (Lan & Lanthier, 2003) which is where mentors can be beneficial.

**Big Brothers/Big Sisters**

Big Brother/Big Sisters is a nationally known mentoring program that serves at-risk mentees ages 6 through 18 by offering community- and school-based mentoring. This program offers special programs such as African American, Hispanic, and Native American mentoring. They also offer mentoring for military children and have the Amachi Program, which is for children who have a parent or parents in prison.

The Big Brothers/Big Sisters program was the focus of a study conducted between 1992 and 1993 to assess the impact of intense mentoring, consisting of face-to-face contacts for at least three times a month in three-hour intervals (Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri,
The results of the Big Brother/Big Sister study were that mentees were less likely than the control group to start using illegal drugs, to skip class or a day of school, and to start drinking. In addition to these gains, mentees reported that they felt support and more approval from classmates. Providing mentees with consistent mentoring relationships helped mentees feel more socially connected and enabled them to make better decisions for themselves such as not skipping school, which led to fewer discipline referrals. Also mentees who participated in this program were less likely to engage in substance abuse, making criminal activity and juvenile delinquency less likely.

**School-Based Mentoring Programs**

In 2004, the Indiana Legislative Services Agency met to assess the merit and impact of school-based mentoring programs. The council heard testimonies on the impact and advantages of mentoring. The impact of mentoring included providing role models for mentees, allowing for more community involvement in public schools, and increasing success and pro-social behaviors of mentees. The council recommended that all Indiana children be provided the support of school-based mentoring programs and found that mentoring initiatives are imperative for enhancing the social growth and evolution of children.

In a review of the Linking Individual Students To Educational Needs (LISTEN) school-based mentoring program, Lampley and Johnson (2010) identified at-risk middle school students that were identified by number of absences, low grade point averages (GPA), and discipline referrals. These students were then assigned mentors. The mentors took part in training and met twice a week with their mentees throughout the school year. Those who served as mentors ranged from teachers, librarians, and school counselors to custodians and cafeteria workers. The researchers reviewed archival data from 2003 to 2005 and found that discipline referrals
decreased, grade point averages increased, and attendance records improved for those mentees who took part in the LISTEN program.

School-based mentoring programs have many advantages for those mentees who need more support in getting through school. Some of the advantages of school-based mentoring are that school-based mentoring takes place within a school building for one hour a week which makes it more likely to have volunteers than would programs requiring much more time from volunteers (Herrera, 2004; Jucovy & Garringer, 2008). For parents who lack advocacy skills or who are struggling and have little spare time, school-based mentoring allows for teachers to refer mentees who they deem at risk based on day to day interaction in a learning environment. School-based mentoring is less expensive, more effective at matching of mentor/mentee, and offers more direct supervision by teachers. Finally because school-based mentoring takes place in an educational setting, it gives primacy to education and academic achievement in the mentoring relationship (Herrera, 2004; Jucovy & Garringer, 2008).

School-based mentoring has been shown to improve student confidence, behavior, attitude, and attendance rates. It has also been shown to improve a student’s participation in the classroom, improve grades and attendance, as well as decrease grade retention, and decrease mentees’ being late for school (Hansen, 2001). Not only does school-based mentoring benefit mentees but also mentors. Mentors who work in schools, compared to mentors who work outside of schools, are better informed of mentee achievements and areas where their mentee needs improvement. Mentors also have more direct support from other mentors who work in the same school (Herrera, 2004; Jucovy & Garringer, 2008).

Regardless of where mentoring takes place, when mentors are informed of mentee achievement, they feel a sense of pride, knowing that they made a difference. In the school
environment mentors can network with other mentors and are able to brainstorm ideas with one another on activities that will benefit mentees. Mentors may also feel safer in a school environment versus going to a mentee’s home environment (Herrera, 2004; Jucovy & Garringer, 2008).

In order to assess the effectiveness of school-based mentoring, the national non-profit organization Public/Private Ventures conducted a mixed methods study (Herrera, 2004). Although the study examined several aspects of mentoring, for the purposes of this research study only the benefits that mentees may gain from mentoring involvement are summarized. The researchers found improvements across several areas when mentees met with their mentors for at least nine months. According to the findings from the study for mentees in the mentoring program, peer social networks strengthened, social skills improved, and their ability to make friends increased. Mentees were found to have improved social skills, confidence, and were more willing to trust others as well as express their feelings. Referrals to the principal’s office declined and small improvements were made in appropriate classroom behavior and academic commitment. Results of the Public/Private Venture study also showed that there was a statistically significant difference in reports of liking school for those mentees who were in the mentoring program for nine or more months compared to other groups who met for a shorter amount of time.

**Tutoring Within Mentoring Programs**

High school dropouts are often lacking in the areas of scholastic performance and socialization. Mentoring and tutoring are effective strategies in tackling these areas (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). Many mentoring programs offer services to mentees such as academic intervention and tutoring.
Big Buddies program is one program that offers mentoring and tutoring to mentees. In Dennison’s (2000) study, mentees in the third and fourth grades were assigned to work with high school honor roll students. Results from this study showed that mentees benefited through an increase in self-esteem, positive attitude, and behavior in the classroom.

Social as well as academic involvement are beneficial to at-risk mentees. When Ginsburg-Block and Fantuzzo (1997) examined urban mentees in elementary schools, they found that African American students benefited from peer tutoring, which led to the students feeling more accepted socially and accomplished academically. Activities that allow mentees to discuss and exchange ideas with adults coupled with working on academic tasks have been shown to improve students’ grades (Schinke, Cole, & Poulin, 2000).

In a dropout prevention program developed and implemented by Somers and Piliawsky (2004), a mentor/tutor program was offered in city public schools for low-income ninth grade African American mentees. The program was aimed at providing these mentees with academic as well as social support to build self-esteem, motivation, and self-efficacy which would reduce the dropout risk. The mentees in this program were paired with mentors who were predominately African Americans ranging in age from 18 to 24 years. Findings from this study showed that retention rates for ninth grade mentees who participated in this program were higher than for those who did not participate in this program. More specifically, after a one-year follow up, tenth grade mentees who finished the program dropped out at a rate of only 7.7%, compared to the 13% dropout rate for the high school and the 15% dropout rate for the school district as a whole (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). Finally, the mentees in this study reported that having African American role models made them more optimistic about their future.
Effects of Mentoring on Mentors

In research on the topic of mentoring, one point that stands out is that although the quality of mentoring programs and impact on mentees have been studied in depth, mentors remain virtually invisible. There is a small body of research that shows that mentors benefit from being mentors. Mentoring is more than a one-sided relationship. It is a mutual relationship where both parties learn from one another.

In in-depth interviews conducted by Philip and Hendry (2000) with 30 mentors ages 13 to 18, mentors reported that they had better insight into the day-to-day struggles of mentees as a result of their mentoring experiences. Mentors also reported that they were better able to engage in reciprocal relationships with mentees and that the experience allowed them to make sense of their own past and current challenges. Although mentors also reported challenges such as coping with difficult relationships and surviving on few resources, they described that they had gained cultural capital that helped them to cope with daily challenges. Similarly, in an earlier study with a national sample of adult mentors, McLearn, Colasanto, and Schoen (1998) reported that mentors felt they had grown personally from the mentoring experience. Mentors reported that they had improved self-esteem, had more patience, felt effective, and felt that they were better people. Psychosocial and occupational growth was also reported as benefits to volunteer mentoring.

Although many young people serve as mentors, older adults who fulfill the role of mentor also benefit greatly. Older adult mentors gain a sense of accomplishment from sharing their past experiences and wisdom with the younger generation (Van Willingen, 2000). Older adults who mentor also reported greater life satisfaction and perceived health benefits than did younger adult volunteers. Broadly speaking, benefits to mentors are personal, as seen from a cross-cultural
study conducted by Clinard and Ariav (1998), who showed that mentors benefit more personally than professionally from mentoring. However, mentors stated that they were able to understand their role in college more clearly after participating as mentors. Mentors benefited most from mentoring when they had adequate training, ongoing support, and when they received feedback about advantages of their relationship with mentees (Clinard & Ariav, 1998; Washington State Department of Personnel, 1993). When this happens, mentors and mentees are able to share knowledge and influence one another in positive ways.

Mentors receive a boost of self-esteem and confidence when they see their mentee grow and develop over a period of time. Other benefits to mentors include recognition for service to their communities, an expansion in their social networking community, as well as personal satisfaction. Mentors who are able to handle challenges placed on them and who learn how to balance responsibilities and priorities reported an increase in self-confidence.

Bandura (1997) described self-efficacy as one’s expectations of how well one will accomplish desired tasks. Those with higher self-efficacy set higher goals for themselves and strive to succeed, leaving them with higher self-confidence. Also, observing the effects of one’s own behavior toward another is critical to behavior change because human behavior develops through modeling. Previous research has shown that mentors learn from and look up to one another, as they see themselves as being part of a brotherhood, where they hold one another responsible for being successful.

The Student African American Brotherhood

The SAAB program at the university in this study has recently undergone a name change and is now referred to as Brotherhood of Successful Scholars (BOSS). However, this retrospective study focuses on the members of the original SAAB group and, so, I use the term
SAAB throughout, despite the name change. The mission and values of BOSS are very similar to those of the SAAB group. At this medium-sized state university in the Midwest, SAAB was established in 2007 as a branch of the National Student African American Brotherhood.

SAAB was originally initiated by Dr. Tyrone Bledsoe in 1990 at the campus of Georgia Southwestern State to address the social and academic needs of African American men on that campus. SAAB was established to encourage students to excel in the areas of student professionalism and academia and to get them involved in the community. With chapters in 27 states, SAAB has been a positive influence on thousands of at-risk African American and Latino male students in high school and college. The university’s SAAB mission statement, modeled after the National SAAB Headquarters (2011), is as follows:

The Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) is a dynamic organization established to assist men to excel academically, socially, culturally, professionally, and in the community. SAAB is comprised of male students who strive for academic excellence and make a commitment to plan and implement programs that benefit their community at large. We encourage our participants to embrace leadership by being positive examples for each other through a strong commitment to academic achievement, brotherhood, and community service. SAAB is not a fraternity. Participation is open to all African American men who are interested to ensure their success and increase retention rates.

(para. 1)

The members of SAAB adhere to four core values set forth by the organization: (a) proactive leadership, (b) accountability, (c) intellectual development, and (d) self-discipline. Leadership is very important to the SAAB members; each member serves as a servant leader, meaning they serve the wants and needs of their organization as well as the community in which
they are located. The students attend leadership development workshops on how to connect to
the university and the community. SAAB members promote the community by mentoring in the
local school corporation and devoting time to Habitat for Humanity, the Boys Club, and the local
Big Brothers/Big Sisters program. Intellectual development and self-discipline are also essential
elements of being a SAAB member.

Academic excellence is first and foremost on the SAAB members’ agenda. Their aim is
to ensure that African American and Latino male college students graduate with the help of
positive peer support. Self-discipline plays a role in that members of SAAB are required to
maintain a C average in all classes, attend study groups, tutoring, and academic study skills
workshops.

Community service and a commitment to the Brotherhood are central themes for the
members of SAAB. The members of SAAB hold each other accountable to ensure their success,
and their motto is “I am my brother’s keeper and together we will rise” (SAAB, 2011, para. 2).
The goal for the Student African American Brotherhood is

for all African American men at educational institutions to take full advantage of their
academic years and to better understand and practice their full responsibilities, rights, and
privileges as citizens of this country. Additionally, SAAB plans to work in the
community with other younger African American males in need of guidance and
direction along with adopting Habitat for Humanity as its official service project. Our
objective is that all African American men will be role models for each other as well as
for other African American men in their community. Additionally, it is our hope that
SAAB members will be well prepared to enter the work force as professionals and
compete with the best for a meaningful place in our society. (para. 2)
The SAAB members aim to serve as role models for other students in the university and for mentees in local area schools. The members of SAAB provide leadership to its members to make sure they all graduate from college and to show mentees in the community that going to college and being successful is something that they can attain. As a Brotherhood, the members hold each other accountable to ensure their success, and they strive to promote self-discipline and intellectual development. Although currently limited to African Americans at ISU, an aspiration of the SAAB program is to be more inclusive in the future by having more than just African American men as members. The previous advisor for the program of SAAB had been advocating for an open admission policy where members of all ethnicities could take part in the SAAB program. The university does have a chapter of the Student African American Sisterhood (SAAS). The aim of SAAS is to unite and empower women as well as enhance their developmental experiences.

Research has been conducted showing benefits for African American men who belong to peer groups like the SAAB program. Zell (2011) looked at the Brother2Brother (B2B) program, which is modeled after the SAAB national program, at a large western university. Membership in a peer group is positively associated with psychological and social development as well as academic achievement. Focus groups were held with the B2B members and the mentors were asked about their experiences of mentoring and how the program had impacted their grades, class attendance, and motivation to graduate from college.

Analysis of the data from the focus groups as reported by Zell (2011) revealed that the mentors were more motivated academically to get above average grades and focus on graduation. Data also revealed that the African American male members of B2B were more motivated to dress professionally or with a purpose and claimed that they felt more mature. Other findings
from the focus groups of B2B members revealed that students felt a stronger connection to their campus, making them more likely to attend campus activities and assume leadership roles.

Students reported that membership in B2B provided them with validation (Zell, 2011). Being told they were a positive influence and a supportive mentor provided validation to the members. Mentors reported that helping mentees through mentor activities gave them a feeling of confidence and positive self-regard. The African American male members of the B2B program also reported that as a result of being a member of B2B they felt a sense of purpose and personal growth in the areas of taking responsibility, being held accountable, and using organization, problem-solving, and networking skills. The members of B2B remained engaged with the group due to the collaboration and collective goals of all members involved. The organization instilled in the mentors a feeling of trust and that someone was looking after them by emphasis on the brotherhood itself. Senior members of the B2B showed new members what was expected of them as a college student and held the new members accountable for personal development and academic achievement. Mentors reported that the B2B group made them take responsibility all the while providing them with support that helped build their confidence.

The National SAAB (2011) group has written about the benefits of belonging to SAAB for African American men in college. The young men in SAAB reported experiencing a more positive self-concept and gaining leadership skills. The members also reported understanding how to deal with racism and knowing the importance of setting long-term goals. It was reported that being a member of SAAB provided African American male students a supportive and positive academic environment. Members of the national SAAB group are also looking at ways in which social support impacts student success.
I became acquainted with SAAB when I was asked to participate in grant writing research for the Brotherhood. The purpose of this grant research, funded by the American Telephone and Telegraph Foundation, was to define prevention strategies to expand and enhance the African American Male Mentors Program, an initiative to keep local middle and high school mentees in school in a local school district in the Midwest. Already interested in the topic of drop-out prevention, this researcher became intrigued by SAAB, particularly after meeting individuals active within that organization. Questions came into my mind such as (a) How does mentoring influence African American men in the areas of achievement outcomes and motivation to graduate? and (b) How does mentoring affect their sense of belonging and ability to take on leadership roles? My quest for answers to these questions culminated in the plan for this study.

Preliminary interviews were conducted with the advisor of the SAAB, the president of SAAB, the academic chair of SAAB, and the school counselor of a local high school to test the validity of the topic and gain interview experience.

Summary

This summary would not be complete without a discussion of the lack of resources and other complexities that serve to maintain the disparities in the opportunities afforded to African American male students. The glass ceiling effect (Rowe, 1990) or unseen barriers that face minorities is one reality that serves to maintain discrimination. Small and often unseen inequalities that are embedded into our realities sustain this glass ceiling. Not only are lack of resources and the glass ceiling barriers to students, but also labels such as *bad students* or *students who need remediation* hold students back from reaching their full potential.
The historical realities of racism are embedded in everyday transactions between students’ home and school environments (Rowe, 1990). These realities serve as barriers to African American students who are trying to be successful in traditionally White male-dominated institutions. The trend for African Americans to be more likely to drop out of high school than their Caucasian counterparts is not ceasing. Although the numbers are shrinking, the tendency for African Americans to drop out is still high. Nationally, the state of the dropout problem is that about 68% to 71% of high school students graduate and approximately one-third of all students in high school are dropping out (Finnan & Chasin, 2007). More recently, the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) records show that of all the high school dropouts in 2009, 3.0% were White and 4.3% were Black. When demographics are considered more closely and individual students are considered, men are more likely to drop out of high school than are women. The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) also reported employment statistics for African Americans who graduated from high school. Of the African Americans who graduated high school in 2010, 33.9% were unemployed. Of those African Americans who dropped out of high school, 46.6% were unemployed.

Indeed, there does not seem to be a single solution to solve the problem of students dropping out of school. However, there are several ways to help mitigate the factors that lead students to drop out of school. In the context of the current economy, the impact and consequences for those students who drop out could be even more devastating than they have been in the past. As a result, there is a need to engage the question of how to reduce dropouts and find real solutions.

There are generally blatant signs of detachment from school that are characterized by students lacking a sense of connection, sense of mattering, feeling alienated from school, and
feeling an aversion to school. Some at-risk students lack feelings of enthusiasm and engagement in school and others report that their teachers provide them with little support and interest. Students who do not feel a link or connection in schools are left feeling isolated, discouraged, and not supported. Not feeling a sense of connection relates to dropout rates in that students are more psychologically motivated to accelerate in school when they feel respected, needed, and supported (Anderman, 2002; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Mentoring that involves a supportive, positive, and encouraging role model seems to benefit students regardless of their age. It would appear that there is something that is missing from students’ educational experience that they are able to obtain when provided with a mentor. Feelings of alienation, a sense of belonging, attachment to school, and motivation are benefits of mentoring. At-risk mentees also benefit from mentoring programs, more specifically African American male mentees who are often marginalized and labeled until they ultimately fail and drop out of school.

Mentors impact mentees holistically. As reported by Schargel and Smink (2001), mentors who participate in mentoring programs struggle with issues that put their development, success, or health at risk. Mentors not only provide mentees with encouragement to succeed academically but also act as a sounding board for mentees who often have no one to confide in or trust. Mentors can have an impact on mentees that will benefit them emotionally, physically, socially, and psychologically. Against this backdrop, the main research questions that this study answered were

1. What are mentors’ perceptions of and experiences in the SAAB mentoring program?
2. What effect does being a mentor have on the mentor’s desire to be successful in college?
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This research study utilized a qualitative approach. Qualitative research allows for a deeper understanding of a phenomenon that cannot be readily understood through quantitative measures. Qualitative research allows the researcher to understand meanings of social interaction that cannot be obtained through numerical data or laboratory settings (Patton, 1990). Accordingly, qualitative research allows the researcher to learn about different variables impacting a situation in a natural setting. In this study the qualitative research approach allowed participants to describe their experiences of and opinions about mentoring in a manner that allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of mentoring from the mentors’ perspective.

Theoretical Framework: Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory

The theoretical framework that guided this study was Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory or bioecological systems theory. This theory focuses on the context of individual development and places emphasis on the relationships in the individual’s life that are responsible for development. This theory states that environmental systems within which an individual interacts help to shape psychological development. Each system contains roles, norms, and rules that help to shape development. Development then is a transactional and not causal process. Furthermore, each individual interaction is based in its own reality and can only be understood in a particular moment and within its context. Bronfenbrenner’s (1999) theory stated that his or her environment directly impacts how a child grows and develops. Groups and organizations such
as the family, caregivers, and the individual’s school that directly interact with the individual have an impact on how the child grows.

According to Bronfenbrenner’s theory, the environments in which children develop are just as important to their growth as biological characteristics. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1999) described five structures of environment that impact a student’s life:

- The microsystem describes the immediate contacts, relationships, connections, and structures the child participates in such as family and school.
- The mesosystem comprises the relationships and connections within the microsystem that have an impact on one another.
- The exosystem describes the connection between the child’s immediate environment and a larger social system that impacts the setting in which the child lives.
- The macrosystem is part of the child’s environment that encompasses the culture in which they live including class, race, socioeconomic status, and cultural values.
- The chronosystem refers to the dimension of time and describes the internal and external changes within the child’s environment which include things like aging, death, and divorce as well as the moment in history being lived.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) stated that bidirectional influences in this environment have the greatest impact on the child at the microsystem, which is the layer of environment that directly impinges on the child. Bidirectional influences mean that both people in the relationship learn and grow together. The immediate environment is essential to the child’s development and this is the environment in which students would have the most direct contact with mentors in schools, making the mentor-mentee relationship very important.
According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), a person cannot separate the contexts in which they create meaning from the experiences they have had. He referred to what are called proximal processes or the process of human development through reciprocal interactions with the immediate external environment. When individuals do not have interactions and relationships, the mesosystem begins to weaken. Bronfenbrenner reported that caring relationships are necessary for an individual’s growth. When the microsystem breaks down, individuals are left trying to fill the void of relationships which often leads to behavioral issues, anti-social behaviors, and lack of self-guidance. Thus, an individual is able to grow and develop to their fullest potential only when they are raised in environments that are nurturing and when they have relationships with others that are encouraging.

Relationships are so essential to a child’s development and success that when a child is ignored and not responded to, he or she begins to feel chronic disconnection (Jordan, 2000; J. B. Miller, 1976). When individuals feel isolated or cut off from others, they begin to feel unworthy and a sense of shame. Jordan (2000) describes isolation as a primary source of suffering in the lives of many individuals. J. B. Miller (1976), through the use of relational cultural therapy, described relationships as mutually growth fostering and emphasized that mutual empathy is essential for growth to occur. A person being open to be influenced and affected by another person characterizes mutual empathy. When the openness, or allowing oneself to be affected by others, occurs, a person is more likely to feel a connection and sense of mattering. J. B. Miller described strong relationships as mutually empowering and able to help a person overcome feelings of powerlessness and shame. Further, mutual empathy is described as reciprocal relationships, which are essential in helping an individual feel self-worth and well-being. Mutual empathy leads to an increase in self-knowledge.
Bronfenbrenner (1979) wrote that the five contexts or environments are all interconnected so that once a breakdown in the microsystem occurs, there also begins to be a breakdown within the mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. For example, the mesosystem is the layer of the people’s environment that connects all the pieces of the microsystem together (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Bronfenbrenner suggested that, in order to maintain the microsystem, the members interacting such as the students, teachers, mentors, parents, extended family, and all other members of the system must have direct contact with the child. For example, if a person does not have the support needed to gain knowledge, learn, and excel, the exosystem will be impacted because the individual will not have the skills needed to be successful in the larger social system of society. An individual’s development is also impacted if the environment in which they live is not supportive of their cultural differences and values, thereby causing a breakdown in the macrosystem. A breakdown in the previous contexts of the person’s environment ultimately has an impact on the chronosystem, which can negatively impact an individual’s health as well as relationships. Although the examples provided may imply causality, the relationships between Bronfenbrenner’s systems are not causal chains but rather transactional in nature.

**Philosophical Paradigms**

Researchers choose philosophical paradigms based on their perspectives of how reality and ways of knowing are discerned and understood (Creswell, 2007). The paradigm that a researcher chooses guides his or her research strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Philosophical paradigms can be viewed as being on a continuum from positivism and post positivism at one end, to constructivist-interpretive, to postmodern critical, and feminist paradigms at the other end. The paradigm chosen impacts the questions asked by the researcher and how the researcher
will interpret the information collected. Philosophically this study was based on constructivism and critical race theory.

**Constructivism**

Traditional positivist perspectives hold strictly to the idea that objective truth about individuals’ experience does exist, which is opposite of the constructivist perspective, which I used in this study, and that multiple constructions of the truth and knowledge can and do exist (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The constructivist paradigm describes a way of knowing that is subjective in that knowledge and realities are socially created and co-constructed. Implicit in the beliefs of this paradigm is the idea that bias cannot be eliminated from research endeavors such as interviewing due to the fact that the interviewee and interviewer co-create knowledge and come to the research setting with their unique backgrounds and experiences. Qualitative researchers who use the constructivist paradigm believe that there are multiple truths about reality and that those truths are constructed by individuals within particular social, cultural, and historical contexts. The aim of the constructivist paradigm is to understand the meaning created from experiences and interactions within individuals. The participants and the researcher therefore create knowledge collectively. Constructivist theory describes a unique system of knowing that is dependent upon cognition or the way in which thoughts are processed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Under the broader category of constructivism as social constructivism, Burr (2001) described some of the basic beliefs of this paradigm. Construction is a social process where constructs of reality emerge from physical interaction and conversation. This means that realities are created through our dialogue with others and interactions with others; our realities are subjective in nature and can only be understood in a particular moment. In addition, the
nature of reality is constructed between individuals and the ways of knowing in the world are subjective and multiple. The author also wrote about how the best method for gaining knowledge about the world from the social constructivist perspective is through interpreting experiences and achieving resolution through discussion of different points of view. The aim of the social constructivist approach is to arrive at a consensual understanding that is informed by the experiences of all of those involved (Burr, 2001). It is my view that using the social constructivist interpretive paradigm implies that reality is dynamic, socially constructed and ongoing, and is subject to the interpretations of the participants and the researcher. Social constructivism describes our ways of knowing and understanding as being historically and culturally specific, and this knowledge is sustained through the daily interaction of social life (Burr, 2001). Knowledge is created through daily interactions and shared language. Hence, in this study the participants’ narratives of their experiences of mentoring were explored.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical theory, which also guided this study, states that sexuality, race, class, and gender, which are socially constructed categories, limit individuals (Creswell, 2007). The aim of the critical theory perspective is to expose and challenge these limitations. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), critical race theorists view racism as endemic in society. Critical race theorists recognize the fact that racism operates through systems of power. One of the aims of the critical race theorist is to make the social world more aware of race, racism, and oppression, thereby making individuals more culturally competent. By definition, critical race theory states that laws and practices enacted by the dominant culture normalize racism (Creswell, 2007).

Solorzano and Villalpando (1998) used critical race theory to describe why the numbers of African Americans graduating from colleges are so low. The authors described how
individuals on the margins of society or being of different race and class face more obstacles and oppression than members of the dominant culture. These marginalized individuals do not have as much access to resources and are offered fewer opportunities (Yosso, 2005). Critical race theorists refute claims made by educational institutions that claim that they are color blind, neutral, and offer equal opportunities to all students (Burke, 2004). Critical race theorists aim to liberate schools so that they can help students meet their full potential.

Critical race theorists claim that schools have the ability to empower students and set them free from oppression (Yosso, 2005). Critical race theory critiques the United States educational system and seeks to challenge claims that African Americans are to blame for poor academic performance due to a deficit model. According to García and Guerra (2004), minority students and families are seen as being deficient in the areas of cultural knowledge and skills. These authors also wrote that African American families are depicted as not supporting or valuing their children’s education. The deficit model is perpetuated through educators, thereby maintaining inequities in schools.

Critical race theory was used in this study to aid in the analysis of interview data collected, allowing for a deeper understanding of inequities faced by students in our educational system (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998). Focus group interview data were examined for perceived microaggressions (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) and how they impacted the student’s experience of the collegiate environment. Microaggressions are those intentional or unintentional behavioral or verbal indignities and slights faced by people of color on a daily basis (Solorzano et al., 2000). How students experience the racial climate of a university plays a role in graduation rates. Approaching this research from a critical race theory perspective allowed me to examine how the participants challenged the dominant discourse of
African American men. Together the participants and I challenged widely held interpretations of African American men transforming the prominent understanding to represent more realistic experiences of this group.

Critical race theory emphasizes that power struggles based on race are created and perpetuated in our society through the storytelling of one’s own reality. Critical education theorists argue that storytelling is used to strengthen the identity of racial minorities as would utilizing minority discourse in educational institutions (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Instructional strategies used in our education system are used to perpetuate the myth that African Americans are deficient (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Social factors such as discourse, race, gender and education serve to maintain injustices and power imbalances found in educational systems (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Inequities in school lead students to feel marginalized and oppressed, thereby creating a culture of silence (Freire, 1970). Oppression is perpetuated through social interactions, leaving students to feel negative about themselves. Through the process of consciousness raising (Freire, 1970) or understanding of social oppression, students can take action for themselves to create change.

The inequalities that African Americans face is so much a part of their social fabric that it often goes unrecognized and unacknowledged by the dominant culture. Critical race theorists aim to give a voice to those who are impacted by power and oppression. In this study, a guiding assumption based on critical race theory was that African American male mentors served as role models for younger African American mentees, giving them confidence to succeed in a society where racism is common.
Research Questions

In this research study the research questions were as follows:

Main Questions

1. What are mentors’ perceptions of and experiences in the SAAB mentoring program?
2. What effect does being a mentor have on the mentor’s desire to be successful in college?

Subsidiary Questions

1. What are mentors’ perceptions of the effect they have on the students they mentor?
2. What are mentors’ views about what worked in regard to the mentoring program?
   More specifically, did mentors perceive themselves to be effective in providing students with information on how to be successful in school and in helping students improve social skills?
3. What, if any, are some improvements, according to the mentors, that could be made to the mentoring program?

Research Strategy—Grounded Theory

Grounded theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), which is a specific method of inductive analysis, was used to analyze the data collected and aided in concept development. This method of data analysis was created by the classical work of Glaser and Strauss (1967). From the grounded theory research strategy, a theory is generated about a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). According to the grounded theory approach, data collection and analysis occur simultaneously.

In grounded theory, rather than using some pre-existing theory or concept, the researcher examines participants’ utterances for implicit or explicit meanings and then uses those constructs
to clarify and build on the emerging conceptual categories. The grounded theory approach allowed me to gather data about the collective and personal experiences of a group of research participants from a larger group to gain an understanding of how the larger system works. Using a small representative sample of mentors from the larger group of mentors allowed for a better understanding of how the mentor system works from select mentors’ perspectives. Implicit in grounded theory is the belief that conceptual categories come from the data. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the researcher does not simply report objective reality, but interprets it, which is why looking at many cases and being up front and explicit about your own biases as a researcher was essential.

Charmaz (2000) described a constructivist approach to grounded theory where the researcher and participant share in constructing and defining data based on their subjective experiences. Data do not simply await discovery but are produced from the interactions between researcher and participant. The shared construction of data was dependent upon the researchers’ and participants’ structural and cultural contexts, as well as their values and ideologies. Lived reality was uncovered through an interactive process rather than through an objective reporting of it.

**Researcher-as-Instrument**

In positivist paradigms, the researcher is seen as neutral and objective as are the data and the process of research itself. However, in constructivism and critical theory and in qualitative research more broadly, there is explicit acknowledgement that the researcher is aware that his or her own biases and expectations may play a role in the research process. Qualitative researchers acknowledge their own biases and the fact that within all scientific inquiry, subjectivity is natural
(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In qualitative research, reflexivity refers to the researcher’s understanding and acknowledgment of his or her influences on the process of research.

My social class (middle), race (Caucasian), gender (female), and personal history did influence the interactive process that took place with the participants and me. Using semi-structured interviews and a focus group were the best avenues to get opinions and perspectives on the mentoring program. Both methods of interviewing ensured that the knowledge, perspectives, and experiences came straight from those who were involved in the mentoring program and did provide rich detail. Semi-structured interviews provided room for rewording questions as necessary if any further explanation were needed. Focus groups offered group formulations on a topic instead of individualized, unique ones. Thus, these two forms of interviewing provided insights into experiences of mentoring at an individual and group level.

In order to build trust, participants were informed of the confidentiality of their responses. The participants were informed that the intention was not to evaluate them or report them in any way but to try and gain a better understanding of the dynamics of the mentoring program and to help members of SAAB and any others invested in the SAAB group to improve leadership roles as a mentor, and to have the SAAB members understand the impact that mentoring in the schools has on African American at-risk students.

**Mentoring Experience**

I have had previous experiences being a mentor while working at a middle school and also working at the university level as a mentor for college-level students. I have worked within the medium-sized state university’s school counseling program by doing grant writing research for SAAB. Despite having had some experiences with mentoring and SAAB, the proposed research was approached from the standpoint of a curious learner. I was committed to studying
the effects of mentoring on mentors because I know the value that I felt as a mentor. I know what being a mentor did for my own personal sense of belonging and was never asked how my experience positively impacted me.

**Concerns**

Some people involved in the SAAB program had concerns about the intentions of this research. Some of the concerns were that they might be penalized for the findings from this study or that a program evaluation was being conducted, neither of which was the case. Other concerns were fear of being blamed or held responsible for any negative comments made by the mentors. In order to address this concern, by using pseudonyms and using the information gathered for educational purposes, I ensured confidentiality of all participants and informed them of the same.

My own race influenced the dynamics of this research endeavor in that I am a White middle class woman who is college educated. These contrasting identities had an impact on how participants related to and perceived me initially. My own Whiteness influenced the interactions with the mentors, who were African Americans. When conducting my semi-structured interviews and focus group, my role was to be the listener and not evaluator. I was clear throughout that I was not the expert in the subject matter of being an African American mentor; rather, participants were the experts in this area. By acknowledging subjectivity and biases and approaching the participants as experts, I reduced imbalances of power that might have been perceived.
Sampling Strategy

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Merely being a member of SAAB was not a sufficient criterion to be included in the study. The following were the sampling criteria for this research study:

- Participants had to be university students currently enrolled in classes.
- Participants must have been active members of SAAB.
- Participants must have been actively engaged in the mentoring program.
- Participants must have been a mentor for at least one year.

The 10 mentors were selected based on the criterion of level of engagement with the mentoring program, which was defined as being a mentor for at least one year. The mentors chosen were the ones considered most active. Most active was defined as those students in SAAB who attended the regular weekly mentor meetings and who were actively mentoring in the schools.

The African American female school counselor interviewed was currently working as a school counselor in the Midwest town in which the study took place. The SAAB administrators were chosen based on their level of engagement with the male mentors. Level of engagement was defined as actively mentoring on a weekly or biweekly basis.

Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select 10 of the 15 mentors and approach them for potential participation. I gathered a list of mentors because this information was published online through the SAAB website. I then contacted each prospective subject directly via email. I emailed each mentor about the purpose of my study via a recruitment script (Appendix A) and emailed them a potential participant response form (Appendix B) as well as a consent form for
individuals (Appendix C) and focus groups (Appendix D). I obtained a list of SAAB administrators from the university’s website and collected their email addresses. I then emailed each SAAB administrator a recruitment script (Appendix A), potential participant response form (Appendix B), and consent form (Appendix C). The school counselor who participated in the preliminary interview process was also recruited for participation via email. The school counselor was sent a potential participant response form (Appendix B) and consent form (Appendix C).

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) defined purposive sampling as a method in which the researcher uses preselected criteria to choose participants. This method of sampling was chosen because my participants were a subset of the larger population of mentors. Once all participants were contacted via email and had agreed to participate by emailing back the recruitment form, potential participant response form, and consent form, I again contacted the prospective participants to set up a meeting to start the interview process.

Participants

The main participants in this study were 10 African American male college students at a medium-sized state university in the Midwest who participated in the SAAMMP. Saturation is the process of developing conceptual categories from the data, which requires a continual sampling of the data until no new emerging categories or themes are produced (Creswell, 2007). Grounded theorists rely on theoretical saturation because it provides evidence for the conceptual categories generated from the data. Choosing 10 of the 15 mentors of SAAB to participate in the study provided a detailed description of the participants’ experiences leading to saturation of the data.
From these 10 participants, three participated in the focus group for this study. The mentors varied in academic year from freshman to senior as well as major and minor in college. Other participants were one local school counselor and two members of the SAAB administration, including a student executive board member and the SAAB advisor who was also the university’s director of the African American Cultural Center.

To summarize, the participants and their roles in the study were

- one school counselor who participated in a semi-structured interview,
- two members of the SAAB administration who participated in a semi-structured interview,
- 10 mentors who were former SAAB members who participated in a semi-structured interview,
- three of the 10 mentors, who participated in a focus group.

**Tools and Techniques**

**Informed Consent**

The informed consent forms provided in Appendix C and Appendix D provided information about confidentiality, time commitment, purpose of the study, participant rights as a research subject, and benefits of participating in the study. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and they had the option of withdrawing from the study at any point in time. In order to ensure participants’ confidentiality, a pseudonym was assigned to their demographic questionnaire and corresponding interviews (Appendix E). Once interested individuals contacted me via email about participating, I contacted each subject and we decided upon a meeting time and place that was mutually convenient and in a private setting. For the focus group, I gathered dates and times that best fit each participant’s schedule and coordinated a
time and place based on the information gathered. Data to answer the two main and three subsidiary research questions came from four sources:

- 10 individual semi-structured interviews with 10 mentors,
- one interview with a high school counselor,
- one individual interview with two administrators of SAAB, and
- one focus group with three SAAB mentors.

The first main research question regarding the mentors’ perceptions and experiences of the mentoring program came from the individual semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview questions also answered the second main research question regarding the effect of being a mentor on the mentor’s desire to be successful in college. Focus group interview questions answered two of the subsidiary research questions pertaining to mentors’ perceptions of the effect they have on the students they mentor, and mentors’ views about what worked in regard to the mentoring program. More specifically, did mentors perceive themselves to be effective in providing students with education on how to be successful in school and in helping students improve social skills? I gathered input from administrative members involved in SAAB and from a school counselor to answer the final subsidiary research question regarding what, if any, are some improvements that could be made to the mentoring program.

**Demographic Questionnaire**

During the first interview with the SAAB mentors, participants were assisted with the demographic questionnaire (Appendix E). The mentors were ages 21-24. Participants were from cities located near and around the medium-sized Midwestern university. They either were seniors in college, had graduated, or were currently in graduate school. Majors included
recreational therapy, psychology, safety management, math, English, and elementary education. Students reported engaging in activities such as NAACP, fraternities, and coaching.

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

In grounded theory, multiple iterations of data must be allowed in order to ensure that the data are exhaustive and that theoretical saturation occurs (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The semi-structured interview questions (Appendix E) were derived from Wyatt (2009), as well as from a review of existing literature discussing the current issues facing students who drop out of school and the perceptions of other mentoring programs as well as my preliminary work on this topic. The mentors participating in this study were interviewed during the academic year. The interview questions covered information such as personal experiences, attitudes, school attachments, and influences. Interviews also addressed whether or not there had been changes in the students’ perceptions of sense of belonging, self-efficacy, motivation, and sense of support. Mentors were asked about whether the program had had an impact on their own feelings of isolation, alienation, as well as negative peer influence and finally their attitudes toward dropping out. All interviews were audio-taped to aid in the transcription process.

The interviews with SAAB administrators elicited information on topics such as their views on the quality of mentors and whether or not they viewed the SAAB members as role models. The interviews with the SAAB mentors (Appendix E) and SAAB administrators (Appendix F) took place on the Midwestern campus in a private area of the SAAB office. Interviews with the school counselor were completed at the counselor’s school. The conversation with the school counselor focused on what curriculum was covered with the mentees and what benefits the counselor perceived the mentors had gained from being part of the mentoring program.
Following the completion of the final interviews, all participants were debriefed. Debriefing the participants allowed me to inform them further about the research and provided an opportunity for them to talk about their experiences. Debriefing helped to reduce the possibility of psychological harm for participants and provided closure to this step of data collection.

The purpose of using grounded theory was to understand the shared social problem that exists for the participants (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). The examples and stories that came from the participants were used for theoretical analysis. I did not use multiple interviews due to the fact that interviewing multiple individuals and groups involved with SAAB and conducting a focus group had already ensured saturation. Also the focus group conducted with SAAB mentors provided a deeper understanding of the meanings and perceptions of the SAAB mentors as a group. The focus group allowed for omissions and errors in my own interpretation to be corrected, allowing for a more complex and dense analysis.

Focus Group

In order to gather information about what was working and what was not working in retaining African American male students in school through the male mentor program, I conducted a focus group with three of the mentors who originally agreed to participate in individual interviews. The mentors who participated in the focus group were those mentors who had been members of SAAB the longest. The focus group questions (Appendix G) centered on what the mentors found useful and effective about the SAAB mentoring program while mentoring, what could have been done differently regarding the mentoring program, and what would they add to the mentoring program to make it more effective.
Self-Reflective Journal

A self-reflective journal was kept throughout the data collection and analysis portion of this study. This allowed me to look at the data in a reflective manner and to recognize my own biases and subjectivity during the interview and analysis phases of the study. Keeping a journal throughout the data collection process provided clarity of my own thought processes when trying to make meaning of the experiences my participants shared with me.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), data triangulation refers to the researcher’s attempts to collect data through multiple sources at different times, in different spaces, and from multiple persons to gain a more detailed picture of a particular situation. Data triangulation allows the researcher to cross-examine the data collected to check for credibility in the results. The method of data triangulation used in this study helped me to gain multiple perspectives and added richness and depth into my inquiry process. Interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed. A transcriptionist was hired who signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix H).

Analysis

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The grounded theory approach was used to guide the data analysis of the semi-structured interviews and focus group interview. Grounded theory analysis required me to look in depth at the data gathered to look for new perspectives and leads, as well as questions to raise to allow for an integration of findings. Responses were categorized into core concepts and sub-categories, which were used to derive emergent themes from the data. Data collection and data analysis were simultaneous and the constant comparative method occurred when the researcher began the coding process by identifying similarities and differences from the data collected (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The
constant comparative method allowed for systematic data analysis to identify when key themes, ideas, and experiences were expressed by the participants. The method of constant comparison allowed me to ensure saturation of core concepts (Creswell, 2007) by comparing each interview and the themes developed from each to be certain that no emerging themes were missing.

**Coding Procedure**

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), the coding process allows the researcher to see the assumptions made by the participants as well as those assumptions made by the researcher. The coding process used in grounded theory is systematic in that each piece of data is summarized and labeled. From the summaries and categories that emerged from the data, a theory was developed. Coding of the data consisted of comparing each piece of data collected and looking for similarities and differences.

**Open, Axial, and Selective Coding**

In order to identify emerging themes from the data, open, axial, and selective coding procedures were used (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These three stages of data analysis were used in grounded theory in order to generate a theory from the data collected. In open coding, the data were broken down sentence by sentence. Through the constant comparative method, data were compared and grouped together based on similarities and given a label. Once the labels were created, axial coding was used to develop main and sub-categories from the data. Axial coding was a way of reconnecting the data once they had been broken down during open coding. The process of open and axial coding continued until the data had been thoroughly examined for clear themes. During selective coding, a hierarchical structure was developed of core concepts and sub-categories. Selective coding was used to connect the previously found categories in order to build a story from the data. The theory was generated by analysis of the themes in the
data. Selective coding allowed for a core concept to emerge from the data, around which all other concepts were draped.

**Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research the terms trustworthiness and rigor replace the terms reliability and validity, which are used in quantitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed four evaluative criteria and steps to take to ensure trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative research. Trustworthiness refers to credibility, dependability, and confirmability in qualitative research. In this study in order to ensure trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and confirmability were addressed by using member checks, acknowledging subjectivity, and researcher reflexivity. Within this study the steps of data gathering and analysis were thoroughly described, creating a clear audit trail (Wolcott, 1990).

It is also well recognized by qualitative researchers that the interview process cannot be one that is strictly neutral, and that being honest and open about the experiences and motives each person brings to the interview is the first step to gathering more thorough and complex information. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) noted, the work of the interviewer should be considered as that of collaboration with the participants. The interviewer should be a partner with the participants in order for the information gleaned to be used to advocate for the group being studied. Hence, in this study I shared my intentions of collecting information to show how useful mentoring can be and to encourage its practice in other institutions of higher learning.

**Credibility**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described credibility as relating to whether or not the findings are congruent with or accurately describe reality. The authors stated that being engaged with or establishing a relationship with the organization was important; in this study, I had a history of
interacting with and working for SAAB. I also had the SAAB administrators participate in nominating 10 participants for inclusion in the study.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) wrote that triangulation is another way to ensure credibility. Triangulation through the use of multiple data sources was employed in this study in order to gather richer and more in-depth perspectives of the experiences with the SAAB program. The participants were diverse in that mentors, a school counselor, and SAAB administrators were interviewed thus providing multiple perspectives on the topic of mentoring.

**Transferability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described transferability in terms of providing a thick description of the setting, context, social, and cultural relationships in which the dialogue of data was collected. This thick description should include the number and length of data collection sessions, the time period of data collection, any organizations taking part in the study, and limitations on participants, methods of data collection, and the number of participants in the study. Qualitative researchers are not concerned with generalizing results (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), but they are interested in seeing whether or not two environments are similar enough to conclude that in a similar situation the results would be comparable. Transferability allows other researchers to look at a detailed description of the study and determine if there are similarities between their research environment and the present study so that results could be inferred about their population of interest. In order to ensure transferability or allowing readers to transfer the results into another context (Morrow, 2005), in this study, I provide a detailed description of the research strategy, coding procedures, data analysis, and participants.
Dependability

Dependability involves an in-depth description of the research so that a reader would understand the methods used in the study. Dependability could be safeguarded, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), by having a clear and strategic research design, providing specific details of the data gathering procedure, and evaluating the effectiveness of the research design and inquiry process. In order to ensure dependability, a detailed recording of the research process was conducted. The research process as well as how themes were abstracted from the data were consistently described. The use of a committee member and member checks to audit my interpretation of data also served to ensure dependability. This audit trail or transparent depiction of the research from start to finish was used to establish the consistency of my findings (Wolcott, 1990).

Confirmability

Finally, in order to ensure that the research is trustworthy, rigorous, academically sound, and free of bias, confirmability, as an evaluative criterion, was used. Procedures that were used to aid in confirmability were using the method of triangulation, being open and admitting assumptions and beliefs, being upfront about the limitations of the research, and providing an in-depth description of the research methods to be used. After having a select number of mentors and SAAB members review their transcripts for coding validity, I enlisted an auditor. To ensure the quality and consistency of the coding process and analysis process, a member of my doctoral committee viewed one transcript and the analysis of the interview transcript.

Member Checks

Member checks helped to guarantee trustworthiness. My doctoral committee members and participants were invited to review the interpretations of the data collected, which served as
built-in checks for the interpretive dialogue being developed. In order to arrive at solid interpretations of the data, member checking, or allowing others involved such as the mentors or administrators of SAAB to review the coding process of their own interviews, added to the trustworthiness of the research as well as served as a check on my own assumptions that may have impacted the coding process (Angen, 2000). Themes that I abstracted from the data based on my interpretation were verified by the participants. I followed up with participants during the coding process and final data summary to ensure that their perspectives were accurately represented. Member checking helped to ensure the credibility of the research by allowing participants to confirm or refute my interpretations of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Although member checks serve to ensure the adequacy of preliminary data collection, there are some drawbacks (Angen, 2000). New experiences may change how participants view their first responses or the respondent may disagree with my interpretation of the data. Despite these drawbacks, member checks are seen as crucial in establishing credibility of research findings.

**Researcher Reflexivity**

The participants’ responses to me as well as the research process itself were impacted by my experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In order for me to be reflexive I acknowledged as well as tried to prevent my own experiences from biasing the data collected. Thorough descriptions of my participants’ responses were taken, and my own reactions to the participants during the interview and focus group process were recorded and transcribed. Self-reflective notes and a personal process journal were kept in an attempt to become more aware of my own biases and my acknowledgment of my biases served to help minimize them.
Subjectivity

Subjectivity is inherent and acknowledged in qualitative research (Morrow, 2005). The research process is itself not clean and neutral as quantitative researchers would suggest (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Given these facts, I aimed to ensure that the participants’ experiences were reflected through the data analysis process and not my own perspectives. In order to ensure that the participants’ experiences were adequately reflected, my own biases were continuously and carefully examined through self-reflective notes and journaling. I also used member checking to ensure that the emerging themes were consistent with what the participants had conveyed.

Preliminary Interviews

Preliminary interviews had been conducted to gather data about the male mentoring program. Interviews had been conducted with the SAAB advisor, the SAAB academic chair, the SAAB president, and the school counselor of a local high school where the SAAB mentors serve. Preliminary data had been collected from the mentors about their experiences with mentoring and what membership in the SAAB group means to them. The mentors were asked about what led them to join the SAAB group and how group membership had influenced their academic success. A local high school counselor was interviewed on a preliminary basis to find out what the mentors were teaching the mentees and her perception of the effectiveness of mentoring on high school students. The administrators of SAAB were also contacted following IRB approval to schedule interviews. I had already been in contact on a preliminary basis with some of the mentors and administrators of SAAB so they were aware of the research taking place.

From the interview with the SAAB advisor, he felt as though the name of SAAB itself hinders its expansion. This may have been a reason that the SAAB name was changed to BOSS.
He wanted to make the program more inclusive of other ethnic groups. He also spoke of the fact that teachers get to choose which mentees get selected for mentoring based on who they perceive to be at risk and stated that being at risk is defined by more than just the student’s skin color.

Data from interviews with the SAAB president and academic chair revealed that being a part of the brotherhood and being held accountable for their actions by the SAAB members, who are like siblings, was a motivator to be successful in college. Both men seemed to think that mentor training could be improved but that the social and personal development they receive from SAAB made it worth being a member. A local school counselor was also interviewed and from that interview I found that the SAAB mentors do serve as positive role models for the high school students but that they need to be more structured and come in with an itinerary when working with the mentees. The local school counselor is an African American woman. In fact, she is one of very few African American school counselors in her school district. I chose this person to interview because I am most interested in high school and college-level students and dropout prevention. The mentors were also active in her school.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this retrospective qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of mentors in a mentoring program, specifically those in the Student African American Male Mentors Program (SAAMMP) run by the SAAB. The main objective was to understand the mentors’ perceptions of being a mentor and the meaning they made out of being mentors.

The grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was taken throughout this study. According to Creswell (2013), the grounded theory approach consists of collecting and coding the data and thematic development from the transcriptions. In accordance with this approach, a constant comparative method was employed, by comparing the data and developing emerging themes. In this section I offer verbatim quotes from participants to illustrate the themes that emerged.

Context of the Data Collected

The interviews took place at a medium-sized Midwestern university. Interviews were conducted in the African American Cultural Center at the university. All of the men interviewed were African American men who had previously been members of the SAAB organization. All of them had served as mentors for the SAAB organization.
The general attitude of the respondents was that they were willing and eager to participate in the study. The overall sense I had was that these men had learned a lot from the mentoring program and had reaped benefits from membership and that they believed that they were contributing to a greater cause by serving as positive role models for young men in the local school corporation. The experience of interviewing them was very humbling because I learned much more from the participants than I had originally thought I would. All of the interviews took about an hour to conduct, and the mentors offered rich and detailed information about their experiences of being mentors and the meaning they attached to it. Pseudonyms were given to the participants and these pseudonyms will be used throughout the results section when describing direct quotes. Pseudonyms were given to protect the privacy of the participants in the study.

**Overview of the Themes Developed**

Several themes emerged from the data collected, mainly from the explanations and expansions of ideas that were brought up by the mentors during the interviews.

1. The first theme set dealt with the impact and importance of the mentoring program itself. This theme comprised the different aspects of the program, namely, what it meant to be a mentor, such as serving as a role model, a derived sense of belonging, and connections made from a family-oriented approach.

2. A second class of themes dealt with the importance of learning from one another and of sharing experiences and struggles in order to make a connection to mentees.

3. Finally, but maybe most importantly, was the theme that seemed to cut across all other themes: the idea of Black men issues. In general, Black men issues were described as lacking positive role models, isolation, aloneness, being excluded, feeling stuck, being outside of mainstream, and questioning of the American dream.
Specifically, the themes were

- The Mentoring Program
  - Improvements to the Program
  - Being a Mentor: Meanings
  - Role Modeling
  - Sense of Belonging
  - Connection to Campus Leaders
  - A Family-Oriented Approach
- Learning from One Another and Accountability
  - Sharing Experiences and Struggles to make a Connection
- Black Men Issues
  - Giving Back/Lack of Role Models
  - Feeling Stuck and Feeling Excluded
- Acting White

**The Mentoring Program**

When speaking of the positives of the program, T.J. stated, “The summer bridge program gave us a chance to get credits and study before college started. Also going into the schools was something new and it was a good positive experience for us and students.”

T.J. saw being part of summer bridge as giving him an upper hand that he felt he needed to be successful. It also shows that he was eager to get a head start to ensure his success in college. Being successful is important to him, which is an idea that challenges many negative stereotypes surrounding Black youth. One other student, J.R., stated that
I never thought that I would see myself as a mentor, first of all. I thought that I needed to be mentored actually, so for me to actually go into schools and talk to younger students who came from where I came from and basically came from the environment where I came from, the neighborhood of urban and schools like that, going to public schools so I felt like I could give back in that way. What kept me going with it was holding accountability for myself, being accountable, practicing what you preach.

According to J.R., the mentoring program forced him to be accountable and gave him the opportunity to contribute even though initially he thought he himself needed a mentor. Interestingly, he did not see himself in the influential role of a mentor. He thought he needed help, but he was unaware, until this program, that he would be able to provide help to others. This idea spoke to the fact that, often, young people are unaware that they have the power to change things for the better by serving as a role model for someone else.

**Improvements to the Program**

When asked about the mentoring program itself, several themes emerged regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the program: the need for more consistency within the program, the need for more time to be spent with the mentees, the need for more college preparation skills to be shared with mentees, and the need for more opportunities for bonding with the mentees. Some of the participants spoke of what could have been improved with the mentoring program. For instance, J.T. stated,

I think the constant changes in the program were a problem with advisors changing every day. As the years went past I think that they lost sight of the things that worked and did not continue to lead the incoming freshmen and younger men. I think we should have
had more brotherhood events where we got to bond and come together as a family. That would have made SAAB feel like a real brotherhood.

Here, J.T. pointed to the lack of consistency and monitoring and unclear goal-setting for the program. J.T.’s concern over the lack of consistency in the program is significant. Bonding was also important to this man. More opportunities to bond would have been beneficial in getting to know and spend time with others like him.

**Being a Mentor: Meanings**

**Role modeling.** When students were asked about their experiences of being mentors, R.J. stated, “Being a mentor forces you to do better, provides opportunities for involvement, provides you with a sense of mattering, belonging, and allows you to develop leadership skills. It also encourages accountability and being a productive citizen.” Here, R.J. communicates that once you take on the role of being someone that another person looks up to, you take that role seriously. You do better because other young Black men are looking up to you and you do not want to be a disappointment to them. You matter and belong to a group that is striving to do better for one another. This sense of mattering and belonging is powerful because it reiterates the importance of the individual when, prior to this, without the group, the individual may have always felt as though he did not matter, that his voice did not matter.

C.J. emphasized the aspect of being a positive role model by stating that being a mentor was important because it allowed students to see people like themselves in college, and “like I had to be kind of like a better person, like some of the stuff you do you can’t always do, especially with people looking up to you.” On the other hand, J.C. stated this slightly differently. He said, “I see the importance of doing this for minority men. To be in higher education, there are not enough of us in college.” His reference to the number of Black men in college spoke to
the fact that he is a minority in that not many men who look like him are in college since Black men are underrepresented in higher education. In fact research has shown that in 2002, of students in higher education, only 4.3% were Black men, which is that same percentage that was recorded in 1976 (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). As a result, this student felt the need to be a representative of his minority group and work with potential students who have the ability to pursue college despite other obstacles that may be in their way.

All these quotes emphasize the point that not only can you overcome negative stereotypes if you work hard, more importantly, your work serves as an inspiration to other men, providing hope to the younger generation of Black men. An educated Black man defies many stereotypes of the typical Black man held by a racist society. The statement “there are not enough of us” shows that this student understood the significance of his role as a positive Black male role model because this was something that he may have lacked in his own life.

Several other participants described what being a mentor meant to them, also pinpointing their importance as role models. C.W. stated,

I felt like I was helping them out, being an example. Not only that, an African American male, a positive African American male. Some of them didn’t have that so that was useful for me, in a way, seeing that they came from a negative background and they seen somebody that been-there-done-that, you know, that made it here. It kind of made me feel like I was doing something for them and this is worth my time.

This student spoke of making it and relishing the opportunity of being living proof of that for younger boys who are still unsure of whether they will. He spoke to the fact he, like the young Black students he worked with, came from a negative environment. He was able to relate to students because of this. He knew what it was to be Black in a racist society and he knew that he
was still able to make it to college. Serving as a positive African American male role model made him feel more useful and powerful and that he was using his time in a positive manner.

**Sense of Belonging**

Besides the significance they attached to serving as positive role models to young Black boys, some students commented on being a mentor and stated that “it made me have a sense of belonging to the university and my organization,” “it made me proud of my university,” and “telling students what school I go to, that’s making me belong to the school even more.” M.J. shared,

Mentoring was something I felt like we did that was the main reason for doing SAAB. That was the whole idea of being part of the group was to get involved and go into the schools, I guess, besides doing other things, but I feel like with me being a mentor, I did have some sense of belonging to the university, but I knew I had some stuff to work on.

These quotes are powerful in communicating the fact that being part of a university gave them a sense of mattering and belonging. They had finally arrived; they now had the chance to be someone other than what people expected them to be, based on prevalent negative stereotypes. Being involved in an organization that gave back to youth like themselves gave them a sense of pride because they now had a voice and an audience eager and willing to listen. Simultaneously, M.J. knows that merely arriving is not enough, that you have to continue to work on yourself. Being a part of college is more than showing up and going to classes. There are still things he needs to work on personally, but being involved with youth like himself is a step in the right direction.
Connection to Campus Leaders: Resources for Social and Educational Development

Another theme that emerged was the importance of connecting to the campus, campus leaders, and how this was beneficial for their own social and economic development in the future. One participant stated that “being a mentor helped me learn to work with different people, learn the rules, and learn how to network.” Another student said, “I’ve gotten to know different faculty on campus. The president of the university knows me by name, by face.”

These two quotes are very interesting. First of all, the “learn the rules” comment could take on many meanings, but I took this to mean “learning how to navigate the rules of a predominantly White institution with White instructors and White students.” The significance of networking in terms of professional growth and career prospects means that due to being a mentor this student was able to meet influential people on campus, where these encounters could lead to opportunities he may not have had otherwise. Networking then became a resource for advancement that this young man might not have had, had he not been involved in the mentoring program. The fact that the university president knows a student by his name and face holds significance in that someone in a position of power and who is also a positive male figure is able to recognize this student because he knows of the student’s work. This student’s quote emphasizes that had he not become a mentor he would not have become involved, which would have not have allowed him to become recognizable to those in positions of power. A.J. was asked about his experiences of being a mentor, he stated,

It helped me want to be better and do better. You had to have a certain GPA in order to mentor which meant doing good in classes. The more you studied things the more you learned and found out what you were interested in.
This student went on to discuss how understanding the importance of doing well in school and studying so that you could find out what you are good at, helped him to finally declare a major in construction management. For him, being a mentor meant being held to a higher academic standard himself that in turn forced him to engage in some self-exploration about his own interests, which he may have never been encouraged to do before.

A similar story was shared by another participant, who was also a SAAB administrator, when he stated “I saw a great difference in the young men’s attitudes (both the SAAB guys as well as the middle school students). It made me want to go into student affairs to continue learning about retention.” One other participant stated “Being a mentor changed my post-secondary plans from psychology to student affairs. I fell in love with helping students achieve.” From these quotes, it becomes clear that being a mentor helped them in more ways than simply seeing students like themselves become successful and encouraging them even more to want to continue to make a difference in students’ lives. It helped them to figure out the direction in which they wanted to steer their own professional paths, something they had not quite known before.

Finally, J.M. stated,

I never thought about going further in college but I had brothers that was helping me talk about going to graduate school and things like going to grad school and getting a doctor’s degree and making me feel more professional than ever.

This student spoke about professionalism as not just a standard of conduct but also as a subjective experience. J.M. finally had people in his life making him feel like he could accomplish something great for himself. Feeling “more professional” was a personal experience
because before coming to college and joining SAAB he had not been encouraged or told about all of the possibilities for him.

**A Family-Oriented Approach/Being a Big Brother**

Another theme that emerged from the data concerned the importance of taking a family-oriented approach with students, that is, treating mentees like family members, as if the mentors were big brothers, looking out for their mentees. S.B. mentioned,

> I use a form of counseling called “intrusive counseling.” It’s not your average, hey, John you know you didn’t do well and you know better than that. Mine’s more of a family-oriented approach. You know, get your butt up, man. Make something happen for yourself. You owe something to somebody other than yourself. You’re sitting here failing for what? So I’ve engaged these students into my own extended family. I treat all students that I come in contact with or that I engage with like family.

This quote shows that sometimes you have to be real with your students just as one would be with family. Sometimes you cannot sugarcoat things in order to avoid hurting feelings. Taking a straightforward approach with students and pointing out what they need to do in order to be successful is important. Hard work means doing for others and not sitting around feeling sorry for yourself. You have to do better and give to others in order to be successful. One other way to analyze his statement is that in order to drive students to do better, you cannot be passive and simply wait on the sidelines for them to do something. He is suggesting that you cannot always focus on protecting the self-esteem of the student, an idea that is quite dominant in mainstream U.S. society. He is questioning and challenging the utility of protecting students’ self-esteem for the betterment of the students. For him, improving a young person’s self-esteem is to spur them
Another student, K.W., shared the same sentiments but more gently by stating,

Being like a big brother, I find that to be more useful. Being their friend more than just the enforcer. Being less demanding and more resourceful. And I found that you have to be more of a brother or friend than a parent to them cause that’s what they need. They need that. They need more of a friend, a brother, to sit down with them and say, hey, this is what you could do. This is what I did and this is what I dealt with.

This quote describes the fact that you have to be a brother, friend, and resource in order to work with African American men. Based on this and others’ quotes, it seems that young Black men have been disappointed by at least one parental figure and have encountered negative individuals in the enforcing role. I wonder also if there is a lack of trust in those who hold expert and enforcer roles and more stock is put into someone who is willing to share their own personal experiences with them. Vulnerability is introduced when people share their personal experiences, in that struggles and hardships are often expressed, which helps to build a trusting relationship and bond between African American men. It seems more effective to share with a student the possibilities they have instead of telling them what they have to or are expected to do, because often their own expectations of others have not been met.

**Learning From Each Other, Holding Each Other Accountable: A Culture of Excellence**

Another theme that emerged from the data was the importance of African American men learning from one another and holding one another accountable for their actions. In a sense this “holding each other accountable” helped to create a culture of expected excellence within the SAAB organization. One participant said, “That’s one thing I think our organization is about. Keeping each other lined up together. Encouraging each other. If we’re struggling, we help each
other out, providing some resources and learning from each other.” Another participant, Z.W., commented,

We all have personalities but in the same manner we’re here for one thing and that’s to graduate together. Especially being minorities on campus. It’s difficulty having that voice. I believe that’s the main thing, the mission, being together, unity, which helps create a culture of excellence.

His words reminded me of the song by Bill Withers (1972) with the lyrics,

You just call on me brother, when you need a hand
We all need somebody to lean on
I just might have a problem that you'll understand,
We all need somebody to lean on.

Without one another they would be alone, so each member serves as a pillar of strength, a resource to help each member get by. There is also a sense of obligation to reduce the chances of isolation and aloneness on a campus where there are few others who look and sound like them. These African American men not only learn from one another but also lean on each other.

The theme that cuts through all this seems to be of aloneness/isolation due to being Black in a racist society. As Black men, they each understand the plight that the other faces. They are not all alike and may even have clashing personalities, but they understand that there is strength in their voices together, and without unity, they go unheard and overlooked.

**Importance of Sharing Experiences and Struggles, Which Helped Make a Connection**

When I asked T.J. if anyone could be a mentor to African American students, he remarked, “Having a preppy person from Bel Air coming in and talking to some hood rats from Compton, that’s not going to do anything for them.” This quote has a few implications. First of
all, T.J. makes it clear that mentors must have some experience of knowing what it is like to be an African American man to be able to relate to the students whom they were mentoring. Similar background experiences were important to be able to understand the struggles that are faced by African American men. In order to be effective you have to know what it is like to be poor and/or looked down upon as if you were somehow “bad” based on the color of your skin. The term “hood rat” in itself denotes scandal and a bad image. In addition to being an African American man, being a “have” versus a “have not” is of some importance. There is a difference in the experiences of students who have been raised in more affluent homes (“a preppy person from Bel Air”) versus those who have to struggle economically (“hood rats from Compton”). Another participant, A.R., shared a similar thought by saying,

You can’t bring me to come and talk to a bunch of rich kids. I mean, keeping it real, I can’t go talk to rich kids. I’ve been broke my whole entire life so it has to be a connection. That’s the main thing. There has to be a connection. If you have a connection with that person then anybody can mentor.

Again A.R. too conveys that a personal connection that goes beyond just being an African American man is crucial in serving as a mentor. In his case, he points out that having struggled economically all his life, he can talk to a child from a financially difficult background but definitely not with a rich child. He would be unable to make a connection to rich kids who would look at him differently. We are aware of socioeconomic differences from the start of any relationship and when two people do not share similarities in that regard, it becomes a barrier to building rapport. A.R. is clearly conveying that for the most part, black and white students often do not come from the same economic place. He seems to be sharing that you have to have had
the experience of being black and navigating the struggles of being poor in order to relate to 
young black boys from impoverished backgrounds.

**Black Men Issues**

A theme that emerged from the data was the importance of setting an example and being a positive role model, which would hopefully help to change student attitudes. One of the participants, F.W., stated that

issues that were important for SAAB to address with our young men was peer pressure because there’s the pressure for African American men often times not to be smart ‘cause it’s not cool to be smart and that peer pressure was then blow off your classes, cut school, get involved in a lot of those things that are out there in the street. And they needed to see some young men that had faced that pressure who were now, in spite of that pressure, were successful and continuing on, you know, with postsecondary education.

This quote shows the importance of serving as a role model to set a positive example for students. The meaning here is that despite peer pressure, students can make a choice to be successful. This participant spoke directly of the pressures not to do well or not to try hard.

Several of the young men interviewed shared the importance of going against the negative stereotypes that they feel characterize African American men. R.C. shared his experience of mentoring and shared his feeling when he met with students. He stated,

Let us show you how you can do it and be successful. You don’t have to give in to the pressures of the street, of the drugs, of the sex, of the racism, of the whatever—you fill in the blank, you can be more than a rap star or basketball player.

R.C. was very aware of the negative stereotypes and limited definitions of those who belong to his ethnocultural group. He was sharing that there is a pressure for Black men to live up to the
negative stereotypes that are laid out for them or to be force fitted into the rap star or basketball player molds that are so common in U.S. society. He noted that with guidance, you can be more than what you or others ever thought that you could be; you do not have to settle with the lot handed to you in life. D.R. shared that

a lot of the boys don’t know what they want to do. A lot of them want to be basketball players, football players, and we were telling them that there is more to life than just athletics, there’s more than just playing sports.

D.R. said that African American men are often held to a preconceived notion that they will not amount to more than being athletes, rap stars, or drug dealers. He laments that, unfortunately, African American boys often do not know what they want to do, partly because they have been told by society and the media that they only have a few limited options and if those options do not pan out, then they are doomed to the opposite side of fame and fortune, which is poverty and amounting to nothing. There is no in-between based on this idea. But D.R. asserts that African American men like himself have options, and that all that they need is for someone show them what those options and alternatives are.

**Giving Back What You Did Not Have, Lack of Positive Role Models**

“Black men issues” was a theme that ran throughout the data. Many of the young men talked of the importance of showing African American male students how to be a man and providing an emotional connection. Emotional connections were often lost with father figures due to being raised primarily in single-parent households. The participants spoke about this with anger, expressing feelings of being let down and disappointed while also communicating the desire to be more and have more. J.T. stated,
I learned that these boys like myself don’t have a positive role model at home so everything you do, everything you say has to be positive and you not only say it but you have to walk what you say. You had to walk what you talk. Practice what you preach.

This quote is powerful in that it spoke to the fact that not having a positive male role model has a negative impact on African American men. At the same time, this quote also relates that despite what one lacked, J.T. believed that you can still give back to others. He spoke of the importance of being positive, implying that so many things in the lives of African American men are negative that being positive is a rarity. In order to be influential in the lives of young Black men, you have to do what you say you are going to do. Young Black men like J.T. have learned through negative experiences that they cannot count much on the words of others, which is why for them, actions are especially powerful. This statement also spoke to the pressures faced by young Black men in that their actions are seen as generalized to the whole population of Black men. So if they do anything wrong, it will reflect badly on all African American young men. It is as if J.T. is saying that since everything he does will be scrutinized by society, he, like other Black men, has to mind everything he does and says. This young Black man is constantly aware of the fact that he has to try and break away from negative stereotypes even when he is doing good. One other participant, B.W., shared his experiences and stated that these kids came from poverty-stricken environments. They were angry because there was no man in the household so a lot of our conversations and a lot of our talks or the thing that popped out more than anything else was that they were angry.

Another participant, K.W., stated that these kids have been let down so much in their lives to the point that I don’t want to lose them more than they are right now. It’s hard to keep them engaged because everyone
that they come in contact with disappoints them or leaves them. So it’s the attitude. It’s getting them to see differently. It’s that tangible aspect. You don’t find too many African American teachers around and it’s a cultural understanding.

Like other participants in my study, K.W. spoke of the disappointments that young Black men encounter, but he went further to describe the importance of not losing them. This suggests that these African American boys are vulnerable in that even minor setbacks and let downs could have a detrimental impact on them. Getting to college is not enough. The particular experiences these young Black men have in college also set the background for how successful they will be. He described that you have to help young Black men see things differently by being a strong presence in their lives. He spoke of a cultural understanding that is shared among young Black men that they are a precious commodity within the world of higher education. He said you do not see many African American teachers, so the ones that are there have even more pressure placed on them to have an impact on the young men they work with. When looking at the quote that there are not many African American teachers, this student seems to be correct given that Bireda and Chait (2011) reported that although 40% of the national school population are minorities, only 15% of the national teaching workforce are minority. Black men know that presence and attitude go a long way in helping you be successful, but without a role model to mirror appropriate presence and attitude, youth can become easily discouraged because there are not many in society fighting for their success or even demonstrating it.

**Feeling Stuck and Feeling Excluded**

Other participants discussed black men issues, and one participant in particular spoke passionately about the matter. J.R. described black men issues as the following:
Struggling. Not having a job. Not having clothes. Not having food. Listening to your mother argue with you, be upset dealing with not being able to have a job. Being unemployed. Seeing your friends with things that you’ve always desired but you don’t have the capacity or the ability to afford, just those types of issues. Just life issues. Life issues in the ghetto or life issues in poverty. A lot of African American men want to be rappers or basketball players because that’s the quickest way they can see to get themselves out of poverty. We as Black men, we do a lot of window shopping. I think there was a rap song about window shopping and it was more or less just looking into a window and looking at something and daydreaming that you can afford to go get it. Having champagne taste but empty pockets. Wanting to drive a Lexus but I’m stuck in a Buick.

This quote powerfully conveyed the sense of always being an outsider. The theme that seemed to emerge from this quote is the feeling of being stuck and also being excluded. It communicates the sense of not being able to make changes, no matter how hard you try. It seemed as though J.P. was discussing a struggle that seemed to be insurmountable, due to poverty and lack of basic resources such as food and clothing. He spoke of not having things, of not being able to pay for things, which is not due to lack of hard work but due to the fact that there are few opportunities for Black men to get basic needs met. He spoke very matter of factly that struggling and poverty are just life issues that Black men face, that other races do not have to struggle with, at least not to the same degree. It just is how it is, regardless of how hard you try. He mentioned that young Black men think that the only way to get ahead is to search for a quick way out of the plight that seems destined to them. You either become famous or a drug dealer, these are the options allocated to Black men based on their life experiences. J.P. used the
analogy of window shopping, usually discussed with regard to women and wealthy men, to talk about the “outsider looking in” experience of Black men in U.S society. He said that simply by the color of his skin, he was outside of mainstream society. J.P. seemed to be questioning the entire idea of the American dream.

The American dream, a national philosophy that was defined by James Truslow Adams (1931), states that regardless of the position to which you were born and your social class, through hard work everyone has the opportunity for success and prosperity. This idea stresses that life will be better for those who work hard, which is based on ability and achievements and not the circumstances that you were dealt at birth. The American dream is based on the idea that all people are created equal. The idea of the American dream is that if you work hard enough, you can have a good job, a family, children, and a house with a white picket fence, but this participant is directly questioning this ideal, upon which our nation is based. J.P. said that this dream has not been realized by most Black men. He spoke of wanting more than what he is stuck with, but not being able to obtain those things. The things that would make life better are just beyond the reach of Black men. He said that Black men are told about all the things they could or should have but are not given the chance to obtain those things due to stereotypes, racism, and bias that are always against them no matter how hard they work. He said that, in fact, all men are not created equal; therefore, they are not able to obtain the promised American Dream.

**Acting White**

The foundation laid throughout this study deals with a phenomenon called acting White. The reader can determine throughout the presented findings that this is the underlying premise of what these young men were trying to explain. The problem with acting White comes from
research done by Fordham and Ogbu (1986). The authors conducted a study following African American high school students and reported that these students did not advance academically for fear of being accused of acting White. These authors found that educational gaps were apparent between African American and Caucasian students and these gaps were caused by strongly held cultural attitudes. To do well in school was seen as something White students did, so when Black students did well they were accused of acting as if they were something they were not. The stigma associated with the idea of acting White affected students’ motivation to want to do well, according to Fordham and Ogbu.

In Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) work, acting White referred to African Americans selling out or betraying their own cultural identity by living up to cultural standards set by dominant Anglo Saxon culture. Acting White goes beyond educational achievement and incorporates the way one dresses, speaks, and even the music one listens to and activities one engages in. The authors stated that the term acting White is a socially constructed term that comes out of a response to inequality and racism faced by Black Americans. However, the men who participated in my study were not hampered by any idea of acting White. In fact, they were openly and proudly committed to academic success for themselves and their mentees and also took pride in being Black. It seemed as though the students were well aware of this acting White phenomenon but chose to ignore the negative connotation by striving to be successful against all odds. The participants in this study acknowledged the barriers they have faced and are working as mentors to help break down those barriers for students who will be coming after them.

This being said, it brings to mind the work of Boykin and Bailey (2000) and Tyler et al. (2008). These authors discussed how sharing the same experiences and practicing the same cultural norms are essential for students to feel as though they belong. Tyler et al. defined
cultural discontinuity as “a school-based behavioral process where the cultural value-based learning preferences and practices of many ethnic minority students—those typically originating from home or parental socialization activities—are discontinued at school” (p. 281). The participants talked about a disconnect of shared personal experiences pointing out that only African American men can relate to other African American men when it comes to understanding the background and experiences they come with and the norms and values that impact minority students. Without a shared understanding, school performance and well-being are negatively impacted. The men in this study worked to create cultural continuity for their mentees. This meant they try to teach these men to embrace change and growth and that it is acceptable to go against the negative expectations laid before them. The participants in the study shared experiences in order to transcend cultural learning and set out new, more positive experiences for the students they mentor.

This section would not be complete without visiting the work of Delpit (1988). Delpit described the cultural capital possessed by middle- and upper-class White students as including knowledge of the implicit value systems and discourse codes that are required to be successful in the system of education. She described how students from White middle- and upper-class families come to school primed or already knowing the values, language, and rules of the culture of power and how students not from the culture of power lack this knowledge and are labeled as needing remediation. The participants in this study worked with mentees so that they could be successful in the education system. By sharing experience, imparting wisdom, and serving as role models, they strove to impart knowledge that is required to be successful. The participants were in fact working to break down barriers of institutionalized racism and discrimination that have been built up against African American students for centuries.
The purpose of this retrospective qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of mentors in a mentoring program, specifically those in the Student African American Male Mentors Program (SAAMMP) run by the SAAB. The main objective was to understand the mentors’ perceptions of being a mentor and the meaning they make out of being mentors. Several themes emerged from the data collected. Specifically, the themes were

- **The Mentoring Program**
  - Improvements to the Program
  - Being a Mentor: Meanings
  - Role Modeling
  - Sense of Belonging
  - Connection to Campus Leaders
  - A Family-Oriented Approach

- **Learning From One Another and Accountability**
  - Sharing Experiences and Struggles to Make a Connection

- **Black Men Issues**
  - Giving Back/Lack of Role Models
  - Feeling Stuck and Feeling Excluded

- **Acting White**

The theme that seemed to cut across every aspect of the data collected had to deal with Black men issues. These issues dealt specifically with a feeling of being stuck and excluded. Feeling stuck referred to not being able to make changes no matter how hard you work. Feeling stuck referred to the notion of not being able to change the reality of institutional racism that
seems to permeate every thread of the African American culture. Exclusion referred to being shut out of the American dream. This meant that African Americans were excluded from the basic idea that our nation is founded upon, such that if you work hard enough you can have those things promised to you such as a good job, home, and family life.

Despite these odds, the participants in this study seemed to be well aware of what they were faced with and were striving to make the futures of their mentees better by sharing with them their own experiences and showing them that success is possible. The young men in this study chose to ignore those negative connotations assigned to them and were striving to make themselves more successful. They were striving to bridge the gap between themselves and the younger Black student population. They were working towards creating a cultural continuity by establishing connections and stability with young people.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This retrospective study was conducted in order to gain an understanding of the experiences of mentors in a mentoring program, specifically those in the Student African American Male Mentors Program (SAAMMP) run by the SAAB at a medium-sized state university in the Midwest. The main objective was to understand the mentors’ perceptions of being mentors and the meanings they made out of mentorship. A secondary objective was to investigate whether being a college-aged student mentor for students in public middle and high schools would provide mentors with motivation, the sense of belonging, and the sense of mattering that they need in order to make the decision themselves to stay in college until they graduate. Chapter 5 addresses the findings of this study within in the context of the qualitative research questions that this study tried to answer, links the findings to scholarship addressed in the literature review, and outlines potential future research related to the topic. Limitations of the study and application are also examined.

Overview of Findings

For the African American male students in this study, the experience of having been a mentor was a positive one. The personal meanings they attached to being mentors were positive too, taken summatively. Although the students did discuss challenges that they had to confront, they were able to use these challenges in a productive manner in order to become more effective
mentors. For instance, despite challenges that these mentors faced due to being African American men, and perhaps because of them, they were able to serve as positive role models and help other students find the strength they needed to become successful despite similar struggles. As discussed in the literature review, peer influence appeared to play a role in the success of African American male students. In fact, peers are very influential and do provide each other with a sense of belonging, support, self-esteem and self-confidence (F. W. Lee & Ip, 2003) which appeared to have been the case in this study.

The college students in this study described the importance of serving as positive role models for the young middle school-going African American men they were mentoring. They believed that they served as an inspiration, a source of hope, and provided evidence that you can make it despite the circumstances from which you came. The African American mentors discussed feeling accountable, in that they were providing living proof that you can be successful even in face of negative expectations. The mentors took this role seriously and took pride in their ability to offer consistent role modeling to their young mentees, something they had themselves lacked growing up. This finding is consistent with the results of a study conducted in Washington State, where mentors worked harder knowing that they served as role models and were key players in whether or not their mentee stays in school (Washington State Department of Personnel, 1993). Utsey et al. (2003) explained that having the role models in mentees’ lives allowed for the development of meaningful interpersonal relationships, healthy recreational activities, leadership skills, and socially acceptable behaviors.

As shown in the study conducted by Lan and Lanthier (2003), there was noticeable deterioration of African American male student success in school during the eighth to 12th grade years, and students as early as eighth grade reported feeling alienated. Feelings of alienation and
lack of success have led to increased dropout rates and this phenomenon has carried over into the realm of higher education where they are still underrepresented. The African American mentors in this study spoke of their awareness of being underrepresented in colleges and universities and that by asserting themselves as positive role models, they were able to regain a sense of power over their own futures. Being a mentor allowed them to be visible and heard within the community and the institution. They were able to say, “We are here, here are our experiences, and this is what you can learn from us.”

To varying degrees, all of the mentors in the study expressed feeling a sense of belonging to the SAAB organization and university as a result of their membership in SAAB. Sense of belonging or connection is crucial for young people who are developing their sense of identity, and it impacts their emotional, social, intellectual, and psychological functioning as well as their academic performance (T. Lee & Breen, 2007). As noted in the literature review, not feeling a sense of connection and belonging relates to dropout rates in that students are more psychologically motivated to accelerate in school when they feel respected, needed, and supported (Anderman, 2002; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Therefore, being a part of the SAAB group provided the African American men in this study the sense of connection and belonging they needed to excel academically.

Similarly, the participants in this study spoke of the importance of connecting with campus leaders and how those connections were important to their own social and economic development in the future. By making connections to campus leaders they were able to learn the rules of navigating within a predominantly White institution and how to network within that system.
Research has shown that being a part of a Big Brother program has positive results. The Big Brothers/Big Sisters program was included in a study conducted between 1992 and 1993 to assess the impact of intense mentoring, consisting of face-to-face contacts for at least three times a month in three-hour intervals (Keating et al., 2002). The results of that study indicated that mentees were less likely than the control group to start using illegal drugs, to skip class or a day of school, and to start drinking. In addition to these gains, mentees reported that they felt support and more approval from classmates. Consistent mentoring relationships helped mentees feel more socially connected and enabled them to make better decisions for themselves leading to fewer discipline referrals.

Based on the literature, it would seem as though the practice of exclusion for African American male youth starts at a young age and continues on with them into adulthood. For example, an intersection has been identified between exclusionary discipline practices and being of low socioeconomic status, male, and having low achievement (Wu et al., 1982). African American students have also been more frequently subjected to exclusionary discipline practices in school such as suspension, expulsion, and corporal punishment (Townsend, 2000). The removal of African American students from the classroom for disciplinary reasons lowers the likelihood of their return to school in general (IDOE, 2009). When students are not allowed to be successful in school or given the opportunity to work as hard as White students due to being removed from the educational system, it is no wonder they are left with unattainable dreams.

Overall, the students interviewed in my study had chosen to defy the negative connotations attached to being African American by striving to be successful against all odds. My participants acknowledged the barriers they had faced and were working as mentors to help break down those barriers for their young mentees, who would follow them. By sharing
experience, imparting wisdom, and serving as role models, they were imparting the knowledge that is required to be successful. The participants were in fact working to break down barriers of institutionalized racism and discrimination that have been built up against African American students for centuries.

**Links Between the Present Study and Existing Literature**

**Sense of Belonging**

The African American men in this study discussed many barriers to academic success that they had encountered throughout their educational endeavors. Many of these barriers have been written about extensively in the literature. All of these men spoke of what it is like not to feel as though they belonged in higher education for one reason or another. Many of the reasons were focused on institutionalized racism, lack of role models, dearth of sense of belonging, and not seeing students who look like themselves within institutions of higher education. As research shows, African American men are less likely than any other race or gender to enroll in a four-year college (Noguera, 2003). In fact, research shows that the percentages of Black men enrolled in institutions of higher education have not changed for the past 25 years remaining at 4.3% (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). This is a cause for concern given that after all these years and so much discussion, research, and policy around this topic, there is little to show in the way of real change, which indicates that something is not being done right. Once students are enrolled in college, their sense of belonging seems to be tied with level of engagement while in college. Harper (2012) reported that students who spend time engaged in college-related activities derive gains in the domains of cognition, intelligence, ethics, skill development, grade point averages, college life adjustment, as well as racial and gender identity development.
Similarly, membership and engagement also improve and enhance relationships with faculty and peers, which was reported by African American men to be factors in academic success.

Creating Cultural Continuity

Boykin and Bailey (2000) and also Tyler et al. (2008) discussed how similar experiences shared among students and links between the contexts of their home and school are essential for students to feel as though they fit in. Tyler et al. defined cultural discontinuity as “a school-based behavioral process where the cultural value-based learning preferences and practices of many ethnic minority students—those typically originating from home or parental socialization activities—are discontinued at school” (p. 281). The participants in my study talked about a disconnect between their personal experiences and those of many of their non-Black peers, pointing out that only African American men can relate to other African American men when it comes to understanding the background and experiences they come with and the norms and values that impact minority students. Without such a shared understanding, school performance and well-being are negatively impacted.

The men in this study were working to create cultural continuity for their mentees by using their shared backgrounds to connect with them and then to teach them to go against the negative expectations placed on them due to the color of their skin. The participants in the study set out new, positive possibilities and experiences for the students they mentored. The men who participated in my study were striving to be successful against all odds and were making such success possible for their mentees too. They were not hindered by any fear that such striving could be misinterpreted as “acting White.”
Connection and Mattering

These African American men spoke of not seeing themselves as mattering much until they came to college. Sense of mattering, which is a construct separate from sense of belonging, is an influential factor in the academic success of African American male mentees (Harper, 2012). Having a feeling of interpersonal mattering has been shown to encourage mentees to excel in their educational pursuits. Sense of mattering is even more imperative to the marginalized population of African American men, who are often seen as unmotivated, perceived to not be as engaged, and are expected to fail. For the men in this study, being a part of the SAAB organization made them feel as though they mattered. They were finally receiving recognition for their hard work by being recognized on campus.

In addition to feeling as if they matter, Harper (2012) reported that for African American men, making connections on campus was a factor in collegiate academic success. In fact, connecting with older Black leaders on campus was cited as imperative to networking, choosing classes, transitioning, and asking for help which ultimately led to greater student success.

Sense of mattering is an old concept with a long history. It derives from the concept of marginalization, also a term that comes from as early as the Civil Rights movement and likely predates even that. Marginalization as defined by Park (1928) refers to the sideling or disregarding of particular persons or groups. Marginalization impacts those persons deemed to be different from the in group based on differences such as race, ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, and the like. Individuals are either accepted or rejected based on whether or not they belong to the in or out group respectively. The students in this study were not as concerned about being a part of the in group of White individuals; instead they were trying to find strength within their own group. The concept of sense of mattering would not be complete without
recognition of the work of Ellison (1952). In his book, *Invisible Man*, Ellison described the experiences of African Americans of not being seen, and due to their invisibility to Whites, even questioning their own existence. In speaking of the refusal of others to see him, he spoke of wanting to fight back or lash out so as to make others see him. The young men in this study spoke of not being seen until they came to college.

Schlossberg (1989) explored the theory of marginalization and applied it directly to college students. She described marginalization as feeling as though one does not matter, does not belong, and does not have a voice. Students who feel marginalized or socially excluded are less likely to do well in college, feel as though they do not matter, and are less likely to feel as though they are capable of making a difference. When students feel socially excluded or disregarded, Schlossberg reported that they tend to be less involved, less successful, and less likely to finish school. It appeared as though feelings of social exclusion were in direct opposition to belonging and mattering. Students who feel excluded based on race and are placed in the out group are unable to feel a sense of mattering and belonging. In addition, Freire (1970) stated that marginalized groups lack a voice and are often forced into a culture of silence thereby pushing them further into oppression. Marginalization as described by Schlossberg can stem from interactions with other social groups that place the status of being unequal and lower onto the minority group. Schlossberg stated that marginalization not only impacts a student’s sense of belonging and mattering, but also impacts his or her ability to fit in, feel significant, and leading them to feel as though they are not needed by others.

The students in this study had carved their own niche for themselves by strengthening their bonds with members of their own ethnocultural group. In doing so, these African American men were ensuring that they did not become marginalized.
Implications for the System of Education

The results from this study show that for African American men, serving as mentors has many positive benefits. Being a part of an organization where African American men are able to work together for the good of the generation after them has an impact on how they view themselves as well as the hard work they put into being successful. However, the connections and sense of belonging that these men attain comes late, only in college, which spoke to the fact that something needed to be done earlier.

There is a flaw in the educational system as a whole, given that these men speak of being left behind at such young ages. In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics (2010) reported that in the state of Indiana, African American students aged 16 to 24 dropped out of high school at a rate of 9.3%, the highest among all ethno-cultural groups. These numbers speak to the fact that being left behind is happening earlier for African American men than for their counterparts from other ethnocultural groups.

Families from cultural orientations that differ from the culture of power provide knowledge to their children that contrasts with that of the middle and upper classes, and these differences are seen as deficits (Boykin & Bailey, 2000; Delpit, 1988). Often in the school setting, success is dependent upon knowing the rules of the culture of power, and those students lacking such knowledge, mostly low-income or minority students, feel estranged from the teacher and the educational system. For instance, minority children are not familiar with indirect communication styles and questioning which are strategies teachers often use (Boykin & Bailey, 2000). This leads to miscommunication and often to discipline referrals for African American students who are attuned to responding to direct behavior requests. In attempts to balance power differentials in the classroom, teachers often use veiled commands, but African American
students, unaware of the rules of the classroom culture, see indirect commands as the teacher offering an alternative. Given this, it would seem as though those working within the system of education should strive to take into consideration these things so as to help African American men become more successful. Home-school cultural discontinuity results in problems for many ethnic minority students. Teachers’ reactions to minority students who do not exhibit the norms and values of the dominant middle-class culture in schools, or show familiarity with them, may compromise the school performance and psychological well-being of minority students.

Given the fact that despite the wealth of information available about the importance of home-school cultural continuity in improving educational outcomes for students, many public schools do not recognize or utilize core African American values, such as using direct methods of communication, choosing instead to teach from a White, middle-class perspective. Thus, many African American students are left to face academic difficulties and often failure. Tyler et al. (2008) reported that students who experience home–school discontinuity reported feeling higher levels of anger and less self-worth, difficulty with emotional and academic well-being, lower self-efficacy, poor self-esteem, and lower grade point averages. Given all of this, it is not a wonder that so many African American men are left feeling stuck and excluded.

In addition, some studies have shown that one of the most recurrent and reliable variables that impact at-risk mentees’ dropout rate was the perception that teachers did not care about them (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Startlingly, research has shown that once a student drops out of school, his or her self-esteem improves (Ekstrom et al., 1986). This means that there is something happening within the school environment that is causing some students to feel alienated, which decreases their self-esteem, leading them to want to drop out of school. This research spoke to why connections are so important to young African American men. Like
everyone, they desire to be recognized given the fact that throughout their educational careers, they have often gone unrecognized.

For years, the phenomenon of school dropout has been studied from the point of view that there is something internal about the students that contributes to a decision to drop out. In fact, students often drop out due to a disconnection or disengagement from the school which results when students are alienated by those who work in the school building (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). When students feel alienated they start to lose interest and motivation. When students do not feel socially valued their behavior changes for the worse which causes teacher expectations of student success to drop (Larkin & Chabay, 1989; Resnick & Klopfer, 1989).

Some researchers prefer to use the term pushed out rather than dropout (Brownstein, 2009, p. 1). This phenomenon of being pushed out stems from strict zero-tolerance policies that force students out of school for even minor infractions, or the creation of an environment that does not facilitate their success, forcing them to leave. Often the targets of these policies are African American youth. According to Brownstein (2009), zero tolerance policies “are paving the way for higher dropout rates and involvement in the criminal justice system, a pathway often referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline” (p. 1). Often these harsh zero tolerance policies lead some students into the criminal justice system, which alienates students from schools and destroys any relationships students had with educators at their school. Taking into consideration the phenomenon of being pushed out, African American students are more likely than other students to be suspended or expelled from school for subjectively based infractions. As Brownstein noted, African American students are more likely to be held to zero tolerance policies for infractions that have more subjective interpretations such as being disrespectful or noisy. At the same time White students are held to more objectively proven infractions such as
smoking or vandalism. The implication here then is that African American students are being pushed out of schools for reasons that are unclear and subjective based on the arbitrary use of zero tolerance policies.

In order to combat the prevalence of being pushed out due to harsh zero tolerance policies, a data-driven evidence-based approach known as positive behavior supports (PBS; Brownstein, 2009) was recently developed. This model is based on supporting positive behaviors, prevention, and behavior analysis aimed at keeping students in school and using suspension and expulsion as a last resort. PBS is an alternative to exclusionary discipline practices. Although PBS is only the first step in combating push out practices, it is a step in the right direction. So are mentorship programs like SAAB, the focus of this study.

The research points to the fact that something needs to be done much earlier for African American male youth. Interestingly all these data, overwhelmingly negative, do not account for the resiliency of the African American men who are able to make it to college despite having so many odds stacked against them. Research shows that African American men are making it to and successfully graduating from colleges and universities. It is important to move from a deficit view of African American men in college and start looking toward factors that create success within this population. Harper (2012) noted that for African American men, early school experiences were cited as being influential in college student success. African American men noted that having a teacher who went above and beyond by offering information, support, and additional resources played a significant part in whether or not they were successful during their school experiences (Harper, 2012).
Implications for Families

One final yet noteworthy idea to mention is the fact that families can and do play a critical role in the success of their children. As cited in the literature review, according to Amatea and Brown (2000), students enter the school building with perspectives and worldviews that they learn from their family structure or system. Students do not develop in isolation, but within a context that includes their family as one component among many. Students may be successful when there is collaboration and open communication between the student and those involved in the school, family systems, and the community (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2007).

Harper (2012) reported that African American men who are successful in college cite that the high expectations of parents were a major factor in deciding to go to college. Students whose parents sought out tutoring, summer camps, and other college preparedness activities saw these things as important in their decision to attend college. Also, as cited in the literature, miscommunication plays a crucial role in whether or not African American men are successful in school. Better communication can begin by acknowledging the power structures built into the educational system, as well as recognizing the vicious cycle of poor performance and failure by African American male students. Better communication on the part of those in the school system, or those in power, starts with recognizing the multiple factors that impact the families they work for, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and cultural background (Applebaum, 2002).

Resiliency and Responding to Racism

As discussed earlier, the negative expectations placed upon African American men did not seem to impede success for the students in this study. In fact, the students in this study were
actively trying to go against the stereotypes that others tried to impose on them. As cited by Harper (2012), Black male students are often faced with the burden of proving their academic prowess due to the assumption that they were only admitted to colleges based on affirmative action or the idea that they were on athletic scholarships. When faced with discrimination and stereotypes, Black students used racism response strategies such as educating their peers, using nonviolent methods of communication, and reflecting on the negative encounters they faced. These students were able to resist internalizing the negative stereotypes about them by using these racism response strategies.

One interesting finding is that the participants in this study were also not impacted by what Steele and Aronson (1995) and Bain (2004) identified as stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is defined as anxiety due to potentially confirming negative stereotypes about a particular group, such as African Americans. The stereotype that African Americans are less intelligent than other groups (Bain, 2004; Steele & Aronson, 1995) contributes to poor academic performance, lack of confidence, and less interest in achievement. The African American male participants in this study, although well aware of the negative stereotypes against them, were not hindered by this threat. In fact, the participants acknowledged and actively strove to combat the vicious cycle of stereotypes and negative achievement.

**Limitations of the Study**

My race may have impacted the amount of information disclosed by my participants. According to Gibson and Abrams (2003), building trust with African Americans is often a difficult challenge faced by White researchers. Although care was taken to build trusting relationships with my participants, due to the nature of some of the sensitive and racially driven
topics, it is possible that my participants were hesitant to disclose their true thoughts and feelings.

In addition to my race being a possible factor impacting the amount of information disclosed, my gender too may have played a role. I was often the only White woman in a room full of African American men when I went to meet participants. The participants initially reacted with hesitation to my entry into their space. Once we were able to sit and talk one on one, they became much more relaxed and let their guard down. There has been a long history in the United States of African American men being accused of wrong doing in similar situations. On the other hand, Gibson and Abrams (2003) reported that when working with White researchers, African American participants made an effort to communicate carefully what they were trying to convey so that they were not misunderstood. It did seem to be the case with the participants that they were very careful to make sure that I understood what they were communicating. I also had an advantage when working with this group due to having a pre-existing relationship with the former SAAB administrators while conducting grant work for them a few years prior.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Further studies examining African American male perspectives on meanings they take from acting as mentors are needed. Feeling stuck and feeling excluded could be further explored in relation to how African American college students view these concepts. Those in institutions of higher education would benefit from more research on how being a member of positive and proactive groups helps to improve the sense of mattering and belonging for African American men that is often lacking in their own personal backgrounds. More research on race, ethnicity, and factors that lead to exclusion of African American men from higher education is also needed. Also, as part of a follow-up study, the participants could be interviewed more than
once for clarification. This was not possible during this study because several of the participants were no longer students and had moved away, which made getting access to them challenging.

The ability of African American men in this study to acknowledge and actively defy the negative stereotypes and notion of acting White was captivating and inspiring. More research is needed to understand further what other factors besides membership help to play a role in young African American men being so resilient in the face of obstacles set before them.

Educating low-income families with knowledge about college preparedness would help parents understand more fully what it takes for their students to be successful in college. This would be especially important for those parents who have not had the opportunity to go to college themselves (Harper, 2012). Research on ways to educate and empower parents about college preparedness programs would be beneficial to students and parents.

Harper (2012) also described a need for educating teachers and counselors from the K-12 to college settings about how to engage African American students. He argued that teachers and counselors are ill prepared when it comes to working with different cultural groups. Research into the education programs of teachers, faculty, and counselors would be beneficial to see how exactly they are prepared to work with diverse groups. Research surrounding the curriculum that goes into preparing these professionals could be more closely examined.

One final recommendation for further research would be to examine the amount of individual versus institutional responsibility that is taken to ensure student success. There is much research focused on the individual student and ways in which they can ensure engagement and success. A closer look at institutional practices that focus on equitable treatment could be taken. Institutional practices such as seeking out students, encouraging engagement, and
assuming responsibility could be looked at more closely to see how much responsibility professionals are taking on to ensure student retention.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

MENTORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF A UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP THROUGH A STUDENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MENTORING INITIATIVE

Recruitment Script Mentors:

I would like to invite you to participate in a study examining the experiences of African American mentors. This study would involve your participation in an interview and an optional focus group discussion. The researcher will ask questions about your experiences as a mentor and the impact that mentoring has had on your college success. It is your decision to participate in the study. I will need you to complete the attached potential participant response form that indicates yes, I am interested in participating in the study or no, I am not interested in participating in the study. If you choose to receive more information about participating in the study, the form has a place for you to write your contact information (name, phone number, and address) for the researcher, Amanda Gilman, to contact you. If you choose yes, Amanda Gilman will contact you and give you more information about the research project and your participation in this study. After you make your decision, please return this form via email. Thank you.

Amanda Gilman

gilmanamanda@hotmail.com
MENTORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF A UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP THROUGH A STUDENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MENTORING INITIATIVE

Dear SAAB Administrator,

Recruitment Script:

I would like to invite you to participate in a study examining the experiences of African American mentors. This study would involve your participation in an interview. The researcher will ask questions about what, if any, are some improvements that could be made to the mentoring program? It is your decision to participate in the study. I will need you to complete the attached potential participant response form that indicates yes, I am interested in participating in the study or no, I am not interested in participating in the study. If you choose to receive more information about participating in the study, this form has a place for you to write your contact information (name, phone number, and address) for the researcher, Amanda Gilman, to contact you. If you choose yes, Amanda Gilman will contact you and give you more information about the research project and your participation in this study. After you make your decision, please return this form via email. Thank you

Amanda Gilman

gilmanamanda@hotmail.com
MENTORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF A UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP THROUGH A STUDENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MENTORING INITIATIVE

Dear School Counselor,

Recruitment Script:

I would like to invite you to participate in a study examining the experiences of African American mentors. This study would involve your participation in an interview. The researcher will ask questions about what, if any, are some improvements that could be made to the mentoring program? It is your decision to participate in the study. I will need you to complete the attached potential participant response form that indicates yes, I am interested in participating in the study or no, I am not interested in participating in the study. If you choose to receive more information about participating in the study, this form has a place for you to write your contact information (name, phone number, and address) for the researcher, Amanda Gilman, to contact you. If you choose yes, Amanda Gilman will contact you and give you more information about the research project and your participation in this study. After you make your decision, please return this form via email. Thank you.

Amanda Gilman

gilmanamanda@hotmail.com
APPENDIX B: POTENTIAL PARTICIPATION RESPONSE FORM

MENTORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF A UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP THROUGH A STUDENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MENTORING INITIATIVE

Research Study: Mentors’ perceptions of a university-school partnership through a student African American mentoring initiative.

Dear Potential Participant,

Please fill out the following information. Thank you.

_____ Yes, I am interested in participating in the study.

If indicated YES above, please provide the following information so that the researcher, Amanda Gilman, may contact you about more information related to this study.

Name:

Phone Number:

Address:

_____ No, I am not interested in participating in this study.

Please return this form via email along with the recruitment script that was attached.

Amanda Gilman

gilmanamanda@hotmail.com
APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM FOR INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANTS

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

MENTORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF A UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP THROUGH A STUDENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MENTORING INITIATIVE

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Amanda Gilman, M.S., M.Ed. who is from the Department of Communication Disorders and Counseling, School and Educational Psychology in the College of Education at Indiana State University. This study is being conducted as a requirement for Amanda to complete her dissertation for a doctoral degree in Counselor Education and is being supervised by Dr. Hemalatha Ganapathy-Coleman. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

• PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this study is gain an understanding of your experiences of and opinions about mentoring in the Student African American Male Mentoring Program of the Student African American Brotherhood.

• PROCEDURES
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

Interviews
• Participate in an interview conducted by the researcher.
• Provide consent to be audio-taped during the interview.
• Devote approximately 1 ½ to 2 hours of your time for the interview.
• In addition, you can choose to participate in a focus group which will not take more than one hour of your time.

• INTERVIEWS
The interviews will be conducted face to face. The interview will take place at a place of mutual convenience. You will be asked questions about your experiences with and perceptions of the SAAB mentoring program.

• POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
There are minimal risks and no more than expected in daily life. There are no foreseeable harms or inconveniences that might result from participating in the study. The risk in this study is breach of confidentiality, however slight.
• **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**
The intent of this study is to understand your experiences of and perceptions about being a SAAB mentor, school counselor overseeing SAAB or SAAB administrator. You may not directly benefit from this study and your participation will not provide benefits directly to you.

• **CONFIDENTIALITY**
Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by not attaching names to the interviews conducted. Your name will not be disclosed. A pseudonym will be assigned to your demographic questionnaire and corresponding interviews. The interview responses will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office following the audio-taping of the interview. The transcribed dialogue will be secured on my personal computer. Only my doctoral advisor, a transcriptionist, a peer auditor and I will have access to the information from the interviews. Your transcript and the analysis of your interview transcript will be reviewed by a peer auditor to cross check the dependability and the quality of the research being conducted.

• **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**
You can choose whether or not to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study following the individual interview, data collected will be destroyed and not used. If you do chose to withdraw please notify the PI via email of your choice to do so.

• **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**
If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact Amanda Gilman, at 812-241-1007 or by email at gilmanamanda@hotmail.com. The faculty advisor of this project is Dr. Hemalatha Ganapathy-Coleman, Department of Communication Disorders and Counseling, School and Educational Psychology, Indiana State University and may be contacted at 812-237-2870 or by email at hema.ganapathy-coleman@indstate.edu.

• **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**
If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or e-mail the IRB at irb@indstate.edu. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.
I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

________________________________________  _______________________
Printed Name of Participant                  Date

________________________________________  _______________________
Signature of Participant                      Date
APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

MENTORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF A UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP THROUGH A
STUDENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MENTORING INITIATIVE

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Amanda Gilman, M.S., M.Ed. who is from the Department of Communication Disorders and Counseling, School and Educational Psychology in the College of Education at Indiana State University. This study is being conducted as a requirement for Amanda to complete her dissertation for a doctoral degree in Counselor Education and is being supervised by Dr. Hemalatha Ganapathy-Coleman. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

- PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
  The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of your experiences of and opinions about mentoring in the Student African American Male Mentoring Program of the Student African American Brotherhood.

- PROCEDURES
  If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:
  
  - Participate in a focus group which will not take more than one hour of your time.

- FOCUS GROUP
  The focus group will be conducted face to face. The focus group will take place at a place of mutual convenience. You will be asked questions about your experiences with and perceptions of the SAAB mentoring program.

- POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
  There are minimal risks and no more than expected in daily life. There are no foreseeable harms or inconveniences that might result from participating in the study. The risk in this study is breach of confidentiality, however slight.
• **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**
  The intent of this study is to understand your experiences of and perceptions about being a SAAB mentor. You may not directly benefit from this study and your participation will not provide benefits directly to you.

• **CONFIDENTIALITY**
  Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by not attaching names to the interviews conducted. Your name will not be disclosed. A pseudonym will be assigned to your demographic questionnaire and corresponding interviews. The interview responses will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office following the audio-taping of the interview. The transcribed dialogue will be secured on my personal computer. Only my doctoral advisor, a transcriptionist, a peer auditor and I will have access to the information from the interviews. Your transcript and the analysis of your interview transcript will be reviewed by a peer auditor to cross check the dependability and the quality of the research being conducted.

• **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**
  You can choose whether or not to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study following the focus group interview, data collected will be destroyed and not used. If you do choose to withdraw please notify the PI via email of your choice to do so.

• **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**
  If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact Amanda Gilman, at 812-241-1007 or by email at gilmanamanda@hotmail.com. The faculty advisor of this project is Dr. Hemalatha Ganapathy-Coleman, Department of Communication Disorders and Counseling, School and Educational Psychology, Indiana State University and may be contacted at 812-237-2870 or by email at hema.ganapathy-coleman@indstate.edu.

• **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**
  If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or e-mail the IRB at irb@indstate.edu. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.
APPENDIX E: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE AND SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR MENTORS

MENTORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF A UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP THROUGH A STUDENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MENTORING INITIATIVE

Demographic Questionnaire:

Pseudonym ___________________

1. What is your current age? ____
2. What year are you in college?
   _____ Freshman
   _____ Sophomore
   _____ Junior
   _____ Senior
3. Where are you from?
4. Where did you go to high school?
5. What if any activities in the community are you involved in?

6. What is your major at the university? ______________________________
7. What if any is your minor at the university? __________________________

Interview Questions:

Exploring the Experiences of African American Male Mentors

1. Are you currently an active mentor for the SAAB program? _____ yes _____no
2. What is the length of time you have been a member of SAAB? _____
3. What is the length of time that you have been a mentor for the SAAB program? _____
4. What was the most important factor in deciding to become a member of SAAB?
5. Could you speak about your experience of being a mentor?
Perception of What Worked:

6. Could you tell me a little about the aspects of the mentoring program you found most useful for yourself when working with your mentees?

7. What aspects of the mentoring program did you find was most effective?

Perception of What did not Work:

8. What aspects of the mentoring program did you find to not be of benefit to you and or your mentees when working with your mentees?

9. What aspects of the mentoring program did you find least effective?

Improvement:

10. What aspects of the program and in what way could the program improve to enhance your skills as a mentor?

Experience and Impact:

11. To what extent, according to you did being a mentor impact your college experience and performance?

12. Would you recommend the experience of being a mentor to a friend? Why? Why not?
APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELOR AND SAAB ADMINISTRATORS

MENTORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF A UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP THROUGH A STUDENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MENTORING INITIATIVE

Questions To Be Asked:

1. How do you choose students to work with the SAAB mentors?
2. What are your thoughts about the SAAB program?
3. How do you feel the SAAB mentors have benefited from participating in the mentoring program?
4. What are your thoughts about what is working?
5. What are your views on the quality of the mentors?
6. What are your perceptions on SAAB members as role models?
7. Who provides the curriculum to be covered with the mentees?
8. What issues do you feel are most salient that the mentors work with mentees on?
9. How would you describe the consistency of the SAAB mentors?
10. What are your expectations for the SAAB mentors?
APPENDIX G: CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Transcriptionist and Peer Auditor

I, _______________________________, will for professional or educational purposes be participating as a transcriptionist or peer auditor in the proposed dissertation research of Amanda Gilman from the Department of Communication Disorders and Counseling, School, and Educational Psychology at Indiana State University. Regardless of my role, I understand and agree that the information and documentation that I will be exposed to during and related to my participation with the proposed research project is confidential. I further acknowledge and agree that I will not, without appropriate authorization, access information that is considered privileged or confidential, release or discuss such privileged or confidential information to anyone other than the primary investigator, Amanda Gilman, or use such information for unauthorized purposes.

I understand that such authorized purposes only include discussions about the participants or the transcription process with the primary investigator while in a secure and private location. I recognize that all transcription of the recorded interviews will occur in a private and secure location while under the supervision of the primary investigator, Amanda Gilman. I also agree that I will not copy or otherwise take any recordings, documentation or written information from the research project without express permission from the primary investigator.

Regardless of my association with Amanda Gilman, the research participants, or Indiana State University, I further understand and agree that this confidentiality agreement continues after the end of my affiliation with Amanda Gilman’s dissertation research project and all related parties.

Signature: ____________________________________________________________

Date: ________________________________
APPENDIX H: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR MENTORS

MENTORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF A UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP THROUGH A STUDENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MENTORING INITIATIVE

Perception of What Worked:

1. Could you tell me a little about the aspects of the mentoring program you found most useful for yourself when working with your mentees?

2. What aspects of the mentoring program did you find was most effective?

Perception of What did not Work:

3. What aspects of the mentoring program did you find to not be of benefit to you and or your mentees when working with your mentees?

4. What aspects of the mentoring program did you find least effective?

Improvement:

5. What aspects of the program and in what way could the program improve to enhance your skills as a mentor?

6. Could you speak about your academic environment and its role in your academic success?