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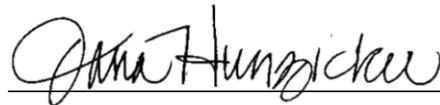
ACHIEVING ACADEMIC AND CAREER SUCCESS: HOW SIX LOW-INCOME
AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS DEFIED THE ODDS

A Scholarly Research Project

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Approved:



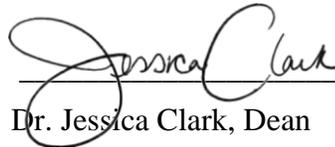
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ABSTRACT

Students from higher-income households have more advantages related to access to a quality education and educational opportunities. These advantages give students from higher-income households many opportunities to achieve academic and career success. Low-income African-American students, on the other hand, encounter many challenges as they aspire to achieve academic and career success, which limits their opportunities. This convergent mixed methods, interview-based, participatory action research study described factors that contribute to the academic and career success of six low-income African-American college students who were participants in the TRIO program at a community college in central Illinois. Findings of the study revealed five common themes that assisted these students in defying the odds and achieving academic and career success: 1) Family support was a determining factor for each student's academic and career success, 2) Non-family mentors served as positive role models throughout students' school years, 3) Involvement in extra-curricular activities, sports, and leadership helped students build character and develop skills, 4) Upward Bound (UB) and TRIO staff provided positive influence toward academic and career success, and 5) Personal determination empowered these students to persevere, be resilient in the face of adversity, and defy the odds.

Keywords: African-American students, academic support, TRIO programs, mixed methods research, interview research, participatory action research

DEDICATION

This research study is dedicated to two very special ladies who are no longer with us. My maternal and paternal grandmothers are now in heaven among the angels. They would be so proud of me and my huge accomplishment. They always told me that I could do anything that I put my mind to and to trust God in all that I do. I am thankful for these two resilient, courageous women. I appreciate their wisdom, strength, and love for God. I am sure they are smiling down on me from heaven.

I am thankful for my mother and father who became parents at a very young age. You ensured that all of my needs were met and that you provided a caring and nurturing home for me. I appreciate all the sacrifices you made and all the love, support, and encouragement you have given me over the years. You showed me how to overcome adversity, advocate for myself, to never give up, to be independent, and to pursue my dreams. I have always wanted to make you both proud. I am hoping that obtaining my doctoral degree made you extremely proud. Thanks for everything!

To my beautiful daughter, you are the best gift that life has given me! I hope that I have been a great role model and inspiration for you to follow in my footsteps. The many sacrifices that I made throughout your life was to create a better life for us both. You made me proud over the years with all of your academic and personal accomplishments. I hope that I have made you proud as well! I wish you continued success and the best of luck in your future endeavors. Please remember that you are loved, and the sky is the limit. Keep God first in all things~ CMH.

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At this time, I feel thankful and blessed to have obtained my doctoral degree. First and foremost, I thank God for giving me the strength, knowledge and determination to continue on my educational journey to success. God smiled on me and made my dream a reality.

I did not share with many that I was in a doctoral program. My rationale for this was, I wanted to make sure that I was close to completion before I announced it. Failure was not an option for me, but I wanted to deliver the news with confidence. Additionally, I have learned over the years that everyone is not sincerely happy for you, even when you are doing great things.

I appreciate the love, support, understanding, and prayers I received from my daughter, parents, and close family and friends throughout my program and during the completion of my scholarly research project. I am thankful to you all for cheering me on as I worked to reach the finish line. I am now able to spend more time with you all now that the program has ended. Your patience is greatly appreciated.

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CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Low-income African-American (AA) students face a myriad of challenges in their pursuit to receive an education. Many are forced to attend urban schools that lack funding and resources to improve the learning experience for this population (Petty, 2014). Often, these students' families do not have the financial means to purchase technology that will enhance learning or pay for participation in educational enrichment programs. This can lead to increased school drop-out levels and decreased graduation rates. Morgan et al. (2015) states that nationally, 13% of teens are not attending school or participating in the workforce and 11% are not completing high school on time. Completing high school and pursuing a college education need to be top priorities for our nation's youth, especially for low-income African-American students as there is a correlation between educational attainment and income earning power (Morgan et al., 2015). Some low-income AA students defy the odds and achieve academic success despite their socioeconomic status and race. Low-income AA students should be afforded the same educational opportunities as students from other ethnicities to ensure academic and career success.

Introduction to the Topic

Challenges of African-American Students

Many African-American youth share the same story as it relates to growing up in poverty: being raised in a single family household, attending a low-income school, experiencing academic struggles, and having few educational opportunities such as academic enrichment, school choices, and college options. These types of factors contribute to this population's overall lack of success in college and career. As a result of such challenges, low-income African-

American youth often score lower on standardized tests and have lower high school and college graduation rates in comparison to students from other ethnicities (Education Trust-West, 2015).

African-American parents who lack education and parental involvement are often unable to provide their children with support and exposure to programs designed to help youth succeed (Vega et al., 2015). If education is not a priority in the home, students may not find education beneficial to their future. Rodriguez and Conchas (2009) assert that low-income African-American students continue to lead other ethnic groups in low graduation rates and high drop-out rates, stating that poverty, residential segregation, and healthcare disparities are just a few of the social and economic challenges this group is forced to contend with. Rodriguez and Conchas (2009) also point out that urban schools are charged with improving or eliminating the achievement gap while also grappling with lack of funding, high leadership turnover, and inadequately prepared teachers.

Alexander et al. (2014) examined the living conditions, role models and opportunities of disadvantaged Baltimore children and how it affected them during adulthood. The researchers found that urban advantaged students maintain their privilege by attending an institution of higher education, while the urban disadvantaged make a decent wage by obtaining high-paying, blue collar work and marriage. Alexander and Olson (2014) found that some respondents in their study overcame childhood obstacles to achieve a satisfying quality of life without the benefit of a college degree. Respondents who delayed having children had better socioeconomic status outcomes in comparison to those who did not.

Despite having a satisfying quality of life, urban advantaged students still chose to attend college and experienced difficulty with successful completion. By the age of 28, 80% of the respondents in Alexander and Olson's (2014) study reported attempting college, some several

times, but ultimately did not obtain a degree. The challenges discussed here are identifiable factors that can pose barriers to success for some low-income African-American students.

Despite the challenges, there are students from this population who defy the odds and achieve academic and career success.

African-American Students and Success

In spite of these challenges, there are also success stories of African-American students from low-income families who achieved their goals of obtaining career and academic success. McLaughlin (2018) conducted research focused on Cabrini Green youth in Chicago two decades after they participated in an after-school program where half of participating youth successfully completed high school. The Community Youth Creative Learning Experience (CYCLE), the after-school program offered a plethora of services to students such as: tutoring, scholarships, enrichment, summer camps, and more. Most of the participants completed high school, did not experience a life of poverty, and perhaps most important, their children followed in their footsteps. Participants in the program attributed mentoring, having the opportunity to participate in activities and resources outside of their neighborhood, and a sense of belonging where the staff was committed to helping all students (McLaughlin, 2018).

Williams et al. (2014) asserted that not enough attention has been given to high achieving students despite barriers such as lack of housing, poverty, and food insecurity. In their study, Williams et al. (2014) highlighted the successes of an African-American female in the tenth grade who was very talented, well-behaved, and received good grades. This student lived in a single parent home, her mother was unemployed, and she went on to live with relatives after she and her mother lost their home. This student was so driven and motivated to succeed that she took public transportation to get to school each day, arriving before many of the teachers.

Despite these challenges, she maintained good grades and excellent test scores. Williams et al. (2014) refers to students who achieve academic success despite the adverse conditions that exist as “educationally resilient” (p. 6), stating that this population of disadvantaged yet driven students is often not recognized or understood by school counselors and others directly involved with their education.

Cooler (2012) conducted a study of 25 low socioeconomic status (SES), high achieving elementary students and identified three factors that students in the study believe led to their academic success: 1) positive feelings about school, 2) internal locus of control, and 3) having a role model in their lives. Additionally, study participants believed that hard work is the reason for their academic achievement and that education is necessary to help them achieve future goals.

Anderson (2018) discussed the findings of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) report, which identifies challenges of the African-American population as well as their strong desire to succeed. The key findings of the report emphasize perceptions of success, education, and future goals held by low-income African-American youth who demonstrate a great deal of determination and drive, despite the challenges and negative narratives surrounding their success (Anderson, 2018). The 2018 report included 797 African-American participants aged 16 to 20. The report stated that African-American youth want to be heard when it comes to improving the crisis in the U.S. education system. The youth would like to communicate to education stakeholders the academic and personal needs of African-American students to achieve academic and career success. They consider education a major factor in achieving their life goals and have a strong desire to obtain a college degree. According to Anderson (2018), 65% of African-American youth felt that their high school adequately prepared them for college. Anderson

(2018) states that 75% of respondents revealed that an adult at their school tracked their progress and wanted them to be successful. This finding is significant in that research shows that students who have this support is more likely to strive for a college degree. Anderson (2018) concluded that African-American students need a seat at the table as well as a voice to advocate for an equitable education system for all students.

Factors of Success

Participants in Anderson's (2018) study defined success as having a successful career that is important to them, as well as completing high school, college, and obtaining a graduate degree. However, Education Trust-West (2015) discussed troubling inconsistencies that exist and discuss steps that have been taken to improve opportunities and academic achievement for African-American students in California. The push to improve education for these students has included collaboration from the citizens of California policy makers, and school leaders. Alexander and Olson (2014) emphasized the importance of collaboration by bringing families, schools, and communities together and creating strength-based partnership programs. Ashtiani and Feliciano (2018) suggested that stable mentoring partnerships and innovative social resources are imperative for low-income adults in pursuit of a degree.

Academic and Career Support Programs for African-American Students

The Upward Bound program began following President Lyndon B. Johnson's signing of the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) during his administration's War on Poverty (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). The Student Support Services program was designed to provide support to college students in their efforts to obtain a college degree. Upward Bound and Student Support Services are programs designed to identify and deliver services to first-generation, low-income

minority students. The name “TRIO” represents three of its first programs: Upward Bound, Student Support Services (SSS), and Talent Search.

TRIO programs utilize a direct, student-focused approach to increase college access and success for low-income individuals (Coles, 1998). TRIO programs are federally funded and serve students in middle school, high school, and college (Sabay & Wiles, 2020). Both programs have been shown to be particularly effective in helping African-American youth in their pursuit to achieve academic and career success. In one study of the program’s effectiveness, TRIO achievers reported that the program exposed them to new possibilities and broadened their horizons, provided them with the confidence to succeed, and a sense of personal empowerment. These individuals are now leaders in their careers, communities, and families (Coles, 1998).

Upward Bound, TRIO’s program for high school students, provides services such as free tutoring, educational workshops, ACT preparation, and the opportunity to attend cultural enrichment activities at no cost to the students (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Upward Bound also offers a residential summer component, which allows Upward Bound high school participants to stay on a college campus and attend classes during the summer. Upward Bound programs nation-wide serve their students throughout the academic year as well as during the summer. TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) is for college students and offers tutoring, assistance with financial aid and scholarships, provides academic and career advisement, educational workshops and cultural enrichment activities (Sabay & Wiles, 2020). TRIO programs were designed for first-generation college and low-income students to help students overcome cultural and social barriers to higher education. The goals of the program are 1) to prepare students for opportunities and challenges that they are likely to face in the future and 2) to ensure that outreach and institutional support are accessible to students at colleges and universities allowing them to achieve success (Balz &

Esten, 1998). Highly targeted early intervention programs, the development of lasting relationships with the program participants, and the attention students are given related to their personal circumstances are referred to by some as the cornerstone of TRIO's success (Balz & Esten, 1998).

Researcher's Experience

As person who was once a low-income African-American youth, I experienced some of the factors that can pose challenges to success for this population. I grew up on the south side of my city, located in Illinois; lived in a neighborhood that was drug and crime infested; attended under-funded public schools; faced many challenges in school; and understood that educational programs were usually not affordable for low-income families such as mine. Fortunately, I lived in a two-parent home, which was not – and still is not – very common for a family residing on the south side of town in a poverty-stricken neighborhood. My parents were married at the time, which is another rare occurrence for the African-American culture, then and now.

My parents did the best they could under the circumstances. I was not at all a high achieving student, the teacher's pet, or involved in lots of extra-curricular activities. I also did not have very many teachers who expressed a sincere interest in my education. The use of one hand was all that I needed to count the teachers who had a profound impact on my education.

My parent's limited income did not allow me to participate in programs that many of my Caucasian counterparts did. Instead, my mother sought programs that were free or inexpensive. Free tutoring was available at the Urban League, 4-H programs were complementary during summer, and classes through the park district offered scholarships. In high school, Tomorrow's Scientists Technicians and Managers (TSTM) and Project Opportunity were college preparation

programs in which I was a participant. These programs only required me to bring money for trips and provided me the opportunity to visit various college campuses and career related activities.

TSTM afforded me the opportunity to tour colleges and universities, receive tutoring, attend academic and career workshops, serve in leadership roles, and participate in community service projects. This program allowed me to experience that would not have been possible had I not been a participant. I developed so many different skills and interests as a result of TSTM. Much later in life, I had the opportunity to be a TSTM parent as my daughter was a participant in middle and high school. Project Opportunity was held on the campus of a university in my city, which allowed me to spend two weeks on campus gaining the experience of on-campus living as well as attending classes designed for program participants. During this time, I began to think about career possibilities and college plans. This experience reassured me that failure was not an option and that it was up to me to achieve success. When the program ended, I had a better understanding of college life as well as the dedication and hard work required to be successful. It piqued my interest even more about pursuing a college education.

Although I faced many obstacles along my educational journey, I still managed to beat the odds. I believed in myself, had a strong support system, and realized that as an African-American female working hard was a must. I was able to demonstrate resiliency and achieve success. I wanted more out of life and my strongly-held belief that the sky was the limit was a great source of motivation for me. The TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) program at the local college I attended was very beneficial to me as I pursued my associate degree and planned to transition to a four-year university. I received both academic and personal support from the program. It really helped to have access to an office that was available to help in any way that they could.

The TRIO SSS program became more than just a program for me; the mentors and my fellow student participants were like members of my family. I created life-long relationships as a result of participating in the program, and later I served as an Upward Bound advisor and counselor. It was my goal to help students overcome barriers to academic success and serve as a source of support for all students. My ability to obtain two associates degrees, a bachelor's degree, and a master's degree appeared as a shock to many because they did not believe in my potential and desire to do great things and evolve into the phenomenal woman that I've become. My life experiences, and experiences in the TRIO SSS program seems to mirror many of the experiences shared by the study participants. My philosophy as the researcher, is that if education is not a priority in the home, students may not understand how it will benefit them during their K-12 and college years or in the future.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purposes of this study were 1) to describe factors that contribute to the academic and career success of low-income African-American college students enrolled in the TRIO program at a community college and 2) to identify actions that high schools and community colleges can take to promote the academic and career success of low-income African-American students. The study was guided by two fundamental research questions: 1) What factors contribute to the academic and career success of low-income African-American college students enrolled in the TRIO program at a community college? 2) What actions can high schools and community colleges take to promote the academic and career success of low-income African-American students?

Significance of the Study

There is a need to explore urban students' perceptions of educational support from their own perspectives (Vega et al., 2015). The educational inequities within the United States' school system that directly and adversely affect the achievement of African-American students deserves a great deal of discussion (Vega et al., 2015). The students who are directly affected should be a part of these discussions to ensure that their voices are heard, and their needs are understood. To combat these educational inequities, students' perceptions about how educators can support and assist them in achieving academic and career success must be considered (Vega et al., 2015). In the U.S., the substandard educational attainment of low-income youth has been a persistent social problem (Ashtiani & Feliciano, 2018). It is emphasized by Anderson (2018) that there is an ongoing crisis involving African-American students within the U.S. education system that requires educational stakeholders as well as the participation of students to discuss the problem and potential solutions.

The lack of opportunities and resources remain barriers for this student population. Contrary to popular belief, African-American communities value education and encourage youth to pursue higher education, but they often experience academic challenges that interfere with the college preparation process. A wide range of programs should be implemented by postsecondary institutions to assist these students with their challenges and weaknesses (Anderson, 2018). It is further stated that colleges and universities prioritize the development of bridge programs that are designed to connect higher education to secondary education, making the college preparation process for first-generation students an easier transition (Petty, 2014). TRIO programs are a great solution to addressing the challenges and needs of first-generation, low-income students. TRIO

programs in comparison to many similar programs, is the ideal choice as evidenced by its ability to promote successful outcomes for students (Sabay & Wiles, 2020).

The findings of this study will be beneficial for policy makers, community stakeholders, non-profit programs, school districts, college personnel, churches, and educators who are interested in implementing effective programs for low-income, African-American students designed to increase academic and career success. McElroy and Armesto (1998) wrote:

If we as a nation are dedicated to closing the gap of educational opportunity between disadvantaged and advantaged students, we must direct our efforts toward improving the academic and technical skills of our future workforce, decreasing the dropout rates, increasing graduation rates, and assisting students in making a smooth transition from high school to the postsecondary educational arena. (p. 379)

The findings of the study will also enable parents and students to gain insight as to how success can be obtained despite ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status.

Organization of the Research Report

This chapter introduced the challenges faced by low-income African-American students as well as factors that support their academic and career success. Two support programs that have proved beneficial to this population, Upward Bound and TRIO, were also discussed, and I, the person who designed and carried out the study, shared my personal experiences as a low-income African-American youth and how academic and career success was obtained. Chapter 2 will present related literature from the perspectives of various researchers, focusing on the success of low-income African-American students, while also highlighting factors that pose challenges to academic and career success. Chapter 3 will provide details surrounding the

methodology and research methods used for this research study, including the participants, setting, procedures, and data analysis. Chapter 4 will present the findings of the research study by comparing the research questions to the findings, identifying common themes, and making connections to the literature. Chapter 5 will provide a concluding compilation of the study by presenting implications for practice, suggestions for future research, and a discussion of the study's limitations.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Summary of Research Problem

Researchers have thoroughly investigated the challenges that African-American students face in their pursuit of a college education. They have also revealed various challenges among this population that can interfere with their educational journey such as growing up in poverty, residing in a single-parent home, having limited educational opportunities, and experiencing a lack of support in school. The findings of their research demonstrate that the attainment of academic and career success can be more difficult for this student population if interventions are not put in place early on in their educational years to ensure that they are given an opportunity to succeed.

The ways in which this same population have defied the odds are also highlighted in the research studies detailing how these students defied the odds and achieved academic and career success. Students who are successful despite the barriers they face may attribute their success to their own personal drive and motivation, mentorship, after-school programs, a strong support system or systems, or access to academic opportunities, educational programs such as TRIO. This chapter reviews the literature related to poverty and school performance, protective factors and processes, and programs for academic and career success related to low-income, African-American youth, with particular attention devoted to the TRIO program.

Poverty and School Performance

Poverty

A consistent wealth gap for African-American families was reported by Travis and Leech (2014), who reported that in 2010, the poverty rate for African-American children was 38.2% overall and 48.8% in the households of single mothers. One examination of troubling

inconsistencies that exist for African-American youth emphasized that African-American students have been historically impacted by use of discriminatory policy and institutional decisions (Education Trust West, 2015). For example, there are African-American youth and families who value and prioritize education. However, the students do not benefit when they attend schools that do not recognize their talent and have low expectations for their academic outcomes (Education Trust West, 2015). There are also concerns that these students rarely gain acceptance into gifted and talented programs, and are unable to access college preparation classes, complete high school on time, and obtain a college degree.

It is the assertion of Education Trust West (2015) that African-American students' inability to access opportunities are due in large part to historical inequitable policy decisions and institutional weakness as opposed to parent commitment to education or lack of ability on the student's part. On the other hand, the possibility of African-American students achieving success regardless of low socioeconomic status (SES) has been demonstrated among low- and high- income students who excel in school. According to the Education Trust West (2015), opportunity and achievement gaps can be closed by the implementation of promising practices in school districts and by working closely with parent and community organizations.

Poverty and School Performance

A phenomenological qualitative study conducted by Williams, Bryan, Morrison, and Scott (2017) found that children entering kindergarten from the highest socioeconomic group had cognitive scores 60% higher than their peers in the lowest socioeconomic group. At both fourth and eighth grade, there was a 20-point score gap between low and high-income students in math and in reading. There were similar gaps in science and writing. According to the National Center

for Education Statistics (NCES), high-income students have a 16% higher graduation rate in comparison to their low-income peers (Williams et al., 2017).

Children from African-American families residing in impoverished urban neighborhoods are more likely to experience an ineffective kindergarten transition (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2017). According to Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez (2017), children's performance during their transition to kindergarten has profound implications for future academic success, including life-long consequences. It is important for children to start school ready to succeed. Parents can play an instrumental role in their child's academic success by being proactive and intentional in assisting them with educational needs during the early educational years.

Williams et al. (2017) discussed three ways in which concentrated poverty directly affects students' school performance. First, low-income students who live in impoverished communities typically have very little access to social and academic supports outside of the school environment. The supports are summer learning programs, tutoring, academic enrichment opportunities, and homework assistance. Second, this population is frequently exposed to circumstances that affect their well-being, safety, and health. Examples of these circumstances include poor living conditions, drug and crime-infested neighborhoods, limited access to health care, and lack of food supply. Third, parents of low-income students are unable to obtain high levels of social capital due to exposure to unfavorable conditions. All of these poverty-related factors pose significant challenges to the academic development of low-income African-American students (Williams et al., 2017).

Academic Challenges

Vega et al. (2015) found that educators frequently blame parents for their inadequate involvement in their children's education. Vega et al. (2015) also noted that Latino and African-

American students demonstrate a considerable achievement gap in comparison to their Caucasian counterparts. When compared to Caucasian students, African-American students typically produce lower scores on standardized tests, have low grade point averages, and have higher drop out rates. Those who successfully complete high school are less likely to attend and graduate college when compared to their Caucasian peers (Vega et al., 2015).

A study conducted by Thomas-Richmond and O'Quinn (2018) reported that children involved in a tutoring program were poorly treated due to systemic institutionalized racial inequities, which many of the students found to be hurtful. Teachers' low expectations in turn affected the students' academic progress (Thomas-Richmond & O'Quinn, 2018). Students in the study were able to describe in detail the characteristics of caring and respectful teachers, as well as those who were not caring and respectful. Characteristics of caring and respectful teachers included calling on them to answer questions, speaking in a pleasant tone, and providing a nurturing and supportive environment. Their description of uncaring and disrespectful teachers was excessive yelling, being quick to send students for disciplinary action without getting the full story, making students feel as if they were not a member of the class, acting as if they did not care about them or their education, and not taking time to learn more about them.

According to Howard (2016), a plethora of challenges remain barriers for African-American students in relation to their school experience, affecting their overall educational experience. There is a wealth of data that proposes that African-American children, more so than their peers of a different race, encounter distinctive challenges in schools that disrupt their academic opportunities and negatively affects their academic success (Howard, 2016). It is the assertion of Howard (2016) that dissimilar academic outcomes for African-American children compared to peers from different ethnic groups have been consistent and continue to be

persistent in several chief areas, such as minimal accessibility to high quality, early childhood education opportunities, disproportionately low scores for math and reading, minimal opportunities for selection in gifted or talented classes, underrepresentation in Honors and AP courses, high probability of being suspended or expelled, the lowest graduation rates of any racial subgroup, and the least likelihood to attend a university.

Supports for At-Risk Students

Petty (2014) emphasized the critical needs of first-generation students and what is required to help them achieve academic and career success. According to Petty (2014), post-secondary institutions should make a variety of programs available to assist at-risk students with barriers they may face. One of the major challenges is motivating these students to set aside adequate study time to ensure that academic success and college completion is achieved. It is highlighted by Petty (2014) that low-income parents do not fully understand the benefits of completing college for themselves as well as for their children. Because low-income students are likely to have a job while in college, a primary challenge is that more time is spent working and less time is spent on academics.

McLaughlin (2018), who conducted a five-year research project centered around 700 plus Cabrini Green youth two decades after they participated in a comprehensive after school program, found that most of the program participants obtained their high school diploma and did not become a victim of poverty. McLaughlin (2018) asserts that after school activities engage students in both formal and informal learning that can aid in closing the continuous achievement and opportunity gap that exists among culturally and linguistically diverse learners living in poverty. Morgan et al. (2015) stated that it is imperative that college outreach and academic enrichment begin as early as the middle school level to serve as a motivator for students, increase

their knowledge about college, and engage families, students, and schools aspiring to increase graduation and college entry rates among their entire student body (Morgan et al., 2015).

Protective Factors and Processes

Although African-American youth face many challenges, there are students from low-income neighborhoods who achieve academic success. It is the assertion of Williams et al. (2014) that individuals must possess a deeper awareness and more thorough understanding of protective factors and processes, as well as their positive effects on a student's academic success. If this awareness and understanding is not present, well-intended programs, school policies, and counseling services are less likely to impact students in a positive manner, including protective factors and processes that promote academic success among low-income African-American students (Williams et al., 2014). Additionally, school counselors and other school personnel utilize such information to create or make needed changes to programs, services, and existing practices that provide direct support to failing or at-risk students due to poverty (Williams et al., 2014).

Defying the Odds

Alexander and Olson (2014) studied the lives of 790 disadvantaged Baltimore children for 25 years. These researchers randomly selected students from 20 public elementary and middle schools located in Baltimore, MD middle- to upper-class students attended four of the schools. Eight of the schools consisted of the poorest students within the city of Baltimore. Focusing on degree attainment, employment, household income, and substance abuse, comparisons were made with regards to gender and race. The research findings indicated that half of the research participants' socioeconomic status (SES) mirrored that of their parents. Essentially, those who were poor remained at the same SES level, and those who were

considered better off maintained their better off SES status (Alexander & Olson, 2014). Moreover, few children from the low-income families in the study completed college, yet Caucasian males who did not attend college obtained good paying jobs. Of the 314 students from low-income families, 30 reached middle-class SES by the end of the study (Alexander & Olson, 2014).

According to Williams et al. (2014), high achieving low-income African-American students residing with single mothers considered school-related parenting practices to be integral factors that contributed to their academic success. Students specifically stated that they received verbal praise for making good grades, their academic progress was routinely monitored, their relationships with their mothers were positive and open, and the support of extended family to assist with academic assistance was available. It was concluded by Williams et al. (2014) that these family protective factors provided a layer of support to various environmental issues, such as poor living conditions, financial insecurity, and family conflict, all of which have the potential to pose barriers to the academic success for African-American students and others from low-income backgrounds.

It is the assertion of Anderson (2018), that racial disparities among African-American youth are not due to being disengaged, as they report academic success as a top priority on their list of educational goals. Rather, African-American youth want their voices to be heard as they provide valuable insight on their educational environment and structural factors that may interfere with their ability to achieve success (Anderson, 2018). According to Anderson (2018), over 90% of students agreed that they are in control of their own destiny and responsible for what takes place in their lives. Even so, approximately one-third of the students had concerns about their race being a barrier for possible opportunities.

Supportive Social Relationships

From pre-school through college, when students develop a sense of security and belonging within their school community and create relationships with peers and teachers, these also serve as sources of support that promote an increased sense of belonging and future academic and personal success (Travis & Leech, 2014). Vega et al. (2015) reported that the students in their study consistently stated that they were supported by family members and the Upward Bound staff, and that both enhanced their educational experiences. According to Vega et al. (2015), the collaborative efforts of families and schools denote positive implications for increased access to college preparation material (Vega et al., 2015). The need to understand the students' perceptions and how educators can assist in developing a collaborative relationship is vital (Vega et al., 2015). It is the assertion of Thomas-Richmond & Quinn (2018) that educators must gain a better understanding of African-American children as well as their needs. They must also understand that these students are capable of learning and want to achieve academic success. Woodson (2016) suggested using metaphors as a means of helping African-American youth to express their feelings and viewpoints.

Murray et al. (2016) examined the significance of teacher-student relationships between teachers and youth from low-income, large, urban environments. These researchers found that supportive teacher-student relationships serve as a chief protective function to those who have been exposed to poverty or other socio-demographic risk factors (Murray et al., 2016). Ashtiani and Feliciano (2018), who studied access to resources for educational attainment by youth from high and low-income families over the course of 14 years, found that youth from low-income families benefited from mentorship from someone who had experienced college, such as a

teacher, counselor, or coach. This research suggests that stable mentoring partnerships and innovative social resources are imperative for low-income adolescents in pursuit of a degree.

Critical Consciousness and Critical Action

The lives of low-income and primarily racial/ethnic minority youth, ranging from ages 13-17 from the Chicago area were examined in two additional studies. According to Roy et al. (2019), critical consciousness has become a framework for understanding how low-income and racial/ethnic minority youth recognize, interpret, and attempt to alter the experiences and systems of oppression that they experience in their daily lives. Critical consciousness determines the probability of an individual's participation in critical action behaviors based on their personal experiences with various forms of financial hardship and structural oppression.

Explaining that critical action refers to the true behaviors that an individual will engage in to achieve social change, Roy et al. (2019) examined the extent to which youth's experiences with poverty influenced the students' ability to take some form of action. The six experiences that prompted critical action were prejudice and intolerance; community violence; world issues; economic disparities and lack of opportunities; individual or interpersonal challenges; and issues related to mental health and well-being (Roy et al., 2019).

Roy et al. (2019) asserted that youths' family and neighborhood contexts demonstrated a predictive role for their involvement in sociopolitical action, concluding that neighborhood income inequality is marginally predictive of critical action behaviors independent of neighborhood and household poverty (Roy et al., 2019). Importantly, the researchers emphasize that support for critical consciousness development can be given by many individuals who support the student, such as parents, peers, teachers, and leaders within the community.

A study conducted by Rapa et al. (2018) examined the longitudinal associations among critical action, career expectancies, and occupational attainment. found that sociopolitical constraints and social identity threats minimize major developmental processes for marginalized youth, such as career development, school engagement, and future occupational attainment in adulthood. However, critical consciousness has been linked with marginalized youths' school engagement and career development, as well as their occupational attainment later during their adult years (Rapa et al., 2018). The findings of this research demonstrate that critical action plays a crucial role in fostering career expectancies in late adolescence for marginalized African-American youth. It is further stated that critical action may help marginalized youth with prioritizing social identity threats and structural constraints, resulting in a pathway to social mobility and engagement (Rapa et al., 2018).

Empowerment

A study presented by Travis and Leech (2014) discussed an empowerment-based Positive Youth Development model (PYD) to provide a culture-bound, developmental, strength-based, and action-oriented perspective of healthy development for African-American youth. Travis and Leech (2014) asserted that negative stereotypes, such as intellectually inferior, delinquent, aggressive, and hypersexual, often get attached to African-American males and females. Such stereotypes can negatively influence the overall health, well-being, and academic results of African-American youth.

Adolescents can show healthy development when they enhance their personal and environmental strengths despite stereotypes, challenges, and barriers. According to Travis and Leech (2014), Five C's of positive youth development can empower African-American youth: competence, confidence, connection, caring, and character.

Resilience

It is the assertion of Williams et al. (2014) that research has been consistent in demonstrating that schools and school personnel such as principals, school counselors, teachers, and support staff play an integral role in the development of educational resilience for K-12 students who are considered at risk. According to Williams et al. (2017), students who defy the odds and achieve success are referred to as academically resilient and make up an integral sector of the public school community, yet this population of students have not received sufficient research. Academic resilience is acquired by the inclusion of internal character traits and external protective factors that lessen the influence of risks and vulnerabilities encountered by students who reside in impoverished living situations. For example, students who develop positive and supportive relationships with a teacher are motivated to achieve academic success in school and work hard at overcoming challenges. Additionally, resilient students have the option of relying on assets from their family and community to address their need for educational attainment. In other words, they utilize both intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation to achieve academic success despite the barriers they may face.

Strategies provided by Williams et al. (2014) allow school counselors and school personnel to implement to foster educational resilience: 1) Promote collaboration among families, schools, and communities, 2) School personnel should advocate for students in and outside of school, 3) Seek to develop a better understanding of the students' personal lives, 4) Educate parents on school policies and how to navigate through various processes, 5) Provide a safe space for parents to share information, knowledge, and resources, 6) Create counseling, academic, discipline, instructional, and classroom strategies and interventions that create caring teacher-student relationships, 7) Teach African-American students about resiliency and help

them understand their personal attributes and environmental resources that contribute to their personal resiliency, 8) Integrate a system-wide intervention for resiliency, and 9) Identify diverse forms of parent/caregiver involvement, and provide various outlets for family participation.

Programs for Academic and Career Success

The Need for Supportive Programs

Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez (2017) found that parents who advocated for the education of their young children enrolled them in the Head Start program for pre-kindergarten students. This federally funded program is geared towards families from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds whose preschoolers are at risk for not being adequately prepared to enter kindergarten. According to Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez (2017), the mothers actively promoted what they envisioned as a successful transition by monitoring and assessing their child's readiness skills, facilitating positive school readiness skills, discussing the transition with the child, and remediating academic and socio-emotional weaknesses.

Petty (2014) asserted that higher education institutions must make student retention a priority by understanding the root of the problems this population continually encounters and creating successful programs to motivate first-generation students to continue pursuing their college degree. Anderson (2018) emphasized that required changes will not occur in K-12 education unless the individuals who will serve as champions for a better education, along with the valuable feedback of African-American youth, are active participants in the reform process. School personnel must be proactive in educating African-American youth early on about pursuing a college education and how it will benefit them in the future. This researcher provides for recommendations to improve outcomes for the education of African-American youth: 1) reduce barriers to college attendance, 2) address widespread student discipline issues that create unequal

opportunities to learn, 3) challenge the deficit narrative about the educational aspirations of low-income African-American youth, and 4) improve school-based practices and partnerships to increase African-American student achievement.

As one example, Morgan et al. (2015) studied a four-year program called GEAR UP implemented at an urban high school to prepare students for college. The study, which consisted of 294 students and parents who were categorized as academically and economically disadvantaged, found that participants of GEAR UP had a higher graduation rate than students who were not in the program. Students of the GEAR UP program received tutoring, mentoring, community service opportunities, STEM related activities, college fairs and college tours, residential summer college enrichment program, and college preparation assistance. The services provided to parents was designed to give them a better understanding about the college process as well as its importance.

The TRIO Program

TRIO Program History

TRIO programs are federally grant-funded college outreach and student success programs developed to identify and deliver services to students pursuing higher education from first-generation and low-income backgrounds (Sabay & Wiles, 2020). Three TRIO programs were designed over the years to help first-generation college and low-income students overcome cultural and social barriers to higher education (Balz & Esten, 1998).

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) during his administration's War on Poverty (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). This legislation promoted the Office of Economic Opportunity and TRIO programs. As part of this law, Upward Bound, the first TRIO initiative, began. The Upward Bound program was designed for students

in ninth through twelfth grade. While in this program, students receive tutoring, assistance with college entrance exams, opportunities to attend college visits, summer enrichment program, and educational workshops.

In 1968, the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act implemented the Student Support Services (SSS) program and no longer housed Upward Bound in the office of Economic Opportunity. The SSS program was designed to support this targeted population while in college and to assist them with successfully completing college. The final TRIO program to evolve was Talent Search, which was initiated by the 1995 Higher Education Act (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). TRIO is not an acronym. The all-capitalized name refers to the three programs in existence in 1995: Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services. According to Sabay and Wiles (2020), eight TRIO programs exist at this time of this writing: Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student Support Services, Education Opportunities Centers, Veterans Upward Bound, Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs, Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, and Upward Bound Math-Science (University of the People, 2021). These programs are designed to serve students throughout their K-12 (kindergarten through high school) and college years, starting from middle school to community college and university students, including non-traditional students who plan to obtain a college degree (Sabay & Wiles, 2020).

TRIO Program Effectiveness

The TRIO program's effectiveness and specific characteristics were highlighted in a study conducted by Mahoney (1998). This researcher found that the TRIO program was effective because it was supportive, responsive, synergistic, and successful. Mahoney (1998) elaborated

that TRIO's holistic model required counselors to respond to students as whole individuals as opposed to addressing student's individual problems.

According to Mahoney (1998), TRIO counselors and staff take support to a higher level when addressing the critical needs of students. Providing assistance to students beyond typical work hours, TRIO staff members often view their work as their mission and calling in life (Mahoney, 1998).

One TRIO Student Testimonial

One student who reflected on her experience in a TRIO program, stated that through TRIO, she found support to realize her educational goals (Graham, 2011). Growing up in a working-class neighborhood as an African-American female, she recalled not being surrounded by individuals who attended college. Even so, the TRIO program began preparing her for college during her high school years. Additionally, the Upward Bound program, under the umbrella of TRIO, provided American College Testing (ACT) preparation classes and assistance with completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

Another TRIO benefit reported by Graham (2011) was the fee waivers provided to students to cover the college application fees that she incurred. This former TRIO student reported that the TRIO programs provided the resources, preparation, and support she needed to succeed personal and professionally

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the literature related to poverty and school performance, protective factors and processes, and programs for academic and career success related to low-income, African-American youth, with particular attention devoted to the TRIO program. Chapter 3 will describe the study's research methodology and research methods.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the study's research problem along with its purpose and questions, research methodology, research context, data collection, data analysis, and the researcher's positionality.

Research Problem, Purpose, and Questions

The purposes of this study were to 1) to describe factors that contribute to the academic and career success of low-income African American college students enrolled in the TRIO program at a community college and 2) to identify actions that high schools and community colleges can take to promote the academic and career success of low-income African American students. The study was guided by two fundamental research questions: 1) What factors contribute to the academic and career success of low-income African American college students enrolled in the TRIO program at a community college? 2) What actions can high schools and community colleges take to promote the academic and career success of low-income African American students?

Research Methodology

Mixed Methods Research

This researcher utilized a mixed methods research design for the purposes of gathering both qualitative and quantitative data. Mixed research designs are also referred to as mixed methods research or multi-strategy research (Stahl, Lampi, & King, 2019). Individuals who promote mixed methods approaches feel that several research questions can be best answered by utilizing a multi-strategy design (Stahl, Lampi, & King, 2019). According to Creswell and

Creswell (2017), mixed methods research designs require the researcher to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. When quantitative and qualitative data are combined, there is typically a more credible interpretation of a research problem as opposed to interpreting each form of data separately (Mertler, 2020). According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), the researcher bases the inquiry on the assumption that collection of diverse types of data will provide a better and complete understanding of the research problem compared to quantitative or qualitative data individually. The study should start with a broad survey to ensure that results are generalized to a specific group and next, attention will be centered on qualitative, open-ended interviews to collect descriptive views from participants to assist in providing an explanation surrounding the initial quantitative survey (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The challenges and benefits of mixed methods research are discussed by Almalki (2016). First, it is crucial that researchers are cognizant of their own skill sets and can meet the demands of this approach. Second, and the most pressing challenge, is selecting the most appropriate mixed method research design for the particular study. Lastly, this approach can also be time-consuming and is still questioned by some sectors of academia.

According to Almalki (2016), if these challenges are overcome, mixed methods research can be beneficial to many investigative studies and a suitable approach to any project. Moreover, the use of varying approaches has the ability to provide more depth and scope of information that would not be accessible if using a singular approach. This provides opportunities for researchers to hold informed conversations or debates regarding information that is created by both qualitative and quantitative collection methods. The benefits, according to Almalki (2016), far outweigh the challenges.

Convergent Mixed Methods Research Design

Convergent mixed methods is the research design used to conduct this study.

“Convergent mixed methods are a form of mixed methods design in which the researcher converges or merges quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This design typically requires the investigator to collect both forms of data around the same time and then combine the information into the interpretation of the comprehensive results (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

According to Garcia and Mayorga (2017), the convergent mixed methods design has two distinct processes of methods and data collection, both qualitative and quantitative, with the merging or integration of the two occurring in the final reporting of results as a means of validation.

While utilizing the convergent mixed methods design, it is posited by Moseholm and Fetters (2017) that investigators tend to have varying levels of clarity of intent regarding the process of merging data. They refer to the first pattern as a “blind path” approach, which describes researchers who support the belief that merging both data types will provide new insights about the circumstances surrounding their research. The second pattern is the “matching” approach, where the researcher intentionally designs data collection instruments to have related items to ensure that both instruments will show data that reflects the same phenomena/variables. The third pattern, “the data diffraction” approach, calls attention to the design of the quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments to gain various aspects of a central phenomenon. In this approach, the primary goal is to retrieve different types of data that will display information about various aspects of a phenomenon relative to the researcher’s interest.

This researcher appreciated having the option of merging quantitative and qualitative data together and analyzing both forms of data simultaneously. Another benefit that this researcher found of value was the ability to utilize the qualitative data to evaluate the reliability of the quantitative data. Subsequently, the quantitative data identified by this researcher was used to describe qualitative data findings. The benefits of the convergent mixed methods research design is reflected in this research study from the data collected during the interviews to the number of times a particular theme was mentioned by the study participants. The researcher found the convergent mixed methods research design to be beneficial, reliable, and effective in the researcher's data analysis process.

Action Research

Due to one goal of this study being to identify practical solutions related to the study's research questions, an action research approach was used to bring the convergent mixed methods research design to fruition. According to Mertler (2020), action research can be traced back to Kurt Lewin, who developed the term "action research" around 1934. It was Lewin's belief that research conducted in the context in which the problem existed was the key to reaching a solution to that specific problem or implementing some form of change (Mertler, 2020).

According to Vaughan (2020):

He believed that for social practice, typical theoretical research was not sufficient, claiming instead that the most appropriate types of research was action research.

He described action research as research that compared the effects of different forms of social action, consisting of a series of spirals that each entailed a circle of planning, action, and fact finding about the result of action (p. 411).

Unlike traditional research, action researchers are committed to taking action and effecting positive educational change within their classrooms and schools based on the findings of their research (Lari et al., 2019). Action research is widely used by educators at a variety of levels, such as administrators, teachers or counselors, who have an equitable interest in the learning and teaching environment for data collection purposes to examine how teachers teach, the way in which students learn, and how their school operates collectively (Mertler, 2020). It is the opinion of this researcher, that action research is critical for low-income African-American youth as it helps educators identify ways to address students' academic needs, receive the necessary supports that promote academic and career success, and create school systems that recognize and support this population of students.

There are a plethora of models outlining the action research process. Some models are simple, while others are more complex in nature. Each model begins with a central problem, involves some observation or monitoring of current practice, and includes collection of information and data (Mertler, 2020; Vaughan, 2020). Most models agree that there are four steps in conducting action research: 1) Identify an area of focus, 2) collect data, 3) analyze and interpret the data, and 4) develop a plan of action (Mertler, 2020). In this way, action research strives to develop a body of knowledge that improves professional and community practices and enhances the well-being of the individuals involved (Stringer & Aragon, 2021).

Participatory Action Research

Action research functions on the assumption that all people who affect or are affected by the problem being investigated should be included in the processes of inquiry (Stringer, 2014). This researcher wanted to include the personal and educational experiences of low-income African-American students within this study to demonstrate the importance of implementing

programs and processes that will give this student population an opportunity to achieve academic and career success. Therefore, participatory action research was the specific form of action research that was utilized for this research study.

Participatory action research (PAR), which surfaced as a result of research efforts like cooperative inquiry, is tasked with achieving a “clearer focus on the needs of participants involved in the research process compared to earlier approaches” (Jacobs, 2018, p. 44). PAR provides participants the opportunity to demonstrate how their practices are molded and constrained by political, economic, and cultural structures and the opportunity to evaluate the degree to which they can intercede on their own accord to avoid these constraints or how they can maneuver within these structures to lessen the illogicality, dissatisfaction, and carelessness within (Jacobs, 2018).

Participatory research, as posited by Wright, Burke and Hadley (2020), is fundamentally concerned with providing different and often underrepresented voices with a chance to re-present what is observed and communicated about the research moment. According to Cook et al. (2020), participatory action research uses community engagement strategies to include participants themselves in the research process. The distinguishing characteristic of PAR is an emphasis on advocating for equity of power sharing between researchers and participants (Cook et al., 2020). Neither the researcher nor the participants should have more control during the research process; they are working collaboratively for the same purpose.

Because the purpose of participatory action research is to improve the quality of the lives of those who make up communities, families, and organizations; empower individuals as well as groups to enhance their quality of life and promote social change; and help individuals extend their understanding of their personal circumstances and to resolve significant issues or problems

that confront them (Mertler, 2020; Stringer, 2014). For all of these reasons, this study utilized participatory action research to talk directly to college students to describe factors that contributed to their academic and career success and to identify actions that high schools and community colleges can take to promote the academic and career success of low-income African American students.

Research Context

This study took place at a community college located in central Illinois. This college, which currently serves 7,813 students across ten counties and has three campus locations, offers associate degrees and certificates in various occupations. The specific school or identity of the participants in this study will not be revealed to protect the identity of the study participants. A guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity is among the important factors that are included in the informed consent (Mertler, 2020).

Research Participants

The study's six research participants were members of the college's TRIO program. All participants were eighteen years or older, African-American, currently enrolled in the TRIO program or a former TRIO participant, and a member of a low-income household. "Low-income" was defined as students who are receiving need-based financial assistance to pay for college (Sabay & Wiles, 2020).

Participant Selection

To select participants for the study, the researcher used a nonprobability sample (also referred to as a convenience sample), in which participants were selected based on convenience and availability (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). After securing permission from the college's Executive Director of Institutional Research and Planning to conduct the study, the researcher

requested that the TRIO Director recommend three female and three male students to participate in the study. Students who were recommended by the community college's TRIO Director were sent an email in November 2020 inviting them to participate in the study. Two weeks later, a follow-up email was sent to six students who elected to participate after it was confirmed that they met all selection criteria. The follow-up email informed participants of the agreed upon date and time of their interview and included a letter of informed consent, which provided a description of the nature of the research study as well as the requirements for each participant's involvement (Mertler, 2020). The research study required each participant to participate in at least one interview with the researcher.

The email to the study's six selected participants gave a detailed description of what the study entailed and the participants' role and timeframe of research study activities. This is referred to as the principle of accurate disclosure (Mertler, 2020). It was fully explained to the participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Prior to and the day of each participant's interview, the researcher reviewed the letter of informed consent and answered any questions that participants had. The interview was conducted only after each participant signed the letter of informed consent and agreed to proceed with the study.

Data Collection

Interviews

According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), there are advantages to utilizing interviews as a main source of data collection for research studies. Interviews are useful when the researcher cannot directly observe the participants, when participants are given the opportunity to provide historical information, and when researchers have flexibility in the way in which questions are asked (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). There are also several limitations when it comes to

interviewing participants for research studies. Interviews provide indirect information, they are based on the perspectives of the interviewees, they provide information in a designated place as opposed to the natural setting, the researcher's presence could possibly bias the participants' responses, and some individuals lack the ability to be articulate and perceptive (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

During November and December of 2020, the participants in this study participated in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Mertler (2020) states that in semi-structured interviews, the researcher asks several "base" questions, and also has the option of asking additional follow-up questions depending on the circumstances. Stringer and Aragon (2021) explain:

Questions, in fact are merely triggers that enable participants to explore and describe what is happening in their lives or to reflect on events associated with issues of concern. Their purpose is to generate meaningful conversation, not containers to be filled with "appropriate" answers (p. 129).

When collecting qualitative data, interviews are likely best conducted by utilizing a semi-structured or open-ended format (Mertler, 2020). Toward this end, the researcher intentionally designed open-ended questions for the purposes of obtaining more information from the participants allowing them to elaborate and provide detailed responses (see Appendix H). The researcher also utilized the skill of probing a great deal throughout the interviews with study participants. Probing took place when the researcher wanted to gain more information following an interesting response or one requiring additional detail. It is the assertion of Gill, Stewart, Treasure, and Chadwick (2008) that the use of probing is to allow the researcher to gain more direct or transparent answers. Additionally, examples of verbal probes would consist of the

researcher repeating the participants statement, providing a summary of the main idea, or verbally responding to areas of interest (DeJonckeeere & Vaughn, 2019).

Additionally, Mertler (2020) suggests that before the interviews are conducted, it is best to prepare an interview guide that contains specific or general questions; and after the data are analyzed, member checking should be used to follow up with participants to review the accuracy of the information obtained. Prior to the interview, participants were given an interview guide prior to the interview to assist them in providing accurate, detailed responses. Following data analysis, member checking was incorporated to allow the study participants to verify the accuracy of the information being collected by this researcher. This researcher created a binder for each study participant to ensure that information was organized, well maintained, and stored in a confidential location.

Data Analysis

Data analysis, which included developing case studies, qualitatively coding the data, and conducting a thematic analysis, began immediately following the interviews. This process began in December of 2020 and continued through December of 2021.

Case Study

The researcher composed a case study for each participant to evaluate the similarities and differences with regard to the six research participants' academic and personal experiences. A case study is defined as an in-depth qualitative research study of an individual program, activity, person, or group (Mertler, 2020). Case studies, which integrate positively with mixed methods research designs, traditionally collect both qualitative and quantitative data in order to gain a more comprehensive view of the case (Guetterman & Fetters, 2018). One step of conducting a case study is for the researcher to identify individuals or places that may be good sources of data

for the study. Next, the researcher starts the data collection process while concurrently exploring, analyzing, and reviewing the data to determine next steps for the study (Mertler, 2020).

Preparing for Thematic Analysis

According to Lester, Cho, and Lochmiller (2020), thematic analysis is the arranging of varying approaches sharing the goal of recognizing patterns within qualitative data sets. This researcher incorporated thematic analysis during the process of analyzing the six case studies. Preparing and organizing the data is one of the first steps in thematic analysis (Lester et al., 2020). This researcher prepared for the data analysis process by gathering field notes and recordings from each participant's virtual or phone interview into a three-ring binder. The second phase is transcribing the data. Lester et al. (2020) states that audio or video data are typically collected in qualitative research, and then time is set aside for the researcher to analyze the data. The researcher typed each handwritten interview and double checked each typed transcript for accuracy. Next, the researcher reviewed the interview notes taken during each interview in preparation for coding the data.

Qualitative Coding and Thematic Analysis

It is stated by Lester et al. (2020) that a code is a short, descriptive word used to give meaning to the data being analyzed. Creswell and Creswell (2017) define coding as the process of structuring the data by bracketing chunks of text and recording a word or phrase that represents each bracketed chunk in the margins. The researcher used these definitions to guide the process of assigning descriptive words or short phrases to participants' transcribed interview responses to make sense of the data collected.

First Stage of Thematic Analysis

As the first step of data analysis, the researcher used pre-determined codes to the data. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), pre-determined codes are assigned to topics that the researcher believes are likely to occur in the data findings. Before beginning the coding process, this researcher created pre-determined codes such as family (FAM), success (SUC), and support (SUP) as these codes were likely to occur based on the research surrounding low-income African-American students and their educational experiences. As part of the analysis process, this researcher reviewed the responses to each question for each participant and highlighted significant words, phrases, and sometimes full sentences in correspondence to the identified code. The researcher used gel pens and highlighters in a variety of colors to distinguish different categories of pre-determined codes. The first and second columns of Table 1 list all pre-determined codes used for the study's initial data analysis.

Table 1

Coding Progression

Pre-determined codes		Theme codes	Common themes
FAM	Family	Family Support	Family Support was a determining factor for each student's academic and career success.
SM	Single Mom		
DL	Dad Left the Home		
TP	Two-Parent Home		
SIB	Siblings		
EXF	Extended Family		
MENT	Mentor		
ELM	Elementary/ Middle School		
HS	High School		
COUN	Counselor		
TEA	Teacher		
SUP	Support		
AC	Academic Challenges		
AAH	Academic Achievement/honors		

EXC	Extra-Curricular Activities	Involvement in Extra-Curricular Activities, Sports, and Leadership Roles	Involvement in Extra-Curricular Activities, Sports, and Leadership helped students build character and develop skills.
SPO	Sports		
LEAD	Leadership		
POS	Positive Experiences	Positive Influence of Upward Bound and TRIO	Upward Bound (UB) and TRIO Staff provided positive influence toward academic and career success.
UB	Upward Bound		
TRIO	TRIO		
FUP	Future Plans		
TRM	Trauma	Shaping Experiences	Personal Determination empowered these students to persevere, be resilient in the face of adversity, and defy the odds.
HOME	Home Environment		
VAE	Value of Education		

Second Stage of Thematic Analysis

Second, the researcher organized all text coded with pre-determined codes by its color category to identify patterns in the data. The color categories were the first step toward identifying the study's emerging themes. After placing highlighted words in its appropriate code category and reading the coded data for all participants within each category, this researcher identified five emerging themes: 1) Family support was a determining factor for each student's academic and career success, 2) Non-family mentors served as positive role models throughout students' school years, 3) Involvement in extra-curricular activities, sports, and leadership helped students build character and develop skills, 4) Upward Bound and TRIO staff provided positive influence toward academic and career success, and 5) Personal determination empowered these students to persevere, be resilient in the face of adversity, and defy the odds (see Table 1).

To fully understand each individual research participants' experiences related to each emerging theme, this researcher reorganized the coded and themed data by participant, re-read each participant's coded responses from beginning to end, and made additional notes. It was necessary to review the data multiple times to ensure accuracy. It is stated by Braun and Clarke (2012) that various patterns can be discovered across any data set; the purpose of analysis is to

identify those relevant to answering a particular research question. After identifying and articulating the study's emerging themes, this researcher proceeded with categorizing specific themes.

Third Stage of Thematic Analysis

Third and finally, the coded data from each participant was used to develop each emerging theme into a complete sentence that articulated a final, common theme for each category of data: 1) Family Support was a determining factor for each participant's academic and career success, 2) Non-Family Mentors served as Positive Role Models throughout their school years, 3) Involvement in Extra-curricular Activities, Sports, and Leadership helped students build character and develop skills, 4) Positive Influence of Upward Bound & TRIO afforded participants many unique educational opportunities and the acquiring of new skills throughout their participation in the program, and 5) Personal Determination empowered these students to persevere, be resilient in the face of adversity, and defy the odds. The fourth column of Table 1 lists the study's five common themes.

Reporting the Study's Thematic Analysis

Once data analysis was complete, a thorough description of each participant's interview responses was written by the researcher and included in the study's Findings section. Participants' pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. Each participant's experiences were organized into the following categories: Family, Elementary and Middle School, High School, The Value of Education, Extra-Curricular Activities and Sports, Influential People, Upward Bound and TRIO Experiences, and Future Plans. The participant descriptions were reported in detail using each student's pseudonym to ensure that readers of the study's findings had an opportunity to "get to know" each participant prior to reading the study's common

themes. The study's common themes were reported and elaborated in light of related research and the study's research questions in the study's Discussion section.

Researcher Positionality

Herr and Anderson (2015) state that researcher positionality prompts researchers to ask themselves who they are in relation to the research setting as well as in relation to the research participants. A large portion of action research is centrally concerned with these issues of the relationship between outsiders and insiders, since clarity about both is essential for thinking through issues of research validity or trustworthiness, as well as research ethics (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

This researcher was essentially an outsider as it relates to this study because there was no prior existing relationship between the researcher and the community college or with any of the research participants. The fact that there was no relationship, helped avoid potential bias on the part of the researcher (Mertler, 2020). However, this researcher can be considered an "outsider within" due to race, gender, and similar life experiences (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 46). Both the researcher and the research participants were African-American, and three of the research participants were female, as is the researcher. The researcher was also able to identify with the study participants as a person who grew up in a low-income household, as a former student of the community college where the study took place, and as a former TRIO member. The researcher believes that this "outsider within" positionality was useful in fully understanding the research participants' experiences while at the same time objectively coding and thematically analyzing the study's data.

Summary

This chapter discussed the study's research problem along with its purpose and questions, research methodology, research context, data collection, data analysis, and the researcher's positionality. This researcher will present and discuss the findings of the study in chapter 4.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter reports the findings of the scholarly research project where each student's family, academic, and career experiences are described in detail. Then, themes and patterns among the six students are identified and discussed. The chapter closes with a synthesis of the research findings and offers discussion in light of the study's two research questions: 1) What factors contribute to the academic and career success of low-income African-American college students enrolled in the TRIO program at a community college? and 2) What actions can high schools and community colleges take to promote the academic and career success of low-income African-American students?

Research Findings

The participants of this scholarly research project consisted of three female and three male students enrolled in the TRIO program at a local community college in central Illinois: Sharee, Kallie, Maddy, John, Maurice, and Roosevelt (See table 2). Each participant shared information about their family; elementary, middle, and high school experiences; educational values; involvement in extracurricular activities and sports; influential people in their lives; Upward Bound and TRIO experiences; and future plans.

Table 2

Student Participant Information

Pseudonym	Age	Year in college	TRIO participation
Sharee	19	2	High school & college
Kallie	21	3	College
Maddy	21	3	High school & college

John	20	1	College
Roosevelt	20	2	College
Maurice	22	4	High school & college

Sharee

Family

When asked about family, Sharee responded, “I love my family; family is everything!” She is the third of five children, three girls and two boys. Her mom was a single parent who worked very hard to raise her children and give them a “better life” than she had growing up. Sharee’s grandmother and aunt also resided in her home. Sharee stated that it was “always busy” in their house and “never a dull moment.” She proudly stated that she had three women helping to raise her and point her in the right direction. It was evident that she looked up to the women in her home and valued their guidance. Sharee stated, “It is a blessing to have family who truly cares about me and my future. I know they are steering me in the right direction.”

Elementary and Middle School

Sharee attended four different schools between kindergarten and eighth grade. She reported that it was “difficult” each time she started at a new school. She had to make new friends and learn her way around at each school. Sometimes, her class was doing something totally different from what she had been doing at her previous school, which complicated things for her. Asking for after school help to improve in subjects where she was not doing well was her solution to not only raising her grades, but also for developing a better understanding for the content area. Sharee explained that she “had to work really hard and did not catch on quickly.”

Sharee really liked her third-grade teacher. She talked about how this teacher “made learning fun and really showed that she cared for her students.”

Sharee liked science more than any other subject. In middle school, she was in a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) program after school, which helped her with her social skills and with feeling more comfortable meeting new people. She was also in a girl’s group in seventh and eighth grade. This group allowed her to participate in both fun and educational activities such as going out to eat, to movies, to museums, and skating. Other activities that Sharee was involved in included Girl Scouts, basketball, and student council. Sharee’s middle school student council experience had a “major impact on her academic and career success.” She stated that the group sponsor often reminded the student council members that they were considered the leaders of their school and they should act accordingly. Sharee stated that she was a good student, made the honor roll, and received awards for most improved student at various times during middle school.

High School

Sharee was very proud to announce that she was captain of her cheer team in high school. One positive school experience was when she was elected homecoming queen by her peers during her junior year in high school. She did not think that she would win due to “not being popular” during her high school years, referring to this experience as a “much-needed self-esteem booster.” Sharee made honor roll occasionally in high school, highlighting her efforts and desire to do well academically. Sharee feels that success is achieved when an individual sets short- and long-term goals and works hard to achieve them.

The Value of Education

Sharee's aunt has a high school education, but her mom and grandma do not. She went on to state that her grandmother did not have an eighth-grade education either. She feels this is the reason they all encouraged her to finish high school and go to college or get a good paying job. Sharee's mom talked about getting her GED at some point, but doing so would have been difficult while raising children and maintaining a household as a single parent. Sharee discussed how her mom would always tell her, "You can be whatever your heart desires as long as you get an education."

Extra-Curricular Activities and Sports

Sharee emphasized that she and her siblings had to get all of their homework done before being allowed to do any leisure activities. If she brought information home about academic opportunities, her mom would allow her to participate only if it was not too far away from their home and free of charge. It was this moment, where Sharee knew that she was different in that her options for activities were limited in comparison to some of her peers who resided in higher income households. This distinction became a motivator for her during the late part of middle school. When she reached high school, she stated that she was better prepared to seek out opportunities on her own that took place at school and in her community.

Influential People

Sharee credits her mom, relatives, family friends, counselor, and teachers for supporting her and encouraging her to complete college. She expressed her appreciation for a few teachers that believed in her and went the extra mile to help her in any way that they could. For example, her sixth-grade math teacher bought her flash cards and workbooks to help her practice at home, allowed her to stay after school to get help with her homework a few days a week, and took her

home afterwards. She stated that one of her mentors was her high school cheer coach and the other was a TRIO staff member. Her cheer coach helped her “become more confident” in new things that she attempted and “was always honest, no matter what.” Sharee still communicates with her coach and the TRIO staff member. Sharee states that her former cheer coach still acknowledges her birthday by sending her a present each year, which makes her feel cared for. Sharee is an assistant cheer coach for her former high school and works part-time at a pharmacy. Sharee enjoys her role as assistant cheer coach and would like to continue in this role as both a coach and mentor. She views the TRIO staff member as a second mother. She recalled the staff member coming to visit her while touring her campus with students who were in the program. During this time, Sharee was able to discuss her college experiences with the group of high school students.

Upward Bound and TRIO Experiences

Sharee participated in Upward Bound during high school and participated in the TRIO program in college. Through participation in the TRIO program, Sharee received help with homework, participated in college visits, and went on field trips to museums, job shadowed at local businesses, and volunteered at various locations throughout the community. “I took advantage of the tutoring offered by the program. I always struggled in math and needed a lot of help” she said. Sharee discussed the guest speakers and how it benefited her. She viewed this as another educational opportunity.” “TRIO literally is the best program that I have been a part of in all my years of education! Best decision I could have ever made,” Sharee stated. Sharee particularly liked the fact that she had the opportunity to visit colleges and universities and was able to stay overnight in the dorms. She stated that it was good to have these first-hand experiences so that she and her peers could see how it felt to live the life of a college student.

Outside of TRIO, Sharee is an assistant cheer coach for her former high school and works part-time at a pharmacy. Sharee enjoys her role as cheer coach and would like to continue in this role to serve as both a coach and mentor to

Future Plans

Sharee noted that completing college at her prospective university is next on her list of priorities. One day, she hopes to be a mentor to a group of young girls to provide motivation and guidance, just as others did for her. Sharee plans to transfer to a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) in Georgia upon completing her associate degree. She plans to pursue a degree in Criminal Justice and then go to law school.

Kallie

Family

Kallie recalls the love in her home. She expressed her sincere appreciation for her upbringing as well as the morals and values that her parents instilled in her. Kallie is also thankful for extended family who helped raise her after her parents passed away. Being raised by her maternal aunt allowed Kallie and her younger brother to continue receiving the love and nurturing that they received in their parental home. Kallie worked very hard to be a great role model for her brother, who looked up to her. She states that her brother was her cheerleader through elementary, high school, and now, during her time as a community college student.

Elementary and Middle School

Kallie discussed the many challenges she faced as a child and teenager. She reported being sexually abused at an early age and “traumatized by the death of her mother” during primary school and her father during high school. Kallie describes this as “a very dark time” in her life that continues to sadden her after so many years have gone by. The loss of both parents

caused her to experience an “enormous amount of stress” and sent her into a “deep depression.”

Kallie acknowledges that, being so young, she had no idea that she was depressed, but she knew that it was a feeling that she did not like and wanted it to go away. As an orphan, she felt

hopeless and all alone without her parents, and as a result, her grades suffered

In elementary school, Kallie was on the speech team and enjoyed participating in speech debates.

She enjoyed giving speeches on topics that she was most passionate about. Kallie spoke about a speech that she did celebrating the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She described the intense

preparation that came along with her outstanding performance. Kallie recalled her first time

giving a speech and what made it exciting. She also described her first time giving a speech as

“really scary and intimidating” due to the large audience. After this first success, she gave

speeches at church during holidays in the presence of family and friends. Kallie thanks her

speech coach for helping her develop the skills needed to deliver quality speeches. Kallie took a

moment to reflect on a poster that hung in the hallway at her grade school. It read, “Believe,

Achieve, Succeed.” She found the poster to be both inspirational and motivating. Kallie related

the poster to the many challenges she had faced in her life but managed to overcome. She states,

“The poster is just another reminder for me that I can achieve my goals.”

High School

Kallie “struggled academically and emotionally” during her early years of high school.

She received emotional support from a former teacher who connected her with the high school

counselor. Kallie expressed how grateful she was to have a teacher who “cared enough to

connect her to the support” that she needed at that time. She met with her counselor on a regular

basis to address the “trauma in her life.” and devised a plan to help improve her grades. Kallie

managed to address the trauma in her life that she described as “barriers to her achieving

academic and personal success.” As a result, she graduated from high school and then enrolled in a community college near her home. Kallie also received support from former teachers who motivated her to complete eighth grade and high school. She explained, “Success means doing the best you can in all that you attempt, not comparing yourself to others, and being uniquely you.”

The Value of Education

Kallie stated that her parents were “no nonsense” when it came to her education. However, it was hard to get help with assignments due to the health issues and hardships her family experienced. Her parents wanted the best for her and her little brother. Kallie stated that her parents did their best to expose her and her brother to as many educational opportunities as they could, such as free programs at their local Boys and Girls Club and after school programs. Despite their illnesses and financial problems, Kallie’s parents demonstrated that education was important by encouraging her and her brother to do their best and to try hard in school. Kallie recalls her mother saying, “Hard work pays off in the long run.”

Extra-Curricular Activities and Sports

Kallie discussed the impact that the arts had on her during her youth. The source of her exposure to the arts was during her participation at the Boys and Girls Club. She was also a participant of the city-wide cheer squad throughout high school, an activity that she really enjoyed. Kallie recalled the cheer competitions that she attended, and the fun moments she experienced with her cheer coach and team. Kallie thanks her speech coach for helping her develop the skills needed to deliver quality speeches.

Influential People

Kallie described second grade as being “very memorable.” She described her teacher as “mother-like and nurturing.” She went on to say how she always felt safe and cared for while in this teacher’s presence. Kallie also discussed how her aunt her raised her was always supportive by attending her cheer and speech events. While Kallie missed her birth parents, she was thankful that her aunt was able to provide a loving home for her. “My aunt treats me like one of her own children. She has been there for me through the good and bad.” Kallie stated that her speech coach still reaches out to her to see how she’s doing and frequently informs her about speech opportunities that she can participate in.

Upward Bound and TRIO Experiences

Kallie states that TRIO was “Heaven sent” because it provided so many benefits. In the absence of her mother and father, she views the TRIO coordinator and students as family. She states that she was given a wealth of support and always had someone she could contact for whatever she needed at the time. Kallie discusses instances in which she was able to spend time with the staff and engage in activities that really made her feel as if she was a part of a family. She is appreciative of all that the TRIO program did for her personally and academically. She made life-long friends in the program and is still in touch with TRIO staff. She is hoping to find a program similar to TRIO at the university she is currently attending. She states that TRIO helped build her self-confidence, advocated for her when she encountered an issue involving discrimination on campus, and motivated her to continue her education. Kallie states that TRIO is like her second family.

Future Plans

Kallie is currently a Theatre Arts Production major. She intends to continue her education after she completes her undergraduate studies. Kallie hopes to help youth in the future by providing the same type of nurturing and compassion that the TRIO program gave to her. Kallie explained that she does not want a student to endure the trauma that she did without receiving support. She further stated that her traumatic experiences can help someone else who may have similar experiences. Kallie spoke of serving as a mentor to youth in the future to help them overcome various challenges they may experience in school or in their personal lives. Kallie's career goals consist of building a youth center, acting, and writing plays. At her future youth center, she intends to offer a plethora of activities that allow youth to experience the world of drama, music, and art.

Maddy***Family***

Maddy stated that her primary school years are “memorable” because her father resided in the family home until third grade. She is a middle child with two siblings. She stated that she is “blessed” to have a mother who was resilient and cared for her and her siblings without the presence of her father. Maddy admired her mother for this, saying that her mother's strength is what inspired her and helped her to become the woman that she is today. Maddy is also thankful for her siblings and the love that they have shown one another during good times and bad.

Elementary and Middle School

Maddy recalls the fun aspects of elementary school, such as school-wide events and activities in her classroom. Maddy stated that she loved reading books and that she participated in the school spelling bee in the sixth grade. She also had the opportunity to write a book along

with other members of her fourth-grade class. She has been writing ever since and plans to write a book one day. Maddy talked about her involvement in student council and math club while in middle school, stating that math was one of her favorite subjects. Once her dad left the home, she reports experiencing some “depression” and displayed a “lack of interest in fifth grade” due to the void in her life. Things improved by sixth grade as she found a way to cope with her parents splitting up. Maddy’s coping mechanism was immersing herself into her studies and extra-curricular activities to get her mind off her home life.

High School

Maddy stated that she was not involved in sports nor a lot of activities at school, further stating she wanted to devote more time to her studies. She mentioned being on the class committee to assist with homecoming week during her junior and senior year. Her love for reading still existed in high school, as she discussed reading books just for fun. Maddy was involved in the Upward Bound program in high school and the TRIO program when she entered community college. Her involvement in Upward Bound at the high school level helped tremendously when she transitioned to college. She had already been exposed to the program and knew that she would continue receiving the same support at her community college.

The Value of Education

Maddy reflected on how her older brother and parents would read with her when she was younger. Maddy states that this is how she developed a love for reading. She discussed her mother buying her books when they had book fairs at school. Maddy reminisced on times that she spent with her dad while reading a few of her favorite books. She remembers her mother telling her, “Reading is very important; don’t ever stop reading. It will help you learn about so many things.” Maddy explained that her parents “did not finish high school,” but wanted to live

long enough to see their children graduate. She went on to say that her parents “did not allow them to watch television or do fun activities” until all homework was complete.

Extra-Curricular Activities and Sports

Maddy was a member of student council and math club in elementary school. She enjoyed the many activities that she helped plan for her fellow students. Maddy stated that she enjoyed being a leader and having an opportunity to make decisions that were beneficial to her peers. Math was one of Maddy’s stronger subjects; she did very well and got good grades. Maddy described Math Club as an opportunity for her to show off her skills and compete against other students who loved math.

Influential People

Maddy stated that she had a strong source of support between her family, high school guidance counselor, middle school math teacher, and TRIO staff members. Maddy says that her mom, dad, and siblings were her main supporters. However, her guidance counselor was instrumental in introducing her to the TRIO program. She says that her counselor did a great job of monitoring her academic progress and addressing her academic needs. Maddy discussed her challenges with math and the support and assistance she received from her math teacher. Math was one of her favorite subjects in middle school, which prompted her to join the math club. She discussed how taking more difficult math classes in high school, such as algebra and trigonometry, required her to seek individual tutoring to help her understand the content and do well in the courses.

Upward Bound and TRIO Experiences

Maddy was involved in Upward Bound during high school and TRIO in college. She credits TRIO for helping her become organized and develop better study habits and time

management skills. She states that TRIO “set the foundation” for her college experience. She further states, “I learned so much from the program and cannot thank them enough for encouraging me and helping me believe in myself. Maddy credits her participation in the TRIO program as her reason for pursuing an occupation in the medical field. She spoke highly of the TRIO staff and provided a few highlights of the program such as: tutoring, ACT test preparation, cultural and academically related field trips, and counseling. She is still in contact with TRIO members and staff, and they occasionally plan group outings around the holidays or summer. Maddy states that TRIO prepared her for college and for the real world. She states that they were more than just school personnel to her; they were like family. Maddy says, “I am thankful for the time they spent helping me continuously improve, never settling for less, and preparing to be great.” Maddy is thankful for the support and opportunities she received from the TRIO program, stating that it has made her a well-rounded individual both academically and personally.

Future Plans

Maddy plans to obtain a position as an anesthesia nurse after completing her undergraduate studies where she is currently a nursing major. She plans to obtain her master’s degree in the future. Maddy would like to get involved in more student organizations and volunteer programs in college.

John

Family

John was raised by his maternal grandmother. He stated that his mom and dad had “substance abuse issues,” so he and his older sister lived with their grandmother. His three other siblings were younger and lived with their dad’s side of the family after becoming wards of the state. John said he is thankful for having such a caring grandmother who provided a loving home

for him and his sister, all on her own. John quoted his grandmother as frequently saying, “You can learn to do things the right way or the hard way.” He commented on the strength of this statement and how he appreciated his grandmother’s tough love. John also expressed his sincere appreciation for his older sister as she helped care for him just as his grandmother did.

Elementary School and Middle School

John reported that elementary school was okay, but he felt more successful by the time he reached seventh grade. He explained that his behavior frequently got in the way, interfering with his learning. John discussed his frequent trips to the principal’s office, after school detentions, and out of school suspensions. As a result, he started seeing a therapist outside of school and a counselor at school. He stated that counseling helped him improve his behavior and develop anger management skills. During this time, John was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). John stated that he was not a very strong student and had to put forth a lot of effort to keep up his grades. Science is the subject that he found interesting. His middle school’s STEM program gave him the opportunity to be with his peers and participate in hands on activities in positive and constructive ways.

High School

John continued to talk about how proud he was of himself for staying in high school and improving upon his weaknesses. He stated that he did not get recognized a whole lot at school but gave credit to a few of his teachers and also to his high school counselor for providing a positive school experience for him. He explained that these individuals took the time to address his needs instead of acting as if he did not exist.

The Value of Education

John recalled his grandmother saying, “An education is one thing that can never be taken from you; stay in school.” He described his grandmother as being very strict, but also fair. He went on to state that his grandmother stayed “on him” about behaving at school and doing his homework. When he got in trouble at school, he said he faced consequences at home as well. John stated that during the latter part of his middle school years, he began to understand that the consequences he was given was all because of poor decisions that he made at school. He went on to say that his grandmother wanted him to care about his education just as much as she did, if not more.

Extra-Curricular Activities/Sports

John described himself as being “a loner” and “not very outgoing.” In spite of this, he discussed his involvement with the robotics team in middle school from his sixth to eighth grade year. The robotics team traveled to other Illinois cities for competitions. John was happy to report that he received two robotics rewards and was acknowledged by his coach following one competition. He also assisted with a robotics program at his old primary school and thoroughly enjoyed being back at his old school and helping kids learn more about robotics. John stated that he developed a love for art at a young age, and he and his sister went to an after-school program each day following school. This is where he received tutoring and engaged in fun activities with peers. In high school, he was in an Art Club that gave him the opportunity to put some of his artwork on display during school art fairs.

Influential People

John states that his grandmother encouraged and motivated him to always do his best. He acknowledged that she “ran a tight ship” and did not allow him and his sister to neglect their

priorities or misbehave without correction. He expressed his gratefulness for his grandmother taking him and his sister into her home and loving them unconditionally. His older sister was also very influential as she served as a major role model for him academically and personally. In addition, John is appreciative of the guidance counselors and teachers who cared enough to help him stay on track to ensure that he was meeting academic requirements.

Upward Bound and TRIO Experiences

John stated, “Every student should get involved with TRIO. It will help with many aspects of their college experience.” John acknowledged the TRIO staff for giving him the tools to be successful in college and for meeting his personal needs as well. John discussed being very independent and not connected with a group of friends when he started college. He stated that the TRIO activities and social events allowed him to be with his peers more and develop healthy relationships. John shared that he became very close with one of the male advisors and was able to improve his self-confidence and grades because of the relationship he developed with this advisor. He described him as a “father figure,” someone who he looked up to and ultimately depended on. To date, he considers this advisor a close friend and speaks with him on a regular basis.

Future Plans

Once he earns his associate degree, John would like to transfer to a university in Illinois, but he is unsure of when he will do so. When he does, he would like to join a program that mirrors TRIO to ensure that he has a source of support on campus. He is interested in Criminal Justice. John would like to spend some time job shadowing as well as researching career options to learn more about occupations in the Criminal Justice field. John ultimately wants to make his

grandmother and older sister proud of him by obtaining his bachelor's degree. He was proud to announce he will be the first college graduate in his family.

Roosevelt

Family

Roosevelt talked about his home environment being extra complicated. He described his home environment as “dysfunctional,” “inconsistent,” and having “ongoing issues.” Roosevelt, the youngest of four children, was raised in a single parent home. He experienced a lot of trauma at an early age, and things just seemed to go downhill from there. Roosevelt's mother was in an abusive relationship that was unfortunately witnessed by him and his siblings. The abuse was directed toward Roosevelt and his siblings at times, causing them to seek the help of relatives to intervene and help them escape the violence. Roosevelt spoke very highly of his mom and how she did what she could to care for him and his brothers and sister. He discussed how she always came through for him even when she really did not have extra money to spare. For example, Roosevelt needed new shoes for basketball. His mom started saving her paychecks from the low-paying job she held at a fast-food restaurant. He commented that she did not have to work extra hours to give him something he wanted, yet she did. He further stated that growing up in a single parent home and “in the projects” is not shameful to him. He is glad to have had that experience because it makes him appreciate what he has and motivates him to work harder to get to where he wants to be. Roosevelt emphasized that he felt loved and knew that his mother wanted all her children to be successful.

Elementary and Middle School

Although Roosevelt did not recall many of his experiences during elementary school, he describes the later part of middle school as being very tough for him. He admitted that his

behavior was the cause of his problems at school. He acknowledged that the counselor, basketball coach, and even one of his teachers tried to step in and help him pull things together. Roosevelt explained that his behaviors started around third grade and progressively worsened. He recalled receiving phone calls home, writing sentences, and staying after school for detention. He was proud to announce that he finished the eighth grade due to a lot of support from his mother and staff at his school. Roosevelt discussed his skills in basketball, and further stated that he used his basketball skills as a motivator, thinking that one day it may be his ticket to college. As captain of his middle school basketball team, he felt that it was important to be mindful of his actions as he was considered a leader in eighth grade. He appeared to be very proud of the opportunity he was given to lead.

High School

Roosevelt played basketball in high school as well, serving as the captain of his team all four years. The team members had a lot of respect for Roosevelt and looked to him for advice and leadership. He became very excited when discussing his accomplishments in both basketball and football. Roosevelt proudly shared that he helped lead his basketball team take win the championship during his junior year. It was clear that he enjoyed basketball more and intended to play in college.

The Value of Education

Roosevelt explained that his mother dropped out of high school and did not go to college. However, she obtained her GED and has always maintained a job although she earns very little pay. He discussed how his mother emphasized on a continual basis that she did not want him to make the same mistakes that she did. Roosevelt quotes his mom as saying, “You need your education more than anything. Sports are good, but books should always be first.” Roosevelt

stated that his mom worked a lot and was not home until the evenings. She made sure that his older siblings helped him with homework each day.

Extra-Curricular Activities and Sports

Mentioned earlier, Roosevelt played basketball in middle school and was team captain of his basketball team all four years of high school. Additionally, he was on a JFL (Junior Football League) team in the fifth grade and also played football in high school. In high school, Roosevelt felt that he needed to make a decision as to which sport he wanted to play the most. He enjoyed being a part of JFL (Junior Football League) when he was in middle school. It made him happy to see his family at his games rooting him on. He knew that playing both sports would be a huge time commitment, and he wanted to make sure that his studies were not being neglected due to sports. He valued the opinions of his family and decided to take their advice to stick with the game of basketball. Roosevelt explained that he had started playing basketball first and thought that he may be able to play professional basketball in the future if he focused on basketball exclusively during high school.

Influential People

Roosevelt described his support system as being his mom, siblings, high school basketball and football coaches, and TRIO staff members. He stated, "I could always count on them when I had no one else." Roosevelt stated, "My mom told me to never give up and, when I fail, to try again." He stated that he often refers to that statement when he feels like giving up. Roosevelt discussed a conversation that took place with his football coach during his freshman year of high school. He described this conversation as being one that his coach had never before had with him. It was harsh, but he understood that every bit of it was coming from his coach's heart. He knew how much his coach cared about him and wanted the best for him. He quoted the

coach as repeatedly saying, “You will not be another statistic! Success is right around the corner only if you want it!” Roosevelt says, “My counselor always motivated me and kept me informed about opportunities that would be beneficial to my education.”

Upward Bound and TRIO Experiences

Roosevelt stated that through the TRIO program during high school he made new friends, received a lot of help with tutoring, and went on college visits. He was notably excited about the fact that the program was one-hundred percent free of charge, and he reflected on the change he saw within himself after being in the program not even three months. He noticed that his time management, organization, and study skills had improved. He even reported developing a genuine interest in his academics as opposed to doing well to ensure he was eligible for basketball. He said someone from the TRIO staff was always available for him. He was able to get help with job applications, interviewing tips, note taking, and academic advisement. Roosevelt continued participating in the TRIO program when he went to college. He recruited members of his basketball team into the program, and that had an enormous impact on his life. Roosevelt stated, “Everyone needs someone in their corner to provide support and encouragement. TRIO gave me all the tools I needed to become successful.”

Future Plans

Roosevelt is unsure of where he will transfer upon completing his associate degree, but he expressed an interest in sports medicine or athletic training. He plans to visit a few schools that he is interested in. Roosevelt discussed his desire to move South and will likely select a school in that area. He said if things go well for him in college, he may consider getting his master’s degree. In the future, Roosevelt would like to create his own boy’s youth traveling basketball

team. He stated, “I would like to pour into young people the same way that people poured into me. They need to know that others care about their success and overall well-being.”

Maurice

Family

Maurice admires his mother for her ability to care for him and his siblings with no assistance. Maurice’s mother worked two jobs and also had to tend to his twin sisters who were younger than him. Maurice helped his mother with household chores and taking care of his sisters. As the oldest child in the home, he viewed it as his duty to “help out.” Maurice’s dad did not reside in the home with his family but lived in the city where he grew up. He stated that he knew he had to step up and be the man of the house in the absence of his father. Maurice states that his upbringing taught him how to overcome a myriad of challenges.

Elementary and Middle School

Maurice recalls his educational journey as a time where he wishes his experience consisted of “more ups than downs.” He expressed frustration when he talked about the teachers who did not want to help him. He explained that he asked for help but was overlooked most times. Maurice stated that he could never understand why he did not receive help when it was evident that he was struggling. Another challenging issue for Maurice was attending several schools during elementary and middle school. He struggled the most with reading and math. Maurice sought assistance with homework from an uncle who resided in his home. He talked about how patient his uncle was with him and how he would often come to the school to support him for a school event or parent teacher conferences, when his mom could not attend. Maurice is appreciative of his uncle’s support at home and at school.

High School

Maurice reported that he had a better experience in high school, as opposed to elementary and middle school, because he received more help from his teachers. Math was one of his more challenging subjects, and he reported getting extra help from his math teachers in high school. He stated that his football coach was instrumental in getting him the tutoring assistance that he needed. Maurice stated that he was thankful for his coach as well as the teachers who gave of their time to help him before and after school.

The Value of Education

Maurice stated that his mother reinforced the importance of completing homework and trying his best in class. He stated that his mom was not always available to help him and his sisters with homework but always ensured that they had basic school supplies and received help with their homework when they struggled. His uncle often told him, “Education is a necessity. It is hard to make it in life without it. Knowledge is power.” Maurice defines success as being able to achieve all of his short- and long-term goals in a specific amount of time. He stated that his football coach always reminded him and his teammates that, “Education is your number one priority; sports always come after.”

Extra-Curricular Activities and Sports

Maurice played JFL in middle school and football in high school. Maurice appeared very excited each time he discussed his past and current experiences with football. He discussed how his involvement in sports helped him develop in many other areas of his life such as leadership, being a team player, discipline, and working hard to achieve his goal of winning. Maurice stated that sports was also an escape from things that he was been dealing with personally. He discussed how he was motivated to put forth more effort in class to ensure that he was eligible to

play each game. Maurice stated, “I left all my worries behind once I hit the field!” Further stating that he just wanted to play the game and make his coach, teammates, and family proud.

Influential People

He was glad to have the assistance of his high school math teacher as she recognized his struggles with math and wanted to help him improve. She arranged times before and after school to help Maurice on an individual basis. Maurice stated that she showed him and other students that she cared and refused to let them fail. He explained that his high school football coach was never concerned solely about football, which is what he liked about him. Maurice says his coach was concerned about his health, safety, grades, and overall well-being and was always willing to help him and his family. He was introduced to the TRIO program by his math teacher and football coach. He credits them both for helping him improve his study habits and effort.

Upward Bound and TRIO Experiences

Maurice was introduced to Upward Bound by a former teacher and his football coach. He raved about all the good things the TRIO program did for him. He recalled several benefits of the program, including college visits, tutoring, the summer enrichment program, and workshops. Maurice stated that he would not have had the opportunity to visit an HBCU had it not been for the TRIO program. Maurice was able to get the academic help that he needed by attending tutoring and was able to maintain his eligibility while on his high school football team. He stated, “The TRIO program is my second family. I go back to campus to visit or even volunteer when I can.”

Future Plans

Maurice now attends a university in northern Illinois where he is the captain of his football team. He is hoping that his football career goes beyond college. He stated that he has

devised a plan in the event that he stops playing football after his college career. His plan is to find a full-time job related to his current field, which is Biology. Maurice is undecided about whether he wants to continue working or pursue a graduate degree. He also expressed an interest in having his own mentoring program as well as becoming a football coach. Maurice wants to make his mother and family proud of his accomplishments. He stated that he is trying to set an example for his twin sisters as well. He has always been a person who keeps a journal of where he is going, where he has been, and where he wants to go. The next item on his list is to receive his bachelor's degree. Roosevelt stated with confidence, "Graduation is the next goal to cross off of my list and then I can truly say, mission complete!"

Discussion

As this researcher analyzed the data, emerging themes were identified for all of the participants. The emerging themes are as follows: Family support, Non-family mentors served as positive role models, Involvement in extra-curricular activities, sports, and leadership, Upward Bound and TRIO, and Personal determination. This researcher provides detail below as to how each theme was significant in the lives of the student participants.

Table 3*Emerging Theme Percentages for Participants*

Participant	Family support	Non-family mentors	Extra-curricular activities and sports	Leadership roles	UB and TRIO	Personal determination
Sharee	X	X	X	X	X	X
Kallie	X	X	X		X	X
Maddy	X	X	X		X	X
John	X	X	X		X	X
Roosevelt	X	X	X	X	X	X
Maurice	X	X	X	X	X	X

Family Support

The first common theme in this research study, Family Support, showed that family support was a determining factor for each student's academic and career success. One of the reoccurring themes for family support was single-mother-led households. All six participants grew up with siblings in their home, and two of the six participants, Sharee and Maurice, had extended family members residing in their home. Williams et al. (2014) stated that there is a positive relationship between the number and frequency of stress and risk factors and the high degree of academic, psychological and behavioral problems displayed by children.

Only two of the six students, Maddy and Kallie, reported having both parents in the home at some point during their youth, but even so they felt supported. Kallie's dad was in the home until he passed away. Maddy's father was in the home, but then left after issues in the relationship with her mother. Maddy and her dad continued to spend time together after he left the home. Family supported each participant, despite the challenges and unfortunate events that

occurred within their families. According to Williams et al. (2014), the quality of the immediate care giving environment is a strong indicator of resiliency in children, which was true in this study. The love and support of family was integral to the lives of the six participants. They all communicated the importance of family and the many benefits of having a family who truly cares and that they can rely on.

The need for family support for low-income African-American students is imperative at home and at school. Family support was provided for students as they attempted to maneuver through issues outside of school as well as those that was experienced at school. Sharee and Maurice experienced difficulties due to attending several schools during their K-12 education. These difficulties consisted of needing additional support with their studies, feelings of being behind in school, and lack of assistance from teachers. According to Freidman-Krauss & Raver (2015), increasing school-related social capital, enhancing relationships, and the quality of schools may be useful strategies for minimizing school mobility. Prior research demonstrates that highly mobile students' academic progress is unaffected when they transfer to quality schools that provide interventions that effectively address their needs. It is the assertion of Dalton (2013) that research has revealed that an effective school is one of the best deterrents of mobility, as parents will be hesitant to move if their child is experiencing success at the school.

Kallie lost both parents during her K-12 educational years, and Roosevelt experienced trauma in the form of domestic violence at an early age. Maddy and Kallie suffered from depression due to a trauma related experience at a young age, which affected their academics and required counseling. Both girls were able to overcome their issues of trauma by receiving the necessary support from their counselor and family, which supports Johnson's (2019) finding that

African-American and Latino students often show resiliency regardless of their higher-than-average stressors and misfortune as a result of traumatic experiences.

Amatea and West (2007) declared that children living in poverty are considerably more likely than children from the middle-class to report increased levels of anxiety and depression, exhibiting a higher frequency of behavioral and academic difficulties, and a lower level of positive academic interaction and engagement in the school system (as cited by Johnson, 2019). In this study, all six participants had the support of family during good and bad times. Family supported them with their studies, school events, and other activities. The student who lost both parents to death, the student whose father left the home, and the students who did not have a father in their lives still had family to rely on. Extended family members demonstrated their loyalty to these students by assisting with homework in the absence of the mother, attending school activities, assuming the role of a parent after the death of both parents, and providing shelter during a domestic violence situation. All six students viewed family as a huge source of support and an integral part of their lives.

Non-Family Mentors

The study's second common theme was Non-Family Mentors. For all six students, non-family mentors served as positive role models throughout their school years. In particular, guidance counselors were instrumental in supporting students on both a personal and an academic level. According to Ohrtman et al. (2016), school counselors can assist at-risk students by helping them overcome barriers and become more engaged in the learning process. The combined support of family, mentors, counselors, and TRIO staff helped all six students throughout their educational journey. They were able to rely on these non-family mentors during both academic and personal struggles. This finding demonstrates that having access to at least

one caring adult who has the ability to provide stable care and adequate attention serves as a protective factor for children within a wide range of risk conditions (Williams et al., 2014).

Over time the participants developed a good rapport, and in some cases an unbreakable bond with their mentors, counselors, and TRIO staff, stating that they were like members of their family. According to Ashtiani and Feliano (2015), the difference between mentoring relationships and non-parental adult relationships is that mentors are committed to helping and positively impacting the lives of youth and are willing to support them in any way possible. These types of relationships seemed to characterize the non-family mentoring relationships for the students in this study.

Extra-Curricular Activities, Sports, and Leadership

The third common theme was involvement in extra-curricular activities, sports, and leadership, which helped students build character and, in some cases, build leadership skills. All six participants actively participated in at least one activity or sport during their school years, and some students reported that their participation in activities or sports helped them develop socialization skills, healthy relationships, and positive and constructive behaviors. At least two studies support this finding. Morgan et al. (2015) stated that when youth are involved in learning activities outside of the normal school day, with supportive adults not associated with the school environment, they learn how to engage successfully with adults as teachers and improve their attitude with regard to learning at school. According to Williams et al. (2014), research surrounding youth participation in their communities has shown that children and adolescents develop a sense of purpose as they master skills related to social competence, autonomy, and problem solving.

Leadership is a subtheme that emerged in three of the participants' responses. Extracurricular activities and sports allowed the participants to develop a sense of belonging and provided opportunities for students to give and receive support from their peers, group leaders, and coaches. For Sharee, Maurice, and Roosevelt this led to leadership roles as captains of their respective sports teams. Each student demonstrated leadership by helping their teammates and being a role model for their peers due to increased self-confidence and pride. Soria et al. (2014) asserted that low-income and first-generation students can greatly benefit from participating in student leadership activities because they supply students with social capital, privileged knowledge, resources, and information that they might not otherwise have an opportunity to access. This was true for Sharee, Maurice, and Roosevelt.

Upward Bound and TRIO

The fourth common theme identified in this research study was Upward Bound and TRIO. For all six students, both Upward Bound and TRIO staff provided positive influence toward academic and career success. Most of the participants viewed the TRIO staff as members of their family; and all six participants expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to participate in a program that allowed them to visit several colleges and universities, receive tutoring, attend workshops, participate in ACT test preparation classes, join summer enrichment programs, and benefit from supportive staff members, new friends, and many other aspects of the program. According to Pitre and Pitre (2009), TRIO programs are imperative to ensure that higher educational opportunities are extended to students from diverse economic and social background.

Sharee, Maddy, and Maurice participated in Upward Bound during high school and then TRIO in college, and each student reported a high level of self-confidence and self-esteem as a

result of participating in TRIO. Another interesting finding is that Sharee and Roosevelt went on to serve in TRIO leadership roles during college. These students' leadership progression is supported by a study conducted by McClure & Child (1998), which found that the Upward Bound students were confident that higher education was an attainable goal, signaling a high self-esteem and the willingness to challenge themselves by setting high goals for themselves.

It is important to note that each study participant was able to participate in the TRIO program because they met the eligibility requirements. The U. S. Congress mandated that two-thirds of TRIO participants be identified as low-income, first-generation college students with family incomes under \$24,000, and neither parent can hold a college degree (Balz & Esten, 1998). This study revealed that some of the students' parents did not even hold a high school diploma, yet these parents wanted their children to receive a high school and a college education. An NCES study reported that first-generation college students are usually older, have lower household incomes, and more likely to have children compared to non-first-generation college students (Balz & Esten, 1998). Fair treatment of all students recognizes that additional supports such as counseling, advising, mentoring help disadvantaged students achieve academic success (Mahoney, 1998).

Mentorship was a reoccurring theme among the participants. As a result, the students in this study have continued to communicate with their TRIO mentors beyond their participation in the program at their community college. The student participants reported visits with TRIO staff during the holidays or summers, while visiting their campus, or when they volunteer to help at TRIO sponsored events. All six students reported that they received mentoring from multiple sources, which helped them personally and academically. As a result, most of them would like to mentor youth in the same way that they were mentored by Upward Bound and TRIO. This

finding is supported by Petty (2014), who asserted that first-generation students require mentoring that will motivate them to overcome barriers that seem to hold them back from their achievements, help them develop a sense of belonging on their campus, discuss techniques designed to increase self-esteem.

Because Upward Bound and TRIO provided the study's participants with early exposure to college, community service opportunities, support, and mentorship, all students in the study expressed ambitious discussed plans for their futures. All six students plan to complete their undergraduate studies, and Sharee, Kallie, and Maddie plan to pursue a master's degree. In addition, Sharee, Kallie, and Maurice would like to mentor youth in the future, and Sharee, Roosevelt, and Maurice would like to coach a sports team. A significant effort on the part of TRIO Student Support Services programs is designed to engage students in high impact practices that promote growth and introduce students to paths and individuals who are critical to persistence, graduation, and beyond (Sabay & Wiles, 2020).

Personal Determination

The fifth and final common theme was personal determination. Personal determination empowered these students to persevere, be resilient in the face of adversity, and defy the odds. In addition to the support of family and non-family mentors; involvement in extra-curricular activities, sports, and leadership roles; and participation in Upward Bound and/or TRIO programs, these students wanted to make their families and non-family mentors proud. Failure was not an option for these six students. They are determined to successfully complete college and achieve academic and career success.

Critical consciousness is defined as learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to develop solutions to avoid the oppressive elements of reality (Roy et al.,

2019). In this study, critical consciousness, expressed by the determination to succeed was a personal desire of each student participant. All six students decided that they wanted better for themselves. One action that they took to achieve this goal was taking the necessary steps to obtain a college degree. Roy et al. (2019) found the positive benefits of critical consciousness on career development are more profound within youth groups who are racially/ethnically and socioeconomically oppressed. For the six students in this study, critical consciousness served as “a reliable solution to avoid sociopolitical constraints and social identity threats that limit key developmental process for career development” (Rapa et al., 2018, p. 127).

A Return to the Study’s Research Questions

This study was guided by two fundamental research questions. The final section of the chapter addresses both questions in light of the study’s findings.

Factors that Contribute to Academic and Career Success

The study’s first research question was, what factors contribute to the academic and career success of low-income African-American college students enrolled in the TRIO program at a community college? The support of family and non-family mentors all played an integral role in the six students’ academic and career success. Extra-curricular activities and sports gave the students an opportunity to be a part of a team, to receive some form of mentoring from a non-family adult, and to experience accomplishments that they could be proud of. Of the four students who participated in Upward Bound in high school and TRIO in college, all students reported positive experiences with both programs and discussed at length their appreciation for the support, mentorship, and opportunities provided by the program. The support they received further helped them develop an internal desire to succeed academically and in life. Therefore, the factors that contribute to the academic and career success of low-income African-American

college students are the support of family and non-family mentors; involvement in extra-curricular activities, sports, and leadership roles; participation in Upward Bound and TRIO programs, and personal determination.

Actions that Promote Academic and Career Success

The study's second research question was, what actions can high schools and community colleges take to promote the academic and career success of low-income African-American students? This study demonstrated that TRIO programs can serve as a model for K-12 administrators, individual institutions, and other educators who have a sincere interest in expanding higher education opportunities for all students (Ohrman, 2016). High schools and community colleges can promote the Upward Bound and TRIO programs at their campuses or implement similar programs that provide this population with the tools to achieve academic and career success. High school counselors can take the initiative to introduce students to the Upward Bound program as it is designed for high school students. This responsibility does not lie solely with high school counselors but can include any school personnel willing to advocate for students by informing them of quality educational programs.

It would benefit high schools to collaborate with a TRIO program at a nearby college, allowing them to visit and deliver a presentation highlighting the program's purpose, history, and student benefits. Therefore, the action that high schools can take is to collaborate with a local college who has the program for high school students to participate. High school counselors and student personnel can encourage students to participate in school-wide educational programs as well. Community colleges who do not have TRIO programs or programs tailored to meet the specific needs of low-income African-American students should strongly consider the

implementation of such a program and examine ways in which they can meet the needs of this population with regard to achieving academic and career success.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reported the findings of this scholarly research project. Each student's family, academic, and career experiences were described in detail; themes and patterns among the six students were identified and discussed; and a synthesis and discussion of the research findings in light of the study's two research questions was presented. Chapter five will provide a summary of the study's findings, discuss implications for practice, and offer recommendations for future research. Limitations of the study are also discussed, and final conclusions are drawn.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

After summarizing the study's overall research findings, this chapter summarizes answers to the study's two research questions that integrate reflections from the researcher's life and school experiences. The chapter offers recommendations for practice and for future research, before discussing the study's limitations and concluding the final report.

Summary of Findings

This convergent mixed methods, interview-based, participatory action research study described factors that contribute to the academic and career success of six low-income African-American college students who were participants in the TRIO program at a community college in central Illinois. The study was guided by two research questions: 1) What factors contribute to the academic and career success of low income African-American college students enrolled in the TRIO program at a community college? and 2) What actions can high schools and community colleges take to promote the academic and career success of low income African-American students. Findings of the study revealed five common themes: 1) Family support was a determining factor for each student's academic and career success, 2) Non-family mentors served as positive role models throughout students' school years, 3) Involvement in extra-curricular activities, sports, and leadership helped students build character and develop skills, 4) Upward Bound and TRIO staff provided positive influence toward academic and career success, and 5) Personal determination empowered these students to persevere, be resilient in the face of adversity, and defy the odds.

Factors that Contribute to Academic and Career Success

Family support was demonstrated by all students interviewed. Parents, older siblings, and extended family members helped with homework and other studies, and the value of education was emphasized. All of the students expressed the desire to complete college and make their families proud. This researcher can identify with having family support as well as living in a house with extended family members. This researcher resided in the home with great-grandmother and a great-uncle much like the students in this study. This researcher's family provided ongoing support, encouragement, and love.

The support of non-family mentors also played an integral role for the students in this study. Those who participated in sports received support from their coaches that extended beyond the classroom. This researcher greatly benefitted from the support of non-family mentors. This support allowed me to seek assistance or in some cases advice about issues related to school. They showed me that they cared and was always willing to help. This researcher actually preferred to speak with trusted adults at school when the issue was school related. Speaking directly to school personnel made me feel more confident about getting my issue addressed. School counselors directly addressed the students' academic and personal needs. Teachers were willing to offer individualized help to ensure that they understood the content and had an opportunity to improve areas of deficiency.

Involvement in extra-curricular activities and sports helped students develop personal and academic skills, three students in the study were given an opportunity to serve in leadership roles. These experiences provided all six students with increased levels of self-confidence and pride. This researcher's involvement in extra-curricular activities provided an opportunity to

receive mentorship from group leaders, improve weaknesses and enhance strength, and to feel supported and cared for among peers and adults.

The students in the study credited the Upward Bound and TRIO programs for helping them to achieve academic and career success, and three expressed an interest in serving as a mentor or even creating a program similar to Upward Bound and TRIO to help students tour college campuses, participate in summer enrichment programs, receive tutoring assistance, attend educational workshops, participate in community service projects and receive mentoring by caring adults.

And finally, all six students in the study demonstrated personal determination by accepting support, utilizing available resources, setting goals for themselves, and persisting until their goals were achieved. Their personal determination may have developed as a result of the support they received from family and non-family members throughout their educational years. All six students were encouraged to do great things and told that they could be successful. It stands to reason that, the support, motivation, and words of encouragement they received from their family and non-family mentors helped them to become personally determined to achieve their personal and academic goals. This researcher became personally determined after being motivated and encouraged by family and non-family mentors to go after my dreams and to never give up. It became evident that failure was not something that my family would be proud of nor this researcher. Realizing that life had so many opportunities to offer and that being young allowed for more time to accomplish both personal and academic goals.

The student experiences reported in this study serve as a testament that low-income, African-American students can achieve academic and career success when the appropriate supports are provided, despite the challenges they face. The findings of this study reveal that

low-income, African-American youth can be successful despite the many challenges they may encounter, as evidenced by the stories shared by the six students in this study. This researcher is hopeful that Sharee, Kallie, Maddy, John, Roosevelt, and Maurice will continue to be successful academically and in their desired careers.

Actions that Promote Academic and Career Success

Equitable access to a quality education and enriching learning opportunities should be accessible to all students. Low-income African-American students face a plethora of challenges in their pursuit to achieve academic and career success. The issue of attending low-income schools, receiving poor instruction, lack of educational opportunities, and minimal support are just a few of the issues that this student population is forced to deal with. This problem should be a top priority for our nation; immediate attention is required to address this ongoing issue. The needs of low-income African American students must be acknowledged to ensure that they are given an opportunity to achieve academic and career success. “A better understanding of the ways in which students are able to succeed in school despite the presence of adversity holds great promise for improving the effectiveness of preventative community, school, and family services” (Williams et al., 2017, p. 197).

This researcher believes that the success of low-income, African-American youth should not be determined by the school they attend, being raised in a single-parent home, behavioral problems, trauma at a young age, lack of resources in the home, or limited educational opportunities. Fair treatment of all students recognizes that additional supports such as counseling, advising, mentoring, or some form of assistance help disadvantaged students achieve academic success (Mahoney, 1998). Being given an opportunity to achieve academic and career success is the overarching concern for this student population. The implementation of the

recommendations below should be given consideration as steps are taken to improve this issue at hand.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings of this research study, this researcher offers two recommendations. First, low-income African-American students should have access to all of the following to help them achieve academic and career success: 1) the support of family, non-family, and mentors, 2) involvement in extra-curricular activities, sports, and leadership roles, 3) participation in Upward Bound or TRIO Student Support Services programs, and 4) opportunities to develop the personal determination needed to succeed personally and academically. Second, high schools and community colleges should promote students' academic and career success by 1) implementing Upward Bound and TRIO programs, or similar programs, and actively recruiting students to participate, 2) provide supports to students based on identified and requested needs, and 3) . collaborate with nearby colleges to ensure early exposure opportunities for students. It is imperative that low-income African-American students receive the necessary supports that can help them personally and academically. By participating in educational programs early on that promote academic and career success, this student population can develop strong academic skills that will lead to them achieving academic and career success.

Recommendations for Future Research

Mentorship was an integral part of this research study. This researcher is particularly interested in how parents contribute to their children's education and how the home environment shapes children's interest in education. It would benefit these areas of research to closely explore the effectiveness of one former TRIO member serving as a mentor to a current student or to conduct a case study examination of the impact of mentorship on the academic ability of students

from two-parent and single-parent homes. Having the opportunity to observe TRIO students in their physical environment would also provide a clear picture of program mentorship, students' level of participation in Upward Bound and TRIO programs, and their specific experiences, challenges, and successes in these programs.

Over half of the students in the study participated in Upward Bound in high school and TRIO Student Support Services in college. It would be interesting to make comparisons between these two groups to determine the degree to which participation in both led to the students achieving at a higher rate.

Limitations of the Research

While the results of this research study revealed a wealth of information about each participant, the study had three limitations. First, the data collected was based on student self-reports, which may have provided a limited perspective. For example, it would have benefitted the study to include information surrounding the parents' educational experiences, participants' cumulative grade point averages in high school, or records of each student's TRIO involvement, such as activities or services received including grade level and frequency. Second, this researcher did not meet in person with study participants due to isolation rules in place at the time of the study related to the Covid-19 pandemic. All interviews were conducted via phone and virtually, which may have affected students' responses. Additionally, in-person interviews would have given this researcher the opportunity to observe non-verbal behaviors. Third, this researcher selected only six students to avoid complicating the participant recruitment process in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. While the number of study participants could be increased if further research is conducted, it turned out that the amount of data collected during this study was manageable for one researcher and also provided rich findings.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the six students who participated in this study, challenges that low-income African-American students face may not remain lifetime barriers for all students. Family support; non-family mentors; involvement in extra-curricular activities, sports, and leadership; participation in Upward Bound and TRIO programs, and personal determination empowered these students to persevere, be resilient in the face of adversity, and defy the odds. The manner in which their success was achieved was totally up to the individual.

When students are determined to succeed, they work extremely hard to break down barriers that lie before them. This study demonstrates that low-income African-American students can achieve academic and career success when they are supported in their efforts during their K-12 school years. When students believe in themselves, they begin to dream and set goals, which allows them to SUCCEED in their pursuit of academic and career success.

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APPENDIX A**STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Describe your educational years (k-12 to present). Explain challenges and accomplishments during this time. How did you deal with challenges?
2. Describe your family and provide some information about your upbringing.
3. Was education important in your home? Discuss why or why not.
4. Please discuss favorite teachers, mentors, or positive school experiences.
5. Explain what success means to you.
6. Discuss your support system? Discuss the ways that they support you.
7. Discuss programs and activities (Kindergarten to present) that helped you to be successful in school?
8. What are your career goals? What are your plans after you complete your studies at ICC?
9. Discuss activities that you are a part of at your college. Outside of school?
10. How long have you been in the TRIO program? Were you in Upward Bound during high school?
11. How has the TRIO program helped you? What do you like most about TRIO? Discuss its benefits.
12. Is there any additional information that you would like to share before we conclude the interview?