

**The Road to Success: The Interplay of Academic Preparedness, Imposter Syndrome,  
and Resilience in Male African American Students**

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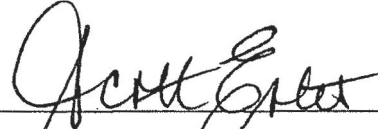
THE ROAD TO SUCCESS: THE INTERPLAY OF ACADEMIC  
PREPAREDNESS, IMPOSTER SYNDROME, AND RESILIENCE IN MALE  
AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

A Scholarly Research Project

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

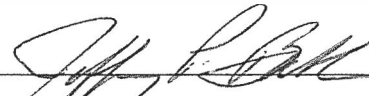
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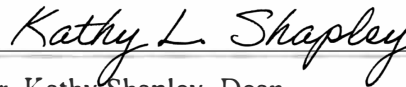
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### **Abstract**

This dissertation investigates the interplay of academic preparedness, imposter syndrome, and resilience among low-income male African American students, focusing on their readiness for college and subsequent success. Using a phenomenological approach, the study captures the lived experiences of these students and reveals systemic challenges and psychological barriers. Findings indicate that disparities in academic preparedness, including unequal access to quality education and experienced teachers, significantly impact college readiness. Imposter syndrome is shown to diminish academic confidence and performance, while resilience proves essential in overcoming these challenges. The study also evaluates the effectiveness of support programs like GEAR UP and TRIO, demonstrating their critical role in promoting college preparedness. The research concludes that tailored interventions addressing the unique needs of male African American students are necessary for fostering academic success and equity. Implications for policy include advocating for modifications to ensure equal access to rigorous curricula, skilled teachers, and adequate guidance counseling. This study contributes to the broader discourse on educational equity and resilience in overcoming academic barriers.

### **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Loretta, whose life as a professional nurse exemplified dedication, resilience, and tireless effort. Her authentic love for God and people, her dedication to serving others, and her unwavering love for her children have been a testament to the best of humanity. She set an example through her compassion, empathy, and stewardship, which I strive to emulate every day. My mother has been my role model and guiding light, and her influence has shaped every aspect of who I am. She truly embodied what it means to live a life of purpose, and I am endlessly grateful for her being my inspiration and my “guiding angel.”

*As Maya Angelou once said, “I sustain myself with the love of family.” My mother’s love is my foundation, and her legacy lives on through my work and the values she instilled in me.*

I also want to express my gratitude to my father, Leon, and my stepparents, Henrietta and Milton, whose support and guidance have been instrumental in my journey. Together, their love, wisdom, and sacrifices have provided the foundation for this work, and I am forever grateful for their impact on my life.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

Thousands of high school graduates across America move into the workforce, trade school, or college every year. Since the early 21st century, Americans have witnessed an American public school system that is sharpened and more focused on college enrollment as a result of a more knowledge-driven job market that is changing rapidly. The goal has been to increase college enrollment and subsequent success; however, a gap exists between the college readiness of White high school students and African American students, and it cannot be ignored.

In examining these conditions, a notable phenomenon emerges: the imposter syndrome. This condition, frequently encountered by college learners but often thought to be more pronounced among marginalized groups, presents a psychological pattern wherein persons question their achievements and endure a consistent, often crippling, apprehension of being unmasked as an “impostor” (Clance & Imes, 1978). This condition introduces an additional layer of intricacy to the adjustment and transition process and can intensify feelings of unpreparedness. Contrastingly, resilience emerges as a vital factor in academic preparedness. Resilience, the ability to recover from unfavorable situations, can substantially impact how African American learners navigate the educational landscape (Seaton, 2008). This study reveals that fostering resilience could aid these students in better managing the trials of transitioning to college, thereby potentially enhancing their academic preparedness.

Despite the government’s and relevant agencies’ efforts to address the problem, African American college students still struggle with transitioning to college. The disparities that attend unpreparedness among this population appear starkly in low-income neighborhoods and have

significantly affected the education system (Whaley & Nol, 2012). This study was conducted to examine the impact of a lack of academic preparedness for college success among African American students and the roles of imposter syndrome and resilience in their achievement.

### **Background Information**

The acquisition of a bachelor's degree is often seen as the most effective means of reducing unemployment, eradicating poverty, and elevating low-income families and individuals into the middle class (Bateman & Ross, 2021; IDRA, n.d.; Lazar & Davenport, 2018). African American students complete college at a far lower rate than students of other ethnic/racial groupings in the United States (Griffin et al., 2022; Schmidt, 2008). Geographic inequalities in college graduation indicate that African Americans from southern states register a lower proportion of college graduates than those from northern regions (Data Center, 2024). Even though numerous factors may contribute to this outcome, research indicates that considerable inequalities in the standard and quality of K–12 education and learning that African Americans receive are significant contributors (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2011). According to national aggregate data, only 57% of African American learners attend schools that offer a complete array of college preparatory courses (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

Moreover, African American students are twice as likely as White students to attend school at an institution where 20% of the instructors are in their inaugural year of teaching, indicating that these instructors lack of teaching experience (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b). African American high school learners in high-poverty schools have less access to school counselors to assist them with college transition and preparation (Bryant, 2015). If these educational injustices remain unresolved, African American learners' relatively low college enrollment, success, and completion rates is likely to persist. Education outcomes are correlated

with lack of opportunity and poverty, so these latter conditions will likely endure in African American communities.

Educational researchers have worked to define college preparedness and the level and quantity of college readiness that high school graduates possess. College preparedness is determined by the combination of essential academic skills, abilities, and habits that students are required to possess to be competent and successful in higher education institutions without using remedial courses or instruction, according to the most conventional definition in recent literature (Camara, 2013). According to Heilig (2011), access to student support programs, including school guidance counselors, more experienced teachers, and rigorous coursework, is also essential for college preparedness, according to research. The correlation between increased course load, notably in mathematics, and college preparation is well established (Heilig, 2011). Learners exposed to college-level coursework in high school are likely to pursue and excel in higher education (McGee, 2014; Roderick et al., 2011). Additional studies demonstrate that the quality of instruction students obtain is the most influential aspect of their academic performance at school (Thompson et al., 2008). Research also indicates that the availability of a guidance counselor and counselors' perceived or real views influence a student's outreach for college enrollment aid (Woods & Domina, 2014). In America's education system, inequalities in access to all these crucial aspects have the potential to impede the success of entire African American communities, and especially of those members who come from high-poverty schools. However, little quantitative analysis has been conducted concerning the impact of African American students' limited access to these crucial elements on their college preparation.

Another crucial aspect of school quality studies is the system level at which analysis is performed. Much of the existing examination of course rigor and teacher quality examines

aggregated state-level or federal data (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a, 2016), although inequalities are most significant at the local school level within districts (Bryant, 2015; Dee, 2005). Even though school districts possess publicly available data on school personnel composition, including curriculum offerings, since gathering this information is required, few conduct a racial equity study of school inputs, choosing to separate data about student accomplishment by race instead. Districts have no compulsion to study these data because no fines are associated with an imbalance in school resources and staffing. In contrast, the national education law imposes numerous consequences on failing schools based on student accomplishment (The White House, 2015). For instance, under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), if an institution fails to make adequate yearly progress in 3 years, it needs to offer learners from low-income families supplemental educational services from a particular state-approved provider. These academic services include summer school programs, after-school services, remedial classes, and tutoring (ESSA, 2015; Kamenetz, 2018). This imposition renders educators significantly more interested in achievement measures and racial disparities. This research study argues that the American school system cannot improve African American students' academic achievements and college preparation solely by analyzing accomplishment data. At the school level, quantitative research is required to identify discrepancies in school resources and their relationship to college preparedness and student achievement. This analysis serves as the foundation for a change plan.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

This research incorporated a set of case studies to probe the impact of psychological elements, such as imposter syndrome and resilience, that influence African American students' academic success and college preparedness. Imposter syndrome, a psychological phenomenon in



which individuals question their accomplishments and consistently harbor an internalized fear of being unmasked as a charlatan (Clance & Imes, 1978), has been identified as prevalent among African Americans in tertiary education environments (Cokley et al., 2017). Conversely, resilience, characterized as the capacity to recover from adversity, stress, trauma, or failures (Southwick et al., 2014), plays an integral role in academic success. However, these factors have not been thoroughly investigated in the context of educational disparities encountered by African American students. This research project bridges this gap by examining how imposter syndrome and resilience interact with and affect the scholastic outcomes of African American students and their preparedness for tertiary education.

### **Successes and Challenges**

#### **Successes**

A study by researchers examining academic preparedness among African American students in public universities that banned affirmative action measures found that academic preparedness was more successful than affirmative action alone in retaining minority student enrollment (Antonovics & Backes, 2014). Academic preparedness policies have effectively closed the gap between nonminority and minority students. Even in educational settings that have banned or substituted alternative measures, the decline in minority student enrollment was less substantial than in institutions relying solely on affirmative action policies. This trend indicates that academic preparedness initiatives can serve as a viable alternative and can mitigate the negative impacts on minority enrollment typically associated with the absence of affirmative action.

Several programs and policies have been introduced to improve academic preparedness among African American students. One of the most notable programs is the Gaining Early

Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) initiative. The program has successfully provided resources and academic support to prepare students for college (National Council for Community and Education Partnerships, n.d.). Moreover, other programs, such as the Common Core Standards Initiative, establish consistent and clear learning goals in mathematics and English language arts. According to research by Henry and Stahl (2017), students who went to schools where the Common Core standards were applied were more likely to be ready for college-level coursework. The success of such initiatives demonstrates the need for and importance of providing targeted resources to African American students.

### **Challenges**

Though there have been successes in the programs and policies designed to improve academic preparedness among African American students, there have also been challenges. One of the most common challenges has been the inadequate funding of such programs. According to Lunceford et al. (2017), programs such as GEAR UP struggle to secure long-term funding, which affects their sustainability and impact. These programs also have the challenge of reaching the targeted groups. Another significant factor contributing to the lack of academic preparedness is inadequate attention paid to systemic issues that add to the college preparedness gap.

These programs have also faced significant criticism. One of the most common critiques is that these programs and policies focus on individual-level factors like personal motivation and academic skills while overlooking more significant systemic issues that are more likely to contribute to the college readiness gap (Adams, 2013). For instance, the policies that emphasize the provision of individual tutoring and test scores may fail to discuss broader structural issues such as systemic racism, unequal access to resources, and the underfunding of schools. Critics opine that realizing true equity in college success and access is difficult without addressing the

more significant systematic issues (Li-Grining et al., 2021). Other scholars argue that academic preparedness policies can inadvertently perpetuate the existing programs (Edgerton & Desimone, 2019).

### **Definitions**

Several keywords are essential to the study. The following definitions will serve as the operative definitions throughout this project.

- Academic preparedness – readiness for academic college including ability in problem-solving and critical thinking, and level of mastery of high school coursework (Chingos, 2018).
- Imposter Syndrome – a mental model in which people question their achievements and maintain a constant, frequently internalized apprehension of being unmasked as a “fraud.” Regardless of outward indications of their capability, individuals undergoing this condition stay persuaded that they are frauds and are not worthy of the triumphs they have realized (Clance & Imes, 1978).
- Resilience – a mental health perspective; it alludes to the progression and outcome of proficiently adjusting to strenuous or demanding life situations, particularly through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral suppleness and accommodation to outside and inside requirements. It is viewed as a vibrant progression incorporating personal navigation through existence that engages both exposure to considerable hardship or danger and the ability to rebound or recuperate effectively from that hardship (Wu et al., 2013).
- Academic success – in the context of this study, refers to several potential components such as educational achievement (test scores, grades), retention (ability

- to remain enrolled), graduation (ability to complete a degree program), and career preparation (ability to develop the experience, skills, and knowledge necessary to be successful after graduation) (Cachai et al., 2018; York et al., 2015).
- Graduation rates – the proportion of students who successfully complete their degree programs within the stipulated time frames (Banks, 2019).
  - African American students – learners who pursue higher education and identify as African American (Boutte, 2022).
  - Federal TRIO Programs – The federal TRIO programs are “designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. TRIO includes eight programs targeted to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a, para. 1).
  - GEAR UP – Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs. This national initiative is intended to motivate young people “to have high expectations, stay in school, study hard and take the right courses to go to college” (para. 1). GEAR UP offers 6- to 7-year grants to partnerships and states to provide necessary services at high-poverty high and middle schools. The initiative’s grantees serve as a cohort of students as early as the seventh grade (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2023).
  - My Brother’s Keeper Initiative – a program launched by President Obama in February 2014. The initiative was designed to address the persistent opportunity gaps faced by young men of color in attaining their full potential. The program promotes

- civic initiatives and supports communities to improve their economic and educational prospects, particularly for young men of color (Dee & Penner, 2019).
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – a federal K–12 education law of the United States. The act was signed into law in 2015 and was a replacement for the previous law called No Child Left Behind. ESSA extended enhanced flexibility to States regarding education and outlined expectations of transparency for communities and parents. This law aims to provide equal opportunities for disadvantaged students, particularly those who receive special education (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2020).
  - ACTS scores – an assessment taken by students intending to go to college. Scores range from 1 through 36. One’s score depends on the number of correct answers in every section. The score has four sections: Science, Reading, Math, and English. Every section is given a score of 1 through 36. The average of the scores makes up the composite score (ACT, 2022).
  - Affirmative Action – a policy with the aim of increasing educational and workplace opportunities for persons who are underrepresented in society. The focus of this policy is on demographics that are underrepresented in professional and leadership roles. In higher education, the phrase refers to the ability of universities and colleges to act “affirmatively” to improve the racial diversity of their institutions (Antonovics & Backes, 2014).
  - Socioeconomic status (SES) – a family or person’s social and economic position in relation to others based on occupation, education, and income. In the context of low-income Black American male students, SES encompasses a complex web of racial,

- health, social, community, occupational, educational, and economic factors that interact to influence academic outcomes and opportunities (Sanacore, 2017).
- Low-income families are those that earn less than a defined threshold (\$15,060 in 2024) and consider both the cost of living in their specific area and the size of the family. This threshold is typically aligned with a percentage of the area's median income of the federal poverty level (Roberts et al., 2023).
  - Black Codes – laws passed in the post–Civil War South that severely limited the rights and freedoms of Black Americans. These laws enabled the arrest of unemployed Black people, forced Black children into unpaid labor, prevented Black people from owning guns or voting, and barred them from testifying against Whites in court. The codes were a mechanism to control and take advantage of the labor of newly freed Black citizens after the abolition of slavery (Egede et al., 2023).
  - Jim Crow laws – state and local statutes enacted from the late 1800s to the 1960s that enforced racial segregation and discrimination in the southern United States. They mandated the creation of separate public facilities for Black and White citizens, such as schools, transportation, restaurants, and restrooms. Jim Crow laws effectively relegated Black Americans to second-class status and citizenship until the passage of landmark civil rights legislation in the 1960s (Egede et al., 2023).
  - Sundown towns – municipalities and counties that excluded non-White residents, especially Black Americans, through discriminatory laws, harassment, threats, and violence. The name refers to signs posted ordering non-Whites to leave town by sundown. These towns aimed to create entirely White communities, not just in the South but across the country (Bazzi et al., 2022; Loewen, 2006).

- The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* Supreme Court decision – a case that overturned the “separate but equal” principle and declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. This landmark unanimous ruling struck down *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and was a significant victory for the civil rights movement that forced the integration of public education (Pickren, 2004).
- Predominantly White institutions (PWIs) – colleges and universities in which White students make up 50% or more of the student body. The term highlights the embedded Whiteness in the history, culture, and practices of many American higher education institutions (Bernard et al., 2017).

### **Significance of the Study**

The enhancement of college enrollment, graduation rates, and success represents a critical challenge in the United States, particularly in the context of African American male students attending high-poverty educational institutions. The importance of this study stems from its examination of the intricate relationships among the elements of academic preparedness, the phenomenon known as imposter syndrome, and resilience.

The investigation into the disparities and inequalities encountered by low-income male African Americans during their high school education is essential in the formulation of educational methodologies and public policies (Fine et al., 2019). Through the detailed analysis of the elements either facilitating or obstructing academic readiness, I sought to illuminate the underlying mechanisms that contribute to an unequal educational environment.

Imposter syndrome, defined by pervasive feelings of inadequacy and a constant fear of being unmasked as a fraud, has become a significant issue affecting the self-assurance and scholastic achievement of students (Clance & Imes, 1978; Southwick et al., 2014). The

concentration of this study on the effect of imposter syndrome on male African Americans confronts an essential deficiency in existing literature, offering a perspective on the psychological hindrances that may inhibit these students' preparedness for higher education.

In this context, resilience is acknowledged as an essential quality that facilitates individuals' transcending challenges and prospering in their educational endeavors (Wu et al., 2013). My inquiry into the ways that resilience aids male African American students in overcoming hurdles related to higher education contributes valuable insights for the creation of targeted support mechanisms and intervention strategies.

The conclusions of this investigation have profound ramifications for the domains of educational governance, lawmaking, and local educational jurisdictions. Those responsible for shaping policy can use the findings of this study to develop nuanced policy modifications that guarantee equal access to rigorous college preparatory curricula, skilled educational professionals, and guidance counseling. In addition, the insights garnered can guide the formation of measures that encourage resilience and mitigate imposter syndrome, thereby equalizing educational opportunities and amplifying college preparedness.

Within a more extensive framework, the findings of the research might exert a considerable influence on the U.S. economic structure, one that coincides with the transforming labor market's requirements for higher education and skills development. By confronting the particular difficulties experienced by male African American students and enhancing academic preparedness, this investigation aids in the countrywide dialogue on educational equality and economic growth.



## **Research Purpose and Questions**

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this research was to examine the impact of a lack of academic preparedness for college success among male African American students. The author intended to identify and analyze the causes of a lack of academic preparedness among the target group, as well as the impact of imposter syndrome and resilience on this population's educational pursuits. Additionally, the author hoped that this research would include recommendations to facilitate academic preparedness among first-year African American students.

### **Research Questions**

To this end, as the researcher, I asked the following research questions:

1. What are the main causes of academic unpreparedness among African American male college students?
2. In what ways does imposter syndrome affect the academic readiness and subsequent college achievement of African American males?
3. How does resilience assist African American males in surmounting the obstacles encountered in higher education?
4. Which support initiatives and interventions have effectively fostered academic readiness among African American male students, and how can they be duplicated across the country?

## **Research Design and Framework**

To understand the nuanced effects of support programs, imposter syndrome, and resilience on the college readiness and achievements of African American students, I selected a qualitative methodology for this research, one steeped in a social constructivist view. Consistent

with the principles of social constructivism, I acknowledge that subjective meanings are ascribed to experiences influenced by the historical and social contexts in which they are embedded (Cresswell, 2014).

Grounded in the social cognitive theory, this research posits that behavior and experiences are shaped by the complex interplay among personal, environmental, and behavioral factors (Almulla & Al-Rahmi, 2023). In aligning with this theory, the study embraces the complexity and multidimensionality of factors impacting African American students' preparedness and success in college.

Semistructured interviews with 3–5 participants served as the primary data collection method. This approach ensured that the research captured rich, detailed narratives offering profound insights into the lived experiences of African American students navigating imposter syndrome. Each interview was approached with an understanding that participants interpret their experiences based on their social and historical contexts, echoing the social constructivist view.

The author's focus extended beyond merely documenting the experiences of grappling with imposter syndrome. The author intended to unravel the intricate ways in which this phenomenon intertwined with individuals' academic readiness, influenced by the reciprocal interaction of personal and environmental factors, in line with social cognitive theory.

Special attention was devoted to exploring triumphs over imposter syndrome by revealing resilience pathways and strategies that have proven effective. These personal accounts, laden with social and contextual influences, illuminate the dynamic intersections of support programs, imposter syndrome, and resilience in shaping college readiness.

The narratives not only shed light on the students' journeys but also contribute to a holistic understanding of the impact of imposter syndrome on college preparedness from a social

constructivist lens. The author hopes that insights gleaned will be instrumental in informing and enhancing support initiatives to ensure they are contextually relevant and responsive to the unique challenges and triumphs of male African American students.

### **Research Project Organization**

This chapter introduced the need for further research on the impact of college preparedness, imposter syndrome, and resilience on college success among traditional first-year African American students. It provided background information on the topic, stated the research problem, discussed the successes and challenges of academic preparedness policies, defined keywords, outlined the study's significance, and presented the research questions and hypotheses. In Chapter 2, I thoroughly analyze the available research and evaluate academic models that hold promise. Chapter 3 presents the methodology used in this qualitative study. The findings and results from the collected data are examined in Chapter 4, which also includes a report on the key findings. Chapter 5 concludes the study by discussing the implications of the results and recommendations for researchers, educational leaders, and policymakers.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter provided an overview of the current state of educational inequality for African American students in the United States. We have gained a nuanced understanding of the challenges these learners face in accessing quality education through an examination of the historical context, current disparities, and factors contributing to the problem.

The next chapter examines the effects of college preparedness, imposter syndrome, and resilience and success on African American students in the extant literature. The chapter will examine the historical context of educational inequality, the challenges African American learners face in higher education, and the interventions and programs that state and federal

governments have implemented to promote college readiness. The exploration of these topics will furnish readers with a comprehensive understanding of the challenges African American learners face in higher education and help to identify strategies that will promote academic success.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Pursuing a university education is broadly acknowledged as a vital route to mitigate poverty, reduce joblessness, and uplift individuals and families from economically disadvantaged backgrounds into the middle class. In the modern employment landscape, the need for tertiary qualifications is more pronounced than ever. In this literary analysis, I probed the historical backdrop of educational disparity affecting African American learners, the influence of imposter syndrome on their academic readiness, and the elements that shape college preparedness and triumph in members of this demographic. Moreover, I investigated the essential part resilience plays in surmounting these challenges.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this research study:

1. What are the main causes of academic unpreparedness among African American male university students?
2. In what ways does imposter syndrome affect the academic readiness and subsequent university achievement of African American males?
3. How does resilience assist African American males in surmounting the obstacles encountered in higher education?
4. Which support initiatives and interventions have effectively fostered academic readiness among African American male students, and how can they be duplicated across the country?

### **Context and Scope**

In contemporary academic discourse, it is essential to approach topics with specificity and clarity, especially when discussing multifaceted subjects like the intersectionality of race and gender. By delineating the scope and context of the analysis, the researcher aims to provide readers with a clear lens through which they can understand the subsequent discussion. This study was focused on the nuanced challenges and experiences of male African Americans in an effort to shed light on factors that impact their academic journey.

### **Intersectionality of Race and Gender**

The emphasis on male African Americans in this analysis arose from the distinct intersectionality of race and gender that presents unique barriers in the sphere of academic preparedness and accomplishment. Carbado et al. (2013) posited:

No particular application of intersectionality can, in a definitive sense, grasp the range of intersectional powers and problems that plague society. This work-in-progress understanding of intersectionality suggests that we should endeavor, on an ongoing basis, to move intersectionality to unexplored places. (p. 2)

In this regard, I did not attempt in this study to explore the full range of intersectional problems that plague society. Instead, I narrowed it down to academic preparedness and the unique challenges faced by a specific demographic of the American population. As Carbado et al. (2013) argued, this is a work in progress, and in the literature review, I endeavored to move the discussion to unexplored places, including the interplay of academic preparedness, imposter syndrome, and resilience among male African American students.

**Imposter Syndrome**

Imposter syndrome, a mental framework in which individuals question their achievements and harbor fears of being unmasked as a “fraud,” has been pinpointed as a substantial hurdle to academic accomplishment in male African American students (Bravata et al., 2019; Clance & Imes, 1978; Feenstra et al., 2020; Harvey, 1981). The disastrous consequences that imposter syndrome has for career advancement (Vergauwe et al., 2015) and on individuals (McGregor et al., 2008) have been well documented.

**Resilience**

The function of resilience, or the capacity to bounce back from disappointments, adjust to alterations, and persist in the face of hardship, is also pivotal in this scenario, as Cassidy (2016) noted. Johnson (2012) concluded that male African Americans have exhibited remarkable resilience in the course of history. Further, according to Johnson (2012), resilience is a significant factor in the academics of the demographic, as it “assisted many African American males to counter racism and cultural, personal, and societal stumbling blocks in life” (p. 40). Other studies, such as those conducted by Williams (2011) and Reynolds et al. (2010), found that resilience was one of the factors contributing to the success of African American students in academics.

**Historic Oppression**

The racial relationships in the United States pose considerable hazards to the wellness of Black men, a predicament deeply entrenched in the philosophies of White supremacy and patriarchal authority that infiltrate U.S. organizations. In their study, Beech et al. (2021) found that the historical oppression of Black individuals in the United States has been executed via myriad savage actions, such as sexual abuse, bodily harm, and arson, with Black men bearing a

heavier burden of these atrocities. The authors also noted that this horrifying past of the Black populace, and especially of Black men, is filled with distressing incidents, with the reprehensible deeds of abduction and enslaving an entire ethnicity leading to immense ruin. Furthermore, they discovered that instead of enjoying a community that promotes recovery, Black people are incessantly subjected to socio-political diminishment by the very same U.S. structures that previously supported and furthered slavery, racial separation, and bias (Beech et al., 2021).

Tactics, both legal and outside the realm of legality, have been used to govern the existence of Black people. In their study, Egede et al. (2023) found that regulations like Black Codes and Jim Crow, along with habits such as racial isolation and police aggression, worked to restrict the standard experiences of those who had been liberated. The term *sundown towns*, as an example, hints at a tradition in which Black people were prohibited from being in public after sunset and risked being murdered if they appeared or drew attention to themselves in that circumstance (Bazzi et al., 2022; Loewen, 2006). The outcomes of these traditions are mirrored in the existing health discrepancies and media depictions of Black men's societal functions, and they result in particular physiological impacts and educational gaps. This section is formulated to cast light on the past and present events that have formed and escalated the sense of imposter syndrome among Black men in the United States. Despite efforts to expose these issues, there are other contributing factors not covered because of limitations in the analysis, signaling the complexity and multidimensional nature of racial relationships in the United States. The racial dynamics in the United States, deeply rooted in philosophies of White supremacy and patriarchal authority, significantly threaten the well-being of Black men.



### **Education**

From the birth of the United States, learning for Black men was deemed superfluous. Williams (2005) illustrated how captive Black men and women united to garner any feasible educational advantages for their people. Black individuals pursued enlightenment, even in the face of brutal aggression or death if their captors uncovered their attempts (Williams, 2005). Black women and men played a key role in these undertakings toward self-instruction.

### **History**

In the period of enslavement, gender divisions required many Black men were forced to toil within the boundaries of the enslaver's domicile, where they heard conversations and otherwise gathered information. They would subsequently convey this intelligence to their enslaved brethren. Williams (2005) narrated the stories of nonliterate Black men who memorized letters, notes, periodicals, and any obtainable texts in their owners' residences so that they could share them with other enslaved people who would interpret the essence of these communications (Williams, 2005). Black men showcased substantial commitment to interacting with their White owners' children, exploiting any feasible chance to learn to read and write.

When slavery was abolished, Blacks were confronted with more challenges. In addition to facing Jim Crow laws, which contributed to the segregation of schools, Black women also encountered gender discrimination and a split in the workforce. White America esteemed education for male but not for female children, thereby presenting Black women with the struggle of balancing domestic responsibilities and child-rearing (Williams, 2005).

Contemplate education itself as an ordeal that has a traumatizing and isolating impact on Black people broadly. According to the Federal Reserve (2021), Black students bear a more considerable student loan debt than all other racial and ethnic groups. Of Black graduates, 40%

have student loan debt resulting from graduate school, whereas only 22% of White college graduates have debt from graduate school. More than half of Black student loan borrowers reported that their net worth amounts to less than their student loan debt. Moreover, 46% of Black student loan borrowers indicated that they were likely to delay purchasing a home. This overwhelming strain could significantly impede indebted Black individuals from pursuing personal growth, wealth, and financial decision-making (Federal Reserve, 2021).

### **Economic Factors**

As Black people confront the struggles engendered by educational inequality, a study by Darity et al. (2018) addressed the racial wealth gap in the United States. The research findings underscore that irrespective of educational achievements, the average wealth of Black families is significantly less than that of White families. For instance, White households with degrees like bachelor's or post-graduate (Ph.D., MD, and JD) degrees are three times wealthier than Black households with similar qualifications. Darity et al. reported that

a Black household with a college-educated head has less wealth than a White family whose head did not even finish high school. It requires post-graduate education for a Black family to achieve comparable levels of wealth to a white household with some college education or an associate degree. (Darity et al., 2018, p. 6)

Data from the Survey of Consumer Finances (2017) indicate that even with a bachelor's degree, Black Americans continue to struggle to achieve economic equality with Whites. The mean family net worth in 2016 for Black families was \$17,600, a stark disparity to \$171,000 for White families. The median family net worth for Black families was only \$138,200, a mere fraction of the \$933,700 for White families (Dettling et al., 2017). The predicament is particularly severe for Black individuals, especially Black women, who end up incurring higher

costs for diminished rewards. They transition from one form of oppression—the realm of education—only to become entrapped by another: the labor market.

### **Historical Context of Educational Inequality for African American Students**

To understand the present-day educational landscape for African American students, it is essential to journey through the historical pathways that have shaped their experiences. From legislative milestones to subtle sociocultural barriers, the African American student experience is a tapestry interwoven with resilience, struggle, and an ongoing pursuit for equality. This section delves into the pivotal events and nuances that underpin the academic trajectory of African American students, highlighting both the challenges they have faced and the strides they have made.

### ***Brown v. Board of Education* and Affirmative Action**

The question of academic preparedness is inextricably linked to the historical context of African American students' experiences in the educational system. Indeed, the struggle for education for African American learners has been a longstanding issue in the United States. Many African American students continue to face significant barriers in accessing quality education in the United States decades after the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. The ruling rendered segregation in public schools unconstitutional (Pickren, 2004). However, the legacy of discriminatory policies and segregation has resulted in longstanding and persistent racial disparities in academic outcomes, teacher quality, and access to resources, as Ferguson (2018) has stated.

One of the main implications of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was the introduction of affirmative policies designed to promote diversity in higher education admissions. These policies were intended to counteract the negative impacts of historical

discrimination (Liptak, 2022). In addition, they encouraged equal opportunities for marginalized groups such as Latino and African American learners. According to Carter and Lippard (2020), the policies have faced significant and sustained criticism and legal challenges. Opponents argue that they promote unfair advantage for specific racial and ethnic groups and are unconstitutional. However, studies show that affirmative action policies positively affect college admissions for African American learners (Reed, 1983; Torres, 2020; Perez-Felkner, 2021). For instance, Bowen and Bok (1998) found that the proportion of African American learners enrolled in the University of California increased by 400% because of the affirmative action policies implemented at the university. In other studies, scholars discovered that affirmative action policies are positively associated with increased diversity in higher learning institutions. Moreover, these policies have been shown to promote academic success in underrepresented groups, as Shafer (2018) noted.

### **The Need for Supportive Services**

However, African American learners still face a challenge in accessing quality education. Studies show that racial disparities in resources and school funding, academic outcomes, and teacher quality continue to hamper education equity in the United States (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Kucera, 2018). Suppose all the relevant stakeholders are to address these disparities. In that case, there is a need for a comprehensive approach that incorporates the policies geared toward providing support for underrepresented groups, improving the quality of teachers and training, and promoting and enhancing access to resources.

### **Imposter Syndrome and the African American Learner**

Imposter syndrome and resilience are salient variables to consider in analyzing the barriers encountered by male African Americans in securing quality education. Since the

milestone ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, considerable progress has been achieved in the dismantling of segregated learning facilities. Nevertheless, Loewen et al. (2006) clarified that African American students still encounter severe obstacles in their academic endeavors. These challenges are not merely historical vestiges but persistent structural barriers within the contemporary educational system. The study underscores the necessity for continued examination of these factors, emphasizing that legal advancements alone are insufficient to ameliorate the complex, multifaceted obstacles that persist in the realm of education for male African American students. The relationship between imposter syndrome and resilience within this context warrants further investigation, as it may yield insights into the nuanced interplay of sociocultural, legal, and institutional dynamics that shape educational outcomes.

Moreover, imposter syndrome, which is common among Black students, can further impede their academic readiness and subsequent collegiate success, as Barton (2022) wrote. Barton discovered that imposter syndrome can adversely affect male African Americans by fostering feelings of incompetence and self-doubt, regardless of their accomplishments and capabilities. Nadal et al. (2021) argued that the intersection of race and gender intensifies this phenomenon, as Black men confront a distinct form of racism that can contribute to imposter syndrome. The internalization of negative stereotypes and the scarcity of representation in educational resources can further reinforce these feelings, as Nadal and colleagues documented.

### **Resilience in Spite of Adversity**

Conversely, resilience plays a vital role in helping male African Americans surmount the challenges they encounter in higher education. According to Weathersby (2022), resilience refers to the capacity to recover from adversity and persist in the face of obstacles. Studies have indicated that resilience can positively influence educational outcomes for male African

Americans, as it enables them to navigate and overcome the systemic barriers they encounter (Spencer et al., 1997; Weathersby, 2022). Spencer et al. (1997) introduced a framework combining individuals' intersubjective experiences with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Examining African American adolescents, Spencer (1997) found gender differences in predictors of negative learning attitudes, with stress and social support significant for boys and perceived unpopularity significant for girls. Furthermore, Weathersby (2022) explored the factors that foster educational resilience among male African Americans earning doctoral degrees. Using narrative inquiry, the study identified mindset, access, mentorship, and self-reliance as primary contributors to these students' academic success and degree completion.

Weathersby (2022) and Spencer et al. (1997) argued that to tackle imposter syndrome and cultivate resilience in male African Americans, it is crucial to implement targeted interventions and support systems. Mentoring programs and student success initiatives have been shown to improve the academic performance and retention of African American male students. These programs offer guidance, support, and a sense of community, which can help combat imposter syndrome and foster resilience. Additionally, creating inclusive and diverse learning environments where male African Americans can see themselves represented and supported is essential.

Together, these studies elucidate the complex interplay of individual, social, and ecological factors that influence educational attitudes and resilience, particularly among African American youth.

### **Factors Affecting College Preparedness**

The journey to college readiness for African American students is complex; it is shaped by numerous factors that span the socioeconomic, academic, and psychological realms. These

factors interlace to craft the unique academic trajectory of each student, with some propelling them forward and others posing formidable challenges to overcome. In dissecting the matrix of college preparedness for African American learners, this section delves into the pivotal determinants that play a crucial role, from the economic realities these students grapple with to the intrinsic psychological battles they confront.

### **Low Income and the Need for Resources**

Many factors affect college preparedness. They include educational barriers, economic barriers, and barriers resulting from social factors. Socioeconomic status is one of the most significant factors that influence the degree of college readiness among African American learners. According to Hamilton and Darity (2017), students from low-income families often have fewer resources, including academic support, tutoring, and quality education, than their counterparts from more affluent neighborhoods. Moreover, the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2021) reported that learners from low-income families and backgrounds may have to work while pursuing schooling. Consequently, the work might affect their academic performance and their preparedness for college.

### **Teacher Quality**

Other studies show that the quality of teachers is another significant factor in determining college preparedness among African American learners. According to Hansen et al. (2022) and Roorda et al. (2011), African American learners are less likely to have access to quality teachers, which can significantly impact their preparedness for college. In addition, Roorda et al. (2011) argued that positive student-teacher relationships are essential to college preparedness. African American learners who report having positive relationships with their instructors are more likely to post greater college preparedness than those who do not (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

### **High School Resources**

Moreover, the high school resources and curriculum can also significantly impact African American students' college preparedness. Studies show that the quality and rigor of high school curricula are positive determinants of college preparedness and success (Adelman 1999). Haskins and Rouse (2013) argued that African American learners are less likely to access Advanced Placement courses, which hampers their preparation and readiness for college. Boser and Higgins (2014) also argued that the lack of access to educational resources and technology can negatively affect the readiness of African American students.

### **Imposter Syndrome**

Within the framework of enhancing college preparedness among male African American students, it is crucial to acknowledge the existence of imposter syndrome and the necessity for resilience. Cokley et al. (2013) noted that imposter syndrome can intensify feelings of unpreparedness, leading to diminished academic performance and increased dropout rates. Conversely, resilience can assist students in surmounting these challenges and persisting in their academic endeavors. Therefore, strategies aimed at enhancing college preparedness should also focus on addressing imposter syndrome and fostering resilience among male African American students.

Specific strategies for mitigating imposter syndrome and promoting resilience may include sponsoring mentorship programs, creating identity-affirming campus spaces, and providing mental health resources. Connecting incoming male African American students with upperclassmen mentors can provide valuable psychosocial support and help normalize feelings of self-doubt (Booker & Brevard, 2017). Establishing culture centers, clubs, and other communal spaces allows students to find solidarity and affirm their identities. Providing accessible



counseling services encourages help-seeking behaviors and equips students with healthy coping skills. Implementing programs like these communicates to students that they belong and can thrive in higher education despite obstacles.

Ultimately, a holistic approach is needed to prepare male African American students for college success fully. Alongside academic support, colleges must also prioritize students' socioemotional well-being by destigmatizing imposter syndrome and empowering resilience. Drawing on compassionate understanding and evidence-based interventions, educators can help foster the self-efficacy and determination students need to overcome barriers (Johnson, 2012). By addressing psychological factors that affect achievement, colleges can close persistent equity gaps and enable more male African Americans to maximize their potential.

### **Resilience**

Numerous researchers have examined the elements that foster resilience among male African American students. For instance, a study by Johnson (2021) on academic resilience among Black male college students previously in foster care identified environmental resources and supports that helped mitigate school failure and enabled academic success. In another research study, James (2022) explored the elements that motivate resilience in African American male graduate students in counseling, providing insight into counseling programs regarding the elements that promote persistence and academic achievement.

### **Challenges Faced by African American Students in Higher Education**

Higher education presents various challenges to African American students. Some are academic in nature; others pertain to personal, financial, and sociocultural elements. Here, we delve into these challenges to provide a comprehensive understanding.

### **Racial Disparities**

African American students in higher education face numerous challenges that have the potential to hinder their academic success and overall well-being. Persistent racial disparities in college enrollment and graduation rates pose one of the most significant challenges (Bowman & Denson, 2022). Despite attempts to encourage diversity and inclusion, African American students remain underrepresented in higher education, particularly in prestigious universities (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2021). White students completed a bachelor's degree within 4 years of enrollment at a rate of 42%, whereas only 15% of African American students did so (NCES, 2021). Moreover, community colleges and for-profit institutions, which usually have lower graduation rates, are more commonly attended by African American students (NCES, 2021).

### **Imposter Syndrome**

The concept known as *imposter syndrome*, or alternatively *imposter phenomenon*, describes ongoing feelings of self-questioning and the diminishing of one's evident achievements and accomplishments (Clance & Imes, 1978). These emotions stir up a kind of uncertainty, even when one's triumphs are concrete, authentic, and well-deserved. These self-created misconceptions might take the form of negative self-talk, doubts, obsession over past failures, and perpetual feelings of not being enough. Although it is not defined as a disorder, it manifests as a psychological pattern influenced by individual experiences, impacts, and attitudes. This term was introduced by clinical psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978.

### **Gender**

During their extensive 5-year investigation into highly accomplished and academically advanced women in the process of earning their Ph.D., Clance and Imes (1978) uncovered that

women appear to be more prone to imposter syndrome than men. However, this conclusion in no way diminishes the impact of this syndrome on Black men. This research mainly included White women from middle- to upper-class demographics, aged between 20 and 45. The researchers' findings revealed that the imposter phenomenon or imposter syndrome occurs less frequently and with less severity in men (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 1). Later research has indicated, however, that men, too, experience imposter syndrome, although not nearly as frequently as women do (Tiefenthaler, 2018).

### **Race**

Imposter syndrome, though capable of affecting anyone, has been linked to more distinct predictors in recent research. Professor Kevon Cokley, affiliated with the Psychology and African Diaspora Department at the University of Austin at Texas, and his colleagues discovered that members of minority communities, especially Black students, face an intense struggle with imposter syndrome. His study indicated that Black students had significantly higher levels of stress and anxiety tied to discrimination-induced depression and imposter syndrome (Cokley et al., 2013).

An analogous investigation was carried out by Bernard et al. (2017), who examined the relationship between racial bias, gender, imposter syndrome, and mental health effects in Black students. The study drew on two sets of data, gathered in two intervals 8 months apart, involving two groups of freshman students (Bernard et al., 2017). These students were part of a moderate-sized, public, predominantly White institution (PWI) in the southeastern United States. The research incorporated 157 students, 107 of whom were female (68.2%) and 50 of whom were male (31.8%). The first group's average age was 19, while the second group's average age was 18 years.

Instruments employed in this research were Clance's Impostor Scale (CIPS, Clance & Imes, 1978), a 20-item self-report tool used to estimate the degree to which individuals harbor feelings or fears of being imposters. The Daily Life Experiences Scale (DLE) was used to assess previous incidents of racial bias, and the Symptom Checklist 90-Revised (SCL-90-R) was employed to evaluate mental health. This 90-item self-report tool was developed to identify signs of psychological turmoil. Among both groups, Black female students reported more instances of bias but displayed lesser levels of distress prompted by racial bias, which could possibly lead to negative mental health results and elevated levels of imposter syndrome. Moody (2022) from the University of Tennessee described the term *double jeopardy status* as referring to individuals who are part of two disadvantaged groups, such as people in this study who were both Black and women, which could amplify psychological vulnerability. The study underscored the unique obstacles that Black women may have to tackle.

In 2018, Stone et al. proposed a culturally sensitive model of imposter feelings among Black graduate students. In this study, Stone et al. strived to reconcile the gap between Clance and Imes's CIP model and the actual educational encounters of Black graduates attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Two queries directed the research: (1) What are the scholarly experiences of Black graduate students attending PWIs? and (2) How closely do these experiences resonate with Clance and Imes's (1978) formulation of the imposter syndrome structure? Given the apprehensions about the suitability of applying the largely White-centric CIP model to the experiences of Black students, the researchers organized focus groups to gain a comprehensive and accurate comprehension of the individual experiences of Black students. Black students constituted 3% of the graduate student population at the university. The research

crew recruited 12 students from a large PWI situated in the southwestern United States. During the focus group exchanges, students revealed a variety of experiences and perspectives.

A corresponding investigation by Lige et al. (2016) delved into the relationships among racial identity, self-value, and imposter feelings among Black undergraduate learners. These individuals were part of both state-run and private PWIs situated in the southern and midwestern areas of the United States. The researchers administered a form to 112 self-acknowledged Black learners, primarily first-year and second-year students, who filled out the form online. The form was sectioned into three areas: (a) Private Regard, (b) Self-value, and (c) Imposterism, with each sector verifying sentiments via a Likert-type scale to measure responses. Private Regard appraised participants' perceptions of Black people and their affiliation in the group using a 6-item Private Regard subscale of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity. Self-value gauged the extent of participants' self-value via their agreement or lack thereof with each item put forth, employing the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Examples of items included "I am proud to be Black" and "I feel that the Black community has made significant contributions to this society." The Imposterism section gained participants' sense of being an imposter or an academic counterfeit using the 20-item CIPS. The collected data revealed that Private Regard had a positive and robust connection with Self-value and was inversely linked with imposter syndrome. Concurrently, Self-value was negatively correlated with imposter syndrome. The outcome affirmed the conjecture that Self-value was a key mediating aspect between racial identity and imposter syndrome at a PWI (Lige et al., 2016).

Building on these findings, Walker's (2018) study extended the exploration of imposter syndrome, specifically focusing on its impacts on the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education of Black male undergraduates. Walker's (2018) academic

research and doctoral dissertation, undertaken at two academic institutions in North Carolina, probed the effect of imposter syndrome and academic self-assurance on the tenacity of Black male undergraduate learners in STEM disciplines. The examination involved 114 Black learners who filled out a combined survey comprising the CIPS, the Academic Milestone Self-Efficacy Scale, and demographic particulars. After gathering the data, the researchers used a multinomial regression analysis to clarify the relationships among imposter syndrome, academic self-assurance, and persistence in STEM fields. Predictably, the outcome showed that a lower proportion of Black women than of their White peers graduated with STEM qualifications. In addition, the findings emphasized a significant negative correlation between imposter syndrome and academic self-assurance and a precisely predictive link between academic self-assurance and continuation in a STEM specialization. This investigation demonstrated how these three elements affect Black female students (Walker, 2018).

Bernard et al. (2017) of the University of North Carolina conducted an analysis that probed the interrelations among racial prejudice, racial self-concept, and the imposter phenomenon among Black university students. The inquiry was structured into two parts: (a) the examination of the connection between racial prejudice and imposter phenomenon and (b) the scrutiny of racial self-concept, either as a safeguard or as a factor amplifying the effects of racial prejudice and imposter phenomenon. Reflecting earlier studies, the participants were situated in a southeastern PWI in the United States, where they gathered 107 female students and 50 male students for a total of 157 students. The instruments the researchers used were questionnaires related to (a) demographic details, (b) The Daily Life Experiences scale (DLE) of Harrell's (1997) Racism and Life Experiences, and (c) the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI-S). The outcomes indicated that racial prejudice was positively linked with higher

frequencies of imposter phenomenon and racial self-concept and that students' views about the importance of their race swayed their levels of imposter phenomenon. Some racial self-concept characteristics shifted with increased and decreased levels of imposter phenomenon and racial prejudice. In the end, the study affirmed that experiences of racial prejudice foster signs of the imposter phenomenon, particularly at a PWI, and that racial self-concept is a vital factor to consider when seeking to understand the relationship between discrimination and mental health among Black students (Bernard et al., 2017).

Bernard et al. (2020) then conducted another study in which they evaluated John Henryism's active coping, institutional racial diversity, and the imposter phenomenon among 266 Black students. The authors argued that John Henryism is a strategy for coping with prolonged stresses or stressors. In this unique research, Bernard and colleagues compiled data from two PWIs and two historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) for comparison. The study shows that students attending HBCUs exhibit tremendous academic success, social backing, more welcoming campus environments, and fewer race-related stressors than students at PWIs. The PWI students reported markedly higher IP scores, lower manifestations of John Henryism, and a greater incidence of social anxiety. Yet students from both types of institutions reported low measures of self-worth. As anticipated, outcomes suggest that the correlation between the imposter phenomenon, John Henryism, and institutional racial diversity negatively impacts an individual's psychological health. The study's conclusions reveal that the imposter phenomenon occurs more commonly in environments that are predominantly non-Black, including at PWIs (Bernard et al., 2020).

Even those who appear to be the most accomplished confess to wrestling with imposter syndrome. For example, Hollywood TV celebrity and influential scribe Issa Rae admitted to

waging a battle with imposter syndrome in the celebrity milieu, explaining, “It’s just been convincing myself that I’m worthy enough to be able to tell these stories, you know?” (Wong, 2018, para. 8). Rae is one among many Black women who recognize the reality of imposter syndrome.

### **Economic Challenges**

Financial barriers also pose a significant challenge for African American students in higher education. African American students more often come from low-income families, meaning they may face difficulties affording the increasing college expenses, such as tuition and textbooks (NCES, 2021). Having limited access to academic resources and support services because of financial barriers can be a barrier to academic success and overall well-being (Perna & Jones, 2013). Financial stress can cause mental health problems like anxiety and depression, which also impede academic success (Richardson et al., 2019).

Numerous studies have highlighted the obstacles African American students encounter in higher education. For instance, Strayhorn’s (2012) research revealed that financial constraints, inadequate academic preparation, and a negative campus climate are among the challenges these students face. Similarly, Harper and Quaye (2007) identified insufficient academic readiness, financial limitations, and an unfavorable campus environment as significant barriers to African American students’ success in college. Given the significance of these challenges, it becomes crucial to effectively address these economic obstacles to enhance African American students’ overall success in higher education, particularly focusing on the unique intersection of imposter syndrome and resilience among male African Americans.



### **Support Programs and Interventions for College Preparedness**

The pursuit of higher education is a transformative journey, one often filled with challenges that require targeted interventions and support programs. For African American students, these challenges can be even more pronounced. This section delves into various support programs and interventions designed to bolster college preparedness among African American students.

#### **Federal Programs**

The federal government has initiated programs like the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) and the TRIO programs to bolster college preparedness. GEAR UP offers support from the seventh grade onward that includes tutoring, mentoring, and financial assistance in an effort to increase access to higher education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.b; Bowman et al., 2018). The TRIO programs, which include Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services, provide holistic support for disadvantaged students, notably boosting college readiness and performance (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a; Youth.gov, n.d.; Quinn et al., 2019).

The federal government's strategic efforts, as exemplified by initiatives such as GEAR UP and TRIO, highlight the imperative of ensuring college preparedness among African American students. These programs indicate the national significance of broadening educational opportunities while also serving as an acknowledgment of the need for tailored solutions. By identifying and responding to the distinct obstacles African American students face, these federal interventions lay the groundwork for a more equitable educational system, thereby ensuring that all students are provided with the mechanisms and assets requisite for success in higher education.

### **Academic Interventions**

On the school front, interventions like Advanced Placement (AP) courses and dual enrollment programs have been pivotal (Attewel et al., 2006). Furthermore, mentoring programs, in which college students guide high school students, have proven instrumental in bolstering college preparedness among African American students (Komiya et al., 2000; Johnson, 2012; Booker & Brevard, 2017).

Several other interventions have also shown promise. The College Readiness Program (CRP) and the Upward Bound program, for instance, have been beneficial specifically for African American students by aiding in college preparation and success (Harris, 2015). The Summer Bridge Program, designed to ease the transition to college, has shown positive effects on the retention rates of African American students (Horn & Nunez, 2000).

Imposter syndrome and the need for resilience are vital considerations in promoting college readiness among male African American students. Programs based on the shame resilience theory aim to cultivate a sense of belonging and grit in minority students, thereby enhancing their academic persistence (Cockley et al., 2017; Ryan-DeDominicis, 2021).

In summary, addressing the unique challenges faced by African American students is crucial if they are to achieve academic success. Through federal initiatives and school-based interventions, there is hope for improved college readiness and higher education success rates for these students.

### **Evaluating the Impact of Support Programs on College Success**

Research has consistently shown that academic readiness is one of the most important factors in predicting college success (Nagaoka et al., 2013). Although academic knowledge is essential, noncognitive factors, such as behaviors, skills, attitudes, and strategies, are equally

crucial to students' post-secondary achievement. High school performance, measured by grades and standardized tests, is a significant predictor of future success in higher education (Bowen, 2009). In addition, students who attend more selective colleges are statistically more likely to graduate, even when factors such as their educational background are taken into account. These findings highlight the importance of academic preparation and careful university selection for achieving success in college.

For African American students, several additional factors play critical roles in determining college success. These include a supportive and inclusive campus environment, access to both academic and financial support, and opportunities to engage with college and career pathways early on (Summers & Hrabowski, 2006). Research by Stanton-Salazar (2001) indicates that African American students can greatly benefit from mentorship programs, particularly when the mentors share similar racial or cultural backgrounds, meaning they can provide relatable role models who can guide students through the unique challenges they may face.

Implementing effective programs that prepare African American students for college success is critical. Successful examples include early intervention programs such as GEAR UP and TRIO, both of which provide academic and financial support to underrepresented students. Additionally, academic enrichment opportunities, such as AP courses and dual enrollment, have proven to be highly effective in enhancing the college readiness of these students (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Mentorship programs that focus on academic readiness and foster students' confidence in their ability to succeed have been particularly beneficial in supporting African American students' transition to higher education (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

The impact of these support programs must be evaluated through both short-term and long-term lenses. Short-term outcomes might include measurable improvements in academic performance, college enrollment, and immediate college readiness. Over the long term, programs that successfully support African American students tend to result in higher graduation rates, greater career success, and increased civic engagement, according to research by Summers and Hrabowski (1998). These factors contribute to the broader aim of fostering sustained academic achievement and personal development beyond college.

When assessing the effectiveness of programs designed to support the academic success of African American students, it is essential to consider not only their academic preparedness but also the social and cultural contexts in which they operate (Nagaoka et al., 2013). A comprehensive approach, one that addresses both cognitive and noncognitive factors, will provide the most accurate assessment of a program's efficacy. Summers and Hrabowski (2006) stressed that achieving college success requires institutions to create an environment where students feel valued and supported throughout their educational journey.

Policymakers and educators must collaborate to identify and replicate successful programs and interventions that can be implemented across various educational institutions. Doing so will improve the overall college success rates of African American students and other underrepresented groups. As the body of scholarly literature suggests, academic readiness remains a critical factor in enabling students to meet the demands of college-level coursework and persist through to graduation.

In summary, the intersection of academic readiness, social and cultural support, and access to resources is vital for promoting the college success of African American students. Effective support programs, such as GEAR UP, TRIO, and mentorship initiatives, provide

invaluable assistance in helping these students prepare for and succeed in higher education. By focusing on both academic and noncognitive factors, institutions and policymakers can create environments that foster success and equity in education for all students.

### **Evaluating the Role of Resilience**

Resilience, as an intricate psychological construct, has been the subject of countless research studies in recent decades. Masten et al. (1990) offered a comprehensive review of resilience. They portrayed resilience as the ability to adapt and evolve successfully in the face of obstacles and hardships. Masten et al.'s work dismantles the idea that resilience is an inborn characteristic, instead underlining that it includes a collection of acquired behaviors, cognitive processes, and actions. These authors' paper is a cornerstone in comprehending the flexibility and variability of resilience across various groups.

Adding to this foundational work, Masten et al. explored the subject further in a 2021 study. In their synthesis, the authors integrated findings from various research strands and emphasized the need to cultivate the identified elements to fortify resilience. The latter study acts as both an extension and a consolidation of Masten and colleagues' 1990 inquiry into the multifaceted nature of resilience in developmental contexts by offering a comprehensive perspective on a subject that has been pivotal in the field of developmental psychopathology. Their research underlines the need to cultivate these elements to fortify resilience.

In considering resilience among African American adolescents, the contribution of Cooper et al.'s (2013) study is pertinent. The authors delineated how supportive communities, robust familial connections, and other protective elements can amplify resilience, thereby aiding adolescents in navigating and overcoming potential hurdles posed by their environments. Cooper et al. offered a comprehensive understanding of resilience within a culturally specific framework.

An additional critical work exploring resilience among African American males is Harper's 2015 research on resistant responses to racist stereotypes. Harper discussed the resilience exhibited by these individuals in the face of possible stereotype threats, emphasizing that being able to resist stereotypes and preserve one's self-worth is a crucial display of resilience.

Supplementing the understanding of resilience, Flook and Fulgini (2008) probed how resilience is formed by the interconnectedness of people's daily experiences. The authors' exploration pinpoints how nourishing and supportive environments at home and school can nurture and reinforce resilience. Flook and Fulgini (2008) proposed that these positive environments aid adolescents in better managing stressors, thereby contributing to the formation of resilience.

Broadening the discussion on resilience, Aryee (2017) underscored the interplay of resilience, ethnic identity, and academic persistence. This research suggests that a robust sense of ethnic identity can nurture resilience and influence the level of persistence in rigorous academic settings.

Together, these studies emphasize the complex and dynamic nature of resilience as influenced by personal, communal, and environmental factors. The body of work also spotlights the role of resilience in handling adversities and fostering positive results. Moreover, the role of resilience among African American males in academic settings is clarified, illuminating how enhancing resilience can significantly affect academic success and overall psychological well-being.

**Resilience and Academic Preparedness**

Harper's 2006 work on the analysis of peer solidarity unveiled the essential role of peer solidarity in the resilience and scholarly attainments of male African American higher education students. Harper's study effectively deconstructed the myths surrounding Black male students' scholastic outlooks by laying bare the robust academic networks they established and their enduring dedication to communal triumph. His work shed light on how joint cultural encounters and trials nurtured a sense of shared identity, which bolstered resilience and empowered these students to conquer academic and societal challenges.

Palmer et al. (2009) discovered a noteworthy correlation between resilience and the preservation of Black males in higher education establishments. Their study suggests that resilience, when aligned with an embracing and affirming scholastic environment, is integral in enhancing academic readiness and lowering withdrawal rates.

Wood and Williams's 2013 research underscored the pivotal role of resilience in the academic perseverance of Black males at community colleges. Their study argued that resilience, defined as the ability to rebound from challenges, was crucial for academic preparedness and triumph in this population.

Strayhorn (2010) thoroughly explored the confluence of race and gender and the influence of social and cultural assets on academic outcomes. Strayhorn discovered that comprehension and application of social and cultural resources could markedly augment resilience, thereby bolstering academic readiness. Hurd et al. (2013) highlighted the critical part played by engaged parenting and mentorship in nurturing resilience among Black youth. Their study emphasized the significance of supportive structures in cultivating resilience and preparing Black male students for academic achievement.

In summation, resilience arises as a prevailing theme in the academic preparedness of male African American students across these investigations. Future research might concentrate on implementing methodologies to nurture resilience at both the individual and the institutional levels (Harper, 2006; Hurd et al., 2013; Palmer et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2010; Wood & Williams, 2013). This step could have substantial repercussions for academic regulations and educational methodologies that would assist this demographic.

### **Gaps in the Literature and Future Research Directions**

Although there is an abundance of studies on college preparedness and success for African American students, unaddressed areas in the literature still exist. One such area is the influence of imposter syndrome, especially in the context of the impact of the intersectionality of race and gender on college achievement. African American students encounter unique hurdles in higher education, including discrimination, bias, and the added responsibility of family obligations (Jackson et al., 2013). Students may also struggle with imposter syndrome, a psychological phenomenon in which individuals question their achievements and fear being unmasked as a “fraud,” and stereotype threat, the situational dilemma in which individuals are at risk of validating negative stereotypes about their racial or ethnic group. Future research should probe these factors and their impact on college success for African American students.

Additional research is also required to better comprehend the relationship between cultural capital and college success for African American students, particularly in the context of imposter syndrome and stereotype threat. Cultural capital, which encompasses nonfinancial resources like knowledge and skills, can grant individuals societal benefits. However, as a result of systemic inequalities and educational disparities, African American students may lack the cultural capital necessary for success in college (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Future research



should concentrate on examining the role of cultural capital in promoting college success among African American students and on how cultural capital can be used to mitigate the effects of imposter syndrome and stereotype threat.

Furthermore, in efforts to boost college success among African American students, there is a need for more stringent evaluation and assessment of the effectiveness of support programs and interventions. This includes an analysis of long-term outcomes, such as college graduation rates and professional achievements, and an evaluation of how individual components of these programs affect student outcomes (Schuyler et al., 2021). The creation and implementation of evidence-based and effective programs, particularly those that address imposter syndrome and stereotype threat, is vital for promoting the success of African American college students.

Investigating the influence of policies and institutional practices on the achievement of African American students in higher education can play a significant role in enhancing these students' outcomes. Measures such as affirmative action and race-conscious admissions have demonstrated their efficacy in fostering college success for underrepresented students by fostering diversity (Bowen & Bok, 1998), but recent Supreme Court rulings have exerted considerable impact on these policies. Specifically, the United States Supreme Court has rendered rulings that eliminate the consideration of race as a determining factor in university admissions, thereby disrupting long-standing affirmative action and positive discrimination initiatives (Tanne, 2023). It is crucial to comprehend the potential repercussions of these legal developments on the college success of African American students. Future research endeavors should encompass these dimensions to offer a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the achievement of African American students in higher education, incorporating the significance of imposter syndrome and stereotype threat.

### **Conclusion**

A review of relevant literature has revealed several factors contributing to African American students' preparedness and success in college. Identified as critical factors were academic preparedness (Chingos, 2018; Li-Grining et al., 2021); access to educational and financial support systems (Hamilton & Darity, 2017; McGee & Pearman, 2014); exposure to career opportunities (Pfund et al., 2015; Summers & Hrabowski, 2006); supportive/inclusive campus environment (Griffin et al., 2022; Woods & Domina, 2014); and the availability of role mentors (Booker & Brevard, 2017; Herron & Turnley, 2023). Success in college and beyond is dependent on the presence of these essential factors (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Cachia et al., 2018).

The literature also underscores the significance of psychological factors such as imposter syndrome and stereotype threat in shaping the experiences of African American students in higher education. Imposter syndrome, characterized by persistent self-doubt and fear of being exposed as a "fraud," and stereotype threat, the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about one's racial or ethnic group, can significantly impact these students' academic performance and overall college experience. Future research should delve deeper into these psychological phenomena and their influence on college success for African American students, and into interventions that can be designed to mitigate their effects.

Achieving college readiness requires successful measures such as early intervention services, including GEAR UP or TRIO (National Council for Community and Education Partnerships, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a) and academic enrichment opportunities like AP courses or dual enrollment (Attewell et al., 2006; Liptak, 2022), in addition to mentoring (Herron & Turnley, 2023; Thompson et al., 2008). Although the literature review has offered valuable insights, there are still deficiencies in current research on college readiness and

achievement for African American students. These interventions can also play a crucial role in addressing imposter syndrome and stereotype threat among African American students, thereby enhancing their college readiness and success.

In the future, researchers may analyze the influence of certain interventions and programs on lasting results like completing college, succeeding professionally, and engaging civically (Dee & Penner, 2021; McNair et al., 2022). Additional investigation is required into the encounters of African American learners in tertiary education (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Lunceford et al., 2017). Their perspective on campus, academic support services, and mentoring relationships must be studied (Komiya et al., 2000; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Addressing the identified deficiencies and gaps in the current research on college readiness and achievement for African American students is crucial to further our understanding of their experiences and to develop effective strategies for their success (Haskins & Rouse, 2013; Torres, 2020). The next chapter will outline the research design and methodology to bridge these gaps, involving formulating research questions, establishing participant selection criteria, determining appropriate data collection methods, and applying analytical procedures (Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Lunceford et al., 2017; Roderick et al., 2009; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). With a focus on addressing current research limitations, in Chapter 3 the author delineates the approach taken in this study to advance knowledge of African American students' college preparedness and attainment through targeted research questions, participant sampling, data gathering, and analysis procedures.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Methods**

#### **Introduction**

This study was conducted in an attempt to elucidate the complex interplay between academic preparedness, imposter syndrome, and resilience among male African American college graduates. Employing a qualitative approach steeped in social constructivism and social cognitive theory, the research endeavor was intended to address the following four central questions:

1. What are the main causes of academic unpreparedness among African American male college students?
2. In what ways does imposter syndrome affect the academic readiness and subsequent college achievement of African American males?
3. How does resilience assist African American males in surmounting the obstacles encountered in higher education?
4. Which support initiatives and interventions have effectively fostered academic readiness among African American male students, and how can they be duplicated across the country?

To garner insights into the multifaceted factors shaping this demographic's educational experiences, semistructured interviews were conducted to elicit personal narratives from the participants. By capturing firsthand accounts, I hoped to elucidate the participants' experiences and perspectives regarding academic preparedness, imposter syndrome, and resilience.

This chapter delineates the methodology, methods, and procedures underlying the study's research design and data collection process. The selected approaches align with principles of qualitative scholarship, upholding requisite rigor while providing latitude to explore individuals'

subjective meanings and understandings (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Creswell, 2014). By detailing the philosophical assumptions and concrete research methods, this chapter furnishes a framework for an ethical and academically sound investigation into the nuanced interplay of factors affecting male African American students' success.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Qualitative Methods**

A qualitative methodology is central to this study, as it illuminates the complex lived experiences of male African American students in relation to academic preparedness, imposter syndrome, and resilience. Creswell (2014) noted that qualitative methods empower researchers to explore individuals' intricate perspectives and ascribe meaning to their multifaceted experiences. Ponterotto (2005) asserted that qualitative approaches facilitate the extraction of thick, vivid descriptions of participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes within sociocultural contexts. Thus, this methodology grants access to the nuanced, multilayered experiences of male African American students at the intersection of individual agency, systemic structures, and resilience forces. Each narrative offers another piece of the intricate mosaic illustrating how personal experiences and systemic factors intertwine to shape academic preparedness.

The social constructivist paradigm underpins this approach, positing that reality is socially constructed through subjective meanings shaped by sociocultural contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This paradigm aligns with Butina's (2015) emphasis on contextually anchoring narratives. A social constructivist lens magnifies the specific contextual and institutional elements interweaving male African American students' experiences, allowing the researcher to elucidate their situated academic realities.

Semistructured individual interviews will elicit rich personal narratives, as modeled effectively in Roberts's (2018) study of professional staff's roles in student retention. Incorporating an intersectionality perspective into the interviews can result in the uncovering of profound insights, as Windsong (2018) demonstrates. Intersectionality refers to examining how different aspects of identity, such as race, class, and gender, intersect to reflect interlocking systems of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 2017). This perspective aligns with the researcher's aim of elucidating how systemic underpreparedness and imposter syndrome affect male African American students' educational journeys. An intersectional lens illuminates how male African American students' multiple marginalized identities shape their experiences with academic preparedness and imposter phenomenon. Finally, the qualitative methodology provides a conduit to gain a richer, contextually grounded understanding of the complex dynamics of academic readiness, imposter syndrome, and resilience for male African American male students. Their journeys will be illuminated through their perspectives, conveyed in their voices, that reflect experiences of hardship, community, and an indomitable spirit.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was underpinned by the conceptual framework of social cognitive theory, which posits that learning and behavior are shaped by intricate reciprocal interactions between personal, behavioral, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986). As one of the preeminent psychological frameworks, this theory recognizes the complex interplay of forces that shape human functioning and capacities across micro and macro levels (Bandura, 2001). Within this multidimensional framework spanning individual, interpersonal, communal, and societal spheres of influence, concepts such as human agency, self-efficacy, collective efficacy, motivation, and

self-regulation are pivotal influences on individuals' cognitive processes, emotional states, and social behaviors (Bandura, 1997).

In the context of this study, social cognitive theory furnishes a comprehensive multilevel lens used to examine how male African American students develop resilience and college readiness within nested environmental systems, from proximal factors like family, peers, and neighborhoods to broader sociocultural and institutional variables related to their cultural community and academic settings (Bandura, 2001). Rather than focusing on any single element in isolation, the theory facilitates investigation of how cognitive, emotional, social, institutional, cultural, and historical factors dynamically intertwine to impact students' educational experiences, capacities, and behaviors across micro and macro layers of their environment and development (Hattar et al., 2016; Heslop et al., 2023). This theory aligns with the study's aim: to elucidate the nuances of how sociocultural and institutional forces such as systemic academic underpreparedness, pervasive racial stereotypes, and individual factors like imposter syndrome shape male African American students' academic trajectories, behaviors, and motivations. Additionally, social cognitive theory's emphasis on human agency and self-efficacy aligns with this study's focus on identifying practices, relationships, and experiences that cultivate resilience, academic empowerment, motivation, and persistence in male African American students (Bandura, 2001; Usher & Pajares, 2006). Concepts such as mastery experiences, peer modeling, and social persuasion can illuminate pathways that foster students' self-beliefs and academic capabilities despite adversities (Bandura, 1997; Usher & Pajares, 2006). This multifaceted framework enables the development of a holistic understanding of the personal, interpersonal, and systemic factors at micro and macro levels that influence male African American students' educational journeys, capacities, and motivations in higher education.

The theory's acknowledgment of *reciprocal causation*—a concept referring to the dynamic interplay among individual, social, cultural, and institutional variables that mutually influence each other—substantiates its selection as an optimal conceptual framework for this study (Bandura, 1986). This term encapsulates the idea that human learning and experiences are not linear but are shaped by the ongoing interactions among various elements. By recognizing the complex interplay among environmental conditions, inner cognitive processes, and behavioral outcomes, this framework facilitates a layered analysis of the factors affecting students' college readiness and resilience (Bandura, 2001).

Social cognitive theory empowers this study to develop nuanced insights into the personal, relational, communal, and systemic forces that intersect to shape male African American students' academic preparedness, experiences, and persistence.

### **Action Research**

For this study, I drew on participatory action research, in which participants are actively engaged as co-researchers in studying a phenomenon that they experience firsthand (McIntyre, 2008). As exemplified in Wilson's (2016) and Thomas and Warren's (2017) studies, collaborative inquiry can be an effective approach for marginalized groups to analyze systemic inequities critically. Engaging male African Americans as co-researchers rather than just subjects empowers them to identify practices likely to enhance their college readiness and success. Therefore, this research method aligns with the critical emancipatory goals of action research methodology (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

African American researchers have argued that applying culturally responsive and antiracist methodologies is imperative when studying marginalized groups to challenge systemic oppression embedded in traditional research (Milner & Lomotey, 2013; Tillman, 2002). As



Souto-Manning's (2019) study demonstrated, a highly participatory design amplifies students' input into research affecting them. Wilson's (2016) work modeled how participatory action research can undergird leadership initiatives promoting equity and social justice. Specifically, Wilson involved Black and Latino parents from an urban school community as co-researchers in a participatory action research project that examined educational inequities. The parent co-researchers helped shape the research questions, collect and interpret data, and develop action plans to address systemic barriers faced by families of color.

Participatory action research provides a conduit for transformative and racial change by engaging students in analyzing their academic experiences and co-constructing improvements. This methodology aligns with my goal of using culturally responsive approaches that empower male African American students to enhance their college success. This population's insider expertise on navigating higher education as a marginalized group is invaluable, and participatory action research provides a vehicle they can use to share this knowledge.

### **Specific Research Design**

This study employed a phenomenological research design grounded in the approaches of seminal theorists. As McIntosh and Morse (2015) advocated, diversity must be embedded throughout the research process, including in the design phase. Phenomenology aims to extract the essential meaning of individuals' lived experiences of a phenomenon through in-depth exploration of their stories and perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Van Manen, 2016). This design aligns with the goal of understanding male African American students' shared experiences regarding college readiness and resilience.

As the researcher, I applied to the individual interviews the technique of *bracketing*, which is a qualitative research technique wherein personal experiences, biases, and preconceived

notions are set aside before data collection and analysis to maintain objectivity, to separate the researcher's personal biases before the researcher analyzes data, as Kallio et al. (2016) underscored in their interview guide framework. Subsequently, I extracted significant verbatim statements related to academic preparedness, imposter syndrome, and resilience from the interview transcripts, as Weller et al. (2018) discussed regarding optimizing saturation. These statements were analyzed and clustered into thematic meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). By conveying both the textural qualities of what participants experienced and the underlying structural contexts, a phenomenological design captures the richness, depth, and complexity of how these young men subjectively perceive and navigate challenges pertaining to academic readiness and persistence (Moustakas, 1994). This approach unveiled the nuances of their lived experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and education.

### **Research Context**

In this study, I focused on male African American students ages 18 years or older who had already earned an undergraduate degree. Participants were recruited from higher education institutions and communities in the Maryland region, where there are populations of male African American college graduates who are willing to share their educational experiences retrospectively.

These contextually grounded reflections on these students' journeys before, during, and after college can provide invaluable insights into how diverse institutional cultures, programs, and practices shaped their development and success. The regional context is fitting, given census data indicating that African Americans comprise over 30% of the population in Maryland (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Additionally, focusing on White institutions where African American males were underrepresented allowed for critically probing their experiences as minorities

navigating environments that were not created with their needs in mind. Their stories can illuminate challenges faced and strategies used to demonstrate resilience and persistence to a degree of completion.

### **Research Setting**

Data were collected via secure platforms like Zoom for virtual interviews and in private, quiet spaces agreed upon with participants for in-person sessions. These settings, including reserved rooms at public libraries or community centers, are selected to avoid institutional environments and power dynamics, meaning authentic expression can be promoted (Milner & Lomotey, 2013). Both virtual and physical interview settings are tailored to ensure participant comfort by fostering a space where genuine experiences and perspectives can be shared openly.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

The initial phase of participant recruitment was rooted in a well-structured approach to ensure the selection of 3–5 African American males who had earned a bachelor's degree. The process employed a purposive sampling technique (Etikan et al., 2016), where the researcher deliberately selects individuals who meet the study criteria rather than selecting a random sample. Specifically, the principal student investigator used his judgment to meticulously target male African American students, known within academic and professional environments, who hold bachelor's degrees. This choice aligned with Etikan et al.'s (2016) description of purposive sampling as a nonprobability technique where units are deliberately selected based on the characteristics of a population and the objective of the study. Prospective participants are identified based on a set of predefined criteria. They must identify as African American or Black, be male, and hold a bachelor's degree. An email tailored to impart clarity and conciseness was sent to potential participants. This communication illuminates the study's objectives and the

criteria for eligibility while providing the investigator's contact details for any requisite clarification or further information.

If the initial phase of recruitment had not yielded the desired number of participants, an auxiliary approach employing the snowball sampling method (Noy, 2008) would have been activated. Under this approach, participants already enrolled in the study would have played a pivotal role in recommending other potential candidates from their networks who met the eligibility criteria. Each referral would have undergone a meticulous verification process to ascertain their suitability and willingness to be part of the study.

Every eligible and interested participant received an informed consent form via DocuSign, a platform that epitomizes efficiency and security in document signing (see Appendix I). Participants underscored the study's affiliation with Bradley University, the role of the student principal investigator, and an outline of any incentives or compensations that participants received. After signing the form electronically, participants submitted the completed document via a secure online portal. The signed forms were stored in encrypted files, accessible only to the research team, to protect participants' confidentiality.

The essence of this robust recruitment strategy was anchored in the aspiration to glean qualitative insights from a specialized group of male African American students with an undergraduate education. The approach was meticulously crafted to amalgamate a diversity of experiences and perspectives and was predicated on reaching a point of data saturation such that additional data would not substantively enhance the informational richness of the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

## Participants

Participants for this study were recruited using a strategic approach that combines purposive and snowball sampling methods to reach a diverse and representative sample. Initial engagement targeted community affiliates and my personal contacts with the researcher, who aligned with the predetermined inclusion criteria, ensuring the collection of rich, relevant, and insightful data.

If the initial outreach does not yield the desired number of participants, the snowball sampling technique will come into play. Participants already engaged in the study will facilitate connections to potential candidates within their networks who meet the established criteria, enhancing the reach and diversity of the participant pool.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- The participants' willingness to provide informed consent was fundamental, ensuring ethical engagement and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were informed that they could remove themselves from the study at any time without consequence.
- Identification as African American or Black was crucial to focus the study on this specific demographic, which was central to the research objectives.
- Participants should have earned an undergraduate degree during recruitment, ensuring the insights gathered were reflective and comprehensive.
- The age threshold was 18 or older, aligning with legal and ethical research participation guidelines.

During the recruitment phase, a screening process was implemented to assess and confirm the eligibility of prospective participants against these criteria. Only those who met all

the criteria were invited to participate, and informed consent was obtained. The target was to secure a final sample of 3–5 male African American students above 18 years of age, holding undergraduate degrees, who were willing to provide informed consent. Their insights and experiences related to academic preparedness, the encounter with imposter syndrome, and the development of resilience were central in unveiling nuanced understandings pivotal to the study's objectives.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As a male African American educator and doctoral candidate pursuing this research, I walked a nuanced line between being an insider and an outsider in relation to the participants' cultural experiences. On the one hand, I aimed to establish trust and rapport with participants by being transparent about my background, values, intentions, and profound connections to the African American community. As a member of this community, I have an intuitive cultural understanding that supports culturally responsive research approaches (Tillman, 2002). However, I also recognized that the substantial diversity within the African American community meant that I might still be an outsider regarding some aspects of participants' multifaceted intersectional identities and life experiences. For instance, differences in age, sexuality, socioeconomic status, geographic region, family structure, political affiliation, and more can shape diverse perspectives and standpoints.

Therefore, as the researcher, I avoided making assumptions based on partial cultural understandings and actively employed reflexivity to interrogate the participants' subjectivity. Through journaling, critical self-reflection, and dialogues with critical peers, I explored how the participants' intersecting identities, values, experiences, and unconscious biases may have shaped their interpretation of the data (Berger, 2015). With this process of rigorous reflexivity, I

supported a more authentic and ethical analysis of participants' narratives by locating myself within the research process (Berger, 2015). Moreover, I was attuned to power dynamics and mindful that my positionality could color my view of participants' experiences.

My complex insider/outsider status was continually interrogated throughout the research process, a measure that ensured rigor while honoring the uniqueness of each participant's story and perspective (Chavez, 2008). Aiming for cultural synchronization, I knew that interpretations are subjective and influenced by my positionality (Tillman, 2002). Thus, reflexivity and member-checking procedures become pivotal for validating the analysis. This reflexive stance fostered rapport and cultural understanding, mitigating biases that could result in the skewing or misunderstanding of participants' narratives. Embracing reflexivity enabled me to engage in ethical, culturally responsive research that accurately conveyed the participants' voices.

## **Research Methods**

### **Data Collection**

#### ***Strategies/Instruments***

The mechanism for data collection for this study centered on intensive individual semistructured interviews with each participant. According to DeMarrais (2004), this method is esteemed for yielding rich, detailed, and descriptive insights that grant the researcher an intimate glimpse into individuals' nuanced perspectives and lived experiences relative to the studied phenomenon. The semistructured format of the interviews, characterized by a balance of predetermined questions and the flexibility allowing for spontaneous probes, was especially advantageous. It facilitated an organic, dynamic exchange that allowed for the exploration of key topics while also making it possible to delve into deeper layers of understanding when nuanced revelations emerged (Kallio et al., 2016).

Each interview was designed to unravel participants' intricate experiences and observations regarding academic preparedness challenges, confrontations with imposter syndrome, manifestations of resilience in the academic journey, and insights for enhancing student support initiatives. The integration of follow-up questions was instrumental in peeling back the layers of complexity, thereby offering a multidimensional view of participants' experiences.

Every interview, whether conducted virtually or in person, was audio- and video-recorded only with the explicit consent of the participant as outlined in the informed consent form. These recordings served as the basis for verbatim transcriptions produced by a professional transcription service that followed strict data security protocols to ensure the anonymity of participants. The transcriptions were subsequently subjected to member-checking procedures, whereby participants were invited to review the transcripts for accuracy and to make any corrections or clarifications (Harper & Cole, 2012). This member-checking helped validate the credibility and trustworthiness of the data.

### ***Procedures***

The interviews, informed by the standards of intensive interviewing, lasted for about 60 minutes each. This allocation allowed participants to delve into the complexities and nuances inherent in their academic and personal journeys (Morse, 2012). The iterative nature of the interviews served as a touchstone for quality and comprehensiveness. Data saturation—the juncture at which additional narratives contribute minimal or repetitive insights—signaled the completion of the interview process (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

To preserve data security throughout the collection and analysis phases, all audio and visual recordings, as well as their exact transcriptions, were stored on a password-protected



computer and in encrypted cloud storage. Access to these was exclusively mine as the principal investigator. All relevant printed materials were kept in a locked filing cabinet in my private office. To maintain participant confidentiality, all identifying names in the files were replaced with pseudonyms. Consistent with ethical research practices, the data will be retained for 5 years after publication, after which all files will be permanently deleted. These stringent protocols ensure the protection of participant confidentiality.

### *Timeline*

A structured timeline underscored the systematic approach to this phase of the research. The first two weeks of October 2023 involved refining interview protocols to set the stage for effective data gathering to ensure the methodologies were comprehensive and ethical. The focus then shifted, during weeks 3–6 in October and November 2023, to participant recruitment, a step aimed at acquiring a diverse and representative sample. This will be followed by the execution of virtual and in-person semistructured interviews, providing a platform for participants to share raw and unfiltered insights. Concurrently, a detailed transcription of each interview was undertaken to capture the depth and nuance of the shared experiences, and weeks 7–8 in November 2023 initiated the member-checking phase, where participants review and validate the accuracy of their interview transcriptions, a step integral to enhancing the authenticity and credibility of the collected data. Finally, weeks 9–10 in November commenced a systematic data analysis process involving a meticulous examination of the interview transcripts to identify and extract pivotal themes and units of meaning, as cited by Castleberry and Nolen (2018). The transformation of raw narratives into structured and interpretable insights was achieved, with each resonating with and contributing to the overarching research objectives.

## **Data Analysis**

The data analysis phase constitutes a meticulous and systematic process conducted to derive authentic, meaningful insights from the qualitative interviews. This section details the specific phenomenological strategies and procedures that were used to ensure academic rigor and integrity in interpreting collected data. The analysis adhered to a structured timeline, as outlined below, to facilitate an ethical, thorough examination that captured the essence of participants' experiences.

### ***Strategies/Procedures***

In analyzing the collected interview data, I employed Moustakas's (1994) systematic phenomenological approach to ensure depth, rigor, and integrity while extrapolating meaningful insights. The initial step involved bracketing, a rigorous process of setting aside the researcher's personal biases and preconceptions to approach the data with a fresh and objective lens. This critical first step ensures that subsequent analyses are uncolored by personal perspectives, facilitating a genuine exploration of participants' lived experiences.

The coding of interview transcripts, an exercise rooted in meticulous detail, followed (Saldana, 2021). Significant statements that relate to academic preparedness, imposter syndrome, and resilience were highlighted at this stage. Every effort was made to remain true to participants' expressions and meanings and to avoid the imposition of external interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These significant statements, extracted verbatim, were organized into clusters of meaning or thematic units. Each cluster underwent a rigorous process of examination and reflection, culminating in the construction of textural descriptions that encapsulated the quintessence of participants' expressed experiences (Creswell, 2013). Concurrently, structural

descriptions were developed that illuminated the conditions, situations, and contexts under which these experiences unfolded (Creswell, 2013).

The textural and structural descriptions were synthesized in the final analysis stage. This composite portrayal unveils the holistic essence and multifaceted meanings embedded in the students' shared experiences relative to the core phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenological reduction techniques such as bracketing, horizontalization, clustering horizons into themes, and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994) were used to further refine these insights by delineating the foundational structural elements that characterize and define the studied phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

### ***Timeline***

The data analysis was structured over a timeline to ensure that data were systematically and thoroughly examined. This data analysis, scheduled from December 2023 to January 2024, was structured for precision and depth. In December, the initial analysis involved bracketing biases and beginning coding, thereby ensuring objectivity and identifying significant statements. As we transitioned to January, the focus shifted to advanced coding and theme identification, with thematic units emerging to reveal underlying patterns. Mid-January was dedicated to constructing textural and structural descriptions that captured the multifaceted shared experiences of participants. By late January, an integration of these descriptions unveiled a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, aligning with the study's objectives and ensuring timely completion.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has delineated the methodology and methods underpinning this study's examination of academic preparedness, imposter syndrome, and resilience among male African

American students. The selected qualitative phenomenological approach was situated within social constructivism and social cognitive theory frameworks, which recognize the social constructedness of subjective realities and the complex interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors influencing human experiences (Bandura, 1986; Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Details about the participatory action research design, purposive participant selection procedures, semistructured individual interviews for data collection, and systematic phenomenological data analysis methods were furnished. This rigorous qualitative approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of male African American students' nuanced, contextualized experiences regarding the research phenomenon.

In the subsequent chapter, the study's findings will be presented by elucidating the salient themes derived from intensive analysis of participants' narratives. Verbatim excerpts from the interview transcripts will be provided to substantiate the emergence of meaningful patterns related to academic preparedness, imposter syndrome, resilience, and recommendations for student support. The results will convey the essence of the demographic's shared authentically lived experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and education. The findings will garner insights that can be used to inform equitable practices and policies in efforts to bolster this demographic's college readiness and success. The discussion will transition into Chapter 4, which will present the interpretation of the results in relation to research questions and existing literature.

## **Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This chapter critically examines the findings of the qualitative study conducted on the experiences of male African American college students. The study is based on the following research questions, as noted in earlier chapters:

1. What are the main causes of academic unpreparedness among male African American college students?
2. In what ways does imposter syndrome affect the academic readiness and subsequent college achievement of male African American students?
3. How does resilience assist male African American students in surmounting the obstacles encountered in higher education?
4. Which support initiatives and interventions have effectively fostered academic readiness among male African American students, and how can they be duplicated across the country?

The research is anchored to the research questions delineated earlier, probing into the finer details of academic unpreparedness, the widespread effect of imposter syndrome, the prominent role of resilience, and the efficiency of diverse, supportive initiatives. Particularly, I wanted to understand academic unpreparedness, delve into how imposter syndrome affects the readiness and attainment of these students, get into the details of how resilience is a critical enabling factor through which they surpass educational barriers, and identify successful interventions to be scaled up. These are important questions, not only in reiterating the thesis that systemic barriers, psychological factors, and community support are indeed major factors in the educational development of male African American students but also in laying out actionable

insights. The analysis will thus contribute to the general discourse on how to increase academic preparedness and success in this demographic and, in doing so, help fill a critical gap in literature and practices in education.

### **Description of Participants**

At the time when the interviews were conducted, all five participants were between 24 and 55 years old. All of the participants chose their pseudonyms, which are used to refer to them throughout the interview process and in this text.

#### **Malik**

Malik is a finance professor in his early 50s who grew up in New Orleans and attended college at Xavier University and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He comes from an educated family: His father has a PhD, and his mother has a master's degree plus 30 additional credits. Malik had a remarkably successful 20-year career in banking; he started his bank before getting his PhD and becoming a professor. His identity as a male African American enabled him to start one of the first Black-owned banks in Nevada. Malik also, through resilience, hard work, and perseverance, overcame challenges in his banking career, such as the 2008 financial crisis. Malik has demonstrated strong leadership and gives back by empowering young students, even later in his career.

#### **Lamont**

Lamont is a 41-year-old nonprofit professional. He grew up in Nigeria and attended the University of Baltimore. Furthermore, he moved to the United States for high school and was the first in his family to go to college. Lamont had some struggles choosing a major but eventually settled on psychology after switching from engineering. He funded his education through jobs and loans while balancing work, school, and family responsibilities. Lamont draws resilience

from his faith, family ties, and African American community. As an advocate for equity in education, he strongly believes standardized testing and other systemic barriers should be eliminated to open opportunities for minority students.

### **Zola**

Zola is a 40-year-old higher education professional with a master's degree in theology who grew up and attended college in Baltimore. His working-class family achieved only a high school level of education. In college, Zola found community and inspiration through campus organizations, overcoming feelings of not belonging with the help of mentors. After obtaining advanced theology degrees focused on social justice, he discovered a new purpose by directing a program supporting minority male students. Zola researches holistic critical mentorship models to help young men navigate systemic barriers.

### **Mubu**

Mubu is a 24-year-old technology professional who grew up in New Jersey and attended college in Baltimore on an athletic scholarship. He feels his preparation for college academics suffered because teachers passed him along rather than properly educating him. In graduate school, Mubu had innovative ideas that lacked support. By surrounding himself with other ambitious, high-achieving African American peers, he found motivation and collaboration that enabled him to succeed. Mubu advocates for colleges to design more personalized, culturally aware mentorship.

### **Ryan**

Ryan is a 28-year-old nonprofit professional who attended college in South Carolina. With a middle-income family background and a master's degree focused on literature and writing, he became deeply involved with student organizations. Although his busy leadership

roles led to struggles with rigorous academic demands, Ryan persevered through faith and community strength. He believes students should pursue higher degrees not just as a means to higher earnings but also to follow their interests and gain purpose. Drawing on his own experience, Ryan advocates for the notion that identity-based student groups can greatly empower minority students when adequately supported by colleges.

## **Findings**

### **Findings from Malik**

Malik is a finance professor in his early 50s who grew up in New Orleans and had a previous successful 20-year career in banking, where he started his bank. As a male African American academic, he offers insights that provide a crucial perspective on the interplay between academic preparedness, resilience, and overcoming obstacles for Black male students seeking success in higher education.

Malik spoke extensively about the current lack of college readiness stemming from systemic deficiencies in the K–12 education system, especially in lower-income areas (Wells, 2020). He highlighted insufficient resources and support structures in these school systems as factors that lead many students to arrive at college unprepared for the rigor and high expectations of the college experience. Malik stated:

Our students just are not prepared for higher education . . . [because of the poor] quality of K–12. Education is just . . . it is just insufficient in terms of college readiness. It just does not exist. Schools are schools. And I do not want to go strictly to funding issues . . . but just from a resource standpoint, you know, just schools are, are not preparing students because they do not have the resources, because they do not have the skill set.



Expanding on these comments, Malik emphasized that African American students especially lack academic focus and interest in education passed down from their local communities and school systems. He argued that the value of and motivation for education must be instilled early and consistently reinforced:

There is a big body of literature that talks about success by 6. You know, those earlier foundation credentials that students get that you build on throughout their education, and when you do not have that, you never quite master that.

Malik also pushed for supplementing standard education in the African American community to promote aspirations toward academic excellence. He stated:

As African Americans, I think we have to recognize that we have to . . . supplement our education that is provided by the system . . . I do think the better education, preparation, skill set, confidence, and everything else will allow an individual to transition through that very quickly.

Regarding resilience, Malik emphasized the critical lessons accumulated from overcoming failures and challenges in life. He noted:

Every experience, whether perceived as positive or negative, serves as a building block. My current standing and achievements are the culmination of overcoming all the challenges I have faced. Those challenges were not insurmountable obstacles, but opportunities for growth. I have learned from the totality of my experiences, and they have collectively shaped who I am today.

He again highlighted the outsized importance of supplemental education and early career exposure for building resilience to succeed both in college and professionally. Malik advocated that students approach higher education with intentionality, explaining:

Simply going through the motions of attending school, like treating college similar to high school by just “checking the boxes” to obtain a degree, represents a missed opportunity. If students in my program are not proactively seeking involvement, exposure to the industry, networking to build professional contacts, securing internships, and gaining a comprehensive understanding of their field, then they are lacking a vital component of their education. A substantial portion of this holistic learning experience occurs outside of formal coursework. Students who fail to immerse themselves in these co-curricular activities are inadvertently falling behind their peers in terms of preparation for future career success.

Overall, Malik’s commentary provides a critical perspective on the factors influencing Black male student success in higher education, which range from K–12 preparation to building resilience and intentionally approaching a college career.

### **Findings from Lamont**

Lamont is a 41-year-old nonprofit professional who emigrated from Nigeria in high school and was the first in his family to attend college in America. His insights speak to the compounded challenges facing low-income first-generation Black students seeking to persist through higher education.

Regarding academic preparedness, Lamont illuminated the challenges he faced in selecting a career trajectory and college major without familial guidance to draw upon, echoing findings highlighted by Amir et al. (2008) and Kulcsár et al. (2020). Lamont elucidated how the absence of loaded expectations from his family, whose members had not previously navigated higher education, left him rudderless in charting his academic path. As he recounted, “They hadn’t done it before, so they couldn’t help me shape the path. I chose the major.” This lack of

familial expertise contributed to Lamont's decision to pursue a field based more on his immediate surroundings than an informed, intentional choice; he stated, “I majored in [field] because it was what I observed around me in the mid-'90s.”

Moreover, Lamont underscored his struggle to maintain academic focus after initially losing motivation in high school, attributing this lapse to immersing himself in a peer group that lacked drive and aspiration. He explained, “Everybody around you is not as driven” in an environment that enables complacency, and “the bars were lower” in terms of performance expectations. Lamont’s narrative highlights how the confluence of insufficient guidance and unsupportive social influences can derail academic preparedness and persistence among underrepresented students.

Lamont emphasized the profound impact that being part of a supportive community can have on fostering resilience and helping disadvantaged students overcome obstacles. For him, changing high schools provided a fresh start and renewed motivation. Importantly, Lamont found that small campus groups centered on shared identities played a crucial role in enabling him to persist. These groups served as safe havens where students with common backgrounds and experiences could find a sense of belonging and support one another in their pursuit of success. Being part of such communities helped students transcend marginalization and instilled in them the confidence and determination to achieve their goals.

Lamont’s perspective highlights the importance of community support and campus initiatives targeting the inclusion of first-generation immigrant students and other disadvantaged groups (Kamalumpundi et al., 2024; Partida, 2018; Salmi & D’Addio, 2021). His insights speak to the additional obstacles these students face and the types of directed assistance needed to help them successfully navigate acquiring a college degree.

**Findings from Zola**

Zola is a 40-year-old student affairs professional with an academic background in theology who is focused on social justice. Having grown up in West Baltimore and now returned to support low-income students at his alma mater—the University of Maryland, Baltimore County—Zola provides a critical perspective on improving a sense of belonging and effectively facilitating success among minority male college students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Zola illuminated the systemic barriers to academic preparedness that exist for students from economically underprivileged backgrounds. He used his personal experiences with standardized testing as a representative exemplar. Students who are not perceived as elite or among the highest echelons frequently lack access to resources that could facilitate their achievement of full academic potential, while their more affluent peers receive ample auxiliary support. In Zola's circumstances, his family's financial constraints meant they were unable to provide remuneration for the requisite fees associated with standardized test administration. As Zola articulated, "That wouldn't have been something that we could afford." This dearth of financial means created an impediment to his academic trajectory that students of greater economic privilege did not encounter.

Zola explained how an early opportunity sponsorship opened up opportunities to win other scholarships that enabled him to persist through college. Zola also emphasized the importance of cultural representation in mitigating feelings of not belonging academically as a young Black male, saying:

If you do not feel you belong there . . . every question you ask, you have to first ask yourself if it is a question worth asking . . . I cannot name a Black male figure who is a staff person in here.

In terms of resilience, Zola cited identity and meaningful mentorship relationships as vital to student empowerment. He highlighted the complexity of navigating systemic oppression and the need for personal support through challenges, explaining the importance of understanding that you are not just that person, like you are not just, like a student, you know . . . having the people connected, having people to remind me . . . mentoring is personal, and it is a connectedness that requires folks to be able to overcome imposter syndrome and all these things with support.

Zola also emphasized his role in modeling resilience and persistently confronting barriers as a known agitator within the university system seeking institutional change to serve disadvantaged students better.

Zola's experiences point to the parachute of individualized guidance and cultural representation needed to foster a sense of belonging among Black male collegians from adverse backgrounds. His insights reinforce the notion that mental health and identity cannot be decoupled from academic success.

### **Findings from Mubu**

Mubu is a 24-year-old technology professional who grew up in New Jersey and attended college on an athletic scholarship. His perspective provides unique insights into the school-to-college transition and the support needed for Black male student-athletes to achieve academic success.

Regarding academic preparedness, Mubu made it clear that he did not feel ready for college. He spoke of teachers passing him through instead of properly academically preparing him for college-level rigor and expectations. He described having difficulties grasping key conceptual foundations to build upon, stating:

As I was transitioning from high school to college, I realized that there were a lot of teachers who just let me slide by. And I was not necessarily the most academically prepared . . . A lot of my high school education was kind of taught to the test and did not necessarily prepare me to apply actual information into the world.

Mubu underscored the profound importance of community support, especially among peers facing shared challenges, as a vital component of resilience. He exemplified this through his personal experience of lacking access to the required technology for assignments, which necessitated his borrowing resources from others in his cohort. Mubu explained:

Building community is a big thing that I've realized has helped me, surrounding myself with not only other African American males, but just other African American people who are in the space, who probably are struggling in the same way.

Furthermore, Mubu highlighted the immense value of having access to faculty mentors who share similar identities and experiences. He observed the empowering impact this connection can have, noting:

Having people of color, specific African American people in the Dean's office, and having that ability to connect with them . . . can be really helpful, because they can also be that kind of light to push you through.

Moreover, Mubu's narrative underscores how cultivating supportive communities among those facing parallel challenges, coupled with representation and guidance from relatable role models, can foster the resilience indispensable for persistence and success amid adversity in academic environments.

Mubu's statements provide invaluable perspective on the distinct barriers facing Black male athlete-students. His insights reinforce the notion that resilience emerges from social

support and cultural familiarity rather than simply from individual, intrinsic grit or determination.

### **Findings from Ryan**

Ryan is a 28-year-old nonprofit professional who became heavily engaged with student leadership while attending college in South Carolina. His thoughts provide a critical perspective on redesigning higher education to empower minority students better.

Ryan discussed at length his aimless trajectory; he lacked career direction upon entering college without having received sufficient guidance. He explained that his academic unpreparedness was related more to a lack of definitive purpose than to a lack of academic training or ability:

I did not know shit. I did not know what—I did not—I did not know what I wanted to do . . . If I had had more options, or, you know, things available to me, I probably would have taken a gap year. I remember I was just doing—getting the degree just to get it, not because I was inspired by anything I was—I was enjoying.

Ryan continually emphasized the fundamental nature of community support rather than solitary perseverance as a requisite component of resilience. He reflected upon his negative experience attempting to pursue academics without a solid social foundation, which stood in stark contrast to the subsequent support provided by his graduate student cohort. Ryan posited that overcoming challenges alongside a group engenders an augmentative effect, as articulated in this statement: “If you go through something with a group of people, it can [provide benefits].” He exemplified this phenomenon through the dynamic of his graduate cohort, noting that such groups of students “working together” across disciplines derived advantages from collaborative endeavors like “study parties or study sessions together.” Ryan’s narrative underscores the

pivotal role that embedding oneself within a supportive community plays in cultivating the resilience necessary to persist through academic and personal difficulties.

Ryan also discussed the weight of cultural expectations carried by high-achieving Black students and the corresponding importance of identity roots. He explained:

I think about those folks. I think about our ancestors. I think about my grandmother . . . I think about Leela Lee, from my—who was a church woman from my church. She read all of my college essays.

Ryan's poignant perspective provides unique considerations regarding how higher education could be reconstructed to offer holistic and spiritual nourishment to students rather than solely training career professionals. His insights speak to how colleges might better empower minority students through community connectivity and cultural continuity with students' home backgrounds.

In summary, these detailed findings from interviews with five participants speak to various factors influencing Black male student success in higher education, factors that range from early academic preparation and career direction to building resilience through community connectivity and cultural representation. The insights highlight opportunities for systemic reforms as well as tailored support needed to improve attainment for this group.

### **Thematic Network of Educational Experiences for Male African American Students**

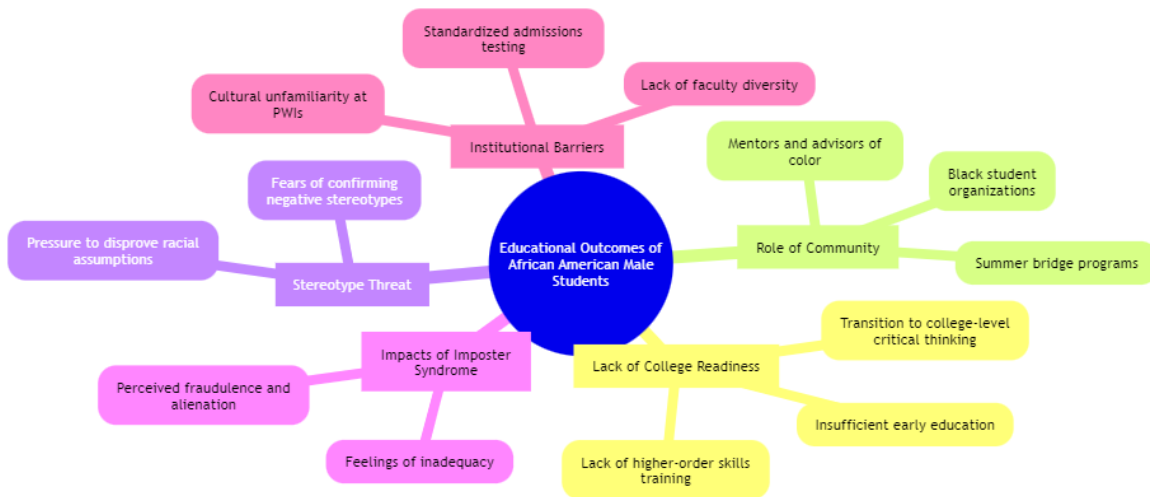
The thematic network model presented below highlights the rich and varied experiences of male African American students in higher education. The overarching theme—Educational Outcomes of Male African American Students—branches into five main themes: Lack of College Readiness, Role of Community, Stereotype Threat, Impacts of Impostor Syndrome, and



Institutional Barriers. The students' educational journeys illustrate how each theme is broken down further (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Thematic Network of Educational Experiences for Male African American Students*



The Lack of College Readiness theme shows foundational academic setbacks for the students, including insufficient early skill-building, gaps in higher-order capacities, and difficulties adapting to college-level demands, all of which undermine the preparedness required to excel. The seminal Role of Community theme demonstrates how social connections providing cultural familiarity, identity affirmation, guidance, and belonging facilitate success by nurturing motivation and persistence. Sources of support include Black student organizations, summer transition programs, or mentors of color. Internal psychological battles also emerge prominently, with Stereotype Threat creating immense pressures that result in attempts to disprove racist assumptions. Meanwhile, Imposter Syndrome breeds self-doubt, perceived fraudulence, and alienation in White-dominant settings. Finally, pervasive Institutional Barriers like lack of faculty diversity, admissions test bias, and systemic racism-imposed constraints that converge

with individual struggles, propagating disproportionate impediments to the students' fulfilling their academic potential.

### **Key Themes**

#### **Lack of College Readiness**

The most prominent theme arising from the interviews was the alarming lack of college readiness plaguing male African American high school students. Nearly every participant confronted academic unpreparedness when transitioning to higher education, and they were often shocked after discovering how deficient their K–12 foundation was.

As Malik bluntly observed, “Our students just aren’t prepared for higher education.” Contributing factors he cited included overcrowded and underfunded schools that lack resources to adequately support students in combating complex modern problems. Mubu described his high school classes as narrowly “teaching to the test” rather than developing critical thinking skills applicable in college contexts. Students graduate with high grade point averages and honors but still struggle to decode complex texts, articulate nuanced ideas, and analyze them from multiple angles.

Lamont said that he felt intensely frustrated upon realizing that he had coasted through less rigorous U.S. high schools after arriving from Nigeria. Placement exams for college coursework showed huge gaps as his scores showed a need for remedial classes. Other participants had similar wake-up calls when they were forced to play catch-up after years of slipping through an overburdened system. Malik noted that if they do not master educational “building blocks” early on, students inevitably flounder later when deficits compound.

### **Role of Community**

Conversely, supportive communities proved instrumental in nurturing success among those who managed to transcend barriers. Every respondent emphasized engagement with cultural groups, peer networks, mentors, faculty, and identity-based programs as crucial to fostering their sense of belonging, building of resilience, and persisting despite obstacles.

Zola credited his roots in the Black church community as having opened early doors to educational opportunities. The cultural messaging he internalized from watching congregation professionals was that education is the vehicle for actualizing aspirations post-segregation. He later paid this gift forward by mentoring marginalized students through his campus diversity program.

For Lamont and Ryan, membership in Black Greek fraternities supplied social connections but also an embedded achievement ethos that buoyed them through alienating institutions. Lamont described the Black Male Society as a haven for discussing struggles specific to that demographic. Mubu advocated for university-sponsored cohorts that are explicitly created for communing among students of color as self-reinforcing ecosystems where the students are accountable to and inspire each other.

These accounts collectively illustrate the multifaceted nature of community support in the educational journeys of African American male students. Whether rooted in religious institutions, Greek organizations, or university-sponsored programs, these communities serve as crucial networks of support, validation, and empowerment. They provide spaces where students can find mentorship, discuss shared experiences, and develop a sense of belonging that counteracts feelings of isolation or alienation in predominantly White institutions. The participants' experiences highlight how these supportive communities not only offer immediate

social and emotional support but also instill long-term values of achievement, resilience, and giving back to their communities.

### **Stereotype Threat**

Multiple participants noted the enormous stress inflicted by the scrutiny and pressure of being one of the few African American students in their academic programs, essentially feeling they represented their entire race. Zola explained this dynamic, saying: “There is this sense of comparing people and groups” along with “the fear of being the one” who might confirm negative stereotypes about African Americans. This ever-present specter of judgment can manifest as paranoid self-doubt, breeding thoughts that one’s performance may inadvertently reinforce stereotypical expectations of inadequacy among African American students. The participants felt the weight of not wanting to fulfill those negative stereotypes through any perceived shortcomings or failures on their part.

Mubu also remarked on disproportionate attention from teachers who concentrate concern on a few pet Black students they deem special enough to rescue rather than universally nurturing all students. When students struggle to overcome imposter syndrome, their worries about affirming assumptions that they do not belong or merit assistance compound psychological burdens. The added weight of symbolic racial representation makes navigating elite institutions designed without minority experiences in mind exponentially more taxing.

The experiences shared by Zola and Mubu illuminate the complex psychological landscape navigated by African American male students in predominantly White academic settings. Their accounts reveal a common thread of constant self-awareness and pressure to perform for themselves and as representatives of their entire race. This burden manifests in various ways, from Zola's articulation of the fear of confirming negative stereotypes to Mubu's

observation of the uneven distribution of support among Black students. Together, these experiences paint a picture of an educational environment where African American students must constantly negotiate their identity, academic performance, and the weight of racial representation. This ongoing negotiation adds an extra layer of stress to the already challenging pursuit of higher education, potentially impacting these students' academic performance, mental health, and overall college experience.

### **Impacts of Imposter Syndrome**

Imposter syndrome itself emerged as another predominant theme for participants across career stages. Malik and Ryan described a phenomenon where high achievers irrationally doubt their abilities and right to be present despite outward evidence indicating that they are successful. Transition periods in which these students enter new and unfamiliar settings can often trigger such fraudulent feelings despite years of having built expertise and confidence.

Potential ripple effects on academic progress and outcomes seem myriad. Some students overcompensate by obsessively overpreparing to mask perceived inadequacies. Others downplay their competence or withdraw from participating. In severe scenarios, imposter syndrome entirely derails students from academic paths once fraudulent fears paralyze them. But even subtle disengagement cumulatively disrupts learning.

### **Institutional Barriers**

Though clearly not the sole culprit, institutional barriers and systemic oppression surfaced frequently as factors disproportionately jeopardizing black male students' college achievement. Mubu noted that technological access gaps prevent less affluent students from completing digital assignments. Ryan called out punitive disciplinary policies, like zero

tolerance, that fuel the school-to-prison pipeline currently decimating many underprivileged communities.

However, overwhelmingly, participants cited standardized testing metrics, like the SAT and GRE, that they claim often erect insurmountable obstacles to higher education access and advancement for students who lack the means to access expensive exam prep programs. Even Zola, who self-identified as a strong tester able to leverage his SAT scores thanks to a fortunate connection, argued ardently against these arbitrary indicators of merit that structurally exclude those from non-mainstream backgrounds. Later in his career, Ryan expressed enormous relief when he was accepted into a graduate program that had waived standardized test requirements, which he had dreaded retaking because he was years out of practice.

These accounts suggest that despite expanding minority representation, America's education system broadly remains highly inequitable (Turestky et al., 2021). Dismantling oppressive structures and questioning fundamental assumptions must remain priorities if we are to center marginalized voices and insights. The resilience demonstrated by those still managing to excel in unjust regimes provides hope for ultimately building a new paradigm shaped by those it failed for so long.

In conclusion, these five salient themes outline hurdles undermining Black male student success in higher education, from kindergarten through doctoral programs. They also reveal buffers enabling some to triumph against stacked odds and frameworks for reform rooted in lived experience rather than privileged ignorance of diversity. By grasping a complete picture of this landscape, including barriers and community cultural wealth available, we move closer to realistic solutions for supporting young African American men seeking to take their rightful place as tomorrow's leaders in shaping a just society.

Participants' accounts of standardized testing barriers, funding shortfalls, and punitive policies align with scholarship demonstrating persistent systemic inequities that undermine Black male higher education access and attainment (Harper, 2009; Strayhorn, 2017; Wood & Palmer, 2014). Quantitative analyses reinforce qualitative reports of high-stakes exam metrics that structure racial disparities in college admissions without evidence of predictive validity. Financial hardships and lack of support resources likewise disproportionately affect male African American retention and completion rates even at elite institutions (Strayhorn, 2008; Wood, 2013). Such findings underscore the need for measured evaluations and funding reforms to dismantle oppressive systems and center minoritized experiences to transform academic trajectories.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter reported on findings from a qualitative study investigating the interplay between academic preparedness, imposter syndrome, and resilience shaping male African American student outcomes across the educational pipeline. The research questions were used to explore causes of unreadiness, impacts of self-doubt, the role of grit, and interventions that effectively support this demographic.

The cases revealed a web of systemic disadvantages conspiring to undermine college preparation in lower-resourced schools. Culturally biased curriculums and assessments, lack of representation, and minimal vision-casting for advanced careers also contributed to disconnectedness from education. However, nurturing communities that transmit aspirational messages and tactical support can foster perseverance to counterbalance deficits.

In sum, cultural familiarity supplied by identity-affirming spaces builds enough social capital for marginalized students to persist through alienating circumstances and institutions.

Despite insecurities aggravated by pervasive stereotype threats and imposter syndrome, communal resilience manifesting as self-belief powered by shared struggles enables students to achieve against the odds. Holistic enrichment pipelines, diversified faculty, cooperative frameworks, and sustained advising relationships further bolster readiness. Superficial initiatives that merely give the appearance of being substantial yet fail to catalyze true systemic change or achieve meaningful goals are inadequate. Enacting lasting progress necessitates fostering a school culture that seamlessly weaves together the continuity of students' identities and inclusive practices rather than relying on isolated, peripheral efforts. Chapter 5 concludes this study by offering implications and recommendations centered on environmental identity safety for empowering marginalized students systemwide.



## **Chapter 5: Conclusions**

### **Introduction**

If Clance and Lawry (2024) were correct in their assumption that about 70% of the population experienced some form of imposterism at some point in their lives, it is reasonable to assume that these feelings might have been exacerbated for male African American students as they attempted to overcome racial hurdles, along with others, in a demanding and isolating environment. This study explored the intricate interplay of academic preparedness, imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978), and resilience in shaping the educational experiences and outcomes of male African American students. The purpose of this study was to explore and chronicle a complex web of systemic, psychological, and social factors that converged to influence these students' academic trajectories through in-depth interviews with five participants.

The study employed a qualitative approach to identify common themes, discover turning points, examine patterns, and chronicle subjective experiences and reflections based on advocacy from previous researchers (Barabasch, 2018; Foote, 2015; King & Gillard, 2019; Mobley et al., 2019). The findings revealed a widespread lack of college readiness rooted in under resourced K–12 schools. Additionally, the study uncovered the crucial role of community support in fostering belonging and persistence, the detrimental impacts of stereotype threat and imposter syndrome on self-efficacy, and the compounding effects of institutional barriers. The results of this study provide a window into African American male graduates' thought processes, thereby offering an opportunity to assess the potential for social change.

The study's results present a nuanced picture of the challenges male African American students faced in higher education. These challenges highlight the urgent need for comprehensive reforms and targeted interventions to support their success. Participants'

narratives illuminated the far-reaching consequences of educational inequities. Among the most common inequities highlighted by the participants were inadequate academic preparation and psychological and social hurdles that undermined achievement, consistent with findings from several researchers (Jones et al., 2023; Voss et al., 2024). At the same time, their stories of resilience and triumph underscored the transformative power of culturally responsive support systems and institutional commitments to equity, as posited by Cooper et al. (2020).

### **Research Purpose, Questions, and Answers**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the impact of academic preparedness, imposter syndrome, and resilience on the college success of male African American students. The research aimed to expound the complex factors shaping these students' educational experiences and outcomes. Ultimately, the chapter sought to inform policies and practices to support their achievement. To this end, the study posed four central research questions:

1. What are the main causes of academic unpreparedness among male African American college students?
2. In what ways does imposter syndrome affect the academic readiness and subsequent college achievement of male African American students?
3. How does resilience assist male African American students in surmounting the obstacles encountered in higher education?
4. Which support initiatives and interventions effectively fostered academic readiness among male African American students, and how can they be duplicated across the country?

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The study's findings, derived from rich, in-depth interviews with five participants, provide nuanced answers to each of these questions.

#### **Research Question #1: Causes of Academic Unpreparedness**

Participants highlighted a confluence of disadvantages that hindered male African American students' college readiness (RQ1). They pointed to underfunded K–12 schools that lacked the resources and rigorous curricula necessary to prepare students for higher education in a way that supported a wealth of research outlining the same challenge (Dohrmann et al., 2022; Lucas, 2023). Participants also noted the impact of home environments where financial struggles and limited parental education created barriers to academic focus and achievement. Moreover, they emphasized the scarcity of relatable role models in their communities and schools, making it difficult for students to envision academic success and cultivate aspirations for college.

#### **Research Question #2: Impacts of Imposter Syndrome**

The study's results illuminate the insidious ways in which imposter syndrome undermines male African American students' academic readiness and achievement (RQ2). Participants described a cyclical pattern in which feelings of self-doubt and fraudulence led to diminished motivation and engagement, resulting in lower performance that further reinforced the sense of being an imposter. They highlighted how the constant fear of confirming negative stereotypes about African American males' intellectual abilities could paralyze students, deterring them from seeking help, asserting their needs, or taking academic risks. Researchers asserted that this self-perpetuating cycle of imposter syndrome and underachievement could derail students' college aspirations and persistence (Holden et al., 2021; Pákozdy et al., 2024).

**Research Question #3: Resilience – Surmounting Obstacles**

However, the study's findings also reveal the powerful role of resilience in enabling male African American students to overcome the obstacles they face in higher education (RQ3). Participants consistently emphasized the importance of communal cultural connectivity in fostering the resilience needed to persevere through challenging and often isolating college environments (Helling & Chandler, 2021). They described how being part of identity-affirming groups, such as Black student organizations (e.g., the Black Students Association) or mentoring programs (e.g., GEAR UP, My Brother's Keeper), provided a vital sense of belonging, purpose, and collective strength (Yusuf, 2020). Participants noted that navigating adversity alongside peers who shared their struggles and triumphs created an amplifying effect that fueled their self-belief and determination to succeed against the odds.

**Research Question #4: Effective Support Initiatives**

Finally, the study identified a range of support initiatives and interventions that had proven effective in promoting academic readiness and success among male African American students (RQ4). Participants highlighted the transformative potential of comprehensive, sustained efforts that addressed both systemic inequities and individual needs. They pointed to the value of summer bridge programs that provided early exposure to college-level coursework, campus resources, and peer networks (Rawal et al., 2022). Participants also emphasized the importance of holistic admissions policies that looked beyond standardized test scores to recognize diverse forms of merit and potential (Logan, 2021). They called for the expansion of culturally responsive mentoring initiatives (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2020), identity-based student organizations, and mental health services attuned to the unique pressures faced by male African American students, as also proposed by research conducted by Botchway-Commeey et al. (2024).

Moreover, participants stressed the need for institutional commitments to faculty diversity; culturally inclusive curricula; and the creation of safe, affirming spaces on campus (Sandhu et al., 2022). They argued that fostering environmental identity safety and cultural continuity throughout the college experience was essential for male African American students' sense of belonging, engagement, and success.

### **Answers to the Study's Research Questions**

#### **Research Question #1: Causes of Academic Unpreparedness**

The first question asked: What are the main causes of academic unpreparedness among male African American college students?

#### ***Synthesis of Common Themes***

The cases highlighted a constellation of disadvantages compounding to undermine academic readiness among Black male collegians. Foremost, underfunded schools in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods were depicted as lacking resources to prepare students adequately. Mubu explained, "You have the system of school and education, kind of not having, you know, the ability or not giving the resources to the students who need them in order for them to be successful."

Relatedly, home environments where families wrestled with financial pressures created barriers to performance as education became less of a priority. As Lamont noted,

If you tend to be in a lower socioeconomic area . . . parents are working multiple jobs . . .

As a result, students have a direct impact . . . [and the] foundations of education are not there.

Finally, low numbers of same-identity teacher role models and little exposure to careers requiring advanced education emerged as drivers of academic disconnect. Ultimately, a lack of tangible vision stifled ambition.

### **Research Question #2: Impacts of Imposter Syndrome**

The second question asked: In what ways does imposter syndrome affect the academic readiness and subsequent college achievement of male African American students?

#### *Synthesis of Common Themes*

A clear pattern across cases pointed to cyclical impacts in which imposter syndrome undercut academic readiness motivation, subsequently diminishing performance, which reinforced self-doubts in a downward spiral. Ryan explained this phenomenon, stating:

It goes hand in hand. Because you have folks that get to school and might be trying to prepare themselves for college, but then all of a sudden, it's like I'm failing . . . the stakes are so high that people feel like they cannot fail.

Zola illustrated how self-imposed stereotypes could become self-fulfilling prophecies that deterred students from pursuing their goals. As he explained: "There is this sense of comparing people and groups of people that I think is detrimental." This comparative mindset bred what is known as "stereotype threat"—"the fear of being the one" who confirms a negative stereotype about one's group. Zola elaborated on this insecurity, describing it as "the fear of being the one for your group of people . . . the fear of not meeting the standard or living into the stereotype in essence."

He suggested this apprehension of failure could be especially pernicious for Black men who might have been reluctant to discuss "this fear of failure outwardly." Zola postulated that this psychological threat of reinforcing stereotypes through underperformance could cause

individuals to “not take the necessary steps” toward achievement, thereby ensnaring them in a self-perpetuating cycle of underachievement.

In other words, perceived hostile environments aggravate insecurities about bringing shame or affirming stereotypes regarding intellectual inferiority. Participants explained that this pressure short-circuited their willingness to seek assistance and assert their needs.

### **Research Question #3: Resilience – Surmounting Obstacles**

The third question asked: How does resilience assist male African American students in surmounting the obstacles encountered in higher education?

#### ***Synthesis of Common Themes***

In examining demonstrated resilience, the central theme involved communal cultural connectivity, which provided vital impetus and support for persevering through unfamiliar, noninclusive institutions. Mubu explained that his graduate school community kept him going when he lacked the necessary resources. Similarly, Ryan characterized resilience as the faith and self-belief powered by sharing struggles, noting: “I would say that resilience is the faith made manifest and that you will achieve whatever it is that you are trying to achieve even if things are not really all that sweet. Right? Now, right?”

Zola also described overcoming imposter syndrome to pass his competency exams only after classmates reminded him of previous successes and connected his current work to a cultural lineage legacy. Hence, cultural wealth transmitted by communities of identity continuity seemingly fostered resilience by offering psychological strength, providing tactical assistance, and reducing isolation in hardship. Building enough social capital and cultural familiarity could counterbalance deficits from other sociostructural disadvantages.

**Research Question #4: Effective Support Initiatives**

The final question asked: Which support initiatives and interventions effectively foster academic readiness among male African American students, and how can they be duplicated across the country?

***Synthesis of Common Themes***

Myriad small and systemic initiatives held promise for advancing Black male scholastic success, as evidenced by the participants' experiences and endorsements. Examples of those initiatives were summer enrichment pipelines, holistic admissions, early acclimation programming, career exposure interventions, faculty diversifying efforts, cultural asset-framing, communal spaces, and sustained multifaceted advising relationships. However, investments needed to move beyond Band-Aid solutions manifesting largely as optics that lacked actual structural change. Lasting progress requires cultural continuity and the injection of identity inclusiveness, rather than siloed peripheral offerings, into the fabric of institutions. As Zola put it: "Our people are not dumb; they know when you are doing something just for show . . . The way in which they support students, challenge the status quo . . . that's how they contribute to change." Thus, duplicating initiatives necessitated centering environmental identity safety (via representation, validation, and cooperation) rather than solely promoting individual skillsets.

These accounts suggested various systemic conditions that, combined, undermine male African Americans' college readiness. Teacher biases, info-deficient standardized curriculums, scaled-back arts/enrichments, lack of mentor figures, inadequately staffed support services, and an absence of advanced college preparatory courses in lower-income district schools were all implicit factors. Ryan said high schools simply push students through without ensuring they



gained the necessary skills. The consequence is that many Black male students struggle mightily as they adjusted to college academics.

The themes arising from the interviews aligned with recent research on systemic barriers that undermine college preparation for male African American high school students. Studies had found that lower-resourced schools serving predominantly Black communities often lack funding for advanced courses, college counselors, and other supports that facilitate the transition to higher education (Knight-Diop, 2010; Nasir et al., 2020). Teacher biases and culturally biased testing have also been shown to negatively impact academic self-concept, engagement, and performance among Black male adolescents (Wood & Harris., 2016). Additionally, several studies echo participants' accounts of inadequate academic foundations, reporting that many male African American students graduated from high school underprepared in critical reading, writing, math, and study skills needed for college success, meaning they needed remedial coursework (Harper, 2015). These multifaceted systemic disadvantages accumulate over time, feeding the gap in college readiness. The research underscores the need for policy reforms that address resource inequities and cultural biases that undermine Black male students' education.

The critical role of supportive cultural communities suggested by the participants in this study aligned with a growing body of research on fostering college achievement among Black male students through communal cultural wealth and social capital models that validated their identities and experiences (Brooms, 2018; Brooms & Davis, 2017). Two studies found that campus groups, peer networks, mentors, faculty allies, and identity-conscious programs provide academic, psychological, and social buffers against systemic disadvantages for African American students by cultivating feelings of belonging, agency, and possibility otherwise lacking at predominantly White institutions (Farmer & Hope, 2015; Negga et al., 2007). This

communal scaffolding has been shown to improve retention, engagement, degree completion, and aspirations to pursue graduate studies (Burt et al., 2019). Such findings suggest that supportive communities can activate individual and collective empowerment to transform educational trajectories for marginalized groups.

The immense pressure participants described to represent their race aligned with the concept of stereotype threat, which has been studied frequently in the context of African American academic performance. Research shows that Black male collegians who confront negative assumptions about their intellect regularly have intrusive thoughts about confirming stereotypes, which undermines their confidence and engagement (Owens & Massey, 2011). Research also suggests that faculty and peers placing high expectations on a small number of Black students to represent all of the diversity within an institution can create a burden of symbolic representation. This burden can lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and imposter syndrome (Yosso et al., 2009). These representational stresses compound general minority status strains at predominantly White institutions not designed for marginalized groups (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Such psychological impacts helped to explain disproportionate Black male attrition rates in higher education.

The imposter feelings described echo a growing body of scholarship on racial minority students and the imposter phenomenon in college achievement contexts (Bernard et al., 2020; Lige et al., 2017; Peteet et al., 2015). Studies found that high-achieving Black men are especially susceptible to irrational doubts about deserving earned success when they are tokenized in elite, historically White environments (Morales, 2014; Sims, 2017). Fears of confirming negative stereotypes exacerbate these fraudulent self-perceptions, undermining confidence, engagement, and persistence (Cokley et al., 2013). Such imposter insecurities disproportionately impact

African American men, despite their demonstrable credentials, in a way that is fueled partly by internalized biases and stereotype threats embedded in academic systems (Petee et al., 2015). Research recommends incorporating identity-conscious mentoring, counseling, and community-building interventions to help marginalized collegians reframe doubts, recognize external barriers, and dispel mistaken self-misperceptions to unlock their potential (Culver et al., 2021).

### **Implications for Practice**

The study's findings hold significant implications for educational policy and practice at both the K–12 and higher education levels. They underscore the urgent need for comprehensive reforms and targeted interventions to support male African American students' college readiness and success.

At the K–12 level, the results highlight the critical importance of equitable funding and resource allocation to ensure that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background or school district, have access to high-quality education. Research consistently underscores the critical role of equitable funding and resource allocation in K–12 education (Knight, 2019; Baker, 2019; Thompson & Thompson, 2018; Sciarra, 2015). Despite efforts to equalize access to experienced educators, low-income and minority students still face disparities in teacher quality (Knight, 2019). Adequate and fair state school finance systems are crucial for high-quality education (Baker, 2019), and the provision of sufficient and equitable resources is essential for student success (Sciarra, 2015). To address these issues, policymakers and school administrators need to prioritize the equitable distribution of experienced teachers, rigorous curricula, advanced coursework, and college counseling services (Knight, 2019). Partnerships between K–12 schools and higher education institutions could expose students to college-level expectations and opportunities early on, helping to bridge the readiness gap (Thompson & Thompson, 2018).

Moreover, K–12 schools must work to diversify their faculty and staff, ensuring that male African American students have access to relatable role models who can inspire their academic aspirations. Jetter and Melendez (2022) emphasized the need for more Black male educators to serve as role models and mentors to address the lack of opportunities and representation for Black students. Professional development for educators should emphasize culturally responsive pedagogies, implicit bias training, and strategies for creating inclusive classroom environments. Schools also need to provide robust mental health services and support systems to address the unique challenges faced by male African American students, such as stereotype threat and imposter syndrome.

At the higher education level, the study's findings underscore the critical role of institutional commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in fostering male African American students' success. Adoui (2023) and Ransom (2018) both emphasized the importance of equitable access and success in higher education, with Adoui specifically highlighting the need to address cultural and societal attitudes. Colleges and universities need to move beyond superficial gestures to enact substantive reforms that dismantle systemic barriers and create truly inclusive campus cultures. They can do so by implementing holistic admissions policies that consider a wide range of factors beyond standardized test scores, such as personal background, leadership potential, and community engagement. Cargile and Woods (1988) and Kučera (2018) further underscored the challenges Black and Latino students face in accessing and succeeding in advanced coursework, with Kučera calling for a shift from technical fixes to a focus on addressing systemic racial barriers. These studies collectively highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to promoting equity in education that includes both K–12 and higher education levels. Proctor (2022) emphasized the importance of school psychology graduate

programs' recruiting students who are open to engaging with racial issues, fostering culturally responsive mentoring by faculty, and ensuring that school psychologists of color are represented as professors and supervisors in PK–12 schools.

Higher education institutions also need to invest in comprehensive support services and programs specifically designed to meet the needs of male African American students. Research consistently emphasizes the need for higher education institutions to invest in comprehensive support services and programs specifically designed for male African American students. Saunderson (2019) and Harmon (2013) both highlighted the importance of these initiatives in easing the transition to college and improving graduation rates. Such initiatives include summer bridge programs that ease the transition to college, culturally responsive mentoring initiatives that provide guidance and role modeling, and identity-based student organizations that offer a sense of community and belonging. Culturally responsive mentoring programs are particularly effective, as they provide guidance and role modeling while addressing the unique needs of these students (Queener & Ford, 2019). Mental health services need to be easily accessible and staffed by culturally competent professionals who understand the unique pressures faced by male African American students. These programs also include identity-based student organizations and easily accessible mental health services staffed by culturally competent professionals.

Moreover, colleges and universities must prioritize the recruitment, retention, and advancement of diverse faculty and staff, which is crucial for creating an inclusive environment and preparing students for a diverse workforce (Rhodes & Lees, 2017). This approach includes recruiting and retaining faculty that reflect the student body and the community, particularly African American males who can serve as powerful role models and mentors for students. However, this strategy requires a significant commitment of resources and a focus on the

academic dimension of diversity (Romero, 2017). Institutions should also integrate culturally inclusive curricula across disciplines, ensuring that all students see themselves reflected in the knowledge and perspectives valued in the classroom.

Creating safe, affirming spaces on campus where male African American students can connect, explore their identities, and engage in leadership opportunities is crucial (Egan, 2019). Doing so means investing in cultural centers, affinity groups, and programs that celebrate African American heritage and foster a sense of pride and empowerment. Saunderson (2019) further explored the narratives of educational and psychosocial support among Black African male students at historically White universities, underscoring the need for such support. Saunderson's findings call for a paradigm shift in how educational institutions approach diversity, equity, and inclusion. Rather than viewing male African American students through a deficit lens, educators and administrators need to recognize and nurture the strengths, resilience, and cultural wealth these students bring to their academic journeys (Briggs et al., 2020). By embracing an asset-based framework and implementing holistic, culturally responsive supports, institutions can create environments in which male African American students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally (Briggs et al., 2020).

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Although this study offers valuable insights into the experiences of male African American students in higher education, exploring numerous avenues for future research could further deepen our understanding and inform practice. Many researchers have explored the experiences of male African American students in higher education and identified key factors that contribute to their academic success. Muhammad et al. (2019) and Irvine (2019) both highlighted the importance of resilience, and of social support—particularly from family,

teachers, mentors, and peers. Thomas (2010) further emphasized the role of internal and external factors in motivating academic success, with a focus on the lived experiences of resilient individuals. Rosser-Mims et al. (2011) extended this discussion to the unique challenges faced by adult re-entry Black male students and called for further research to understand their experiences and develop effective support strategies. These studies collectively underscore the need for longitudinal research to track the academic trajectories and long-term outcomes of male African American students, with a focus on the factors that contribute to their sustained success. Such research could follow male African American students from high school through college and beyond to provide a more comprehensive picture of their academic trajectories and the long-term impacts of academic preparedness, imposter syndrome, and resilience on their personal and professional outcomes. This research could illuminate the factors that contribute to sustained success and identify critical intervention points for support.

Comparative studies that examine the experiences of male African American students across diverse types of institutions, such as predominantly White institutions (PWIs), historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and community colleges, could shed light on the unique challenges and opportunities present in each context. This research could inform tailored strategies for supporting students' success in different institutional environments.

Investigating the intersectional influences of socioeconomic status, first-generation status, sexual orientation, and other identity dimensions on male African American students' college experiences is another key area for future research. Understanding how these factors intersect, and shape students' academic journeys could help educators develop more nuanced and responsive support systems.

The role of spirituality and faith communities in fostering resilience among male African American students is also a promising avenue for future research. Many participants in this study alluded to the importance of their spiritual beliefs and religious communities in providing strength, guidance, and purpose. Further research could examine how these factors contribute to students' ability to overcome obstacles and persist in their academic pursuits.

Participatory action research that empowers male African American students as co-researchers could yield valuable insights and solutions grounded in these students' lived experiences. By actively involving students in the research process, scholars could ensure that their findings are relevant, accurate, and actionable. This approach could also help to build students' research skills, leadership capacities, and sense of agency in shaping their educational environments.

Evaluating the effectiveness of specific interventions and programs designed to support male African American students' success is another critical area for future research. This exploration could include studies that assess the impact of mentoring initiatives, identity-based student organizations, culturally responsive mental health services, and summer bridge programs on students' academic outcomes, social integration, and psychological well-being. Such research could inform the refinement and scaling of effective practices across institutions.

Examining the institutional change processes and barriers involved in implementing equity-focused reforms could also provide valuable insights for practice. Research that explores how colleges and universities navigate resistance, build coalitions, and sustain momentum for change could offer guidance for other institutions seeking to create more inclusive and supportive environments for male African American students.



Finally, future researchers could benefit from integrating diverse methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks to gain a more comprehensive understanding of male African American students' experiences. Mixed-methods studies that combine qualitative and quantitative data could provide a fuller picture of the patterns and processes shaping students' outcomes. Incorporating physiological measures of stress and well-being alongside self-reported data could offer new insights into the embodied impacts of imposter syndrome and other psychosocial challenges. Engaging critical theoretical frameworks, such as critical race theory and culturally sustaining pedagogy, could help to center marginalized voices and perspectives in the research process (Morgan, 2018).

By pursuing these and other lines of inquiry, future research could continue to deepen our understanding of the complex factors shaping male African American students' college experiences and outcomes. Such scholarship is essential for informing policies, practices, and initiatives that effectively support these students' success and create more equitable and inclusive educational environments for all students.

### **Limitations**

Although this study offers valuable insights into the experiences of male African American students in higher education, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. These limitations provide opportunities for future research to build upon and extend the current findings.

One limitation of the study was its small, homogeneous sample of five participants. Although qualitative methodologies prioritize depth over breadth, the limited sample size might have constrained the generalizability of the findings to male African American students in other contexts. Future research could benefit from recruiting larger, more diverse samples of

participants from different regions, institution types, and backgrounds to capture a broader range of experiences and perspectives.

Another limitation was the study's reliance on self-reported retrospective data gathered through interviews. Though participants provided rich, detailed accounts of their college experiences, their recollections might have been subject to memory biases or influenced by subsequent events and reflections. Future studies could employ longitudinal designs that follow students in real-time to gather more immediate and ecologically valid data on their experiences as they unfold.

The researcher's positionality as an insider-outsider, sharing some aspects of participants' racial and gender identities while differing in others, could also be seen as a limitation. Despite efforts to bracket assumptions and engage in ongoing reflexivity, the researcher's own experiences and perspectives might have inadvertently shaped the data collection and analysis processes. Future research could benefit from more diverse research teams and the use of peer debriefing and member checking to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

The study's focus on participants who had completed their undergraduate degrees might have also limited its insights into the experiences of male African American students who did not persist to graduation. Although the findings offer valuable perspectives on the factors that contributed to participants' resilience and success, they might not fully capture the challenges and barriers that led some students to leave college prematurely. Future research could specifically target male African American students who withdrew from college to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that hinder persistence and completion.

Finally, the study's qualitative design and phenomenological approach, though yielding rich, contextual data on participants' lived experiences, did not allow for the establishment of

causal relationships or the testing of predictive models. The findings suggest potential linkages between academic preparedness, imposter syndrome, resilience, and college outcomes, but they could not definitively prove the directionality or magnitude of these relationships. Future research employing quantitative or mixed-methods designs could help to elucidate the complex interplay of these factors and their relative contributions to male African American students' success.

Despite these limitations, the study's in-depth, nuanced exploration of male African American students' college experiences offers valuable insights that could inform practice, policy, and future research. By centering the voices and perspectives of a historically marginalized group, the findings contribute to a growing body of scholarship aimed at understanding and dismantling the systemic barriers that perpetuate educational inequities (Smith, 2019). The study's limitations serve as invitations for further inquiry by highlighting the need for ongoing research that grapples with the complexity and diversity of male African American students' experiences in higher education.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter synthesized the study's key conclusions and highlighted the complex tapestry of factors shaping male African American students' college experiences and outcomes. The findings illuminate the critical importance of early academic preparation, identity-affirming support systems, resilience-building through communal connection, and institutional transformation for this population's success. The research underscores the urgent imperative for paradigm shifts from deficit-based to asset-based frameworks that recognize and nurture marginalized students' cultural wealth. Holistic, sustained interventions centered on

environmental identity safety and cultural continuity are vital for dismantling oppressive structures and actualizing equity.

The study's insights offer valuable guideposts for educational policy and practice and emphasize the need for systemic reforms and targeted support. Future research could build upon these foundations to further unpack the complex dynamics of identity, power, and resilience in academic contexts. By amplifying the voices and experiences of those historically silenced, this scholarship aimed to catalyze transformative change toward a more just, inclusive educational landscape where all students can thrive. Ultimately, the success of male African American students is not only a matter of individual achievement but also a reflection of society's commitment to dismantling structural barriers and creating equitable opportunities for all (Allen, 2019). As educators, researchers, policymakers, and community members, we bear a collective responsibility to harness the insights from this study and countless others to forge a brighter, more emancipatory future for generations to come.

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**Appendix A: Informed Consent Form****Informed Consent Document**

**Study Title:** The Road to Success: The Interplay of Academic Preparedness, Imposter Syndrome, and Resilience in African American Males

**Investigator:** Emmanuel Payano-Frias Contact: [lpayano1@umbc.edu](mailto:lpayano1@umbc.edu), 757-907-0001

**Study Purpose:** The objective of this research is to investigate the relationship between academic preparedness, imposter syndrome, and resilience in shaping the college experiences of African American males, aged 18 or older, who have earned an undergraduate degree. This investigation constitutes academic research.

**Procedure:** Participants will be invited to participate in a semistructured interview exploring experiences, observations, and perspectives pertaining to academic preparedness, imposter syndrome, and resilience. Participation in this study will begin upon receipt of this consent and end in November 2023. The estimated time commitment is approximately 60 minutes.

**Potential Risks:** No substantial risks or discomforts are anticipated. If you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, you can skip them or withdraw from the study.

**Potential Benefits:** While there are no direct benefits, your participation will contribute to our understanding of college preparedness and success among African American students. The findings may inform policies and practices aimed at improving educational outcomes for this group.

**Confidentiality:** Your responses will be kept strictly confidential and only used for this research study. Personal information will not be shared with third parties, and results will be reported in aggregate form without any personally identifiable information.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without penalty.

**Compensation:** Unfortunately, no compensation is available for participation in this study.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about this study, please contact Emmanuel Payano-Frias at 757-907-0001 or [lpayano1@umbc.edu](mailto:lpayano1@umbc.edu). You may contact the CUHSR Office at [CUHSR@fsmail.bradley.edu](mailto:CUHSR@fsmail.bradley.edu) with general questions about conducting research involving human subjects.

**Consent Statement:** By proceeding with the survey/interview, you acknowledge that you have read the information above, received answers to any questions you had, and consent to participate in the study. Please retain a copy of this document for your records.

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



## **Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

### **Demographic Information**

- 1. What is your age range?** (use 5-year increments)
- 2. What was your family income range when you graduated high school?**
- 3. What is your level of education?**
- 4. What was your religion when you graduated high school?** Is it the same now?
- 5. What was your family structure during your childhood?**

### **1. Introduction and Background**

- a. Could you please provide a brief overview of your educational background?
- b. How did your identity as an African American male influence your experience as a college student?
- c. Can you share any challenges or obstacles you faced in terms of academic preparedness when transitioning from high school to college?

### **2. Causes of Academic Unpreparedness**

- a. In your opinion, what factors or challenges contribute to a lack of academic preparedness among African American male college students?
- b. How do you perceive the role of socioeconomic factors in shaping academic preparedness within the African American community?
- c. How do you perceive the role of cultural influences in shaping academic preparedness within the African American community?
- d. How do you perceive the role of educational experiences in shaping academic preparedness within the African American community?

- e. Have you observed any specific institutional or systemic barriers that disproportionately affect African American males' academic readiness? If yes, could you elaborate on those?

### **3. Imposter Syndrome and Academic Readiness**

- a. Could you share your understanding of imposter syndrome?
- b. What do you think is its potential impact on academic preparedness among African American male college students?
- c. Have you personally experienced imposter syndrome?
  - i. If so, how has it influenced your academic performance and overall college experience?
- d. Have you witnessed the effects of imposter syndrome among your male African American peers?
  - i. If so, can you describe your observation and its effects?
- e. In your opinion, what strategies or support mechanisms can help African American males overcome imposter syndrome?
- f. In your opinion, what strategies or support mechanisms can help African American males enhance their academic readiness?

### **4. Resilience and Overcoming Obstacles**

- a. How would you define resilience?
- b. How do you perceive resilience in the context of African American male students navigating higher education?
- c. Can you recall a situation where you demonstrated resilience in the face of academic challenges?
  - i. What were the key factors that contributed to your resilience?

d. Can you recall a situation where you observed a male African American peer demonstrate resilience in the face of academic challenges?

i. What key factors do you think contributed to their resilience?

e. What resources, support networks, or campus initiatives do you believe can effectively foster resilience among African American male students and help them overcome academic obstacles?

### **5. Effective Support Initiatives and Recommendations**

a. Are you aware of any support initiatives or interventions that have successfully facilitated academic readiness among African American male students?

i. If so, could you describe them and their impact?

b. Based on your experiences and observations, what recommendations would you make to universities or educational institutions to better support the academic preparedness of African American male students?

i. How would you support your recommendations?

c. In your opinion, what strategies or practices can be adopted to replicate the success of effective support initiatives across different educational institutions and regions?

**Appendix C: Research Timeline****Research Timeline**

June 2023

- Finalize research design and instruments (e.g., survey, interview guide).

July 2023

- Submit research design and instruments to Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval.
- Start creating recruitment materials (e.g., email scripts, recruitment poster, student portal announcements).

**Participant Recruitment: (1, 1a)**

August 2023–September 2023

- Receive approval from IRB.
- Start participant recruitment through email, student portal announcements, and posters.

**Informed Consent Process: (2, 2a)**

September 2023

- Begin the process of obtaining informed consent from participants, clearly explaining the study's purpose, the participant's role, potential benefits, and risks.

**Data Collection: (3, 3a)**

October 2023–November 2023

- Begin data collection through surveys and interviews.

- Continue the data collection process, ensuring all data is stored securely and confidentially.

**Data Analysis: (4)**

December 2023–January 2024

- Begin initial data analysis, coding, and identifying themes.
- Complete data analysis interpreting findings.

**Writing up the Final Report: (5)**

February 2024–March 2024

- Start writing results (Chapter 4) and continue writing the discussion and implications (Chapter 5).
- Review and revise all chapters of the report.

November 2024

- Finish writing and revising the final report.
- Submit the completed Scholarly Research Project for publication via ERIC.
- Prepare for the presentation of the project in ENC 707.

**Appendix D: Recruitment Email Script**

**Subject:** Invitation to Participate in a Research Study on Academic Preparedness, Resilience, and Imposter Syndrome

Dear [Name],

My name is Emmanuel Payano-Frias, and I am conducting a research study at Bradley University aimed at examining the interplay of academic preparedness, the imposter syndrome, and resilience in African American male students.

If you identify as African American, are age 18 or older, have earned an undergraduate degree, and would like to share your experiences and insights, I would appreciate your participation. The study involves a confidential interview that should take no longer than an hour. Interviews may be hosted virtually through video call or held in-person at a mutually agreed upon location. Unfortunately, compensation cannot be offered at this time.

Please respond to this email if you are interested in participating or if you have any questions about the study. Thank you in advance for considering this opportunity.

Best,

Emmanuel Payano-Frias  
Student Private Investigator  
P.O. Box 2271  
Baltimore, Maryland 21203  
757-907-0001  
[lpayanol@umbc.edu](mailto:lpayanol@umbc.edu)