

Spirituality and Academic Success: Perceptions of African American Males in the Community College

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This article presents findings from a qualitative study of academic success factors affecting African American male students in the community college. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 African American male students at a Southwestern community college. Findings illustrated that spirituality was a positive factor affecting academic success for some participants. Students responses indicated several ways in which their academic success was supported: (1) spirituality served as a confidant, an entity with whom students could dialogue about issues; (2) spirituality served as inspiration for excellence, the pursuit of which was espoused as an important religious virtue; (3) spirituality provided life purpose, thereby reassuring students of their academic plans; (4) spirituality provided an ability to overcome barriers; and (5) spirituality reduced relational distractions, especially those not aligned with a Christian worldview. Recommendations for practice are discussed that address the need for institutional agents to affirm students' spiritual identities.

KEYWORDS *academic success, African American, community college, male, spirituality*

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Spirituality is a core element of African American¹ culture.² Every aspect of Black life is influenced and/or shaped by spirituality and religion.³ This is inclusive of Afrocultural beliefs, practices, traditions, art, mores, and folklore. This ubiquitous force affects how psychological, social, political, economic, and communal experiences are conceptualized, encountered, and reflected upon.⁴ This does not suggest a monolithic Black expression of spirituality, performance of Black religious participation, or belief in the teachings derived from the “Black church” and other religious institutions; however, it does suggest a shared and powerful cultural value system that influences the Black experience.

Because Black culture, and culture in general, is not static (being bound to the domiciles and communities of African Americans), it permeates every facet of society engaged by Blacks.⁵ Thus, African American spiritual beliefs and values impact their interactions in and perceptions of all societal sectors (e.g., healthcare, business, government, education). Therefore, an understanding of how spirituality affects the manner in which Blacks negotiate, view, and engage these institutions is needed. Enhanced understanding of the Black experience in these sectors can better inform institutional policies and practices; hence, this can serve to improve the status of African Americans within each respective sector. This notion, that enhanced understanding can lead to enhanced service, is the guiding motive of this article.

With this in mind, this article presents select findings from a larger qualitative study of African American male students in the community college. The focus of this study was to identify factors that affect academic success⁶ from students’ perspectives. Data collected from this study elicited several constructs (e.g., social, personal, institutional, academic, psychological) and associated factors relevant to academic success. Among the associated factors, spirituality emerged as an important concept. This article illustrates students’ perspectives, which indicates that spirituality has a positive relationship to their academic success.

Although the concept of African American spirituality has been investigated in the psychological⁷ and healthcare literature,⁸ the postsecondary research on this topic is near silent. This point has even greater salience for the extant literature on African American male students.⁹ This is particularly interesting given the historical importance of spirituality in the African American community. As a religious and cultural ethic, Black spirituality “has served as a personal and communal source of liberation, solace, hope, meaning, and forgiveness, particularly in relationship to social, political, and economic injustices.”¹⁰ Thus, as the few studies on this topic, this research sheds light on the often marginalized voices of Black males who (as regular recipients of injustice) viewed spirituality as an emancipatory force for academic empowerment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions of spirituality are numerous and sometimes inconsistent.¹¹ Conceptions of spirituality can range from factors related directly to organized religion to broader concepts such as meaning and purpose for life.¹² Thus, definitions vary from those being restrictive to specific groups of individuals to those which are holistic and inclusive of all individuals in society. Given this wide variance, it is important to provide clarity on how this concept was operationalized in this study.

Jagers and Mock define *spirituality* as “believing and behaving as if non-observable and nonmaterial life forces have governing powers in one’s everyday affairs . . . Although often expressed in God concepts, this ongoing spiritual sensitivity is not necessarily tied to formal church doctrine or participation.”¹³ This definition of spirituality, belief in a greater power (e.g., God, supernatural force, ordered universe), and action based upon that belief, guided this inquiry. This perception of spirituality has confluence with Page’s investigation of spirituality among Black males.¹⁴ Page examined the role between spirituality and coping mechanisms for young adult, urban, African American males in New Jersey. He found their conceptions of spirituality related to having faith in, practicing, and theological adherence to a religious belief system.¹⁵ This finding aligns with Jagers and Mock’s articulation of spirituality in that a belief or faith in something is manifested in one’s life.¹⁶

It should be noted that this definition varies from that of some scholars. For example, Astin uses a definition of spirituality designed to incorporate all individuals, regardless of their belief system (e.g., religious orientation, denominational orientation, belief in God or gods). He stated that spirituality entails several concepts related to our internal mental processes: (a) *human consciousness*—one’s subjective knowledge of internal awareness which is not directly visible or amenable to direct evaluation; (b) the *affective domain*—an individual’s experiential knowledge, value systems, emotional/social intelligence; (c) *reasoning and logic*—one’s rationalization of meta-physical issues; and (d) *unique tendencies*—an individual’s encounters with experiences which are difficult to describe, explain, or discuss such as unexplainable instinct and motivation as well as other numinous phenomenon.¹⁷ Though Astin’s definition recognizes that unexplained phenomena occur, it does not necessitate a personal investment, through belief and action, in forces or powers beyond one’s control.

In a similar vein as Astin, Rendón provided a definition of spirituality that is meant to be inclusive of all individuals.^{18,19} For her, spirituality is not isolated to a belief in the supernatural but is situated in cultural meaning and values. For instance, Rendón discussed spirituality in the context of teaching and learning in higher education. She contended that pedagogy is spiritual if it “honors our humanity, instills a sense of wonder, sacredness

and humility in our college classrooms, respects and embraces alternate cultural realities, and connects faculty and students in meaningful ways.”²⁰ Although this view of spirituality upholds the importance of cultural realities, like Astin’s definition, devotion to a greater power is not necessitated.

Spirituality is interrelated with 2 relevant concepts: religion and religiosity. *Religion* refers to a shared belief system typified by principles, customs, practices, and rites in adherence to God or multiple deities. In contrast, *religiosity* is the performance of these principles, customs, practices, and rites.²¹ Further, religiosity does not necessarily suggest, though it may, a belief in religion. As such, an individual may exude religiosity as part of a cultural practice without an actual belief in religion. With this in mind, spirituality and religiosity are differing concepts;²² although both suggest the enactment of belief systems, spirituality connotes an actual belief which may fall outside an organized religion.

As previously stated, spirituality and religion are important cultural factors in the lives of African Americans. Much of the value attributed to these concepts is fostered by the Black church. African American religious institutions have served as foundational sources of communal activities, resources, and ideology.²³ The Black church had its genesis during the era of slavery where cultural genocide eradicated previous religious systems. According to Calhoun-Brown, since that time, it has served as a safe haven for African Americans as a self-contained civil society.²⁴ Black churches serve many important societal needs for African Americans, such as providing (1) a center for communal events and social interaction; (2) a locale that develops community and political leadership; (3) a venue for local services and programs designed to uplift the community;²⁵ (4) a gathering place for building unity among African Americans; (5) a setting for encouragement, support, and resilience;²⁶ and (6) a setting for spiritual development and religious socialization.

The centrality of the Black church to the Black community may be one reason for the high levels of spirituality and religious involvement among African Americans. Several studies have found that African Americans have higher reported levels of spirituality and religious involvement (e.g., attendance at religious services, praying, reading scriptures) than do their White counterparts.²⁷ Similar to findings derived from examining levels of spirituality and religious involvement among African American and Whites in society, investigations of college students have also found variance between racial/ethnic groups. For example, Walker and Dixon administered a spirituality and religious participation questionnaire to Black and White college students.²⁸ Using correlation analyses, they found that African American students report higher levels of spirituality and religious participation than White students.

Arguably the most interesting finding from Walker and Dixon is that they found a positive correlation between spiritual beliefs, religious

participation, and overall spirituality and student grade point averages. Thus, students with high levels of academic achievement reported high levels on 3 measures of spirituality. Similar findings have been found in other studies of spirituality among African American college students. For example, Phillips found higher levels of adjustment to college among African Americans with higher levels of spirituality.²⁹ Phillips also found that higher levels of adjustment to college correlated with higher academic success among students. Taken together, these findings indicate a relationship between spirituality and academic success.

Research from Lee provides an important insight into the nature of this relationship.³⁰ Lee examined the first-year experience of African American students. She found that religion served as an internal mechanism to guide students' paths. This finding is in line with research from Rendón who found that spirituality impacts students of color by giving them an internal mechanism of strength.³¹ This mechanism of strength serves as a resilience factor for students of color, thereby enabling their success in college. Although the role of spirituality and academic success has yet to be examined among African American male students in the community college (the focus of this research), some groundwork has been laid on this topic among African American males in 4-year institutions (see below). This groundwork served as the conceptual framework for this study.

Conceptual Framework

In his article, "Expression of Spirituality among African American College Males," Herndon identified spirituality as a persistence factor among African-American male college students.³² Using interview data collected from a sample of 13 students attending a predominantly White rural institution, Herndon articulated 3 primary ways that students described spirituality as a support for persistence. First, he noted that spirituality served as a resilience factor. Herndon stated that religious activities (e.g., prayer, attending religious services, reading scripture) provided a method for coping with stress resulting from academic and social barriers.³³ Second, spirituality was identified as providing students with a "sense of purpose, direction, and focus in life."³⁴ In particular, students' development of a sense of purpose was connected to their academic paths and major selections, thus serving as a motivational factor for goal internalization. Third, religious institutions with which students' affiliated provided them with support to persist in college via personal encouragement.

Herndon's 3 expressions of spirituality (resilience factor, sense of purpose, religious institutional support) served as the conceptual lens for this study. His research is one of the few studies of the relationship between spirituality and school achievement in relationship to school the African American male post-secondary education experience. This article is the first extension

of his framework among Black males in the community college setting. As a conceptual guide, this study investigated the topic of spirituality as a factor in academic success by (1) looking for similarities by which students discussed the importance of spirituality; (2) interrogating the data collected for other possible expressions of spirituality that serve to benefit academic success;³⁵ and (3) seeking disconfirming evidence that suggested potential barriers for academic success posed by spirituality. It is important to note that Hernon's model is specific to student persistence, although this study focused on academic success, persistence frameworks are commonly employed as conceptual guides to examine other academic issues (e.g., academic success, student engagement, transfer).³⁶ The following section will explain the methodological design employed in this investigation.

METHODS

This study used qualitative methods to examine students' perceptions of factors related to academic success. Twenty-eight interviews were conducted with African American male students in a community college. A qualitative research approach was selected for this study because it allows for an equal and reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the participant.³⁷ This research approach honors the participants' voices and allows the researcher to approach the participants as providers of knowledge. Furthermore, as noted by Denzin and Lincoln, qualitative research allows predicted and unpredicted outcomes to emerge from a study.³⁸

Participants

Study participants were all self-identified African American males who were at least 18 years of age. Participants had to be currently enrolled as students at the community college research site or have attended (e.g., transferred, dropped-out) within the last 2 years.³⁹ The average age of participants was 24.5 years old and ranged from 18 to 58 years old. Students were representative of diverse majors (e.g., criminal justice, business, culinary arts, biological sciences, psychology) though business was the most common field of study, with 9 participants majoring in this area. Students had varied educational goals, including earning an associate's degree (5 participants); earning an associate's degree and transferring to a 4-year institution (9 participants); and transferring to a 4-year institution without earning an associate's degree (7 participants). Students most recent educational experiences included attendance at a high school (16 participants), another 2-year institution (e.g., community college, technical school) (8 participants), and 4-year universities (4 participants).

Research Site

Data used in this study was collected from Star Valley Community College (SVCC).⁴⁰ Located in the Southwestern United States, SVCC is among a number of institutions in a large community college district. The campus serves a diverse student body of approximately 13,000 students. Females account for a large percentage of the institution's student enrollment. As such, 59% of students at this institution are female, 35% are male, and 6% are undeclared. The racial-ethnic breakdown of student enrollment is as follows: African American (8%), Hispanic/Latino (32%), White (39%), Asian American (4%), Native American (1%), and Other (16%).

Given the large enrollment of Hispanic/Latino students attending this institution, SVCC is a federally recognized Minority Serving Institution. According to O'Brien & Zudak (1998), a Minority Serving Institution is an institution of higher education that "enroll[s] a high proportion of African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students."⁴¹ Although African Americans represent 8% of the institutional enrollment, Black males account for only 14% to 15% of this percentage. As a result, this campus has a minimal African American male population of 148 total students. Bearing this in mind, interviews conducted with the 28 participants represented 19 percent of the total Black male population at this institution.

Data Collection

Interviews with students lasted an hour in length and used a semi-structured interview approach. As noted by DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, semi-structured interviews are "generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee/s."⁴² Pre-planned probes were embedded into the interview protocol.⁴³ This type of probing consists of pre-determined follow-up questions used to delve further into a specific topic addressed in the interview protocol. Pre-planned probes are beneficial (as opposed to unplanned probes) as they allow for greater comparability of data collected among participants. This style of probing also reduces the influence of the researcher on the data collection process.⁴⁴ Interviews were audiorecorded and then transcribed verbatim.

In addition to interviews, data was collected via journaling, on-campus observations (over a 3-month period), and through unstructured concept maps. Unstructured concept mapping is a process whereby participants are given a concept and are asked to depict factors associated with this concept.⁴⁵ As a result, prior to each interview students were given a blank piece of paper and asked to depict, in any way they desired, factors they believed affected their academic success. Students provided varying forms of depictions, including poems, drawings, narratives, and lists. They were

encouraged to use this information to aid them in articulating their responses during their interview. In addition, the researcher collected concept maps at the end of each interview and used these maps as an additional source of data to guide the final analysis.

Three forms of non-probabilistic sampling were used in the recruitment of participants: First, *convenience sampling*, which is acquiring participants who can be easily identified and recruited for participation.⁴⁶ In general, participants attained through convenience sampling are within the researchers' social network. However, because participants in this study were not within this network, students were recruited through direct contact and lunchtime tabling.⁴⁷ Second, *snowball sampling*, which is a referral system where individuals who have already participated in a study refer other potential participants.⁴⁸ After approximately 10 interviews had been conducted, a number of students began approaching the researcher. These students noted that they had friends/acquaintances who had previously been interviewed and that they were also interested in participating in the project.⁴⁹ Third, *maximum variation sampling*, which is a sampling technique where the researcher purposefully includes a diverse cadre of participants.⁵⁰ This sampling technique surfaces important themes elicited across a diverse group of participants. With this in mind, interviews were conducted with a group of Black male students diverse in several areas including age, economic status, major, academic standing, and time status (full time, part time). The next section discusses how collected data was analyzed.

Data Analysis

This study analyzed data collected through an ideas grouping approach as described by Auerbach and Silverstein.⁵¹ In this analytic technique, the researcher identifies key statements or themes from interview transcripts that seem to be repeated throughout the data being analyzed. The researcher then creates a list of these themes and reads through the texts in search for passages related to each theme identified. These passages are then grouped together. This process is repeated continuously until passages from the entire list of themes are grouped together. This process may result in the expansion, reduction, and/or elimination of themes. From this process, themes relevant to academic success for African American males in this investigation were identified. In some instances, such as with the data described in this current study, if available data allowed for a deeper level of analysis then subthemes were analyzed. This is part of the data reduction and expansion process.

Several measures were implemented in order to enhance the validity of this study's findings, they included inter-coder reliability and member checks. *Inter-coder reliability* is a process whereby multiple researchers code transcripts in order to ensure a high degree of congruent coding. The process was undertaken by the researcher and 2 colleagues (2 advanced doctoral

students) on selected portions of transcripts. Member checking was also used in this study. Lincoln and Guba noted that *member checking* occurs when study participants are provided a platform to share input which can serve to correct, validate, and challenge study findings.⁵² In this case, the researcher performed a post-analysis focus group with study participants. During the focus group, students provided comments, clarification, and suggestions on themes presented by the research. This information was incorporated into subsequent versions of the study write-up.

Limitations

Like other research studies, this study is not without limitations. SVCC, as a whole, does not enroll a large number of African American males. Thus, the findings from this study are most applicable to the research site in which they were derived. As a result, findings cannot be generalized to other colleges; however, generalization was not the like other research studies, this study is not without limitations. SVCC, as a whole, does not enroll a large number of African American males. Thus, the findings from this study are most applicable to the research site in which they were derived. As a result, findings cannot be generalized to other colleges; however, generalization was not the focus of this study. This study sought to identify specificities rather than generalities regarding factors that affect African American male academic success at the research site. That being said, study findings may be transferrable as a potential theoretical framework to explore Black males at other community college sites.⁵³ Another potential limitation of this study is the researcher's race/ethnicity and gender. As an African American male, there are benefits and hurdles associated with the researcher examining students within the same racial/ethnic and gender group. The benefits may be that students were more open to sharing their experiences with the researcher and that he was able to fully understand some of their perceptions. However, this personal knowledge of experiences as a Black male may have negatively impacted the researcher's objectivity. This was the researcher's rationale for using both inter-coder reliability and member checking as validity measures.

FINDINGS

The role of spirituality as a factor related to academic success was discussed by 11 of the 28 students. Overwhelmingly, these participants discussed spirituality as a support mechanism for academic success. Certainly, 11 of 28 participants does not suggest an overwhelming association between spirituality and academic success; however, the depth of students comments on spirituality does provide insight on how spirituality may serve as an academic

success factor for some students. Two of the 11 students were Jehovah's Witnesses, 1 was a former Jehovah's Witness, and 9 were Protestants representative of various denominations (e.g., Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, non-denominational). Students responses indicated several interrelated ways in which their academic success was supported: (1) spirituality/God served as a confidant, an entity with whom students could dialogue about issues; (2) spirituality served as inspiration for excellence, the pursuit of which was espoused as an important religious virtue; (3) spirituality provided life purpose, thereby reassuring students of their academic plans; (4) spirituality provided an ability to overcome barriers; and (5) spirituality reduced relational distractions, especially those not aligned with a spiritual worldview.

Although most participants who discussed spirituality described it as a support for academic success, it should be noted that one student (Charles⁵⁴) discussed spirituality as both a hindrance and support.⁵⁵ When asked what affected his success in school, like many other study participants who touched upon this theme, Charles described being raised in a religious household. He also described the importance of spirituality, noting that God could forgive his sins when he made mistakes. When asked for clarification on how this related to academic success, Charles began describing faith as a hindrance, though he later returned to describing it as a support mechanism.

However, you know, it's—but the bad, the bad part is like, you get into issues like religion. You know what I'm saying, like I hear a lot of people debate about religion, like a lot of people talk about how God isn't real. You know, if He's real, then why does He do this and that? When I hear this, you know, it kind of, it kind of irks me a little bit because this is like, I have my belief, you have yours, you know what I'm saying? But don't question what I believe in, you know? And I've often told people that yeah, I believe in God, I believe that there is a God, I believe that He, He will come back one day. And it's not necessarily what the other, you know, the next person believes, they may believe something totally different. But that's what I believe in, just don't, just don't make fun of it, you know what I'm saying? Don't, don't question it. You have your belief, I have mine.

As Charles described, he felt that his religious beliefs were under attack at the institution. In describing these occurrences, he insinuated that others had degraded or made light of his beliefs. Charles stated that he has respect for individuals who do not believe in God or have other beliefs, but he felt that this respect was not reciprocated. Whereas colleges and universities can serve as a platform to discuss divergent opinions, ideas, and beliefs, Charles seemed to be describing the existence of what he perceived as a religiously alienating campus climate.

Charles's perception of the campus climate may be related to the disconnect some scholars see between Black home/community values and those of the college environment. Perrakis and Stevens, in their examinations of African American males in the community college, noted that a cultural disconnect can occur for Black male students when their identities are in conflict with the dominant culture of the institution.⁵⁶ They noted that these instances of cultural dissonance can result in higher levels of attrition. Given the centrality of spirituality to Black life and culture, it is plausible that this is what Charles is describing. Although the pervasiveness of this disconnect cannot be gleaned from Charles's response alone, it does appear that *some* students may experience a cultural-disconnect between their spirituality and the worldviews of, at least some, institutional affiliates.

Spirituality/God Served as a Confidant

Several students spoke about a personal relationship with God. This resulted in an emergent subtheme that addressed the role of spirituality/God in affecting their academic success by providing students with a confidant. As a confidant, students stated that God, or at least God's presence, was with them at all times. They described this relationship as an interaction, one in which they could both talk to and dialogue with God on challenges they faced and successes they celebrated. This sub-theme was best articulated by Andrew after being asked about defining moments in his life:

I think the third defining moment that I would mention, again, I had mentioned the church, I think that the church has always been important to me. Not that I have been a perfect person, and I don't think I ever will be a perfect person, but, I think it has always kept me centered ... Again, I don't think it has always kept me perfect, but, I think it always kept me centered. So my personal relationship with God has always been a continuous thing for me. I am not a pushy person, everything I talk to someone about does not always lead to religion or always lead to God. I have many interests, but, for me personally, I maintain that theme throughout my life. Knowing that God exists and can take issues, can talk to him about my successes, I just keep that continuous dialogue going.

As with the other students who discussed this sub-theme, Andrew noted that the ability to continually "dialogue" with God provided him with a sense of support, essentially reducing feelings of isolation. The literature on African American males in the community college is replete with references to feelings of alienation and isolation.⁵⁷ These feelings are seen as being directly related to Black male persistence and/or academic success in the community college. For some of this study's participants, spirituality/God served to alleviate this void and to fulfill their relational needs.

Spirituality Served as Inspiration for Excellence

Students discussed the role of God/religion/faith in supporting their academic success by serving as an inspiration for excellence. Students noted that they were raised to believe that the pursuit of excellence was an important Christian value. Students described this value as being applicable to every aspect of their lives (e.g., in the workplace, in relationships with friends), including excellence in school/college. They noted that this message came from family members, pastors, and their local church membership. Thus, these students discussed pursuing higher education and striving toward academic excellence as an expectation.

Calvin serves as a representative example of this sub-theme. When he was asked what affected his academic success, he responded “I would have to say Jesus.” When probed further, Calvin noted that prior to being a Christian he was selfish. To illustrate this point, he explained, “I was just living for myself.” When asked to provide an example of what “living for myself” meant, he responded:

Well, even though, I am living [for] myself, like you know, I was like well, I am going to become a lawyer, everything like that. But I had no drive towards getting, you know accomplishing what I wanted to do. It's like, I know I am intelligent, so I can just back off on that way [on schoolwork] without actually having to push myself or do anything. But you know, ever since I met Jesus, I realized that is not what you are supposed to do. You're supposed to push yourself, you know, for anything, strive towards it at all cost. So, it makes me see the vast potential that I have, instead of just limiting myself with oh, being one thing, or oh, you know, just leaning back on something. We're asked to push it further than what it is.

Evident within the quote is the relationship between a perceived Christian ethic of excellence and the psychological outcome of focus. A number of students echoed Calvin's sentiments in this regard. Thus, students who ascribed to this ethic believed that they must be more focused or concentrated on their academic pursuits. As such, the expectation of excellence served as a mechanism by which Calvin internalized his commitment to his goals.

Spirituality Provided Life Purpose

A sub-theme that has an indirect relationship with students' goal commitment is purpose. As described by the participants, spirituality served to make students' life purposes clear. Participants who discussed this sub-theme believed that God has a desired outcome for each person, and that this purpose, often equated with a career, is meant to serve, glorify, and benefit God. They noted that God allows students to encounter barriers and supports on

their path to this purpose as a method of preparing students for challenges they will encounter in the future. Wayne best articulated the intricacies of this concept. He was asked what he believed affected his academic success, he stated,

Ultimately, in each person's life, there is a purpose. You got to have a purpose to do something, and each goal that you achieve, or each barrier that you overcome, or each circumstance that comes up, happened for a reason. To see how tough you are and can you get through that, to ultimately get to your purpose and destination in life. So, that's why I believe everything happens for a reason because, it's preparing you for something later in life.

Wayne served as a good example of this concept. When interviewed, he noted that his goal was to become a pastor and a lawyer. In fact, Wayne had already identified a graduate-level dual degree program in divinity and law that would allow him to achieve a Masters of Divinity and Doctorate of Juris Prudence simultaneously. Wayne informed me that he wanted to achieve both degrees to provide him with the financial stability needed to support his family and avoid being a monetary burden to the church. In this regard, he stated,

So far, what I think his purpose is, obviously, I know it was for me to be successful, for me to be able to help out my family, I know pastors don't really make a lot of money, if, you know, it just depends on your church, the neighborhood, and everything like that. But pastors themselves don't really make a lot of money. So, I know that He [God] knows my interest was in law, before I gave my life to him, so he is using that, allowing me to get a law/pastor degree so, I know with using those two together, I will be able to be successful and be able to serve him at the same time. So, regardless, as long as I am serving him, I think that's his purpose for me now.

While this sub-theme can be associated with students' goal commitment, it also speaks to issues of major certainty. As noted by Mason, major certainty is an important element related to the persistence of African American males in urban community colleges.⁵⁸ As indicated by Wayne, his major had been selected for him, by God. Thus, Wayne did not experience the ambivalence that some students can encounter in selecting and committing to a major.

Spirituality Provided the Ability to Overcome Barriers

The largest sub-theme discussed by participants was the role of spirituality in empowering them to overcome barriers that they encountered. In general, students stated that when they encountered barriers, they prayed, believing

that God heard their prayers and helped them through whatever barriers they faced. For example, when asked what affects his success in school, Mark responded:

I think religious, me always just having faith on that anything I go through, that God will help me, help me get through it. Anything I ask for, He'll also help me, help me get it, I believe. I feel like everything happens for a reason.

In a similar fashion, Tyrone stated the following:

I was raised spiritually through God, my Father, my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Having faith that the work ethic, the sincere, that, the sincere process that I deliver every single day, that God will be by my side. He will uplift me during the hardest moments in my life, and I use faith within myself and faith within God as the foundation within life, and that was everyday in my education battles, everyday.

These statements by Mark and Tyrone illustrate that spirituality served as a resiliency mechanism for students. According to Ceja, *resilience* refers to students' ability to overcome obstacles and succeed when facing difficult circumstances.⁵⁹ With respect to Tyrone, external issues such as drug use and addiction, homelessness, and poverty impacted his academic achievement. However, he noted that his spirituality allowed him to overcome these barriers. This sub-theme, spirituality as an aid for overcoming barriers, was discussed by students in different ways. Most students did not address specific events that spirituality had helped them overcome. Rather, they focused on generalities. For example, Andrew viewed SVCC itself as a barrier to overcome as opposed to a specific person or entity within it. He stated,

So, my religion would tell me, um, there is going to be challenges in life, you are going to have to have faith. When you sign up for an institution, it's not guaranteed that you are going to get through that institution, but, when a person can grasp faith, a person, know that, hey, I haven't entered this program before, but, you know, I don't have no problems feeling that I am going to get through it and it's going to be okay. Yeah, so, my faith, my religion, definitely plays a role in me being successful in the classroom.

Although most students talked in generalities, some students were specific in how spirituality aided them in their academic success. These students noted that they prayed to God prior to taking tests, and that He allowed them to perform well. For example, Eric stated, "if I pray that day when I have a test or something, I ask God to help me pass a test, then it will maybe come true. And then I'll pass a test". Similarly, Terrence noted that he also prayed

before taking tests. He stated, “sometimes I pray that I pass my test or my class because you know, I’m a Christian. That’s what Christians do ‘cause they feel the Lord can get them out of a majority of the situations that they’re put in.” For both Eric and Terrence, test taking and coursework were viewed as barriers to success, barriers which their spirituality allowed them to overcome.

Spirituality Minimized Relational Distractions

Three students (James, Tyrone, and Tim) noted that spirituality reduced relational distractions. Two of these students were Jehovah’s witnesses, and 1 was a former Jehovah’s Witness. These students noted that their religious beliefs prevented them from interacting with other students who were engaged in partying, substance abuse, womanizing, and other actions that would be considered inappropriate for Jehovah’s Witnesses. These students felt that they were better able to focus on their studies because relational distractions with other students were either minimized or eliminated. For example, when asked what affects his academic success, James explained,

Just religious views, basically, like that’s a big part of my academic successes. You know, a good thing about being raised Jehovah’s Witness, I can say is that academically, it helped me a lot. Because it kept my mind, it kept me focused.

When asked whether he was referring to his tenure in high school or his current college experience, James responded that his religion had played an important role in both contexts. James stated that his mother began restricting his interactions at an early age, a practice that she continued, even into his college tenure. Thus, the majority of James’s time at home was spent studying. He explained that this discipline is a result of religious restrictions that stipulate that he “really can’t hang out with certain people, and do certain things.” This restriction of external peer influences was identified as a supportive mechanism for academic success by all these students.

DISCUSSION

As previously stated, Herndon’s examination of spirituality among African American male collegians served as the conceptual framework for this study. Findings from this current study illustrate some similarities with those found by Herndon. First, Herndon found that spirituality served as a resilience factor for students. In his study, prayer, attending religious services, and reading scriptures were the primary methods by which students were able to overcome academic and social barriers. This study also found that spirituality served as a mechanism for students to overcome barriers, a resilience factor.

Students in this investigation noted that this occurred through prayer and a belief in God's presence in their lives. Second, Herndon noted that spirituality supported students' academic success by providing them with purpose, direction, and focus. Thus, their selection of majors and pursuit of career goals were motivated by a sense of fulfilling their destiny. Likewise, this research also found that spirituality provided students with a purpose in life which contributed to major certainty and dedication to academic achievement. Third, Herndon stated that the religious institutions students attended provided them with personal encouragement to persist in college. In this study, students did not describe how members of religious institutions supported them. In fact, in light of this study's definition of spirituality, it seems like this benefit is not necessarily a factor associated with spirituality. Rather, it appears that this is a social benefit derived from participation in the Black church or other Black religious institutions.

This study found 2 factors related to the benefits of spirituality to academic success that were confluent with Herndon's findings. However, 3 factors not addressed in his findings were identified. In this research, students noted that spirituality/God served as a confidant, an entity with whom students' could dialogue about issues. As a result, students' feelings of isolation were reduced. Students believed that they were able to communicate with God in good and bad times. In essence, spirituality served as a form of capital, an item of value that allowed students to better navigate and negotiate their educational experiences. Participants also noted that spirituality served as an inspiration for excellence. They articulated excellence as a Christian ethic, noting that they were expected to perform at their highest personal level. Extant literature on Black males indicates the importance of having high expectations, both externally and internally, in order to succeed.⁶⁰ What makes this theme unique from previous studies is that high expectations originated from students' spirituality. Another finding that was not addressed by Herndon is that spirituality reduced relational distractions. As a result, students were socially isolated from peers who were viewed as negative influences. This social isolation provided space for students to focus on their academic pursuits. Two studies on Black males in the community college, Bush and Faison, found that peers and peer group dependence served as negative factors to academic success.⁶¹ However, not all scholars agree with this finding. Mason found peer relationships to be a positive support for students' academic success for African American males in the community college.⁶² As noted by Wood, peers can serve as positive and negative factors to academic success based upon the nature of their relationships.⁶³ When students receive academic support, encouragement, and information on campus services from peers, the relationships can serve to support academic success. In contrast, he found that relationships where exorbitant amounts of time were spent in non-school related activities (e.g., socializing, athletics) could lead to negative academic success. Clearly, this point is echoed in

students' responses on this theme; positive relationships should be fostered, negative relationships should be limited or discarded.

CONCLUSION

This study has added to the literature by explicating five interrelated ways in which spirituality serves to support the academic success of some students (having a confidant, being inspired, having a sense of life purpose, overcoming barriers, and eliminating relational distractions). These important benefits of spirituality illustrate the importance of affirming students spiritually. Further research should be conducted to determine whether findings from this study are transferrable as a theoretical frame for understanding Black male spirituality and academic success in other community college contexts. For example, the community in this study was a mid-sized, Minority Serving Institution, located in the Southwestern United States. Further studies should determine whether findings differ by institutional size, institutional type, and locale. Finally, researchers should investigate the potential relationship between higher levels of spirituality and religiosity and academic success. Although such studies have been conducted in other contexts among African Americans,⁶⁴ no study, to date, has examined this relationship among Black males in the community college context.

NOTES

1. The terms *African American* and *Black* will be used interchangeably.
2. J. S. Mattis, "Spirituality and Religion in African-American Life," in *Black Psychology* (4th ed.), ed. R. L. Jones (Hampton, VA: Cobb & Henry Publishers, 2004), 93–115.
3. J. S. Mattis, "African American Women's Definitions of Spirituality and Religiosity," *Journal of Black Psychology* 26, no. 1 (2000): 101–122.
4. A. Calhoun-Brown, "African American Churches and Political Mobilization: The Psychological Impact of Organizational Resources," *Journal of Politics* 58, no. 4. (1996): 935–953; M. E. Dantley, "African American Spirituality and Cornel West's Notions of prophetic Pragmatism: Restructuring Educational Leadership in American Urban Schools," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 41, no. 4. (2005): 651–674; K. Newlin, K. Knafl, and G. D. Melkus, "African American Spirituality: A Concept Analysis," *Advances in Nursing Science* 25, no. 2 (2002): 57–70; C. Townsend Gilkes, "The Roles of Church and Community Mothers: Ambivalent American Sexism or Fragmented African Familyhood?," in *African American Religion Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, ed. T. Fulop and A. Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997), 524–543.
5. C. F. Stewart, *Black Spirituality and Black Consciousness* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999).
6. *Academic success* refers to students' grade point averages and successful completion of classes toward their degree goals.
7. D. R. Brome, M. D. Owens, K. Allen, and T. Vevaina, "An examination of spirituality among African American women in recovery from substance abuse," *Journal of Black Psychology* 28, no. 4 (2000): 470–486; R. G. Potts, "Spirituality and the Experience of Cancer in an African-American Community: Implications for Psychosocial Oncology," *Journal of Psychosocial Oncology* 14, no. 1 (1996): 1–19.
8. W. Dessio, C. Wade, M. Chao, F. Kronenberg, L. E. Cushman, and D. Kalmuss, "Religion, spirituality, and healthcare choices of African-American women: Results of a national survey," *Ethnicity and Disease* 14, no. 2 (2004): 189–197.

9. M. K. Herndon, "Expressions of spirituality among African-American college males," *Journal of Men's Studies* 12, no. 1 (2003): 75–84.
10. Newlin et al., "African American Spirituality: A Concept Analysis," 58.
11. See J. S. Mattis, "African American Women's Definitions of Spirituality and Religiosity."
12. L. I. Rendón, *Reconceptualizing Success for Underserved Students in Higher Education* (Washington, DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative, 2006).
13. R. J. Jagers and L. O. Mock, "Culture and social outcomes among inner-city African American children: An Afrographic exploration," *Journal of Black Psychology* 19, no. 4 (1993): 391–405.
14. T. L. Page, "Spirituality and coping of the African American young adult male: A phenomenological study" (PhD dissertation, Capella University, 2008).
15. Though his meager sample size prevents generalizability of findings to represent the African American male experience, it does indicate the existence of conceptions of spirituality closely related to prevailing definitions of religiosity.
16. Jagers and Mock, "Culture and Social Outcomes."
17. A. W. Astin, "Why spirituality deserves a central place in liberal education," *Liberal Education* 90, no. 2 (2004): 34–41.
18. L. I. Rendón, "Realizing a transformed pedagogical dreamfield: Recasting agreements for teaching and learning," *Spirituality in Higher Education* 2, no. 1 (2005): 1–12.
19. L. I. Rendón, "Recasting agreements that govern teaching and learning: An intellectual and spiritual framework for transformation," *Religion & Education* 32, no. 1 (2005): 79–108.
20. L. I. Rendón, "Realizing a Transformed Pedagogical Dreamfield," 2.
21. J. S. Mattis and R. J. Jagers, "A Relational Framework for the Study of Religiosity and Spirituality in the Lives of African Americans," *Journal of Community Psychology* 29, no. 5 (2001): 519–539.
22. J. S. Mattis, "African American Women's Definitions of Spirituality and Religiosity."
23. W. L. Haight, "'Gathering the Spirit' at First Baptist Church: Spirituality as a protective factor in the lives of African American children," *Social Work* 43 (1998): 213–221.
24. A. Calhoun-Brown, "Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement," *Political Science and Politics* 32, no. 2 (2000): 168–174.
25. C. G. Ellison, "Religious Involvement and Self-Perception Among Black Americans," *Social Forces* 71, no. 4 (1993): 1027–1055.
26. R. J. Taylor, "Structural Determinants of Religious Participation Among Black Americans," *Review of Religious Research* 30 (1988): 114–125.
27. R. J. Jagers and P. Smith, "Further Examination of the Spirituality Scale," *Journal of Black Psychology* 22, no. 4 (1993): 391–405; R. J. Taylor, L. M. Chatters, R. Jayakody, and J. S. Levin, "Black and White Differences in Religious Participation: A Multisample Comparison," *Journal of Black Psychology* 25, no. 4 (1996): 403–410; R. J. Taylor, J. Mattis, and L. M. Chatters, "Subjective Religiosity Among African Americans: A Synthesis of Findings From Five National Samples," *Journal of Black Psychology* 25, no. 4 (1999): 524–543.
28. K. L. Walker and V. Dixon, "Spirituality and Academic Performance Among African American College Students," *Journal of Black Psychology* 28, no. 2 (2002): 107–121.
29. F. S. Phillips, "The Effects of Spirituality on the Adjustment to College of African American Students Who Attend a Predominantly White Institution" (PhD dissertation, Boston College, 2000).
30. W. Y. Lee, "Transforming the First-Year of Experience of African Americans," in *Transforming the First-Year Experience for Students of Color*, ed. L. I. Rendón, M. Garcia, and D. Person (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2004), 93–107.
31. L. I. Rendón, *Reconceptualizing Success for Underserved Students*.
32. M. K. Herndon, "Expressions of Spirituality Among African-American College Males."
33. Specific academic and social barriers faced by students for which spirituality served as a resilience factor were not described by Herndon.
34. *Ibid.*, 80.
35. The importance of this approach being the potential revision or expansion of Herndon's 3 expressions of spirituality.
36. For example, these three studies examined academic success guided by Tinto's (1975, 1993) retention/departure models. See P. Hampton, *Academic Success for African-American Male Community College Students* (PhD dissertation, University of Southern California, 2002); P. G. Jordan, *African American Male Students' Success in an Urban Community College: A Case Study* (PhD dissertation,

University of Pennsylvania, 2008); J. R. Mosby, *From Strain to Success: A Phenomenological Study of the Personal and Academic Pressures on African American male Community College Students* (PhD dissertation, University of San Diego, 2009).

37. I. Holloway, *Basic Concepts for Qualitative Research* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997).

38. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (ed.), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003).

39. Dual enrollment students who attended high school and community college simultaneously were excluded from this study.

40. This is a pseudonym.

41. E. M. O'Brien and C. Zudak, "Minority serving institutions: An overview," *New Directions for Higher Education* 102, 5.

42. B. Diccico-Bloom and B. F. Crabtree, "The qualitative research interview," *Medical Education* 40, no. 4 (2006): 314–321.

43. See M. E. Brenner, "Interviewing in educational research," in *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research*, eds. J. L. Green, G. Camilli, and P. B. Elmore (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum & Associates, 2006), 357–370.

44. B. Johnson and L. B. Christensen, *Educational research: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004).

45. A. Zanting, N. Verloop, and J. D. Vermunt, "Using interviews and concept maps to access mentor teachers' practical knowledge," *Higher Education* 46 (2003): 195–214.

46. L. R. Gay, *Educational Research: Competencies for Analysis and Application* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996).

47. Student activities assigned the researcher a table in the campus quad. This table served as a point of contact for participant recruitment.

48. C. Marshall and G. B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999).

49. It should be noted that participants were paid a small honorarium for their time.

50. S. B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

51. C. F. Auerbach and L. B. Silverstein, *An Introduction to Coding and Analysis: Qualitative Data* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

52. Y. S. Lincoln and E. G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1985).

53. See C. F. Auerbach and L. B. Silverstein, 2003.

54. Students' identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms.

55. This disconfirming evidence is presented first to illustrate that the Black male experience with spirituality is not universal.

56. A. I. Perrakis, "Factor promoting academic success among African American and White male community college students," *New Directions for Community Colleges* 142 (2008): 15–23; C. D. Stevens, *Skating the Zones: African-American Male Students at a Predominantly White Community College* (PhD dissertation, New York University, 2006).

57. T. D. Brown, *Keeping the Brother Focused: A Study of the Impact of Male Mentoring on the Community College Level* (PhD dissertation, Capella University, 2007); C. L. Goins, *Psychosocial and academic functioning of African-American college students: Social support, racial climate and racial identity* (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 1995); R. H. Ihekweba, *A comparative analysis of African American male and female students' perceptions of factors related to their persistence at a Texas community college* (PhD dissertation, University of Texas, 2001); P. G. Jordan, 2008; A. I. Perrakis, "Factor Promoting Academic Success Among African American and White male Community College Students."

58. H. P. Mason, *The Relationships of Academic, Background, and Environmental Variables in the Persistence of Adult African American Male Students in an Urban Community College* (PhD dissertation, Northern Illinois University, 1994); H. P. Mason, "A persistence model for African American male urban community college students," *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 22, no. 8 (1998): 751–760.

59. M. Ceja, "Chicana college aspirations and the role of parents: Developing educational resiliency," *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 3 (2004): 1–25.

60. Q. Allen, "Racial Microaggressions: The Schooling Experiences of Black Middle-Class Males in Arizona's Secondary Schools," *Journal of African American Males in Education* 1, no. 2 (2010): 125–143; F. D. Beachum, "Prefatory: Fearless Faith," *Journal of African American Males in Education* 1, no. 2 (2010): 63–72; J. E. Davis and W. J. Jordan, "The Effects of School Context, Structure, and

Experiences on African American Males in Middle and High School," *The Journal of Negro Education* 63, no. 4 (1994): 570–587; R. F. Ferguson, "Teachers' perceptions and expectations and the Black-White test score gap," *Urban Education* 38 (2003): 460–537; C. W. Lewis, B. R. Butler, F. A. Bonner, and M. Joubert, "African American Male Discipline Patterns and School District Responses Resulting Impact on Academic Achievement: Implications for Urban Educators and Policy Makers," *Journal of African American Males in Education* 1, no. 1 (2010): 7–25; P. A. Noguera, "The Trouble with Black Boys: The Role and Influence of Environmental and Cultural Factors on the Academic Performance of African American Males," *Urban Education* 38, no. 4 (2003): 431–459; R. Reynolds, "'They Think You're Lazy,' and other Messages Black Parents Send Their Black Sons: An Exploration of Critical Race Theory in the Examination of Educational Outcomes for Black Males," *Journal of African American Males in Education* 1, no. 2 (2010): 144–163.

61. E. C. Bush, *Dying on the Vine: A Look at African American Student Achievement in California Community Colleges* (PhD dissertation, The Claremont Graduate University, 2004); A. C. Faison, *The Effect of Autonomy and Locus-of-Control on the Academic Achievement of Black Male Community College Students* (PhD dissertation, City University of New York, 1993).

62. H. P. Mason, *The Relationships of Academic, Background, and Environmental Variables*; H. P. Mason, "A Persistence Model for African American Male Urban Community College Students."

63. J. L. Wood, *African American Males in the Community College: Towards a Model of Academic Success* (PhD dissertation, Arizona State University, 2010).

64. K. L. Walker and V. Dixon, "Spirituality and Academic Performance Among African American College Students."