An Exploratory Examination of Spirituality and Black Student Academic Success at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Sheika N. Square

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.uno.edu/td

Recommended Citation
An Exploratory Examination of Spirituality and Black Student Academic Success at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

by
Sheika Nicole Square

B.S. Louisiana State University, 2005
M.N.S. Louisiana State University, 2008

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership and Administration

May 2015
Dedication

To My Super Hero Niyko,

Thank you for being mommy’s pint sized motivation. Even when trials and tribulations would try to force me to believe that I was alone, you would remind me, unknowingly, that I was never alone. You have taught me how to embrace love, accept my place in society, and the power of goodbye. I am thankful for your youth in this process, and happy for the challenges we faced…

Before you I was the pieces that would one day shape me, with you I am what will one day make me!

Mommy Loves You!
Acknowledgements

I would like to start off by giving a special thanks to my friends and family who supported and encouraged me through this entire process. You all told me I could do it and reminded me of why I was built for this. I would also like to say thanks to every one of you that took the time to read the study and tell me it was good…

I would like to thank my advisor and my committee. Dr. Beabout you push and pull, but sometimes your pushes awaken the best of me. Dr. Bonis, Dr. Broadhurst, and Dr. Buddington, thank you for all of your time and effort…each of you offered something amazing to this process.

I would like to thank the person that inspired this study unknowingly and made it okay to be me…a person that stands up and speaks the truth.

Finally, I pay homage to the center of my own spirituality. Without this belief everything else would be irrelevant.
# Table of Contents

List of Figures............................................................................................................. vii

List of Tables................................................................................................................viii

Abstract........................................................................................................................ix

Chapter 1........................................................................................................................1

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

Statement of Problem................................................................................................. 1

Background Literature................................................................................................. 3

Purpose of Study.......................................................................................................... 15

Research Questions..................................................................................................... 15

Overview of Methodology............................................................................................ 15

Significance of Study................................................................................................... 16

Organization of the Study............................................................................................ 18

Chapter 2....................................................................................................................... 19

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review Introduction......................................... 19

Theoretical Framework................................................................................................. 19

Marxist Theory............................................................................................................. 19

Critical Theory.............................................................................................................. 20

Conflict Theory............................................................................................................ 21

Critical Race Theory.................................................................................................... 22

Summary of Theoretical Framework........................................................................... 27

Literature Review......................................................................................................... 28

Spirituality and Religion............................................................................................... 28

Historically Black Colleges and Universities............................................................... 35

Spirituality and Religion at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.................. 39
Summary ........................................................................................................................................... 42

Chapter 3 Methodology ......................................................................................................................... 44

Study Design ........................................................................................................................................ 46

Site Selection ....................................................................................................................................... 46

Getting Access ................................................................................................................................ 48

Participant Selection ............................................................................................................................. 48

Participant Consent .............................................................................................................................. 49

Data Collection .................................................................................................................................... 50

Data Analysis ....................................................................................................................................... 53

Verification Procedures ......................................................................................................................... 56

Ethical Considerations .......................................................................................................................... 57

Study Limitations ................................................................................................................................. 57

Researcher Identity ............................................................................................................................... 58

The Role of the Researcher in the Study ............................................................................................... 60

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................ 61

Chapter 4 Data Analysis and Results ...................................................................................................... 62

Introduction .......................................................................................................................................... 62

Participant Profiles ............................................................................................................................... 62

University D .......................................................................................................................................... 63

Louisiana Black College and University ............................................................................................... 64

Northern U ........................................................................................................................................... 65

Analysis by Emergent Theme ............................................................................................................... 67

Spirituality and Enduring Life’s Obstacles ............................................................................................. 68

Spirituality as an Influence on Personal Transformation ....................................................................... 75

Accomplishing Academic Momentum ................................................................................................. 78

Final Iteration ....................................................................................................................................... 83
Grounded Theory of Spirituality’s Influence on the Academic Success of Black College Students. 85

Summary. 87

Chapter 5 Discussion. 88

Why This Study Was Conducted. 88

Literature Integration. 89

Significance of the Findings. 94

Implications for Leadership and Policy. 94

Study Limitations. 96

Future Research. 97

Summary. 98

References. 99

Appendices. 110

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter. 110

Appendix B: Interview Guide/First Interview Questions. 111

Appendix C: Second Interview Questions. 113

Appendix D: Focus Group Questions. 114

Appendix E: Letter of Consent. 115

Appendix F: Background/Demographic Questionnaire. 116

Vita. 118
List of Figures

The Relationship between Different Forms of Capital.......................................................... 5
The Factors that Make Up Familial Capital........................................................................... 26
Spirituality as an Indirect Influence on the Academic Success of Black College Students........ 67
Spirituality as an Indirect Influence on the Academic Success of Black College Students........ 86
List of Tables

Demographic Table........................................................................................................................................... 49

Themes and Properties Representing the Themes.......................................................................................... 83
Abstract

Previous research has identified spirituality (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008) as an important component of academic success for Black college students. Other factors researched include first year/ freshmen experiences, mentorships, faculty–student engagement (Caboni and Adisu, 2004), rigorous high-school curriculums, and summer bridge programs (Palmer, Moore, Davis, Hilton, 2010). Much of the research on college student success provides a comparison between Blacks, Whites, Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans (Caboni and Adisu, 2004; Carey, 2005; Palmer, Moore, Davis, Hilton, 2010; Townsend, 2007). However, few studies deal with Black students solely, and the influence of spirituality on the academic success within that one population.

The lack of existing research on the relationship between spirituality and Black students’ college success, warrants a study that examines the possible ways in which spirituality might influence the academics of Black students (Hill, 2009). This grounded theory investigation examined the relationship between spirituality and the academic success among fifteen Black college students attending three Historically Black Colleges and Universities in Louisiana. Through depth interviews and analysis of resulting transcripts, it was found that spirituality plays a very important, yet indirect role in the academic successes of Black college students attending HBCUs. Three themes emerged: (1) Spirituality and Enduring Life’s Obstacles, (2) Spirituality as an Influence on Personal Transformation, and (3) the Academic Impact of Spirituality. This study helps to highlight a possible resolution to the post-secondary degree disparity seen between Blacks and Whites.

Louisiana, Critical Race Theory, Familial Capital
Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Spirituality and education both represent access to freedom for the Black community (Giles, 2010). Unlike the emancipation proclamation, spirituality as a symbol empowers Blacks to use a long held cultural strength to overcome social, economic, and educational disparities, (Bell, 1992; Yosso, 2005). Previous research has addressed the impact of spirituality (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008), as well as other factors such as first year/freshmen experiences, mentorships, faculty–student engagement (Caboni and Adisu, 2004), rigorous academics, and summer bridge programs (Palmer, Moore, Davis, Hilton, 2010) on academic success. Many of which (Caboni and Adisu, 2004; Carey, 2005; Palmer, Moore, Davis, Hilton, 2010; Townsend, 2007) provided a comparison between Blacks, Whites, Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans. However, few studies deal with Black students solely, and the influence of spirituality on academic success within that one population.

According to Walker and Dixon (2002), Weddle-West, Hagan, and Norwood (2013), & Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon (2008), the scope of research focusing on education, spirituality, and Black Americans is limited. The need for research exploring this gap in the literature is substantiated by the disparity surrounding Black-White degree attainment. A 2005 study showed that while 60 percent of the White college students that start at a four-year institution graduate within six years, only 40 percent of Black students who start at a four year college graduate within six years (Carey, 2005). A 2010-2012 survey of the population, done by the U.S. Census, showed similar statistics for 2011, with a 39.9 percent six year graduation rate for blacks, 51.0
percent six year graduation rate for Hispanics, and a 62.1 percent six year graduation rate for Whites (Lumina Foundation, 2014). In terms of the 1,715,913 students that received a Bachelor’s degree in 2010-2011, approximately 10 percent (or 173,000) of the bachelor’s degrees conferred in 2010-11 were received by Blacks; contrasting with the 70 percent (or 1,182,405) earned by Whites and the 9 percent (or 154,063) earned by Hispanics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Although access to formal educational opportunities has certainly expanded for Blacks since it was made available to them post-slavery (Fleming, 1984), persistence to degree attainment is still an issue in this community (Carey, 2005; Yosso, 2005).

Researchers have looked to spirituality as a plausible avenue for decreasing the post-secondary degree gap seen between Blacks and Whites. Dennis, Hicks, Banerjee, and Dennis (2005) conducted a study on 430 undergraduate Black American students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the Northeast United States. In this study, he discovered that those partaking in spiritual pursuits were less likely to engage in influences (drug use, crime, adolescent or young adult pregnancy, etc…) that hindered health and academic persistence. The same study also revealed that highly spiritual Black Americans were better able to combat recurring stressors associated with societal issues (racism, economic inadequacies, emotional distresses, etc.) (Dennis, et al., 2005). This study, did not however, focus on spirituality’s influence on Black student academic success specifically.

Much of the scholarship investigating spirituality and its educational impact on Black students, has been carried out at Predominately White Institutions (PWI) (Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, & Lewis, 2002; Dennis, Muller, Miller, & Banerjee, 2004; Herndon, 2003; Phillips, 2000). Collectively the studies concluded that spirituality has a significant impact on the personal and academic life of the student. Additionally, the studies posited that those students who
practiced spirituality on a regular basis were similarly, better able to handle stressors (isolation, alienation, and lack of support) associated with academic living (Phillips, 2000). None of the studies, however, examined these same factors at HBCUs, an environment considered to be less hostile towards Black students (Fleming, 1984; Hill, 2009; Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). Furthermore, the lack of research we see on the relationship between spirituality and Black students’ academic advancement warrants a study that investigates the possible impact of spirituality on the academic success of Black students (Hill, 2009; Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). In attempting to explore the relationship between spirituality and Black American post-secondary academic success, this study recruited Black participants attending HBCUs. This selection process helped the researcher account for and minimize influences that have been shown to oppose Black student academic success (being a minority on a campus and/or experiencing racism, etc.), as well as allow for a larger pool of participants that qualify for the study (Hill, 2009; Riggins et al., 2008). Additionally, investigating the relational impact of spirituality on the academic success of Black Americans at HBCUs, allowed the researcher to also clearly focus on spirituality and its relationship to the academic success of Blacks (Hill, 2009; Riggins et al., 2008).

Background Literature

A Critical Social Perspective. Critical scholars, such as Yosso (2005) identify powerful political elites and many of those leading and working in our educational institutions as intentionally and continually perceiving the “cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities… [of] socially marginalized groups,” (p. 69) as deficient when compared to the White, middle-class
standard that is used to create educational outcomes. This ultimately allows the governing majority in society to monopolize wealth and dictate how educational outcomes will be determined, leading to inherently unequal academic progressions that result in lower Black secondary and post-secondary degree completion rates (Barousse, 2010; Caboni and Adisu, 2004; Yosso, 2005). In turn, this keeps the Black community economically disadvantaged and generationally participating in a system that repeatedly oppresses Black Americans within society; especially as it pertains to higher educational degree attainment (Freire, 1973; Yosso, 2005).

The Black Community and Societal Influence. According to Lauen and Tyson’s (2009) interpretation of the Marxist Sociological perspective, the inability of marginalized social groups to attain a degree is not a mere accident, or a chance occurrence of random events. Rather, ensuring low levels of Black American degree attainment is seen as a tactic employed by the elite members of society to maintain wealth and occupational advantage for an already successful community of elites. Therefore, Black Americans are purposely pushed through a system that is designed to promote the prospering elite majority, by ensuring a systematically unequal and racially biased society, which serves the interests of the elite members “who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed” by Blacks (Friere, 1973, p. 73).

Overcoming such challenges requires deep strength in a world that is not merely indifferent, but actively hostile towards Black American educational attainment (Anderson, 1988). Scholars have utilized a sociological perspective in the search to identify and understand the sources of such strength (Anzaldua, 1990; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This study explored how spirituality, a factor related directly to familial capital (which is in turn a sub-component of cultural wealth—see Figure. 1), might allow Black students to persist towards degree completion.
Yosso (2005) defines familial capital as cultural knowledge passed generationally within a family. This cultural knowledge carries capital that allows a community to stay connected to traditional underpinnings that inform its consciousness and impacts the ability of individuals to function (Yosso, 2005). This consciousness also portrays its legacy and essence; especially as it relates to the educational and distinctive well-being of that group (Reese, 1992; Auerbach, 2001; Elenes et al., 2001; Lopez, 2003). Figure 1 depicts how familial capital directly feeds into community wealth.

![Figure 1](image-url)

**Figure 1.** A model depicting the relationship between different forms of capital, income, and community cultural wealth. Adapted from: “Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth,” by Tara J. Yosso 2005, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), p. 69-91.
**Degree Attainment and Impact on Cultural Status.** In a society stratified by race and class, educational outcomes for Blacks are understandably unequal; much of which stems from an inequitable status in society (Bell, 1992). Townsend (2007) discusses the inequalities in degree completion rates of Black and White students and the economic, familial, and educational struggles experienced by Blacks as a consequence of not prevailing in the university setting. Society places such a high worth on attaining post-secondary success, that those who do not earn a degree are adversely affected (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Townsend goes as far as to say that “a college education is essential to overcoming barriers of poverty and adverse social conditions and to minimizing the educational and economic disparity that exists between Blacks and Whites” (2007, p. 1). He argues that a significant number of issues associated with poverty would be diminished or eliminated if more Blacks completed at least a bachelor’s degree. Yet many minority students, specifically underrepresented, low-income minority students, have a low probability of attaining a college degree (Carey, 2005; Palmer, Davis, Moore, and Hilton, 2010; Yosso, 2005). In 2012, The National Center of Education Statistics reported that over 170,000 Black students earned Bachelor’s degrees; equaling to approximately 10-13 percent of the 1 million plus Black students that were enrolled in a four-year institution in 2005.

Townsend (2007) also explicitly points out the importance of Bachelor’s degree attainment for Black American males. Black males with higher educational degree attainment earn higher wages, maintain better health, and more specifically, are hired above menial positions. This eventually leads to a higher cultural capital (which positively impacts cultural wealth) for the Black community; while also decreasing the number of Black males entering the criminal justice system (Bell, 1992; Carey, 2005; Palmer, Moore, Davis, and Hilton, 2010; Townsend, 2007). Unfortunately, due to the facilitated orchestration of oppressive endeavors (a
mainly White centered educational curriculum, a deficit view of communities of color as places full of cultural poverty, the social inequalities perpetuated by the hidden knowledge of the elite, etc…) the cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities of many African Americans or Blacks may never be utilized, never acknowledged by the broader community, and never make a significant impact on improving completion rates for high school and college (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Yosso, 2005). This ultimately aids in keeping the Black community impoverished and unable to break out of the cycle of poverty (Caboni and Adisu, 2004; Hart and Risley, 2003; Yosso, 2005).

**Black Student Degree Attainment.** Black Americans face such an array of obstacles (academic, racial, etc…) and sociological stresses, that even once enrolled in higher educational institutions, a gap in the persistence towards degree attainment (between Blacks and Whites) can be seen (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). One such obstacle is Blacks’ post-secondary institutional choice patterns. Evidence from Carey (2005) shows an under-representation of minorities at institutions that bolster minority undergraduate degree completion and the over-representation of minorities at institutions with low undergraduate degree completion. For example, in 1997, 28,000 (2.6%) of the Black American students who enrolled at a four-year institution, enrolled at a university or college that only held a three to ten percent chance of graduating them within six years (Carey, 2005). Another 53,000 Black students (5.9%) enrolled at a university or college where they only had a 40 percent chance of graduating. In 2011, 173,000 Black students matriculated through to bachelor level degree attainment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). This is equivalent to a small percentage of the 1,313,000 students that enrolled in a four-year institution in 2005 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012); this number differs dramatically when number of years attended is factored in. Furthermore, Black-Americans constitute only 4-5% of the professoriate (Ladson-Billings,
In 1991, there were 24,721 Doctoral degrees awarded to US citizen and non-citizens and only 933 or 3.8% of these doctorates went to Black men and woman” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 13); 140,505 doctoral degrees were awarded to US residents in 2009-10, with 7.4% (10,417) going to Black men and women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

In 2009-10, White Americans were conferred with 66.3 percent of all Associate degrees (total of 833, 337), approximately 70 percent of all Bachelor degrees (total awarded equated to 1,602,480), 72.8 percent of all Master degrees (611,693 total), and 74.3 percent of all Doctorate degrees (total awarded 140, 505) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). These statistics, along with the others listed, further substantiates the unequal educational degree attainment rates for Black students. Given that this gap has remained over many years, and given the structural racism that prevents meaningful policy reform, it follows that Blacks will need to provide their own solution to this problem, rather than wait for one to be legislated. Black Americans will likely need to draw on their own cultural and community resources to support educational degree attainment. Spirituality is one of the most powerful of these resources, and thus suggests a need to explore the influence of spirituality on the academic success of Black students. The researcher hoped to use this exploration to offer a model that suggests viable options in improving the educational persistence of Black American students.

**Influence of Spirituality on the Black Community.** Prior research has examined the proclivity of Black Americans to engage in religious practices (Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno, 2003; Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). According to Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon (2008), spirituality has played a pivotal role in Black culture and has long been viewed as a foundational ideology of the Black community. Black spiritual traditions and cultural associations have transcended time, geographic locale, social control, and circumstance (Bell, 1992; Riggins,
McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Yosso, 2005). Hill (1999) asserted that strong spiritual [and religious] commitment is one of the most persistent cultural strengths of Black Americans. Studies have also found that Blacks tend to have stronger religious affiliations, higher overall church attendance, and are more likely to cite spiritual or religious association as a means of coping than their White counterparts (Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, and Lewis, 2002; Dennis, D. L., Hicks, T., Banerjee, P., & Dennis, B. G., 2005; Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Walker, 2002).

Through an analysis of the national survey of Black American adults, researchers also found that Black Americans who cited themselves as being more religiously committed tended to report lower levels of stress and distress than those who were not (Jang, 2004; Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). Walker and Dixon (2002) also concluded that those participating in religious and/or spiritual endeavors are more likely to have a positive outlook about school, and dissociate from non-beneficial behaviors. Taylor (1998), notes that religious activity is higher among southerners, women, those that attain higher levels of education, and Blacks. This study looked at the plausible ways in which spirituality might influence the educational successes of Black college students at HBCUs.

Influence of Spirituality on Black College Students. In the context of the persistent gaps in degree attainment between Black and White students, this study intended to take an in-depth look at potential ways in which spirituality connects to the academic successes of Black college students attending HBCUs. The general research consensus is that “overall…, spirituality has a significant role in helping African American college students cope with stress at the collegiate level” (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008, p. 73). Furthermore, studies (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno, 2003; Bryant-Rockenbach and Mayhew, 2012) have
shown that students become progressively more spiritual (and less religious) as they matriculate through their post-secondary education. A study performed by Walker (2002) at a Predominately White Institution, confirmed that spiritual participation correlates positively with academic performance among college students; with Blacks being cited as having a higher spiritual association. In a sample of 192 college students (consisting of both Black students and White students), Walker (2002) measured the correlation between spirituality/religious participation and academic performance and found that Blacks had higher levels of spiritual involvement than Whites. In a study that sampled 1000 White and Non-White students (Asian, Black, and Hispanic) attending a university in a mid-western state, Zullig, Ward, and Horn (2006) found that religiosity and spirituality influenced college students’ satisfaction with health, life, and physical or mental status. The researchers’ preliminary findings also suggested that students, who viewed themselves as spiritual or religious, were more likely to have a higher self-perception of health which led to a higher satisfaction with life. The researchers’ sample however, offered very little variability. Additionally, while the aforementioned research has established that Black students benefit from increased spirituality, this qualitative study focuses on how this relationship might operate.

Why Spirituality versus Religion. According to Bryant-Rockenbach and Mayhew (2012), there lies a necessity in properly defining spirituality as being related to yet separate from religion. Although many studies use the two terms (spirituality and religion) interchangeably, there is a very distinct divergence between the two. The literature attest that these two principles can exist separately and an individual can proclaim to be spiritual without acknowledging religion or religious without being spiritual (Dennis, D. L., Hicks, T., Banerjee, P., & Dennis, B. G., 2005; Constantine, Madonna G., et al., 2006; Riggins, McNeal, Herndon, 2008).
individual can even be spiritual and manifest that spirituality through religious participation. As a result many components of the literature use the two very different components synonymously. It is important however, to define spirituality (Bryant-Rockenbach and Mayhew, 2012); especially in a study dealing with college students, since it has been shown that students become highly spiritual and less religious as they move through the college years. Students also specifically describe their experiences with their beliefs in spiritual terms (Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno, 2003). Therefore this section, and document, will offer a brief yet precise definition of the two distinct principles with a focus on spirituality.

Spirituality entails seeking after a higher sense of self with a focus on the creator and a shift away from egocentricity (Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno, 2003; Dennis, D. L., Hicks, T., Banerjee, P., & Dennis, B. G., 2005; Pargament, 2006). Lindholm (2012) describes spirituality as “pointing to peoples inner, subjective lives, as contrasted to the objective domain of observable behavior and material objects that we can readily point to and measure” (p. 9). The researcher further describes spirituality as a belief in why you are in existence, giving a higher purpose to our lives. Weddle-West, Hagan, and Norwood (2013) cite religion as the surface structure and spirituality as the deep structure. Spirituality is an “abandonment of behaviors and thoughts that exclude, isolate, and oppress,” replacing it with behaviors “that allow for an appreciation” of all the many dimensions of life (Weddle-West, Hagan, and Norwood, 2013, p. 300). This study looked at the potential ways in which spirituality might influence the academic success of Black college students.

**Historically Black Colleges and Universities: The Influence on Black Students.**

Spirituality has been shown to prevail in the personal lives of Blacks, on Predominately White collegiate campuses, and in the confines of environments proven to be more supportive and
nurturing towards Black college students- Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Dennis, Hicks, Banerjee, and Dennis, 2005; Hill, 2009; Riggins, McNeal, Herndon, 2008). However, the HBCUs that are in operation today are repeatedly being faced with providing validation for their existence (Fleming, 1984; Hill, 2009). HBCUs have come under fire for their strict political and conservative affiliations, reportedly “avoiding any challenges to the status quo, suppressing student expression, speech, and life choices”; ultimately creating an environment at some Black institutions, where attendees may feel that their freedom is restricted (Harper and Gasman, 2008, p. 337). Still these colleges and universities provide student attendees with academic, cultural, and social supports that in many cases would not be experienced at other types of institutions.

Comparative studies supply evidence that Black Colleges and Universities provide nurturing, family-like environments that considerably support the Black student through the academic process (Fleming, 1984; Harper and Gasman, 2008). It was also discovered that, 11.1% of all HBCUs graduate more than half of their Black student population within six years (Harper and Gasman, 2008). 19% of the bachelor’s degrees earned by Black men, in 2005, were conferred at HBCUs (U.S department of Education, 2007 as cited in Haper and Gasman, 2008). Even with all-too-common insufficient preparation in K-12 schools and/or disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, researchers find that students attending HBCUs tend to perform well academically; outperforming some of their counterparts attending other institutions in many instances (Harper and Gasman, 2008). Additionally, studies have concluded that Black undergraduate students at HBCUs are more “satisfied, engaged at higher levels, and have stronger self-concepts than their same-race peers elsewhere” (Berger and Milem, 2000; Flowers, 2002; Fries-Britt and Turner, 2002; Harper and Gasman, 2008; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).
Predominantly White Institutions, on the other hand, appear capable of intellectually growing Black attendees, however, in many instances, they are not significantly equipped or designed to socially or psychologically comfort them (Fleming, 1984). According to Fleming (1984), in non-black schools, Black students form adjustment issues that range from feelings of alienation and hostile campus climates. These stressors perpetuate or invoke psychological "withdrawal that impairs academic functioning" (Fleming, 1984, p. 3). Many of these emotional and psychological struggles are absent for students attending Black colleges and universities, due to supporting factors being in place that are not often present at Predominately White Institutions. Studies have also shown “individual students need both intellectual and social inputs during the college years in order to gain a sense of direction and to put college learning to good use” (Fleming, 1984, p. 14). Although Black colleges and universities have been historically depicted as inferior in accommodations and academics, there worthiness and usefulness as intellectual forces and academic staples to the Black community has been documented (Fleming, 1984).

Moreover, examining Black college students in an environment that perpetuates a positive, and supportive academic setting (Fleming, 1984), allowed the researcher to isolate the relationship between spirituality and academic success of Black college students. Without the additional stressors of being a racial minority on campus and having to navigate less through cross-racial student and faculty relationships, HBCU students provide an optimal perspective on the mechanisms by which spirituality might influence the academic success of Black students. This study examined that relationship.
Defining Academic Success. As it pertains to this study, academic success will be defined as a student’s ability to meet the academic requirements needed to stay enrolled in their home institution (institution they attended the prior year). Schreiner, Kammer, Primrose, and Quick (2009) posit that researchers are beginning to expand the definition of academic performance or student success away from the traditional definition that includes graduation rates and performance exclusively. New definitions will incorporate a more personal perception and measure of personal development (Schreiner, Kammer, Primrose, and Quick, 2009). Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) describe student success as including student satisfaction, persistence, levels of learning, and personal development. Conley (2005) asserts that academic success at the college level is determined largely by a student’s ability to successfully and efficiently complete course work. Furthermore, many of the current approaches to defining academic success tend to focus solely on academic outcomes and the behaviors that support those outcomes (Schreiner, Kammer, Primrose, and Quick, 2009). The definition of academic success for this study is a student’s ability to meet the academic requirements needed to stay enrolled in their home institution (institution they attended the prior year); regardless of whether that includes a grade point average of a 2.0 or 4.0, involvement in campus climate, personal development, etc… The main and most definable measure for academic success will be persistence (a student’s desire to carry on their academic progressions at a single institution (Hagedorn, 2005; Tinto, 1993)) to the next academic year/level without any institutional academic penalties (scholarship loss, financial aid loss, probation, academic appeals, expulsion, etc…).
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the potential impact of spirituality on Black student academic success through the second and third year of undergraduate studies. Many scholars have concluded that African Americans have a stronger religious/spiritual foundation when compared to other ethnic groups (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Walker, 2002). However, very few studies have investigated the relationship between spirituality and Black student academic success (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). While taking the premise of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) into consideration, this study attempted to explore the relationship between spirituality and academic success for Black college students, as it pertains to collegiate learning through the second and third year of college.

Research Question

This study attempted to minimize this gap in research using grounded theory, which allows for developmental flexibility and participant interaction. In an effort to fill in a recognized gap in the literature, this study set out to answer the following central question: What is the nature of the relationship between spirituality and academic success for Black college students?

Overview of Methodology

A grounded theory, qualitative study was employed to carry out this investigation (Bitsch, 2005; Creswell, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 2006). The grounded theory approach allows the researcher to develop a theory from the data collected, and the opportunity to flexibly maneuver through the data collection/analysis process (Riggins et al., 2008). The Grounded Theory approach also promotes the incorporation of the participant’s viewpoints into the study’s outcome; an outcome that, as previously mentioned, results in a new theory; adding
to the literature base of a specific topic (Creswell, 2007; Glaser and Strauss, 2006; Riggins et al., 2008).

An inductive approach, like that associated with Grounded Theory, allowed the researcher to draw on data collected systematically and to propose a model that describes the role of spirituality in the academic lives of Black college students. In a related study done by Riggins et al., (2008), the grounded theory methodological approach allowed the researchers the ability to investigate the role of spirituality among African American males attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities. This study examined spirituality and Black American academic success at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, while exploring the relationship of academic success and spirituality on both Black female and Black male students. This grounded theory study also incorporated various forms of data collection which included: observations, demographic surveys, background questionnaires, and interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Glaser and Strauss, 2006; Weiss, 1994).

**Significance of the Study**

According to studies down by Bourdieu (1977) and Lauen and Tyson (2009), intergenerational transmission of privilege and disadvantage operate through the school system; confirming that low quality education in Black communities have been employed for years to keep the populous ghettos of these cultures educationally stagnant. Historically, laws like “*partus sequitur ventrum*”- the child follows the condition of the mother regardless of the race of the father,” which dates back to slavery, made it unlikely for any subsequent generation to exceed the previous one; economically, educationally, or otherwise (Cannon, 1995, p. 40). While laws have changed to be race-neutral, we still see savagely unequal (Kozol, 2012) conditions currently
in place, throughout society (disproportionate numbers failing k-12 schools attended by Black students, low access to selective higher education institutions, deficient view of the cultural capital unique to the Black community, etc.), to keep generations of Blacks chained to generations of poverty, ignorance, and financial deprivation (Bell, 1992; Carey, 2005; Yosso, 2005). One example of this oppression can be seen in the higher educational degree attainment statistics between Blacks and Whites (Carey, 2005). This disparity can be perceived as purposely allowing laws like *partus sequitur ventrum* and theories like those discussed by Yosso (2005), Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, (1999), and Bell (1992) to perpetuate intensely ingrained racism and oppression that are historically associated with the injustices against the Black community and societal culture of our country (Giles, 2010).

Exploring how spirituality might support Black students in persisting towards degree completion, could help in finding possible resolutions to the Black post-secondary degree scarcity through investigative research. Thus allowing the Black community tactical ammunition to combat oppressor control and their continued attempts to keep Blacks generationally chained to non-transformative ways of thinking and a lifetime of poverty (Freire, 1973). Using Conflict Theory, and Critical Race Theory as a guide, this study was able to ascertain a model of how spirituality applies (and how spirituality is applied) to Black college success; ultimately providing a pathway for decreasing the disparity associated with Black student post-secondary degree attainment (Freire, 1973).
Organization of Study

This study attempts to understand the relationships between spirituality and academic success as it pertains to Black Americans. This document began with the problem statement, purpose statement, and significance for the study. The document will then provide a review of the literature, in which a theoretical framework will be presented, followed by pertinent literature regarding: (1) Black America’s educational attainment, (2) religion and spirituality, and (3) spirituality’s influence on education; specifically at the post-secondary level. Chapter 3 of this manuscript will introduce the methodology to be employed, outline how the data will be analyzed, present possibilities for collecting data, and discuss participant selection. Chapter 4 presents analyzed data, along with the theories that emerged; while Chapter 5 discusses the literature as it relates to the study and this study’s limitations.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This chapter serves as an attempt to explicate the lens through which all data was collected and analyzed. The theoretical framework will attempt to set the groundwork for how spirituality, relates to the educational endeavors of Black college students. The subsequent literature review will examine how spirituality, and a student’s relationship with spiritual and religious practices, can influence the academic success of Black students.

Theoretical Framework

Through the use of Marxist Theory, Critical Theory (Freire, 1973), Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1992), and Marxist's sociological perspectives (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) a Theoretical Framework was constructed. Additionally, while taking the effects of cultural wealth into consideration (Yosso, 2005), this framework attempts to act as a guide for this study, which investigated the potential impact of spirituality on the Black student.

Marxist Theory

Marxism is a socio-economic and political worldview based theory that has a root in social alterations, class stratification, and Conflict Theory (a conduit of the Marxist sociological paradigm; Lauen and Tyson, 2009) (Freire, 1973). Marxist Theory also takes into consideration economic theory, a philosophical method, and a pioneering view of social change. For the proposed study, Marxist Theory acted as a foundational lens in which to view how oppression (educational or otherwise) can affect the Black community.

Marxism and Education. Marxism and the Marxist sociological perspective (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) help draw the researcher’s attention to both oppression of one social group by
another as well as the forms of resistance that oppressed groups might utilize. When Marxism and the Marxist sociological viewpoint are applied to the Black community, and the institution of academia, it allows for a clearer depiction of how important examinations of educational influences are to successful educational benchmark attainment within the Black community. Additionally, the Marxist Sociological perspective posits a deeper understanding of how culture (religion, spirituality, and the influence of these two entities on the Black community’s educational endeavors) helps to counteract the detriments imposed on this community by the dominant class (Lauen and Tyson, 2009). Studies have shown that those Blacks that participated in some sort of spiritual practices were more likely to combat environmental stressors efficiently (Dennis, Dixie L., et al., 2005; Riggins, McNeal, Herndon, 2008). The use of Marxist theory and the Marxist Sociological perspective for this examination, allowed the researcher to focus this study of the influence of spirituality on academic persistence, and view spirituality as one of the strengths that Black students can draw on as they navigate a system of higher education that is indifferent or even hostile to their interests (Freire, 1973).

**Critical Theory.** Critical Theory explains how the idea of education for the oppressed, rest on the foundational injustice for that community (Freire, 1973). Freire (1973) believes that in order for educational freedom to be given to the Black community, an underlying injustice must be garnered from the oppressor as well. He also asserts that such a fallacy of generosity, as it pertains to education, is an act of violence on the Black community, and “interferes with man's ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human” (p. 55). Education, when delivered from elites, will necessarily see a Black community that must be academically brainwashed to mimic the upper hierarchal members of society (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), and works to indoctrinate the Black community to fit into a world of oppression (Freire, 1973). The researcher
utilized this perspective during the data collection/analysis phase, understanding that spirituality strengthens the Black student and adds wealth to the community (Giles, 2010); although Critical Theory does not account for race, its premise can be applied to race relations.

**Conflict Theory.** Marxism’s Sociological perspective (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Lauen and Tyson, 2009), refers mainly to the ideals of sociology from Marxist Theory, but advances it with a cultural component (Lauen and Tyson, 2009). Marxist sociology is also associated with Conflict Theory (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Lauen and Tyson, 2009), which was largely used to guide this study, the researcher’s interview protocol, institutional selection, and overall data collection process. Conflict Theory “views education as a tool of domination that aids in the maintenance of the existing stratification order” (Lauen and Tyson, 2009, p. 72); ultimately allowing the governing majority in society to monopolize wealth and dictate how educational outcomes will be determined (Bell, 1992; Yosso, 2005). Lauen and Tyson (2009) further explain Conflict Theory by arguing that elite controlled educational institutions, perpetuate the degree persistence disparity between Blacks and Whites by fostering attitudes and values that preserve the dominant culture. Schools focus on language and cultural codes (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) associated with the “elite rather than the society as a whole” (Lauen and Tyson, 2009, p. 72). Conflict Theory emphasizes that this situation creates tension in society, locking the elite members into positions of power and barring the disadvantaged groups of society out; mainly due to the view of their culture lacking capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Lauen and Tyson, 2009; Yosso, 2005). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), the privileged members of society are considered to possess valuable capital (in the form of cultural knowledge), which is transmitted intergenerationally to secure their position in society. This study examined spirituality from the viewpoint of it being a cultural strength of the Black
community and its relationship to Black student success in the post-secondary setting. Study participants were also selected from post-secondary institutions that focused on fostering environments conducive to Black academic persistence.

**Critical Race Theory**

*Spirituality and Critical Race Theory.* Religion has been noted as being at the forefront of the spiritual evolution that manifested in the Black community, however, religion’s intentional and often (mis)-guided delivery is to blame for the elongation of slavery and in some instances the degradation and cultural destruction associated with the Black community (Giles, 2010). In a narrative depiction of the life of Howard Thurman, a prolific author and distinguished theologian, Giles (2010) gave an account of Thurman’s grandmother’s experience with religion:

“She told me that during the days of slavery, the White minister was always preaching from the Pauline letters—‘Slaves, be obedient to your masters,’ etc. ‘I vowed to myself,’ she said ‘that if freedom ever came and I learned to read, I would never read that part of the Bible’ (Thurman, 1975, p22)!

This, along with many other slave testimonies, displays how although religion (not spirituality) allowed fellowship and interaction it also served to manipulate and dilute Blacks (Giles, 2010). Many times, this was done in an effort to perpetuate a false identity; an identity that kept Blacks in bondage both mentally and physically (Giles, 2010; Thurman, 1975). Oddly enough it was spirituality, not to be confused with religion, that helped Black slaves free themselves from the mental dilution that was slavery, and go on to advocate for, and in many cases fight for, educational as well as physical freedom (Anderson, 1988; Giles, 2010). Although a delineation
contrasting spirituality and religion will be made, this study focused on spirituality and its connection to the academic persistence of Black college students. Furthermore, this study utilized the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to guide the researcher’s attention to ways to combat White privilege, amongst other things, and concurrently substantiate the experiences and strengths of the Black community (Yosso, 2005).

Critical Race Theory: yesterday and today. Although Critical Race Theory first emerged in the 1970’s in the field of law (Bell, 1992; Delgado and Stefancic, 2011; Yosso, 2005), many of its principles can still be related to historical and current perspectives on education. Through the lens of CRT, one observes that much of society’s racism is in the context of education (Lauen and Tyson, 2009; Parker, Deyhle, Villenas, 1999). Schools, both k-12 and higher education, have been used for decades to further the hierarchal societal stratification that has successfully kept educational disparities between Blacks and Whites intact (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Yosso, 2005). This has been achieved through traditional claims of deficiencies in Black communities and vague epistemologies (Bell, 1992; Solorzano, 1997) that act as “camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups” of society (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). To a non-Black community member, the educational system was created as a means to further generational wealth and create educated members of society. Proponents of CRT, however, would suggest that the educational system has been created to mis-educate and stigmatize members of its community (Parker, Deyhle, Villenas, 1999). CRT examines factors like education, finances, and power (Bell, 1992; Parker, Deyhle, Villenas, 1999), and applies them to a “framework that can be used to theorize, examine, and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact on social structures, practices, and discourses” (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). This study examined the interconnections between spirituality and the educational
persistence of Black college students, using the Critical Race Theory and the Premise of Cultural Wealth as points of departure.

**CRT: the nature of being Black.** There exists a facet of education that is very contradictory by nature. It pretends to, or quite possibly intends to, "empower and emancipate" while actually "marginalizing and oppressing" the students entrusted to its care (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). CRT scholars note that “much of the national dialogue on race relations takes place in the context of education- in continuing desegregation and affirmative action battles, in debates about bilingual education programs, and in the controversy surrounding race and ethnicity studies department colleges and university” (Roithmayr, 1999, p. 4). Whiteness has become a normalized standard by which all other entities are measured; with all groups classified in relation to this one oppositional point (Parker, Deyhle, Villenas, 1999). Ultimately conceptualizing whiteness and blackness, and how they fit in to larger sociological, biological, and societal mechanisms. These concepts color even the most mundane aspects of our language, as “‘school achievement’, ‘middle classness’, ‘maleness’, ‘beauty’, ‘intelligence’, ‘science’ become normative categories of whiteness,... [and] ‘gangs’, ‘welfare recipients’, ‘basketball players’, ‘the underclass’, become the marginalized and delegitimized categories of blackness” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 9).

Certain tenets of CRT (Anzaldua, 1990; Yosso, 2005) also suggest that the indoctrination of students into racist theories and/or ideologies are at the very core of the injustices that have been infringed on communities of color (Yosso, 2005). Critical Race Theorists see the school curriculum as a tool used by Whites to maintain White supremacy through *Master Scripting* (Ladson-Billings, 1999); “silencing multiple voices and perspectives, primarily legitimizing dominant, White, upper-class, male voicings” as the standard by which all need to know
knowledge is judged (Swartz, 1992, p. 341). Certain academic strategies like master scripting, furthermore, presuppose that Black students are deficient.

Viewed as devoid of cultural capital and of the educational means to extricate themselves from the trenches of poverty and lack, Black communities have been looked down upon by many in society as deficient and unequal to the majority members of the social order. In reaction, CRT challenges the experience of the majority as the customary/dominant standard and anchors its conceptual framework in the distinctive realities of people of color (Taylor, 1999). CRT focuses on acknowledging such destructive ideologies, like those that view the Black community as culturally and socially deficient, and proposes replacing these with positively associated factors like: familial capital (See Figure 1 (Chapter 1) and Figure 2 (below)), social capital, resistant capital, etc… to understand how marginalized people can combat these racial and social injustices that are part and parcel of American culture (Yosso, 2005). Figure 2 depicts how familial capital embodies the history of a people and the consciousness that, as it relates to the educational and distinctive well being of that group (Reese, 1992; Auerbach, 2001; Elenes et al., 2001; Lopez, 2003), portrays its legacy and quintessence.
In replacing deficit assumptions with asset-based ones, supporters of Critical Race Theory hope to transform our view of the Black community to one as empowered, valuable, and wealthy (fiscally and culturally) (Yosso, 2005). CRT posits that it is no longer ethical to view Whiteness as the normative standard of society, specifically in education, and Blackness as unusual, dissimilar, and insignificant (Taylor, 1999). Although racism is likely permanent, and progress is intermittent with periods of resistance and backlash while white dominance is reasserted (Bell, 1992), CRT and its proponents strongly suggest continual dialogue concerning race and race relations; especially since omission has powerful ramifications (Taylor, 1999).

This study examined the influence of spirituality, a component of familial capital, and its relationship to the academic success of Blacks during the collegiate years. Additionally, the
researcher utilized the component of Critical Race Theory that seeks to confront White Privilege (Delgado and Stefancic, 2011) and challenge the claims that Black communities are filled with deficit knowledge, skills, and abilities (Bell, 1992; Yosso, 2005). This understanding was used to analyze collected data on spirituality and its relationship to the academic success of Blacks in college (Giles, 2010). Critical Race Theory challenges the notion that communities of color are devoid or absent of critical knowledge and wealth (Yosso, 2005). The Critical Race Theory approach to education also entails expanding the view of academic institutions to “acknowledge the multiple strengths of Communities of Color,” and incorporate them into the educational curriculum, in an effort to “serve a larger purpose of struggle toward social and racial justice” (Yosso, 2005, p. 69). A study that examines a component of cultural wealth, like spirituality, and its relationship to the academic success of Blacks, supports this endeavor.

Summary of Theoretical Framework

Marxism’s sociological perspective and Critical Race Theory (CRT) both help one analyze the effects of poverty, cultural wealth, enlightenment, deep-thinking, and educational deficits, whether intentional or not, on certain communities. Critical Race Theory, however, discusses race specifically and is tied heavily to the liberation of the Black American psyche (Bell, 1992). Marxism and Critical Race Theory were the foundational lenses used to complete data collection and data analysis. The primary intent of this study was to examine the interconnections between spirituality and the educational persistence of Black college students. With this intent, the study attempts to offer suggestions on how to incorporate the findings into eradicating the problem of low degree attainment within the Black community.
Literature Review

Extensive research has posed plausible suggestions into improving academic success within the Black community (Carey, 2005; Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, Lynn, 2004). Most of these studies also provide a comparison between race and/or ethnicity (Caboni and Adisu, 2004; Carey, 2005; Palmer, Moore, Davis, Hilton, 2010; Townsend, 2007). The factors previously examined in the aforementioned studies consisted of: (1) first year/freshmen experiences, (2) mentorships, (3) faculty–student engagement (4) rigorous academics, and (5) summer bridge programs. However, few studies deal with Black American students solely, and the effects of spirituality on educational or academic success within that one population. Additionally, despite previous efforts to diminish the disparity between Black and White persistence to degree attainments, a large disparity still exists. This study examined the apparent oversight in the literature in an attempt to investigate spirituality and a potential relationship to or its possible influence on the Black American student.

The following literature review will examine the mechanisms by which spirituality relates to the academic progressions, persistence, and matriculations of Black students. This section will also outline the differences and similarities between spirituality and religion. This study however, sought to explore spirituality primarily.

Spirituality and Religion

Spirituality is often used synonymously with religion. However, there are important differences that impacted the collection and analysis of data in this study. Spirituality is a heightened pursuit of the answers to life’s questions as a guiding force behind daily living
(Dennis, D. L., Hicks, T., Banerjee, P., & Dennis, B. G., 2005; Constantine, Madonna G., et al., 2006; Riggins, McNeal, Herndon, 2008), while religion, according to Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, and Lewis (2002), is often demonstrated in a *routine* and *pragmatic way*. Moreover, spirituality involves seeking after a higher purpose to formulate an elevated importance for living, surpassing one’s focus on centricity (self) and illegitimacies (falsehoods) (Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno, 2003; Dennis, D. L., Hicks, T., Banerjee, P., & Dennis, B. G., 2005; Pargament, 2006). Pargament (2006) tells us that “traditionally, spirituality has been viewed by social scientist as a source of stability in life, a way to conserve a sense of meaning, identity, connectedness with others, peace of mind, or transcendence” (pp. 11). Spirituality has also been found to be associated with personal transformation. Spiritual transformation allows one to better understand human issues and provides clarity when searching for a solution. Spirituality additionally, helps people strive towards the sacred, perpetuating a journey through personal evolution (Pargament, 2006). Religion, on the other hand, “reflects the manifestations of formal theological beliefs and activities of individuals who share a group identity” (Constantine et al., 2002, p. 605). Spirituality allows believers to take the ritualistic behavior of traditional dogma out of the picture, and replace it with a welcoming eagerness for existing that many Americans find imperative for daily living. Spirituality brings purpose to one’s life and transcends meaning in the natural (Berkel, Armstrong, and Cokley, 2004), while allowing fresh perspective that sustains a *connection* to the source (Pargament, 2006); a multidimensionality that provides a premise for a turn away from *self-centered strivings* (Pargament, 2006).

With a harmonious demonstration of the two distinct entities being possible, many researchers “view religion as subsuming spirituality” (Constantine et al., 2002, p. 605). However, both religious practices/beliefs, and spirituality can exist separately and distinctly from one
another (Dennis, Hicks, Banerjee, and Dennis, 2005; Constantine, Madonna G., et al., 2006; Riggins, McNeal, Herndon, 2008). Often times, spirituality and religion are confused by people; leaving room for personal interpretation and different practices amongst cultures and communities (Dennis, Muller, Miller, Banerjee, 2004). Dichotomizing the two (spirituality and religion) is important for a better understanding of how the two distinct principles operate; how the two, separately, influence human behavior. This study examined the relationship between spirituality and the educational successes among Black college students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

**Religion and Spirituality in the American population.** Dennis, et al. (2005) and Inglehart (2004) reported that although less than half of the population attends church and attests to being religious, approximately 58% of the American population considered themselves to be spiritual. Spiritual beliefs were also found to be more prominent among Blacks than any other ethnic groups (Newport, 2010; Walker, 2002); with statistics reporting that 87% of Blacks reported being religious, 72% of religiously unaffiliated Blacks citing some belief in God (spirituality) and the role of this entity in their life, 76% utilizing pray, and 88% indicating their certainty in the existence of God (Sahgal and Smith, 2009). Moreover, of the 58% of Americans that consider themselves to be spiritual, those identified as Black relied more heavily on spirituality as a coping mechanism to combat reoccurring societal issues (racism, economic inadequacies, emotional distresses, etc…) associated heavily with being Black in America (Dennis, D. L., Hicks, T., Banerjee, P., & Dennis, B. G., 2005; Inglehart, 2004; Riggins, McNeal, Herndon, 2008). In a study done by Jang (2004), it was also concluded that Black Americans who relied on religion/spirituality as a coping mechanism experienced significantly less stress than those with no religious/spiritual involvement. The researcher also concluded that
those Black Americans that considered themselves as religiously/spiritually associated had more self control and lower levels of distress than those not religiously/spiritually committed (Jang, 2004).

Studies done on Black women or women exclusively corroborate these findings. Simoni and Cooperman (2000) found that Black [and Latino] women who had contracted and were living with HIV/AIDS, cited their spirituality as a source of strength and also associated their spiritual beliefs with decreased bouts of depression. In a similar study done by Ashing-Giwa (2000), it was concluded that women who had survived breast cancer also referenced their relationship with their spiritual beliefs as a mechanism used for coping. This study specifically focused on spirituality and its influence on academic success; examining personal spiritual involvement in the context of its manifestation.

In comparison to White Americans in general, studies have found that Black Americans seek spiritual and/or religious solace more frequently (Berkel, Armstrong, and Cokley, 2004; Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, and Lewis, 2002). Blacks tend to have a higher religious involvement than many other ethnic groups, with an increase in both Black and White religious involvement being seen in recent years (Newport, 2010). According to a study done by Taylor, Chatters, Jayakody, and Levin (1996) African Americans tended to report higher levels of "attendance at religious services, read more religious materials, monitor more religious broadcasts, and seek spiritual comfort more often through religion in comparison to Whites" (as cited by Constantine, 2002, p. 605). Previous research has also suggested that Blacks, more regularly sanction the use of religion to deal with serious personal or academic or professional problems (Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, and Lewis, 2002). Blacks, additionally, were found to significantly cite spirituality in their connections with academic endeavors (Riggins, McNeal,
Herndon, 2008). Peltzer (2002), when studying a group of Black South African students, found that those who had a positive relationship with their religious or spiritual beliefs had positive health-related behaviors. Black (and Black South African) students seemed to engage more in prayer, meditation, and other spiritual practices on a more consistent basis as well. Furthermore, Black American students were found to be more spiritual than some of their academic colleagues (Jagers & Smith, 1996). In a study done by Walker and Dixon (2002), it was discovered that less than 94% of White students relayed their belief in God, whereas approximately 99% of those Black students surveyed reported believing in God. Black Americans heavy reliance on spirituality may also help to explain their thought patterns, reactions, actions, and behaviors; especially in an academic setting.

**Spirituality and Religion among College or University Attendees.** Although religion is practiced by less than half of the United States population (Dennis et al., 2005), and religious affiliation seems to decline during the undergraduate academic years (Bryant, Choi, Yasuno, 2003), studies have shown that students often become progressively more devoted to spiritual issues during college (Bryant, Choi, Yasuno, 2003). Additionally, researchers have begun to understand the importance of spirituality in the life of college students (Austin, Austin, and Lindholm, 2011). However, very little research has been done on spiritual development as it pertains to higher education (Austin, Austin, and Lindholm, 2011); especially as it pertains to Black college student development.

In a study done by Austin, Austin, and Lindholm (2011), a College Students’ Beliefs and Values survey (CSBV) was created to better understand and assess spirituality’s role in college student development. The researchers first combined multiple perspectives on spirituality, from multiple researchers, to create a four page pilot questionnaire that was administered to 3,700
college juniors attending 46 baccalaureate colleges and universities in the spring of 2003. Students were selected to “insure diversity with respect to institutional type, control, and selectivity level (Austin, Austin, and Lindholm, 2011, p. 42). Students were also selected based on their participation in a survey/study conducted 3 years prior. The second administration of the survey was given to 112, 232 first year students at 236 institutions in 2004, as a 2 page addendum. The final CSBV survey was administered in the spring of 2007, and the sample consisted of approximately 14,000 students from 148 institutions; 300 students were ultimately selected as the study’s final participants.

From the study, the researchers were able to develop a comprehensive understanding of not only how to assess spirituality and religiousness in college students, but what these unique qualities look like during student development. Austin, Austin, and Lindholm (2011), were able to utilize 12 measures in conducting this study. The 12 measures ranged from those that examined religiousness, spirituality, and qualities associated with spirituality. An additional measure, Global Citizenship, was used to assess spiritual development in students during the collegiate years as well. All of the religious measures, with the exception on Religious Struggles, were shown to have a high correlation with each other and with one aspect of spirituality; Spiritual Identification. However, most other aspects of spirituality seemed to be exclusive of religiousness and independent, in many respects, from most other measures. The researchers (Austin, Austin, and Lindholm, 2011) postulated that the study’s outcomes would be extremely useful to future research on student development, and in academic settings that are progressive in discussions about spirituality and religion.

Similarities and differences between spirituality and religion were investigated in a 2004 research study done by Berkel, Armstrong, and Cokley. During the examination, the researchers
performed a quantitative investigation on a convenience sample that included 171 African American undergraduate and graduate students. The majority of students that participated in the study were female (70%) with 30% of the participants being male; approximately 70% of the respondents were undergraduates. In order to qualify for the study, students had to complete a demographic survey and were then given a research instrument packet.

From the data collected, the researchers concluded that many of the religious and spiritual variables examined in the study were associated. Many of the associations however, had limited correlation; leading the researchers to believe that many of the variables between both religion and spirituality vary to some capacity. Religion was shown to be a manifestation of, in some cases, an individual’s spiritual beliefs, yet religion could also “fulfill other needs that may be unrelated to spirituality (e.g., social, personal)” (pp. 10). The researchers also found that there were no significant differences in the religiosity and spirituality of men and women. For future research endeavors the researchers suggested studying the same constructs qualitatively.

In a study done by Herndon (2003), he examined (qualitatively) how spirituality affected Black males on a Predominantly White campus. The themes that emerged from the study supported Black students reliance on spirituality for resilience and persistence (Herndon, 2003). The study sampled and interviewed 13 Black American college students. Herndon (2003) concluded that Black males utilize campus services for a multitude of things (academic support, financial support in the form of scholarships, grants, or loans, campus social support, etc…). However, Black males may require sociological support, not offered on a college campus, to help encourage resilience and persistence (Herndon, 2003). In addition, the study noted that participants of the study cited spiritual pursuits (prayer, reading of inspirational scriptures, and
reading of scriptures) as the mechanism employed to support stress management efforts; mainly those associated with academic performance and finances.

College students who practiced spirituality on a regular basis, were similarly better able to handle stressors (isolation, alienation, and lack of support) associated with academic living (Phillips, 2000). In a study that examined 115 participants, all of which were Black Americans attending a Predominately White Institution, Phillips (2000) examined how spirituality and religion affected the adjustment period in college. The sample consisted of 53 males and 62 females; the effects of gender were also explored. Students were given two demographic questionnaires, The Index of Core Spiritual Experiences and the Student Adaption to College Questionnaire, which were examined and reported on. Phillips (2000) concluded that spiritual pursuits and religious affiliations have a positive effect on college adjustment, which ultimately leads to higher academic achievement and academic matriculation.

**Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

From their inception, Historically Black Colleges and Universities aimed to educate, graduate, and progress students from underrepresented backgrounds. The earliest Black Colleges, nonetheless, were daunted with myriad controversies, concerns, and debates (Gasman, 2008). These debates still perpetuate most of the knowledge surrounding the HBCUs in existence. However, their worthiness and usefulness, as intellectual forces and academic staples in the Black community, has been repeatedly and historically documented (Fleming, 1984). The purpose of this section is to explicate the historical origins of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and then highlight their importance as it relates to this study.
**Origination and Statistical Importance.** The 1800s sparked the dawn of the earliest Black Colleges (Gasman, 2008), many of which were created for a plethora of reasons. Religious White missionary organizations established some institutions with the main purpose of incorporating Christianity into the Black attendees and delivering the country from the nuisance that was the uneducated Negro (Anderson, 1988; Gasman, 2008). Black organizations attempted to facilitate the creation of many early HBCUs as well (Gasman, 2008); creating Black run institutions able to design their own curriculum and minimize racially biased administrative interest. The end of the 1800s bought funding from White philanthropist. “The funding system that these industrial moguls created showed a strong tendency to control Black education for their benefit and to produce graduates who were skilled in the trades that served their own enterprises” (Gasman, 2008, p. 20). Eventually, visualizing a workforce that could be both laborer and a libertarian, White philanthropy began to expand and fund a larger component of the Black educational system (Gasman, 2008). This also fostered greater control of Black Colleges and Universities by White conservatism that supported segregation and the mission of the mogul. Some universities, however, rebelled against this *master scripting* (Swartz, 1992), and displayed their dissatisfaction by creating an unwelcoming environment on campus for industrial philanthropist (Anderson, 1988). White philanthropy to HBCUs continues however, well into the 21st century.

The mid-1900s bought *Brown v. Board of Education* and forced many HBCUs to now compete with HWIs. In 1976, 60 – 75 percent of Black students attended predominately white institutions (PWI) (Fleming, 1984). In 2011, the number of Black students attending PWIs/HWIs had stabilized; with a large proportion of Black students (approximately 300,000) selecting HBCUs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). According to the National Center for
Education Statistics (2012), 3 million Black students enrolled in a degree granting college or university (associates, bachelors, masters, etc…) in 2011. Of this number, ten percent or 300,000 of the Black students that enrolled at a degree granting institution, enrolled at a Historically Black College or University. In 2011, approximately 23% of all bachelor’s degrees attained by Black students were received from HBCUs; institutions that comprise only 3 % of the nations post-secondary educational entities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Additionally, research shows that HBCUs foster environments that are conducive to networking, relationship building, and the social maturation of Black students (Fleming, 1984; Weddle-West, Hagan, and Norwood, 2013); factors that have been shown to influence persistence in higher educational arenas as it pertains to students.

**HBCUs & Importance to Black Education.** Although HBCUs are unfortunately overrun with an over-allegiance to White values...and curricula imposed on them by the larger society, black colleges and universities still provide a place where black students can flourish and manifest into competitive entities; within and externally to the confines of the institution (Fleming, 1984, p. 154). HBCUs have also been shown to positively influence the emotional, social, and mental development of Black Students (Fleming, 1984; Weddle-West, Hagan, & Norwood, 2013). In a comparative study done by Jacqueline Fleming (1984), it was found that black students who attended PWIs were frustrated due to the non-existence of a platform to express their selves, be recognized, or participate in institutional culture. This inability to have their needs met, ultimately frustrated the students and manifested as poor academic performance. Some researchers also believe that the hostility and unsupportive environments that many Black students feel at historically (HWIs) and predominately White institutions (PWIs) may lend to the disparity seen between Black and White higher institutional success rates (Gasman, Baez, and
Turner, 2008; Weddle-West, Hagan, & Norwood, 2013). Historically Black Colleges and Universities offer Black students an opportunity to develop certain mechanisms to deal with the racially-charged society that they will be submerged in following matriculation through the academic curriculum, while eliminating many of these factors from the academic journey. Additionally, HBCUs "appear to effectively impart the orientation and skills that allow Black students to function well in the larger society: aspiration, confidence, motivation, and the ability to enjoy competition in the integrated world " (Fleming, 1984, p. 153). This qualitative study intended to use the ability of HBCUs to foster environments “where Black students can learn without the constant strain of minority status or the tension engendered by the hostile undercurrents” as minorities “in Black-White interactions” (Fleming, 1984, p. 2), to isolate the relationship between spirituality and Black student academic success during the collegiate years. Since it was the researcher’s sole intentions to examine the relationship between spirituality and Black student academic success, engaging participants attending HBCUs and that are minimally combating the social and psychological factors associated with being a minority on a collegiate campus (Fleming, 1984) allowed for a deeper examination of spiritualities influence on Black student academic success; versus an examination of spiritualities influence on other factors that hinder academic success (racial hostilities, cultural adjustments, etc…).

Furthermore, many researchers have concluded that Black students encounter problems with hostility, racism (Gasman, Baez, and Turner, 2008), poor facilitation and communication with faculty, exclusion from the curriculum/campus life, etc...while attending PWIs of learning (Fleming, 1984, p. 162). These problems with social, as well as academic adjustment, often times leads to academic failure in Black students. HBCUs provide environments that allow students to partake in a socio-emotional experience at college that is positive, which supports the intellectual
development of the student; leading to gains “in energy, enterprise, and assertiveness” (Fleming, 1984, p. 63). These gains in energy, enterprise, etc…allow students to develop a positive ethnic identity, self-acceptance, and the ability to self-actualize or seek after one’s self on a macro level, fostering an environment conducive to the pursuit of spiritual endeavors (Fleming, 1984; Weddle-West, Hagan, & Norwood, 2013). The researcher used this environment to explore the relationship between spirituality and Black American academic success during the collegiate years.

**Spirituality and Religion at Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

Black students who do not employ or utilize a mechanism for coping with collegiate adjustment stressors, academic vigor, or the emotional challenges faced while matriculating through college campuses, have been shown to experience higher levels of depression, hopelessness, alienation, and depersonalization; leading to academic failures, feelings of inadequacy, and a higher probability of economic deficit (Fleming, 1984). Dennis, Hicks, Banerjee, and Dennis, (2005), examined spirituality amongst a predominately Black college student population. Their study showed a negative correlation between those individuals partaking in spiritual pursuits and negative societal influences (drug use, crime, adolescent or young adult pregnancy, etc…) that hinder academic persistence, matriculation, or degree attainment.

Dennis, Hicks, Banerjee, and Dennis (2005) proposed a study that intended to “quantify spirituality among African American college students in order to identify spiritual indices that health educators might use in working with students with low scores” (p. 1). The researchers...
sampled 430 undergraduate African American students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) in the Northeast United States. Of the sample there were 156 males and 274 females. 90% of the sample identified as Black, with the remaining 10% identifying as White, Hispanic, Asian American, and other. The results of the study indicated that Black students, in general, demonstrate a fairly high degree of spirituality. Results from the study also confirmed that Black students were more spiritual than White students.

It was also discovered that those partaking in spiritual pursuits were less likely to engage in influences that hindered health and academic persistence. The same study also revealed that Black Americans who rely more heavily on spirituality as a method to enhance personal healthy dimensions, were better able to combat reoccurring stressors associated with societal issues (racism, economic inadequacies, emotional distresses, etc…) (Dennis, et al., 2005). This study, did not however, focus on spirituality’s influence on African American academic success specifically.

In a 2008 study, Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon examined 13 African American male attendants of a predominantly black university, in an effort to explore the role of spirituality on Black American college males attending HBCUs. The study employed a grounded theory method for investigation. The sample consisted of students from various academic majors: Psychology, Criminal Justice, Sociology, Computer Science, and Graphic Design. The researchers used open and axial coding for data analysis, and the constant comparative method of grounded theory to analyze data during the data collection phase.

Three major themes emerged from the study that helped to explain the role of spirituality among Black college male students attending a Historically Black University. The first theme
was the role of spirituality (mainly prayer). Participants described “how through prayer, they received a sense of guidance or direction whenever they felt lost during their matriculation through college and life” (p. 75). The second major theme focused on how spirituality was used in the social context. Participants were found to vocally express their spirituality to others. The second theme also disputed components of earlier research (Taylor, Chatters, and Levin, 2004) that suggested that Black males are not as spiritually involved as their female counterparts. The third major theme described social support from religious institutions. Religious institutions were noted as “being an important variable when it came to staying in school. This type of interaction was viewed as being helpful” when it came to academic progressions (p. 77). The researchers concluded that despite the racial environment, male students held on to their spiritual beliefs. Additionally, the study concluded that when males capitalize and embrace certain cultural strengths, like spirituality, they may continue their collegiate experience. Future research studies posed by the researchers were studies that examined spirituality as it relates to gender, race, and institutional type; further substantiating the need for a qualitative study, like this one, that examines the impact of spirituality on Black American students attending HBCUs.

Weddle-West, Hagan, & Norwood (2013) however, examined the impact of institution type on spirituality. The researchers formulated a study that investigated the spiritual developments of Black American students attending both Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Universities and Colleges (HBCUs). The investigators were specifically interested in how Black students developed spiritually in racially and educationally diverse environments. 125 students were selected to participate in the study; 58 participants were from the HBCU and 67 were from the PWI. Both institutions were in close proximity of one
another. The main instrument used to survey spirituality was the Armstrong Measure of Spirituality (AMOS).

The results from Weddle-West, Hagan, & Norwood’s (2013) study showed that there were significant differences in the spiritual development and practices of students attending the PWI and those attending the HBCU. Students attending the HBCU were found to display lower spiritual manifestations then those attending the PWI. The researchers postulated that this was due to an explanation posed by Constantine et al.’s (2002): that students rely more heavily on spirituality for coping and stress reduction associated heavily with being a minority amongst a majority. The results from this study also revealed that males attending HBCUs tend to display lower levels of spirituality. This was possibly due in part to a “higher degree of African self-consciousness among African American students attending HBCUs” (Cokley, 1999 as cited by Weddle-West, Hagan, & Norwood, 2013, p. 312). This study, which examined the influence of spirituality on Black student academic success during the collegiate years at HBCUs, uses Critical Race Theory and the premise of cultural wealth as points of departure.

**Literature Review Summary**

This literature review is an attempt to establish what is known about spirituality and academic success as it relates to Black American post-secondary success. Researchers like Dennis, Hicks, Banerjee, & Dennis (2005), Inglehart (2004), Jang (2004), and Riggins, McNeal, Herndon (2008) have studied spirituality and its influence on Black Americans. Important findings from these works include: Spirituality plays a pivotal role in the lives of Blacks; Blacks participate in spiritual practices more often than Whites; Black college students utilize their
spiritual beliefs to deal with stresses associated with post-secondary progressions. Other studies have also concluded that those participating in religious and/or spiritual endeavors are more likely to have a positive outlook about school and dissociate from non-beneficial behaviors (Walker and Dixon, 2002). Many studies however, have a limited focus on Black American academic success as it relates to spirituality. Of the studies that examined Black student post-secondary success in relationship to religion/spirituality, many were conducted at Predominately White Institutions. This study sought to examine the mechanisms by which spirituality might influence the academic success of Black college students attending HBCU’s. This serves the broader goal of providing a plausible solution (or model) to the degree persistence disparity between Blacks and Whites.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Grounded Theory: Rationale for the Method

As stated previously, this study used the grounded theory approach (Bitsch, 2005; Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Glaser and Strauss, 2006), and attempted to answer the following central question: *What is the nature of the relationship between spirituality and academic success for Black college students?* In attempting to answer this question, it was important to utilize a widely accepted practice that allowed for validated and reliable data analysis, as well as, outcomes that substantiated theory formation (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 2006). Grounded Theory, as a methodological approach, does just that.

The grounded theory approach, a qualitative methodological approach, allows the researcher to develop a theory from the data collected, and the opportunity to flexibly maneuver through the data collection/analysis process (Riggins et al., 2008). The Grounded Theory approach also promotes the incorporation of the participant's viewpoints into the study’s outcome; an outcome that results in a new theory; adding to the literature base of a specific topic (Creswell, 2007; Glaser and Strauss, 2006; Riggins et al., 2008). Additionally, this particular method allows the researcher to quickly realize themes in the collected data, and the ability to go back again to gather richer data to support the forming theory (Charmaz, 2006). This study used the grounded theory approach, and its usefulness in creating theories from collected data, to study the relationship between spirituality and Black American academic success during the collegiate years.

Charmaz (2006) posits that creating theories grounded in data is only one benefit of utilizing grounded theory as a method in research. Charmaz (2006) suggests that the ability to
use grounded theory as a methodological focal point to directly guide and shape your data
collection is another benefit. This allows the researcher to examine their data through fresh and
exploratory ways (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher can also incorporate greater flexibility during
the data collection phase, since grounded theory provides parameters instead of rules (Charmaz,
2006; Glaser and Strauss 2006). These parameters guide even the most novice researcher;
illuminating proper participant selection and accenting a study with the best ways to collect and
analyze data. Ultimately allowing the researcher to take an initial research intent and shape or
reformat it depending on what emerges from the data (Charmaz, 2006). This study used this
particular methodological approach to conceptualize what was happening in the relationship
between spirituality and the academic success of Black students, and described and explained it
in verified categories. Since this study sought to explore the academic success of Black students
as it relates to spirituality in hopes of forming a model amenable to future verification, a method
that seeks to make systematic sense of conceptualizations (Charmaz, 2006) provided the best
methodological approach for examining such an abstract position.

Many researchers utilize Grounded Theory for its usefulness in helping them legitimize
their research approach, while also permitting the examination of data systematically collected in
an effort to create a theoretical ideal (Bitsch, 2005). In this way grounded theory acts as the
“master metaphor of qualitative research” (Bitsch, 2005, p. 77), allowing the researcher a speedy
realization of what is happening in the data collection process as well as a simultaneous analytic
progression. Performing a study that employed a constant comparative method assisted the
researcher of this study in investigating the relationship between spirituality and Black student
academic success, by substantiating abstract ideals with rich, substantial, relevant, suitable and
sufficient data, and concurrent analysis (Charmaz, 2006).
For this study, the researcher drew on data collected systematically to propose a model describing the role of spirituality in the academic lives of Black American college students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the potential impact of spirituality on Black student academic success through the second and third year of undergraduate studies. Additionally, this study attempts to address a gap in the literature using this approach, and answer the following central question: What is the nature of the relationship between spirituality and academic success for Black college students?

**Study Design**

**Site Selection.** The participants were chosen from three Historically Black Universities and Colleges (HBCUs). All three of the institutions were located in Louisiana and serve a population of predominately Black students. For the sake of anonymity, I will call the Institutions: University D, Louisiana Black College and University, and Northern U. Below a brief demographic and historical synopsis of each institution is provided.

**University D.** University D is a private four-year, liberal arts school, recognized as being in the top tier of HBCUs. The student enrollment is typically around 1300, with a 13:1 student faculty ratio. University D also attributes approximately 74 percent of its total enrollment to continuing students (students enrolled in the previous year that returned for a second, third … year). The University has an on-campus chapel where students, as well as community members, are able to attend services on campus during the academic sessions.
Louisiana Black College and University (LBCU). Louisiana Black College and University is currently led by a president, which with his credentials, gives the University a national distinction. The student population at LBCU is approximately 73% Black, with more than one half of the institution’s enrollment of 3,121 coming directly from Louisiana. The school also has 46 majors across a gambit of degree levels (undergraduate, graduate, and professional). Students who attend this private university experience programs that rank nationally in several areas. 26.5% of the student body population attests to being catholic and the institution boosts a 64.9% first-time freshman retention rate.

Northern U. Northern University was founded and opened with the hopes of serving African American families in an urban center. The university is a Louisiana Selective III institution. This requires that students that apply to the university have at least a 2.0 high school GPA and a 20 on the ACT. Northern U is a public institution and is not directly affiliated with any church or religion; nor is its linage directly associated with any religious base. The University has more than 20 student organizations and 10 academic degree programs geared towards a population of approximately 3500 students.

Why these institutions? This institutional selection process helped the researcher account for and minimize the influence of many factors that have been shown to oppose Black student academic success (being a minority on a campus or racism), as well as allowed for a larger pool of participants that qualified for the study. The researcher also attempted to obtain a purposeful sample with some variation, by choosing HBCUs systematically from multiple locations and with different missions and offerings (Bitsch, 2005).
**Getting Access.** The researcher gained access to the institutions through prior connections made via: conferences, networking, and previous employment. Once contact was made, counselors or first year mentors were asked to provide a list of possible interviewees based on general specifications (year in program, age, race, and likelihood of completing the study) supplied by the researcher. The researcher kept accurate record of all persons involved in the participant recruitment process through excel’s software. Additionally, once participants were identified, emails, phone calls, and face-to-face interactions were the primary means of inviting the participants to agree to partake in the study.

**Participant Selection.** In this study, 15 self-identified Black American students were interviewed about their opinions of how spirituality has influenced their academic successes (or failures). Using purposeful sampling, “the researcher chooses any groups that will help generate, to the fullest extent, as many properties of the categories as possible, and that will help relate categories to each other and to their properties” (Glaser and Strauss, 2006, p.49). Due to the sole purpose of this study being to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of spirituality on the academic success of Black students, this type of participant selection and distribution allowed the researcher to explore underlying student experiences, situations, and unapparent influential factors; while putting emphasis on the beliefs and feelings of the interviewees (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, this method of recruitment helped the researcher ensure that the study ended with a theoretical sample based on the codes and categories that surfaced, while also allowing for systematic variation early on (Bitsch, 2005). Theoretical Sampling happens during the final stages of data collection, and “becomes very directed and deliberate to fill in additional detail,
test for further variation, and clarify final questions near the completion of the research project” (Bitsch, 2005, p. 79).

Furthermore, the sample consisted of participants that had finished their first year of college and were enrolled for or were in the midst of a second or third year of college. A demographic survey (see Demographic Table 3.1) was given to potential participants to ensure their fit with the study. This study focused on the relationships between spirituality and academic success through the second and third year of collegiate studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Participant</th>
<th>Institution Attended</th>
<th>Year in College</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Spiritual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>University D.</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GG</td>
<td></td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie</td>
<td></td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cain</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fazel</td>
<td></td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Free Spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raheim</td>
<td>LBCU</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayceon</td>
<td></td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahogany</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop</td>
<td></td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>???</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ash</td>
<td></td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suede</td>
<td>Northern U.</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>???</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mat</td>
<td></td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radiant</td>
<td></td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tory</td>
<td></td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>???</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Demographic Table 3.1: Shows the participants basic profile and overall fit in the study

**Participant Consent.** Before the interview was conducted, participants were given and signed a consent agreement that outlined the purpose of the study, as well as, their voluntary
participation in the study. Furthermore, participants were notified that there may be no direct benefits to them as the participator, but there may be some possible indirect benefits to their participation (these measures as well as previously stated ones are outlined in the Consent Form, which can be found in Appendix E: Letter of Consent). Additionally, participants were informed that associated risks with participating in this study were minuscule.

Data Collection

The data collection process took place over the span of one academic semester. This process of data collection was achieved by multiple (two to three), one-on-one interviews with each participant in the field, and included elicited, as well as extant texts (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Glaser and Strauss, 2006; Weiss, 1994). Each interview time was scheduled at one-to-two hour intervals to allow the interviewee an adjustment period (Weiss, 1994). This adjustment period (which gave participants time to ask questions or express concerns) happened in the presence of the researcher, and created an atmosphere conducive to participant observation and depth interviewing. Participants were also audio recorded during their interview.

Interviews. The interviews helped the researcher recreate a reality; one that was unique to each participant. Interviews often succumb both quickly and fiercely, to what the interviewer and interviewee put into them (Charmaz, 2006). Additionally, interviews allow participants to become the experts. Since the interviewees ostensibly have a significant amount of insight on the topic being studied, their impetus and openness in an interview act, in many ways, as the driving force behind the interview (Charmaz, 2006).
After participant agreement was received, the home HBCU of each individual participant housed the interviews. This choice was based on perceived interviewee comfort (Weiss, 1994). Before the interview was conducted the participants were given and signed a consent agreement that outlined the purpose of the study and the handling of data collected.

This study’s foundational data collection process rested on depth interviews (Bitsch, 2005, Weiss, 1994). Depth interviews “suggests an effort to obtain the psychological underpinnings of beliefs and opinions” (Weiss, 1994, p. 207). The interview protocol contained specific questions, which were asked in an effort to obtain critical data for collection (and analysis) (Bitsch, 2005; Riggins et al., 2008). The study also utilized open ended questions. The researcher decided on the open-ended interview questions prior to the first interviews. Each of the first interviews was between 30-45 minutes; the first interviews were all recorded and interview notes were made (Glaser, 1998). This allowed the researcher to keep track of the early interviews in an efficient manner. At the conclusion of the first interview, participants were thanked for their time, scheduled for their next interview, and memos were immediately made on interview notes (Bitsch, 2005; Glaser, 1998). Interview recordings were transcribed and memos were made during the analysis process (Bitsch, 2005; Glaser, 1998). Please see Appendix B: Interview Guide for a sample of the study’s questions/instrumentation used.

All participants were asked to participate in a second interview. The researcher scheduled participants first and second interviews within three to seven days of each other. The pilot study showed that waiting too long between interviews increased attrition rates of participants. The researcher interviewed 5-6 participants per week. The second interviews’ questions manifested from the data collected during the coding and memoing of the first interviews. Glaser and Strauss (2006) suggest that data is “collected by theoretical sampling at the same time that it is analyzed”
(p. 109). The second interviews were recorded and the researcher made additional memos based on these recordings. Field notes/interview notes (Glaser and Strauss, 2006) were also taken during the second interview; memos were made on these notes as well.

**Memos.** According to Birks, Chapman, and Francis (2008) memoing allows the qualitative researcher to *engage* with their research at a deeper level; a level that without memoing, would not be possible. Memoing can also be utilized by novice researchers “to enhance the process and outcomes of research in the qualitative domain” (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008, p. 69). Memos can be used to create an audit trail; demonstrating to the reader how the research study was conceptualized (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). Moreover, memos allow the researcher to chronicle their perspective of the research and catalog it for future reference. Using memos from study conception through study analysis, shelters the researcher from decisions made through error, ultimately giving the research momentum (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008).

The researcher chose to use a conversational style of memoing for this study, where the researcher writes memos indicative of how she thinks and speaks (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). Transcripts and interview notes were incorporated directly into the researcher’s memos. However, memos were not written during any particular interview, in an effort to promote distinctions between original participant data and other written documents (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). Additionally, the researcher delineated between early memos and later more advanced memos (Charmaz, 2006; Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008); this helped with understanding the theoretical progressions throughout the study. For this purpose, memos were titled and dated, with titles reflecting the nature and content.
Questionnaires. The text that was used in this study included both participant and researcher input (Charmaz, 2006). A background questionnaire that inquired about experience with spirituality, opinion about spirituality, and value, feeling, sensory, & knowledge as it related to spirituality was given to the participants (Creswell, 2007; Weiss, 1994). Questions asking for more personal information (grades and class standing) were also supplied to the participants in the questionnaire. This allowed the participants privacy in their initial communications and allowed the interviewer better insight on how the students were doing in their academic endeavors.

Data Analysis

The swift action of the researcher in the data collection and analysis process are important and necessary to ensure that meanings, tones, and physical descriptors are not forgotten or wrongly transcribed during the research process (Charmaz, 2006). First, the data collected was typed into word processing software. The data was then read over, multiple times, in an effort to decipher its overall intent. As the researcher read the transcribed documents, notes were made directly on the transcription (memo writing) to keep track of ideas and possible codes (Bitsch, 2005; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2007). Memoing is not restricted to one particular phase of Grounded Theory Research (Birks, Chapman, and Francis, 2008). Birks, Chapman, and Francis (2008) assert that memoing can aid the researcher throughout the research process; leaving schedules and predetermined ideas of when to memo aside. Memoing also maintains the continuity of productivity for the researcher (Charmaz, 2006; Birks). “allowing the researcher to engage with the data to a depth that would otherwise be difficult to achieve” (Birks, Chapman, and Francis, 2008, p. 69). Once segments of the document were thoroughly
analyzed, open and axial coding were used to condense the data (Creswell, 2007; Riggins et al., 2008).

**Transcriptions and Coding.** According to Creswell (2007), there are a variety of effective data analysis methods that can be used in a grounded theory study. The researcher used the open coding process (during initial coding) to form categories within the data that the researcher had transcribed (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Glaser and Strauss, 2006). Open coding, according to Bitsch (2005), refers to the technique of identifying and developing categories and sub-categories in terms of their properties and dimensions. The researcher then employed axial coding and later on selective coding. Axial coding (Bitsch, 2005) allows for a greater examination of categories that have emerged, while focusing on “the relationships between categories and sub-categories, including cause–and-effect relationships, and interactions” (p. 79). The axial coding phase also strives to increase variance in the data through sampling that includes cases “that seem to contradict the evolving theory” (Bitsch, 2005, p. 79).

Selective coding allows the researcher the opportunity to support emerging theories through the use of coding employing the central concept (Bitsch, 2005). The central concept evolves from earlier categories, sub-categories, samples, memos, and field notes (Bitsch, 2005; Glaser, 1998). Selective coding is performed by analyzing data (through the use of memos, and selective codes) with the central concept in mind, spending very little time on concepts that do not support the emerging theory. During the selective coding process, the researcher integrated a theoretical sample into the data collection process (Bitsch, 2005, Glaser and Strauss, 2006); this was conducted at Northern U and included 4 participants. Theoretical Sampling became “very directed and deliberate to fill in additional detail, test for further variation, and clarify final questions near the completion of the research project” (Bitsch, 2005, p. 79). Northern U
participants were chosen to participate in the theoretical sample due to the non-religious nature of the University and the institution not being directly affiliated with any church or religion. This allowed the researcher to look at the actual nature of spirituality, in an environment not directly promoting spiritual and/or religious engagement, and any plausible relationship it had with the academic progressions of Black students. The theoretical sample also allowed the researcher to validate (fill in details, clarify conclusions, exclude irrelevant details, etc…) emerging categories and/or properties that displayed how spirituality impacted the academic success of Black students attending HBCUs; not being limited to exclusively religiously affiliated HBCUs. The categories were then organized into a visual matrix based on theories(s) discovered (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1998).

**Final Analysis.** Grounded theory works best when researchers simultaneously analyze their data while collecting it (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 2006). “Since no proof is involved, the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis in contrast to analytic induction requires only saturation of data-- not consideration of all available data” (Glaser and Strauss, 2006, p. 104). The collected data was sorted from memos, and a substantiated emergent theory/model was formed. Theory is generated when the researcher takes the story apart and puts it back together again (Glaser and Strauss, 2006). Memos were written from sorted memos, generating theory that explains the main premise of the study (Glaser and Strauss, 2006). A final analysis of the study was done just to verify that a systematic theory was formed from the coded data. Since “theory generation is not based on raw data,” the researcher justified any emergent theory (or theories) with the coding process, category formation, and theoretical sample (Bitsch, 2005, p. 79). The manuscript was then written to reflect the final Grounded Theory product; a scholarly written document (Bitsch, 2005; Glaser and Strauss, 2006).
Verification Procedures

The verification or validation process started early in the study during the interview process. Multiple meetings between each participant and the researcher allowed the researcher to build trust with the participants. These encounters also allowed the researcher to check for misinformation/misinterpretations that arose during the transcription process. Additionally, the researcher used recorded audio to check for accuracy and understanding.

Triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing, were also used as methods of verification during the course of the study.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation is a way for a researcher to ensure validity of the research study (Bitsch, 2005). In this study, data triangulation was employed. The use of memos, interviews, texts, interview notes, and a focus group were all used to help strengthen the study’s design, as well as “reduce possible distortions or misinterpretations” (Bitsch, 2005, p. 84).

**Member Checking.** Member checks allow study participants to give feedback on interpretations and reports (Bitsch, 2005). Study participants were given the option to review transcripts as well as the final analysis write-up to diminish errors in written conclusions and researcher interpretations. None of the participants participated in this part of the process, however, participants did give their opinion (mostly of agreement and gratitude for participation) on the final findings during the focus group.

**Peer Debriefing.** Peer debriefing is the process of communicating, with those familiar with the research, about the study. The researcher’s class colleagues and peers were consulted for this role, and asked, periodically throughout the study, to engage with the researcher on the study
and the research process (Bitsch, 2005). The researcher also utilized non-academic associations for perceptions on the study, thoroughness, and readability.

Since the researcher wanted to ensure accuracy and present an unbiased study, these verification techniques were incorporated into the last stages of the verification process (Creswell, 2007).

**Ethical Considerations**

As mentioned previously, the IRB committee was notified of the intent of the researcher to perform this study. This was used as one mode of ethically considering the participants in the study. The researcher also informed all study participants of attempts to keep all correspondence and interviews confidential. In addition, applicant’s names were changed in the study to aid in confidentiality. Furthermore, the spaces chosen to conduct interviews and/or meetings were selected in a way to afford the participants maximum comfort and discretion.

**Study Limitations**

A limitation of the study was the researcher’s exposure to key theories, in the body of literature, surrounding the topic to be studied. According to Charmaz (2006), conducting the literature review of a grounded theory study after developing an analysis helps to protect the researcher from theoretical bias. However, for the sake of academic progressions, the researcher collected a wealth of literature prior to the study’s start. The methodological approach to researching the literature after the conclusion of the study also allows control over the research process and increases analytic power and validity (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 2006). The fact that literature was read and analyzed before the study began, did not directly impact the study’s outcome, however, remained a concern for the researcher throughout the study; the
researcher bracketed herself (when analyzing literature), in an effort to not create categorical bias. The researcher also accounted for this limitation throughout the study by memoing any thoughts that were directly connected to previous research and how they may have impacted that particular moment in the study. Fortunately, most of the literature in existence investigates issues not directly under investigation in this study. The literature did not directly/indirectly impact the outcomes of this study.

**Researcher Identity**

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), the researcher brings an abundance of knowledge to a qualitative study. The researcher's education, profession, and level of knowledge all affect the processing and outcome of a study. Qualitative studies require that the researcher puts him or herself directly into the study; background, education, profession, level of knowledge and all. Therefore, it became important for me as the researcher, to display my own life experiences, basis, and sensitivities (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Glaser and Strauss 2006).

I am currently, during the assembly of this document, a full-time student in the Higher Education concentration of Educational Administration. I was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, and I attended public schools most of my adolescent life. During my primary studies, I attended a school that no longer exists due to Hurricane Katrina, and for middle school I attended Francis Gregory (another school that no longer exists due to the same events). For high school, I studied at a premiere selective institution for public education. After graduating from high school, I went on to receive both my Bachelors in Science (major: Biology and minor:
Chemistry) and Masters of Natural Science (major: Biology) from Louisiana State University (LSU).

Throughout my post-secondary education I fulfilled my teaching passions with Teaching Assistantships in subjects like: Genetics, Microbiology, Food Microbiology, and Biology. After graduation, I took time off from work and school before entering into a position at a New Orleans local High School. I later moved back into the higher education sector as a Biology Instructor and Coordinator at Dillard University in New Orleans; where I held a full-time position for two and a half years before going back to school full-time and filling a position as a Graduate Assistant/full-time student. Dillard University showed me what it meant to be a Black in a Black Metropolis. The environment was set up in a way as to cultivate the best from Black students and push Black professionals to be and/or become their best. Struggle was no longer about race, but became about growth, professionalism, and educational attainment.

It would be a great injustice for me to pretend that my adult life has solely succumbed to my professional progressions. However, what I have found is that my career pursuits have allowed me to pursue personal, as well as academic goals. For instance, during my time at Dillard University I co-directed a student trip to the island of Jamaica. This trip really afforded me the opportunity to expand the cultural knowledge, and in many cases the cultural wealth, of young Black students. The trip also exposed me to the importance of travel for people that looked like me and/or people of less-affluent economic standing. The students benefitted so much from being out of the country and seeing how other cultures interact and live.

Another one of my professional/personal progressions came in the form of several trips to Puerto Rico. Although travel to the island was prompted by professional development, the
excursions really allowed time for reflection and lens (reference point) expansion. Many of the people in Puerto Rico enjoy their lives and they do not spend as much time rushing from task to task as we do in the States. This made me more aware of the hectic schedule I keep and the importance of knowledge and cultural awareness; shaping my investigative interest.

**The Role of the Researcher in the Study.** I am interested in why certain groups are born into a world with many advantages, while other ethnic or economic groups crawl into a world of hypocrisy and rejection (Bell, 1992; Freire, 1973). I wonder if the people that make me feel like I live in a society I do not belong to, will ever know the emotional, financial, and educational ramifications of living in a society you do not belong to. This gives light to my desire to examine what influences Black Student Academic Success during the Collegiate Years.

In attending majority White institutions for all of my post-secondary education, I have learned that the role of racism in this country has become more covert but by no means has it disintegrated or diminished in intensity. Thus prompting me to submerge myself into knowledge in an effort to make sense of the world I live in; to understand the *whys* and the *how* of life, racism, and more recently in my adult life, spirituality. Like academia, spirituality has helped me make sense of the economic and educational hardships that Blacks face. Spirituality has also defined the societal struggles that deliberately reduce the hierarchal gains that Blacks, as a community, are able to make in this majority dominated society. Having a spiritual purpose and connection has afforded me acceptance of this premise and the strength to forge ahead against these adversities that I face as a Black person in a non-Black dominated society. Unlike many religious practices that substantiate the societal imbalance that is currently in place between Blacks and Whites, spirituality and seeking after my creator in a personal, intimate way has garnered a passion in me that is irreplaceable and by many standards sacred. Although I
continually participate in religious practices, it is my spiritual connection that has shaped and created the most impact in my life.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the relationship between spirituality and Black student academic success through the second and third year of undergraduate studies. Much scholarship has concluded that Blacks have a stronger religious/spiritual foundation when compared to other ethnic groups (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Walker, 2002). However, very few studies have investigated the relationship between spirituality and Black student academic success (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). This study is important in minimizing the perceived gap currently in the literature. While examining the disparity between Black and White academic degree persistence, this document investigated how spirituality and its relationship to the Black community might influence this disparity.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

Introduction

When looking at the broader scale of what indirectly or directly influences academics, the literature finds that social circles, spirituality, familial involvement and/or support, campus groups, and non-academic employment (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Caboni and Adisu, 2004; Palmer, Moore, Davis, Hilton, 2010) all play a pivotal role in students’ academic successes and failures. The purpose of this qualitative study however, was to explore the relationship between spirituality and Black student academic success through the second and third year of undergraduate studies. Tinto (1993) believes that students come to colleges or universities with predispositions of what they want to find, as well as how they hope to feel at an academic institution. An entity, like spirituality, that positively nurtures this discovery between students and their academics (Morris et al., 2003; Schreiner, 2000; Walter, 2000), will, according to Tinto (1993), ultimately foster a commitment and heightened facilitated connection between the institution of higher education and the student; thus increasing both retention and persistence. This chapter reports on the themes formulated and the results obtained from data analysis.

Participant Profiles

For this study I chose three Historically Black Universities/Colleges (HBCUs). All three of the institutions were centrally located in Louisiana, and serve a population of predominately Black students. For the sake of anonymity, I will call the Institutions: University D, Northern U., and Louisiana Black College and University. Each university’s participants’ portraits can be found below. Providing a brief synopsis about each participant allows for a better understanding of the spiritual and academic variations found amongst those participating in the study.
University D’s Participant Portraits. Six participants were chosen from University D. Of the six, three were males and three were females. The females were creatively called (to insure discretion) Eve, GG, and Jessie. The males were Cain, Fazel, and Raheim. These names allowed the participants to protect their identity and freely discuss their experiences. The subsequent information outlined, was retrieved from the demographic surveys participants were asked to complete.

**Eve.** Eve was an entering junior that maintained a 3.7 cumulative grade point average. Eve participated in multiple academically and non-academically affiliated on-campus groups/clubs. She also maintained extensive networks inside these affiliations, with her friends, and with her family. The participant attended private, religious k-12 schools, and labeled her denomination as African Methodist Episcopal. Eve also considered herself “some what” religious, and devoutly spiritual.

**GG.** GG was a junior that maintained a 2.5 cumulative grade point average. GG held several roles socially: girlfriend, best friend, mentee, mentor, etc… The participant continued many of her academic relationships from her hometown and formed new networks at University D. GG considered herself both religious & spiritual, and practiced the Baptist faith.

**Jessie.** Jessie, at the time of this study, was re-embarking on her spiritual journey and understanding her position academically and religiously. The participant was currently a junior that a held a 3.2 grade point average. The participant considered herself both spiritual & religious and engaged in on campus religious ministries.

**Cain.** Cain was the 1st male participant to agree to be interviewed for the study. Cain was also the first sophomore to participate in the study. This participant held a 3.1 grade point
average, and like Jessie considered himself religious and spiritual. Cain held campus residential and leadership affiliations. He also attributed much of his academic focus to his social, professional, and familial networks.

_Fazel._ Fazel was just exiting his junior year at the time of this study. The participant had maintained a 2.8 GPA, and had been in good academic standing with the university since entering University D his freshman year. Fazel, in the demographic survey, considered himself a “free spirit.” The participant did not participate in any on campus groups, however, held a job at a local pharmaceutical supplier.

_Raheim._ Raheim, amidst working multiple jobs, was entering his junior year at University D. Raheim had attended the institution for 2 years and maintained a 2.7 grade point average. The participant considered himself both religious and spiritual. The participant sporadically participated in on-campus groups. Raheim attributed most of his spiritual and religious bearings to his familial upbringing.

_Louisiana Black College and University’s Participant Portraits._ Five participants were chosen from Louisiana Black College and University. Two were males and three were females. The females were Jayceon, Andy, and Mahogany. The males were Pop and Ash.

_Jayceon._ Jayceon was a “frustrated” entering junior that, despite her frustrations, was able to maintain a 3.2 grade point average. Jayceon considered herself both religious and spiritual; however, the interview prompted Jayceon to note that she was mainly spiritual and sought after a true connection with her creator. The participant engaged in several on-campus groups and clubs and maintained an open line of communication with her mother.
**Andy.** Andy was a junior, just entering her third year. Andy had managed to maintain a 4.0 grade point average, and prided herself on structured academic achievement. The participant was affiliated with a religious on-campus club and with other academic clubs that supported her major. She considered herself the key factor to her achievement. She also maintained extensive relationships within her social circle.

**Mahogany.** Mahogany came to Louisiana Black College and University from a religious academic background. The participant attended an area Catholic Private high school, were she received her education through honors classes. Mahogany maintained a 3.4 grade point average through her first semester as a sophomore. The participant considered herself extremely spiritual, however, did not relate to many of the premises that defined religion.

**Pop.** Of all the participants, Pop had been in his collegiate academic journey the longest. Although he had 2 and a half years left at Louisiana Black College and University, he had been there almost 6 academic years. Pop’s GPA was a 2.5, and the participant had managed to acquire multiple majors over his academic career. Pop considered himself religious, but was unsure of whether to label himself spiritual.

**Ash.** Ash had just exited his junior year and participated in a plethora of academic clubs and groups. The participant did not consider himself religious, but identified as spiritual. Ash maintained a 3.2 grade point average and attributed much of his academic successes to hard work and social influences.

**Northern U.** Four participants were chosen from Northern University (pseudonym). Two were males and two were females. The females were Radiant and Tory. The males were Suede
and Mat. Participants were also asked to complete the demographic survey; the information outlined was retrieved from that survey.

**Suede.** Suede, at the time of this study, was a second semester junior with a 2.98 GPA. Suede had encountered many academic obstacles and was currently attempting to improve his academic standing. The participant did not really consider himself religious or spiritual. However, the student found prayer and or mediation to be helpful at different points of his academic career.

**Mat.** Mat was the first and only non-traditional student I interviewed. Mat had entered into a career right after graduating high school, but later registered for Northern U at approximately 23 years of age. Mat was a junior with a 3.0 GPA. The participant considered himself to be spiritual but not religious, although he had grown up devoutly religious.

**Radiant.** Radiant had recently finished her junior year at the university and was beginning her voyage to graduation. The student maintained a 4.0 GPA and considered herself to be both religious and spiritual. Radiant participated in clubs and had been at the university for 3 years after a brief stint at a community college.

**Tory.** Tory was an interesting participant that still seemed to be searching for her place in life. The student was unsure if she was spiritual, but attested to being completely non-religious. Tory had just began a recent journey into her spirituality and found that prayer during distress was helpful. The student maintained a 3.8 GPA.
Figure 4.1. Spirituality as an Indirect Influence on the Academic Success of Black College Students with emergent properties.
From multiple depth interviews, and an inclusive focus group, three themes emerged: (1) Spirituality and Enduring Life’s Obstacles, (2) Spirituality as an Influence on Personal Transformation, and (3) Accomplishing Academic Momentum (Figure 4.1), which allowed a grounded theory of spirituality’s influence on Black student academic success to be identified. The formulation of this theory answered the research question: *What is the nature of the relationship between spirituality and academic success for Black college student,* and highlighted the impact of spirituality on academic achievement as it pertains to Black students. The following section will provide a comprehensive analysis as it relates to each theme and the substantiating evidence supporting the overarching theory. The properties associated with each theme and many of the corresponding interview question(s) asked will be discussed in this section as well.

**Spirituality and Enduring Life’s Obstacles: Theme 1**

The importance of spirituality in the lives of African Americans is well known (Riggins, McNeal, Herndon, 2008). According to Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon (2008), “religion and spirituality continue to provide African-Americans with incredible resolve when facing adversity” (p. 71). During this study, participants interviewed referred to their spirituality as a center piece in their decision making, emotional health, and ability to endure obstacles faced as Black college students:

So I feel like [spirituality] motivated my second semester. So second semester… I had a lot of breakdowns—my G.P.A. was a 1.9 first semester. I have to really…it’s easy to drop it, it’s hard to raise it, you know!?!? So I was breaking down, I had anxiety; it was hard freshman year. And then second semester… [the]
first semester [of my] sophomore year, I was…like I said…I was angry, I lashed out…umm …I partied… everyday, I was a rebel and then sophomore year I don’t know what happened…I just…second semester [spirituality] turned it. (GG)

GG felt that in a time when her academic career was going poorly, and she felt almost out of control, her spirituality held her back from the brink and allowed her to persist.

Students (from all three institutions) also referenced spirituality as being utilized when solace was being sought, saying that: “When I can’t get…when there’s nothing more I can do…spirituality relives that…presses a reset button (Suede).” Suede did not completely understand his spirituality, but utilized demonstrations of spirituality when braving life’s difficulties. Another student described feeling the same relief through an outward manifestation of spirituality as well: “Going to church always helps to calm me down. It’s very relaxing and I can always relate to the scripture” (Pop). Spirituality allowed students the ability to endure life’s obstacles and continue to focus on academic pursuits; with the students’ spiritual beliefs acting in finding a harmonious balance, and securing feelings of empowerment & wellbeing: coping with stress and strength in the time of weakness. The next few sections will describe each one of the properties associated with Spirituality and Enduring Life’s Obstacles (balance and empowerment & wellbeing: coping with stress, and strength) in detail.

**Balance.** The pursuit of a college degree is often riddled with how to manage ones time, social influences, economic adjustments, academic obligations, etc... Many students discussed the importance of finding a balance as it pertained to their personal lives and academic careers:

I’ve come to the realization that the stronger my relationship with God is, just the easier it will be to get through it. Not in terms of academic work, but just in terms
of having a calm balance. Like, just so you don’t feel frazzled, and just overwhelmed all of the time. (Pop)

Pop explained how spirituality played a pivotal role in maintaining a balance between his academic self, and his other identities. Other participants also cited their spirituality as a tool used for harmonious mental/emotional/social engagement.

When asked: What does spirituality mean to you, many students reported feelings of being centered and in the right place as a result of their unique relationship with their spirituality: “Spirituality…to me…is being able to center yourself…take yourself mentally away from everything else that’s going on around you. To be able to... just ease down and meditate…and focus on what’s important to you” (Eve). Some participants clarified definitively that their spirituality offered them a sense of peace that allowed them to positively focus on other endeavors. Here the participant (GG) relays how her spirituality offers balance and altitude when things seem discordant:

It means a lot to me because I feel like I’m nothing without my spirituality. When I feel lost, I know that’s where I need to turn to and then it brings me back to reality; like it…it levels me. (GG)

While the participants included above described spirituality as a source of general psychological/emotional balance, others described balance in a more specific sense. Several participants interviewed stated that their spirituality helped them with balance when they felt overwhelmed; offering an internal peace that appeared to be associated with a more focused academic participation:
Putting God first will help like keep you inline [with your academics], give you a sort of structure because you know your priority level. You try and keep a strong relationship with whoever your higher being is, well for me its God because I’m Catholic, and you understand that certain things happen for a reason. (Pop)

Moreover, as with the student above, some students credited their spiritual beliefs with keeping them “grounded” and “on track” as well. Spiritually prompted balance, as it related to academics, appeared to allow students the parameters needed to maintain their standard of academic performance or success. More specifically, spirituality offered students a mental and emotional balance while in a collegiate setting.

**Empowerment & Wellbeing**. While some students described spirituality as a contributor to a generalized sense of balance in their lives, others described spirituality as a support in particularly tough times or support in motivated future-oriented action. For these participants, personal spiritual beliefs seemed to play a role in how participants coped with stress and climbed out/stayed out of a weakened state. Lanier (1997) examined the emotional life of 200 Black college students and concluded that Black students face a number of experiences with racial discrimination, financial strain, and self-perception while in some university settings; ultimately diminishing the confidence of Black students. The participants of this study employed their spirituality to combat these stressors and enhance their academic prowess.

**Coping & Stress**. Spirituality seemed to guide students when employing certain coping mechanisms. Participants consistently spoke of the stresses and pressures associated with matriculating through their academic career. From crying, wanting to drop out, failing/passing classes, and feeling hopeless, students experienced a variety of emotions and possible deterrents while in college:
[I] believe it was first or second semester of my sophomore year and one of my suitemates… found out that they had put us in the wrong room accidentally; that we were going to have to move all of our stuff out. Like and we’re stressing because this is the Friday before classes start. Like classes were going to start that Monday and… the room that we were supposed to go into wasn’t ready so we were going to be in temporary housing. Move all of our stuff in there and then we were going to once [school started], were going to have to move again. And then I was working, doing my internship and then getting ready to start school… I was so stressed out…umm…and I just remember us both… like running around to these different offices to talk to all these different people, so that we didn’t have to move, and we just stopped…in the middle of all that and just prayed about it and in the end…they figured out a solution. We didn’t have to move out of the room. And so…sometimes, in certain situations you … just don’t even worry. While other people are like worrying like ‘well I need to know …I need answers!’ …you don’t worry because you have a sense of security inside. (Eve)

Eve, when engaged in certain spiritual practices as a mechanism for coping with individual stressors and distractions, cited that using spirituality allowed her to separate from pressures and ultimately do better in school or the school setting. Another student described her use of spirituality during an emotional breakdown:

Cause like I said, I have break-downs…like, every other week and for me to just turn to my Word … or just say a simple prayer and I know that…with all that I’ve been through; I’ve known that when I thought I couldn’t do it by myself, He came. He done it for me. (GG)
GG, like Eve, employed spirituality to combat a possible distraction to academic learning. Another student discussed similar use, but during a test: “I took the time to pray, and asked the Lord to relax my mind, guide me, and put my wisdom on that paper it came into light” (Radiant); also demonstrating how spirituality is used by Black college students for coping during times of stress.

Relinquishing control (one mechanism students used in coping) and “trusting God” (another mechanism used) also allowed students to handle feelings of being inundated with obligations, decisions to make, or upsetting incidents:

My spirituality is what keeps me grounded. I can't do well on my academics if my personal life is out of order. I can't always control what happens to me or those around me though try as I might. That's when I feel meditation and prayer are most essential. If I can't do anything else, I have to trust God and the universe to work everything out. I trust in God enough to know that everything happens for a reason even if I don't get it. (Mahogany)

Students, including Mahogany, referenced feelings of not knowing what to do in life and looking to their spiritual beliefs for a sense of reprieve. Ultimately, this relief reduced stress and allowed students the ability to cope with pressures, unsavory environmental distractions, and other possible hindrances to academic progression. Students who used their spirituality to cope with stresses associated with life’s circumstances and the academic environment, typically appeared to easily accept academic setbacks as well as garner the motivation necessary to strive towards academic matriculation/achievement.
A Source of Strength. Feeling out of balance and needing to cope with life’s stresses were just some of the issues these students faced as they ascended through college. Student participants also gave accounts of feeling weakened by different personal circumstances while in school. Issues like having to live up to family educational standards, feeling inadequately prepared during school or other personal situations, and maneuvering through adulthood, all left students looking to their spirituality for strength. Some students even required a spiritual uplift just to get going in the mornings:

I take…I take it wherever I go. Like, it’s one thing that I know that will get me through the day. Like, I woke up this morning…I had a rough morning this morning. I said God give me the strength; I found $30 in my bag! (Jessie)

Spirituality gave students the notion that nothing was impossible with the help of their creator. Spirituality also allowed some students to feel empowered as an individual as a result of having a belief system that offered them strength:

Talking on the phone is different from actually being there, actually crying on…her [my mother’s] lap or whatever. So I feel like [I’m] stronger now because I can talk to Him and I’ve seen all that He’s done in the twenty years of my life and I know that I have so much more to come. (GG)

GG, like many other students, felt strengthened as a result of her spirituality; utilizing both pray and an intimate relationship (with their creator) to achieve this benefit. A few students even went on to relay the belief that their creator was all powerful and in many instances invincible:

“Something bigger than me is on my side” (Mahogany). So if this Supreme Being “was on their side,” any feelings of inadequacy or inferiority should be/would be mitigated. Their spiritual
strength reminded students of the time that has passed and allowed them a positive disposition about the future: “It definitely helps [me] find strength and have a positive attitude” (Ash). Many of the students interviewed cited a renewed sense of balance and a supernatural ability to push through and complete any task as a result of their spiritual connection.

**Spirituality as an Influence on Personal Transformation: Theme 2**

Participants expressed facing many personal challenges while matriculating through their academic career. The challenges encountered ranged from learning to understand new & ever-changing dynamics to becoming acclimated to a different/ new academic environment. Many of these challenges weighed heavily on the students and impacted their personal life. One participant discussed the importance of his spiritual beliefs in finding himself while being away from family and friends:

Umm…yes, it has…it has. I was attending…Franklin? Yeah, Franklin Avenue…it’s off…it’s on Franklin…so yeah, the church Franklin. I think the pastor there is Reverend Luter. They had… college night and it was more so like a revival I would say and…it just had…they had a pastor there…umm…talking about…college. Like basically saying…you know…you’re going to struggle, you have to find…you’re going to find yourself in college. And I feel like I made a connection with that because, I mean I was…well, I’m still trying to find myself, but like when they…when he was speaking on it, I felt a connection through that because I felt like I was going through that. (Fazel)

This ultimately dictated many of the student’s future actions, while also prompting his acceptance of the struggles he experienced and would experience in school. Issues experienced
by the participants, also seemed to have some indirect influence on the student’s academic performance. This section will explicate the students’ use of their spirituality to adjust to changing environmental factors and understand new dynamics; properties offering substantial evidence for the theme Spirituality as an Influence on Personal Transformation.

Adjusting to Changing Environments. In adjusting to difficulties associated with a new academic environment or displacement, students cited their spirituality as helping to define how they would fit into their academic career and how they would develop as a student. One student made use of her spirituality to understand and embrace these challenges:

First semester…I felt like God just spoke to me and came over me one night. And was like this is what you need, even if you don’t agree with what they’re preaching in the church, just the fact that you got that sense of community that’s gonna like bring you home and bring you to me. Even if you’re just going through the motions [at church] and you don’t agree with anything that they’re saying, you just sit there and just be with it and be with me, then we can get through this [not belonging at school] together. (Mahogany)

Embracing a new environment not only helped Mahogany become better acclimated to her new academic setting but also fostered growth within her spiritual self; ultimately allowing acceptance of her new physical surroundings.

For other students, spirituality enabled self-removal from potentially harmful situations on their new campus, permitting the student to “evolve” more as a person:

You might be in a room full of guys… probably smoking and drinking but you know that’s not the good intention that you want to have. That’s really not the
right thing to do. So I probably have to let the inside man [God] speak to me... like, Raheim just walk away like go somewhere else. So it’s kind of... [I’m] kind of good with spirituality (Raheim).

Post-secondary environments can be filled with not only frustrations about adjusting to the actual physical setting, but also the campus climate that comes with this new setting; as seen with Raheim’s experience. Students learned how to utilize their spirituality to connect to their educational institution, while still remaining true to their higher self. Spirituality thus allowed students to adjust to an environment where they could potentially flourish as a student.

A Break Away from the Familiar: Understanding New Dynamics. Students interviewed also employed their spiritual belief system when understanding how to accept disruptions in familiar personal patterns. For instance, participants spoke of shifts in familiar familial and social dynamics that made them rethink many of the foundational components that once shaped who they were:

Well, I would say they are...well, my grand-mother still is now. Me and my mother's relationship is not where it use to be...but for my grand-mother, she is definitely still my number one like, reason for making all of the good decisions that I do make. But now I have noticed that being...having a more estranged relationship with my mother…I have also been involved more in like, religious [and spiritual] based activities. (Andy)

One participant, when asked has this [spiritual] experience had an effect on your college academic experience, recalled praying and a receiving an answer for a better sense of who she should associate herself with when returning for a new academic semester:
I came back to school; no one talked to me out of whole the entire group. And that
gave me time to; like I said, to focus on myself. And like I said, I didn’t go to no
parties; I was in my room. I go to class; I go back to my room. My boyfriend
would come to the room and it’s just me and him… I was so successful! (GG)

The student was answered with a complete shift in the social dynamic she had become
accustomed to; returning to a campus where she now has to accept a break away from the
familiar.

Whether affording students the ability to adjust or helping them grow as a person,
spirituality directly impacted/influenced student evolution. This ultimately dictated many of the
students’ future actions, while also prompting an acceptance of the struggles experienced during
academic progression. From the data collected in this study, it appears that personal
transformation is inevitable when employing spirituality. The section directly following will
discuss Accomplishing Academic Momentum; the third and final theme.

**Accomplishing Academic Momentum: Theme 3**

Studies show that spirituality not only affects the personal lives of Black students, but
spirituality affects the academic lives of these students as well (Riggins, McNeal, Herndon,
2008; Phillips, 2000; Herndon 2003; Lanier 1997). Spirituality allows the participants to cope
with stress: “Spirituality helps with focusing on grades and increased intelligence….outside of
school, spirituality helps with every day issues such as relationship disputes, family issues,
altercations and even scenarios involving danger” (Cain) and to balance life, school, and
relationships. As it pertains to the data collected in this study, spirituality’s effect on academics,
however, is a more subtle/indirect impact.
It appears that spirituality did not specifically cause the students to be academically successful, but alleviated potential distractions: “Spiritually keeps me on track too. I’m able to distinguish what has to be done just by connecting with my inner self” (Raheim). Spirituality allowed students the ability to cope. Spirituality also played a role in how participants perceived the academic setting, indirectly motivating academic participation.

I know this had an influence on my academics because I wouldn’t find myself stressing out about classes like other students. I prayed for understanding of topics during class periods, guidance when studying for tests, and help to remember all that I studied and even what I didn't before I took the test. (Eve)

This in turn allowed the students to study harder, separate from social distractions, participate in academic discussions, study groups, class attendance, etc…

For me personally, my spirituality is going to affect my performance, but I don't think that it is like that for everyone. I think it's more of a faith in yourself which can sometimes stem from the support you feel or not from a higher power. (Mahogany)

Mahogany experienced an increase in her performance when spirituality increased her faith. Another student described how spirituality helped to increase his performance by increasing his “drive”:

So I pray to help him…I pray that he help me…you know…improve my work performance, my…my drive to do better…cause I feel like I was kind of down on myself like during mid-terms…cause I feel like, oh I could do better than this…I
don’t know what’s going on but at the same time I was still being influenced by other things. (Cain)

This increase in drive improved the student’s work performance, allowing Cain to push past distractions and focus on the academic environment.

From this data, two properties were noticed as it relates to Accomplishing Academic Momentum: how students used their spirituality as a means of gaining clarity and boosting their confidence. Both properties are discussed in detail in this section.

Clarity. Although some students did not feel that their spiritual beliefs would, by its self, make them get higher grades: “When people say, ‘Oh I’m just going to pray to get an A on the test,’ it doesn’t work like that! Faith without works is just empty (Pop),” students did express feeling clearer: “I prayed before class even started! [Asking] Lord please give me some type of clarity” (Mat) and more focused as a result of prayer:

Spirituality! I always, if there’s an assignment that I’m like having trouble with, I pray. Every time I take a test, I pray before the test. I pray when I’m studying to help me… umm…focus on what I need to focus on ‘cause sometimes you study the wrong things or you’re not…you’re missing certain points…. I know that in the mornings like I would read devotionals or at night I’ll read a scripture before I go to sleep. So…I feel like…that…I give credit before any test, I pray…while I’m studying I ask to help me God to the right areas so that I can focus on what I need to be focusing on when I’m studying… I’ve just always been, I guess, a spiritual person. (Eve)
Eve’s study habits and test taking abilities seemed to be affected as a result of this clarity.

Spirituality also offered students a clearer, more vivid belief in their ability and the persistence to see certain academic task to completion. Confidence levels began to increase with increasing belief and faith in a higher deity, allowing students to trust in their efforts because it was all a part “of a higher plan.”

**Confidence: Spirituality & the Plan.** Having to trust one’s life trajectory to someone or something else may bother some people. However, for many of the students interviewed, knowing that their place in this journey was not purposeless, offered them a confidence that surpasses intellectual explanation:

I was having a moment the other day crying and stressed just really down. I turned on my gospel … and I knew everything was going the way he wanted. And this was a test to my testimony and my mood did a 180 in a matter of minutes.

(GG)

Here GG attests to how certain spiritual practices keep her confidence level up and pulls her back from the edge.

Participants also spoke of how knowing that a higher source had something bigger for them really helped to motivate them in their respective degree areas.

Because I accept the role of somebody else higher...that higher being named God, in my life at all times. umm...I believe that everything...and I know this...this is kind of going to be a little contradictory because I just said I was responsible for my own academic success but I do believe that everything happens for a reason. And God's plan is that reason. And we just...I feel like we either work with Him
or work against Him but even working against Him it's kind of working with Him because...you know...ain't nothing gone happen if He don't want it to happen. So I just give Him like, the supreme power like, the end. Whatever He say, it happens. To me, spirituality means feeling....like, feeling something greater than you at work in the world. (Andy)

Forcing Andy to put her ego to the side and work with her creator to accomplish her life’s trajectory. This interpretation of spirituality kept students from giving up and indirectly forced them to study harder, become academically stronger, and participate in their overall academics more enthusiastically:

Setting goals and praying that I accomplish [the] goals, reflect on [my relationship with the Lord]… The faith that I put in the Lord; that was it. The faith that I put in myself first, and then the faith that I put into the Lord, I knew he was going to guide me in every trial and tribulation that I was gonna cover in school. (Radiant)

Knowing that a higher being was on their side, not only offered students like Radiant and others confidence to go at their academics, but allowed students to move pass distractions to focus singularly on their academic performance. Both clarity and confidence as bi-products of spiritual beliefs helped students, indirectly, to accomplish academic momentum.
Final Iteration

The themes explained above began as six (6) inter-related themes: A Life Rooted in Spirituality, Balance, Coping & Stress, Spirituality: A Source of Strength, Spirituality as an Influence on Personal Growth, and the Academic Impact of Spirituality. After extensive coding and data analysis, the themes and properties, explained throughout this chapter, emerged. These particular ideas seemed to best support the overarching theory that spirituality plays a very inimitable *indirect* role in academic success. The ability to maneuver between emergent properties and data collection, supported the finding of this presumption and is one of the distinct assets of Grounded Theory. The table following outlines the themes as they relate to the properties that manifested from the codes.

**Table 4.1: Themes and Properties Representing the Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Properties Representing Themes</th>
<th>Examples of Supporting Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Spirituality and Enduring Life’s Obstacles</td>
<td>Balance</td>
<td><em>In terms of having a calm balance.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Being able to center yourself.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Focus on what’s important.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Empowerment and Wellbeing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coping &amp; Stress:</td>
<td><em>When I have issues I don’t try to handle them myself.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>I asked the Lord to relax my mind.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strength:</td>
<td><em>I always felt like, I had somebody to lean on.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>I said God give me the strength.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>I feel like [I’m] stronger now because I can talk to Him.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Spirituality as an Influence on Personal Growth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 3. Accomplishing Academic Momentum

#### Clarity

*While I’m studying I ask to help me God to the right areas so that I can focus*

*Lord please give me some type of clarity*

#### Confidence

*I knew everything was going the way he wanted.*

*I feel like we either work with Him or work against Him but even working against Him it’s kind of working with Him. I knew he was going to guide me in every trial and tribulation.*

---

**Note:** This table outlines the emergent properties as they relate to the participants’ statements. The table also shows how these statements and emergent properties interrelate and relate to each theme. The supporting statements provided act as an aid in understanding this relationship and are not intended to represent all of the data analyzed.
Grounded Theory of Spirituality’s Influence on the Academic Success of Black College Students

The grounded theory of spirituality’s influence on Black student academic success was identified to answer the research question: *What is the nature of the relationship between spirituality and academic success for Black college students?* (Figure 4.1; Figure 4.2) The influence of spirituality on the academic achievements of Black college students comes in many forms (Figure 4.1; Figure 4.2). The data highlighted that students utilize their spiritual beliefs to cope with stress, balance & structure their lives, and gain/build confidence (Table 4.2). Data analysis also indicated that participants used spirituality to help them focus and have a sense of strength (Table 4.2). All are factors important to the academic enhancement of a student’s potential.

Students interviewed also employed their spiritual belief system when adjusting to disruptions in familiar personal patterns. This, once alleviated, allowed the students to maintain clarity and have a more positive outlook about their academic environment & their future. Spirituality acted as a necessary indirect tool for the handling of issues external to academics and those supporting positive academic choices. However, even with certain spiritual components in place, students still had to study, go to class, participate in their academics, refrain from certain detrimental activities, etc… Participants reported still having to strive towards academic excellence and “choose what [they] want[ed] to do” since prayer alone would not keep them from “getting an F.” Spirituality allowed students to accept that a larger scale ideology reigned supreme over their lives, which indirectly motivated them to study harder and continue academic ascension.
Figure 4.2. Spirituality as an Indirect Influence on the Academic Success of Black College Students
Summary

When looking at the broader scale of what indirectly or directly influences academics, this study found that spirituality played a pivotal, yet indirect role in students’ academic successes and failures. Students relied on their spirituality to deal with stress, understand their positions in the academic environments, balance courses with social and personal priorities, etc… Data analysis, associated with this study, highlighted the unique relationship that spirituality has with these components and how this relationship plays into educational progressions. Although spirituality had an indirect role in Black student’s academic careers, it remained imperative in their lives.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Spirituality, as an influence on the academic success of Black students, was examined during the course of this study. It was discovered that spirituality has a definite, yet indirect, impact on Black Student academic success. The data from this investigation also lead the researcher to conclude that students infuse their spiritual beliefs into stress coping, balance, strength building, knowledge cultivation, and personal transformation. This chapter serves as a discussion of the final conclusions as it relates to this study: An Exploratory Examination of Spirituality and Black Student Academic Success at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The first section of this chapter will revisit the purpose of this study, along with providing a re-introduction to the research question guiding this investigation. The second section will present a detailed discussion of the findings in the context of the existing literature. The subsequent section addresses the significance of how spirituality, and the knowledge of how a student’s relationship with spiritual and religious practices, can influence educational practices. The fourth section describes the study’s limitations; with the fifth section offering recommendations for future research as it pertains to spirituality, academia, and Black post-secondary learning.

Why This Study Was Conducted?

The purpose of this study was to investigate the potential relationship between spirituality and Black student academic success through the second and third year of undergraduate studies. Few studies have examined the relationship between spirituality and the academic progressions of Black students (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). While taking the premise of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) into consideration, this study explored the relationship between spirituality and academic success for Black college students; with a focus on those in their second and third
year of college. The research was based on the following research question: *What is the nature of the relationship between spirituality and academic success for Black college students?*

**Literature Integration**

Spirituality plays a major role in the unique way students view their post-secondary institutional experience (Austin, Austin, and Lindholm, 2011). However, very little research has been done on spirituality’s influence on higher educational academic success (Austin, Austin, and Lindholm, 2011); especially as it pertains to Black college student development (Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon, 2008). The data from this study suggests that spirituality does, in fact, affect both the academic institutional experience and academic learning experience. For the participants in this study, spirituality’s influence on their post-secondary educational experience however, was that of a more indirect one. Spirituality only directly affected a student’s ability to cope, maintain balance, and/or seek clarity in situations. It did not specifically or directly influence whether a student remained academically successful as it pertained to GPA, test points, and assignment grade averages. Students described this relationship in terms of their ability to get lower/higher grade markings. As was noted in the interview with Pop; a veteran student who by many classifications may be considered a non-traditional student during the time of this study:

> God gave you free will to choose to do what you want to do, so if you choose not to study and you think that just praying is going to get it done and you get the F you can’t necessarily be upset…because you didn’t put forth the effort…you reap what you sow. (Pop)
Additionally, conclusions from this study suggested that students who actively participated in their academics with a healthy spiritual relationship intact, used spirituality to separate from emotional/academic pressures and ultimately progress in the academic setting:

To me you’re praying all throughout the day. Like before you go to class, like please, like help me to understand what we’re discussing. Cause there are times when I’m so lost; I just have to stop and say, ‘Please help me God understand this!’ (Eve)

Students (like Eve), as a result of their outward spiritual manifestations (prayer, spiritual discussions, meditation, etc…), were clearer when studying, experienced less stress when facing large assignments or academic tasks, and because of their closeness with their creator felt the need to participate more and effectively in study groups, class sessions, out of class work.

**Spirituality Outside of Black Student Academic Success.** Dennis, Hicks, Banerjee, & Dennis (2005) concluded that those partaking in spiritual pursuits were less likely to engage in influences that hindered health and academic persistence. The same study also revealed that African Americans who rely more heavily on spirituality as a method to enhance personal health, were better able to combat reoccurring stressors associated with societal issues (racism, economic inadequacies, emotional distresses, etc…). And while the researchers did not focus on spirituality’s influence on Black American *academic success* specifically, the connection of their findings to the data presented here is strong. Students cited spirituality as a support in overcoming academic anxiety and drew on their spirituality when refraining from social distractions on campus. This included avoiding drugs and alcohol, dealing with new social relationships on campus, and coping with the stresses of living away from home.
This coping function of spirituality is certainly not limited to higher education. Jang (2004) also concluded that Blacks who relied on non-organizational religion (prayer or asking someone to pray) or spirituality, organizational religion (normal practices associated with religion), or subjective religiosity (perceived religiousness) as a coping mechanism experienced significantly less stress than those with no religious/spiritual involvement. The researcher also concluded that those Blacks that considered themselves as religiously/spiritually devoted had more self control and lower levels of distress than those not religiously/spiritually committed (Jang, 2004). Students in this study experienced similar results as a consequence of their spiritual beliefs:

I never considered myself getting stressed out about a situation. Like, okay I might have a lot to do but I already know it’s going to get done some way or another. I’m not worried about it not getting done or what’s going to happen. Like, I know it’s going to get done; it’s just about time management. So I think when you have a strong spiritual connection, you tend to worry less…so you don’t become as…as stressed…you don’t feel like there’s so much pressure on you. (Eve)

Eve expressed how, in comparison to her academic colleagues, she experienced less stress and/or frustration about the future due to her spiritual foundation. Other students also expressed the ability to walk away from treacherous social pressures and the tenacity to go at their academic career alone [away from social distractions] when they felt a higher source was involved. Jessie, a study participant from University D, described feeling a “big relief” and “okay” when describing her relationship with spirituality:
If it wasn’t for prayer, I believe I wouldn’t be where I am. Because it’s a lot of days I was like, ‘I don’t know how I’m going to do this. I don’t know if I can do this. Is this for me?! And after I prayed it was like a big relief. Like okay, I can do this. And I had other people praying with me and for me, so. (Jessie)

Stating that certain academic tasks and even daily living is impossible without the help of her spirituality.

In a study of the effects of spiritual pursuits and religious affiliations, Phillips (2000) concluded that spiritual pursuits and religious affiliations have a positive effect on college adjustment; ultimately supporting higher academic achievement and academic matriculation. The data from this study corroborated many of Phillips’ (2000) conclusions. Data showed that some students felt having spirituality as a personal foundation allowed them to better acclimate to the college setting; thus perpetuating positive academic progressions. Participants cited spirituality as important in helping them evolve as a person as well. Participants referenced spirituality as a major factor in understanding ‘who they were’ as individuals and how to adapt to the new college context around them.

This investigation however, examined Black students and their academic progressions as it relates to spirituality at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Black colleges and universities afford Black students a greater opportunity to participate in the roles they will acquire in society (Fleming, 1984). HBCUs also foster an environment conducive to the successful matriculation of the Black student; an environment largely devoid of racial stigma that often distracts and pushes students to attend more to coping strategies, leaving less focus on academics. Phillips (2000) investigated Black students attending PWI and college adjustment. In
both this study and Phillips’ (2000) study nonetheless, spirituality acted as a buffer making it easier for the Black student to ignore distractions and overcome stressors.

**Spirituality at HBCUs: The Literature Integration Summary.** In a 2008 study, Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon explored the role of spirituality on Black American college males attending HBCUs. The study utilized a grounded theory method for investigation. Three major themes emerged from the study and helped to explain the role of spirituality among Black college males attending a Historically Black University. The first theme was the role of spirituality (mainly prayer). The second major theme focused on how spirituality was used in the social context. The third major theme described social support from religious institutions. Additionally, the study concluded that when males capitalize and embrace certain cultural strengths, like spirituality, they may be more likely to persist in their collegiate experience.

The datum from this study on spirituality and its influence on Black student academic success also prompted the researcher to consolidate the discovered categories into three themes: (1) Spirituality and Enduring Life’s Obstacles (2) Spirituality as an Influence on Personal Transformation, and (3) Accomplishing Academic Momentum. One of the themes paralleled Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon’s (2008) first major theme: The Role of Spirituality. In their 2008 study, the researchers discussed a participant’s description of “how through prayer, they received a sense of guidance or direction whenever they felt lost during their matriculation through college and life” (Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon, 2008; p. 75). This is similar to what a participant experienced in this investigation: “[God] Guide me a little bit” (Pop). In his interview the student discussed how prayer helps to refocus him during periods when he is unsure of what to do. This study went on to uncover spirituality’s influence on academic momentum and
personal transformation/growth as well. Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon (2008) did not focus on spirituality and academics.

**Significance of the Findings**

Intergenerational transmission of privilege and disadvantage operate through the school system (Bourdieu, 1977; Lauen and Tyson, 2009), ultimately, perpetuating low quality education in Black communities. Laws like “partus sequitur ventrum- the child follows the condition of the mother regardless of the race of the father,” which dates back to slavery, made it unlikely for any subsequent generation to exceed the previous one; economically, educationally, or otherwise (Cannon, 1995, p. 40; Giles, 2010). This is extremely similar to the oppressive endeavors that are currently in place, throughout society (disproportionate numbers of failing k-12 schools attended by Black students, low access to selective higher education institutions, deficient view of the cultural capital unique to the Black community, etc.), to keep generations of blacks chained to generations of poverty, ignorance, and financial deprivation (Bell, 1992; Carey, 2005; Yosso, 2005). Using the Marxist Sociological Perspective and Critical Race Theory as a guide, this study was able to ascertain a model of how spirituality applies (and how spirituality is applied) to educational factors that are in place for the sole purpose of keeping the Black community generationally oppressed in an effort to maintain oppressor control (Freire, 1973). Thus supplying a tool useful in decreasing the disparity associated with Black student post-secondary degree attainment.

**Implications for Leadership and Policy**

Exploring the influence of spirituality on Black education as it pertains to college persistence, has allowed the researcher to offer a substantiated model that provides suggestions
for ultimately decreasing the disparity associated with Black American post-secondary degree attainment. Spirituality has long been characterized as an influential factor and positive ideology in the Black community (Bell, 1992). Spirituality and education also both represent access to freedom for the Black community (Giles, 2010). Understanding the emphasis and the importance of spirituality, as it relates to Black college students, may perhaps allow campus leaders a lens in which to view how spiritual practices influence educational persistence.

Furthermore, understanding spirituality as a plausible tool used in decreasing the disparity between Black and White educational attainments may help leaders and/or educational entities find a solution to the high attrition rate seen with Black students. This could impact student retention and marketability of post-secondary institutions as well. Therefore utilizing a model that incorporates spirituality as an influence on Black student academic success, ultimately, aids in reducing Black/White degree attainment disparities, impacts Black student matriculation, and provides an inviting environment that institutional leaders could use to positively appeal to potential attendees. Research has shown (as outlined in the previous literature review) that students become exponentially more spiritual during their post-secondary years. Tinto (1993) affirms that students understand fully how they hope to feel in an academic setting. This study found that students employed their spirituality when combating factors shown to negatively impact academic performance; making it important to therefore, incorporate spirituality into the campus climate.

Additionally, examining “spirituality as a meaning making process for Black students,” contributes to knowledge about their persistence and resiliency as it relates to the academic environment (Hill, 2009, p. 6). Those campus leaders displaying an interest in supporting student spirituality, as an important ingredient in Black student persistence, might sustain Black post-
secondary academic progressions by promoting an environment that is not only inviting but actively supportive to Black student spiritual practices. This may look like incorporating talk of a higher deity into campus’ discussions, fostering safe dialogue about what spirituality means to Black students, or creating an accepting environment that welcomes the way students inwardly and outwardly manifest their spirituality. Leaders might also publicize acceptance of spirituality on collegiate campuses by creating a spirituality infused climate; one that adopts spiritual manifestations as an everyday occurrence.

Campuses could also utilize spirituality to support Black student maturation; this study found that personal transformation is directly influenced by students’ spiritual engagement. This may be particularly of importance on predominately White campuses where Black students have been cited as feeling out of place, frustrated, and personally/socially hindered (Fleming, 1984; Gasman, Baez, and Turner, 2008; Weddle-West, Hagan, & Norwood, 2013). Predominately White Institutions are not the only campuses that could benefit from spirituality on college campuses however. Since this study found that spirituality directly/indirectly supports students’ efforts in enduring life’s obstacles, personal growth, and academic pursuits, minority serving intuitions could use spirituality as well in helping students matriculate to degree attainment. This too comes through supporting the practice of spirituality on college campuses and informing students of the benefits associated with maintaining their spiritual pursuits.

**Study Limitations**

A limitation of the study was the researcher’s exposure to key theories, in the body of literature, surrounding the topic to be studied. According to Charmaz (2006), conducting the literature review of a grounded theory study after developing an analysis helps to protect the researcher from theoretical bias. However, for the sake of academic progressions, the researcher
collected a wealth of literature prior to the study’s start. The methodological approach to researching the literature after the conclusion of the study also allows control over the research process and increases analytic power and validity (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 2006). The fact that literature was read and analyzed before the study began, did not directly impact the study’s outcome, however, remained a concern for the researcher throughout the study; the researcher bracketed herself (when analyzing literature), in an effort to not create categorical bias. The researcher also accounted for this limitation throughout the study by memoing any thoughts that were directly connected to previous research and how they may have impacted that particular moment in the study. Fortunately, most of the literature in existence investigates issues not directly under investigation in this study. The literature did not directly/indirectly impact the outcomes of this study.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Due to time constraints and lack of financial funding, the researcher used gatekeepers that were long time acquaintances or a part of certain social networks. As a result many of the participants were selected in clusters from individual universities; in many instances, they belonged to a particular organization together or attended the same class. If this investigation is done again, it may be interesting to see it done quantitatively with correlations in the data, and on a larger scale; higher participant variation is inevitable if more participants from more areas of the university are selected to participate.

Another future research project may be to follow Black students from freshman year to graduation to see how their spirituality manifests and if it develops. Then to investigate if this change in spiritual maturity/authority influences their academic performance; actually
quantifying spirituality’s level of impact. This investigation employed qualitative methodology. A large scale quantitative experiment, examining Black students from freshman year to graduation and investigating if changes in spiritual maturity/authority influence their academic performance may prove informative as well.

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the relationship between spirituality and Black student academic success through the second & third year of undergraduate studies. Many research endeavors have concluded that African Americans have a stronger religious/spiritual foundation when compared to other ethnic groups (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Walker, 2002). Only a few studies however, have examined spirituality’s relationship or possible relationship to Black American collegiate success. Of those studies involving Black college students, many were done at PWIs, Non-Historically Black Colleges and Universities, or on Blacks not attending college. The goal of this study was to investigate these oversights or gaps in the literature, thus providing a possible resolution to the degree attainment scarcity in the Black community. It is the researcher’s hopes that a study of spirituality’s influence on the educational persistence of Blacks may prove to be pivotal for the educational success of the Black community, by offering an alternative to the rehearsal of a mentality of victimization imposed on the community by societal or historical oppression (Bell, 1992).
References


predominantly African American college student population. *Faculty Working Papers
from the School of Education,* 9.

Dennis, D., Muller, S. M., Miller, K., & Banerjee, P. (2004). Spirituality among a College
Student Cohort: A Quantitative Assessment. *American Journal Of Health Education,*
35(4), 220-227.

Douglass, F. (1852). What to the Slave is the Fourth of July? *Masterpieces of Negro Eloquence:
The Best Speeches Delivered by the Negro From the Days of Slavery to the Present Time,*
47-48.

spiritual strivings (pp. 28-33)]. Chicago, AG McClurg, 1903. Johnson Reprint
Corporation.

Chicana/Mexicana feminist pedagogies: Consejos, respeto, y educación in everyday life.

94194.


24-27.


Hamilton, T. (2010, January 1). Understanding the Black College Student Experience: The Relationships between Racial Identity, Social Support, General Campus, Academic, and Racial Climate, and GPA. ProQuest LLC,


Hill, S. D. (2009). The Exploration of Spirituality as a Means of Coping and Persistence in African American Female College Students (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Irvine; California State University, Long Beach).


Schreiner, L. (2000). Spiritual fit. FIPSE—Through the eyes of retention. 10-12


Taylor, E. (1999) Critical race theory and interest convergence in the desegregation of higher


Appendix A

University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research
University of New Orleans

Campus Correspondence

Principal Investigator: Brian R. Beabout
Co-Investigator: Sheika Square
Date: August 11, 2014
Protocol Title: “An Exploratory Examination of Spirituality and Black Student Academic Success at Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Using Critical Race Theory and the Premise of Cultural Wealth as Points of Departure”
IRB#: 01Aug14

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures described in this protocol application are exempt from federal regulations under 45 CFR 46.101 category 2, due to the fact that any disclosure of the human subjects’ responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects’ financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Exempt protocols do not have an expiration date; however, if there are any changes made to this protocol that may cause it to be no longer exempt from CFR 46, the IRB requires another standard application from the investigator(s) which should provide the same information that is in this application with changes that may have changed the exempt status.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best wishes on your project.
Sincerely,

Robert D. Laird, Ph.D., Chair
UNO Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research
Appendix B: Interview Guide

Interviews with Students

Research Question: What is the relationship between spirituality and academic success for Black college students?

Kinds of Questions: Experience, Opinions, Values, Feelings, Sensory, Knowledge, and Background

Introduction (to respondent):

I am currently working on a project for my dissertation research. The premise of my investigation is to get a better understanding of the possible relationship between spirituality and Black Students’ academic success in college. In an effort to learn more about this topic, I have begun to do interviews that allow participant reflection and input based on actual experience.

I will begin the interview process by asking you a few questions and you should feel free to answer them to the best of your ability. If at any time you are unclear on what I am asking, please ask me for clarification. Do you have any questions before we begin? Let’s proceed…

Feeling Questions:

- What do you think academic success is or How do you define academic success?
- How do you know if someone is successful?
- How have these factors about academic success affected you?
- Based on the factors you just mentioned, would you consider yourself a successful college student? Why or Why not?
  (if student defines their experience with academics as being a failure, tailor questions using brackets)

Experience Questions:

- How did you do your first year in College or at this College or University? Your second year? Your third year?
- What was your overall experience [with your academics] during these times?
- What if anything would you change about your participation in your academics [in college]?
Tell me about the major influences on your academic success [failure]? During your 1st year of college? During your 2nd year of college?

Do you or did you participate in groups at your college outside of academics? If so, which groups?

What is (/was) your role [in these groups]?

Does your participation in these groups impact your academic performance in any way?

Do you have any community relationships or affiliations outside of college? What is your role in these affiliations/relations?

How do you think these community relationships impact your academic performance?

Do you consider yourself a spiritual person? If yes, why?

What does spirituality mean to you?

For these next few questions, I am defining spirituality as an outward expression of a unique relationship with your creator or the ultimate source. (These expressions could manifest themselves as prayer, mediation, purposely building a relationship with what you believe as your Creator, seeking the purpose of life, etc…) if they ask for explanation.

Can you describe your experiences with spirituality?

How is that relationship now?

Has this experience had an effect on your college academic experience?

What if anything would you change about your experience with your spirituality in College?

Do you practice your beliefs on campus? Off campus?
Appendix C: Second Interview’s Questions

• Tell me about the major influences on your academic success [failure]? During your 1st year of college? During your 2nd year of college?
• Please explain in more detail your answer to the previous question.
• Can you state specific examples of how this influence has impacted your academics?
• Do you or did you participate in groups at your college outside of academics? If so, which groups?
• Does your participation in these groups impact your academic performance in any way?
• (If yes) How does your participation in these groups impact your academic performance?
• Do you have any community relationships or affiliations outside of college? What is your role in these affiliations/relations?
• How do you think these community relationships impact your academic performance?
• Does your employment impact your academics in anyway? Explain…
• Can you think of any other major influences or impacts on your academics at this time? If so, please explain…
• What do you feel plays the biggest role in your academic success?
• Do you have any major support systems (physical, tangible, intangible) that play a role in how you do academically?
• Can you describe your experience with religion while in college?
• Can you describe your experiences with spirituality?
• Can you describe your experience with spirituality while in college?
• Has this experience with spirituality had an impact on your college academic experience?
• Has this experience had an impact on your college academic performance?
• How do you feel spirituality has affected your academics?
• What impact specifically has spirituality played in your academics?
• What if anything would you change about your participation in your academics [in college]?
Appendix D: Focus Group Questions

What do you feel has the biggest influence on your academic success?

Well from my research, I am postulating that Family, Social Networking, Academic Clubs/Groups, Friends, and Work are a huge determinant of academic successes or failures. How do you feel about this finding?

Although, I find that Family, Social Networking, Academic Clubs, etc… are a huge direct determinant of academic successes or failures, I have concluded that spirituality plays a more indirect role on academic success/failure. What are your feelings on this?

Wow all of those were interesting…

From the research, spirituality seems to have a more direct role in a student’s ability to cope with stress, have balance, find strength, deal with adversity, etc… What are your thoughts?

How do you feel your spirituality impacts your academics?

What do you feel is the single most important factor in perpetuating (continuing) your academic successes or failures?

What did you find most interesting about these findings? And why?

What did you find most useful about participating in this study?

Thanks so much for your participation!

I am so happy to have embarked on this journey with you. I hope you were able to take something from this, because I learned so much!
Appendix E: Letter of Consent

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Beabout in the Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations at the University of New Orleans. I am conducting a study to examine the influence of spirituality on the academic success of Black students.

In doing that, I am requesting your participation in an interview(s). Each interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes, in a place to be pre-determined and mutually agreed upon. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. If you choose not to participate, this will have no affect or bearing on your academic status. If you do choose to participate, all personal information and information you share will be kept confidential. The results of the research may be published, but no identifying markers will be used.

You will also be asked to participate in demographic and inquiry based open-ended questionnaires to attain background information on your academic and spiritual activities.

Although there may be no direct benefits to you as the participant, there are some possible indirect benefits to your participation. For example, by learning more about the influences of spirituality on academic success, we can create a model to that asserts how to improve educational outcomes for Black students.

The associated risks with participating in this study are minuscule. However, if you have any questions concerning these risks or this research study, please do not hesitate to call me.

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research study, you can contact Dr. Brian Beabout or Dr. Ann O’Hanlon.

Sincerely,

Sheika N. Square
Masters of Natural Science
PhD Candidate

By signing below, you giving your consent to participate in this study:

___________________________  ______________________________  _____________
Signature                                                 Printed Name                                                       Date
Phone Number:                                       Email:                                                          Grade Level:
Appendix F

Background/demographic questionnaire:

- What is your current class standing at the university (ie freshman, sophomore, etc)?
- How long have you attended this university?
- What is your GPA?
- Have you always been in good standing academically while attending college or this university? If no, please explain!
- What do you like about this University? Dislike?
- Would you consider yourself religious?
- Would you consider yourself spiritual?

For the following please write in Yes or No on the line provided
- What are your religious and/or spiritual practices:

  Yes/ NO ______ I spend regular and definable time reading/memorizing the doctrine associated with my belief system.
  Yes/ NO ______ I pray.
  Yes/ NO ______ I practice beliefs that my family/community practices, although I am not sure what these beliefs/practices mean to me.
  Yes/ NO ______ I meditate.
  Yes/ NO ______ I participate in church attendance on a regular and/or constant basis.
  Yes/ NO ______ I use my beliefs to help cope with stress.
  Yes/ NO ______ I participate in many church activities.
  Yes/ NO ______ I am knowledgeable about the doctrine associated with my belief system.
Yes/ NO ______ I watch religious TV programs or listed to religious radio broadcasts.

Please list any other pertinent information that describes your spiritual or religious practices that may have not been listed above.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________.

117
VITA

The researcher and author of this document is from New Orleans, Louisiana. She received both her Master’s of Natural Science and Bachelor’s of Biology from Louisiana State University in 2008 and 2005 respectively. The researcher began her PhD in Educational Leadership and Administration, at the University of New Orleans, in the summer of 2012.