

## Assessing African American College Persistence at a Predominantly White Institution Using the Cultural Capital Theory: A Research Proposal

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### Abstract

Manning Marable once claimed that there were two distinct Black America's. Since desegregation there has been a rapidly growing class of middle class Blacks and a similarly expanding "underclass" of Blacks that has led to much diversity in the socioeconomic background of many Black college students. Education has been pitched as the great equalizer, though many Blacks at predominantly white institutions are struggling to graduate. Most research aimed at solving this conundrum views socioeconomic status separate from cultural identity. This research attempts to capture the "socio-psychological" process of developing identity as an African American at a predominantly white institution. This research contributes to the field of African American post secondary education studies by examining socioeconomic status, cultural identity and collegiate persistence as interdependent variables.

This study uses Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital theory as the theoretical framework. Cultural capital refers to background - knowledge base, skills, and attitudes - families of the dominant socioeconomic class transmit to their children (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). This theory proposes that in order for the dominant group to maintain its dominance some culture is valued or devalued within social institutions.

Qualitative research methods were used for this study. Using convenience criterion sampling, six African-American students from various socio-economic backgrounds were identified in the summer of 2008. All participants were seniors, scheduled to graduate in Fall of 2008 or May of 2009. Students were selected from the Eastside University (pseudonym), a premier research institution and predominantly white university. A focus group was conducted during the summer of 2008, supplemented by ethnographic interviews and case studies provided by Lorenzo Dubois Baber (2007). During the data analysis phases four themes emerged that highlighted the cultural identity changes in the participants: 1) the construction of an ethnic identity; 2) the conversion of various forms of cultural capital; 3) the experience of stereotype threat and racism; 4) and the progression towards blended perspectives.

This research is meant to add significant data regarding the heterogeneity of the Black community and how the differences in cultural identity are portrayed on

predominantly white campuses. Much of the previous research on Black student persistence is based on other forms of capital such as social, human, and financial, and has a tendency to assume that Black's share a collective identity. As the Black underclass and middle class both continue to grow wider apart it is inherent that researchers study this phenomenon transitionally. This research does that and provides analysis and recommendations for helping future generations of Black students to persist on predominantly white campuses.

### Introduction of Inquiry

Institutions of higher learning are in essence the American dream encapsulated in concrete and cinderblock. They are the places where the fields can be leveled, success can be achieved, and where the hopes and dreams of equal opportunity rest. In short, a college degree is the great equalizer. Some interpersonal and institutional racism seemingly will always exist but the completion of a university degree immediately boosts ones social, financial, and cultural capital as well as, their socio-economic status, and chances of success in life.

It was once believed that college was a place where merit and individual ability alone could assure a positive, successful outcome. However, much evidence has been found to the contrary that indicates plenty of other factors are closely tied to an individual's success at an institution of higher education (Lindsay & Justiz, 2001; United States Department of Education, 2005). Much to the chagrin of the African American freedom fighters of the past who paved the way for equal rights legislation such as Brown v. Board, African American's are graduating from college at a significantly lower rate than Whites (JBHE, 2006). Students from low income backgrounds are statistically less likely to achieve a baccalaureate degree when compared with students of high income background. This is significant when considering that between 1980 and 1998, the population of the African American underclass has tripled from 900,000 to 2.7 million.

Statistics show that students stemming from this segment of the population are the least likely to attend college and are even less likely to graduate. Conversely, Black students from middle to upper class income backgrounds are attending college in record numbers. However, when studied, researchers tend to group all the segments of the Black population with no regards for the differences in the socioeconomic backgrounds of each sector (e.g., Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Cabrera, et al., 1999; Reason & Rankin, 2005).

Many scholars have examined why only 43 percent of Black students graduate from college within six years. They often point to the affects of social, financial, and human capital on the success, resiliency, and persistence of African American students (Wilson, 1987; Gates & West, 1996; hooks, 2000; Dyson, 2005). However, this research specifically examines the affects of cultural capital and the formation

<sup>1</sup> African American underclass – welfare dependent, marginally educated, and chronically unemployed

of cultural identity on the persistence of Black seniors at predominately white institutions (PWI's).

Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital theory has been used by researchers of secondary school systems to consider the influence of social class differences on educational experiences for African Americans (Roscingo & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Lareau and Weininger define cultural capital as background – knowledge, skills, and attitudes – that families transmit to their children. This theory proposes that in order for the dominant group to maintain its dominance certain culture is valued or devalued within social institutions.

### Research Questions

The population of Black students attending predominantly white institutions is largely heterogeneous and does not maintain the collective cultural identity often associated with people of color. Because of this distinction this literature will add to the scholarship regarding post secondary education of Black students with an emphasis on cultural identity formation. The following questions will be addressed:

- How does socioeconomic status affect cultural identity formation?
- What culture is valued/devalued at predominantly white institutions?
- How have students relationships with their parents changed since high school?
- How have students relationships with their closest friends changed since high school?
- How have students personal romantic relationships changed since high school?

### Significance of Study

As we enter into the 21st century we face the prospect of having the nation's first Black president. This is remarkable progress seeing as how a mere sixty years ago Blacks were hardly allowed to vote. Blacks were granted access and before long a Black man has navigated himself through the political system and has positioned himself one election away from the top spot in the government. This progress has spilled over onto the educational field as well. There are more Black undergraduates, researchers and doctors than ever before. However, there are also numerically more Black dropouts than ever before. If we operate under the assumption that education is the great equalizer it is the duty of the educator, the researcher, and the scholar to find what it takes to help more African Americans achieve higher education. Most resources have been put into getting Black students from high school into college programs but the more imminent problem is how to go about keeping them there.

Most of the competitive research oriented schools in the nation are Predominantly White Institutions (PWI's) and African American's are attending these colleges at

the highest rate ever. It is important to find what helps to keep Black students in school in order to help close the educational achievement gap and eventually the income and wealth gap. Scholars have linked educational achievement with the formation of capital. Capital is the most important predictor of the success or failure of a student (Orr, 2003).

Socioeconomic status has often been examined as a stagnant commodity, when in fact it is actually in a state of constant fluctuation. One may take a snapshot of a particular Black family earning middle class wages, but lack wealth. What ream on the socioeconomic ladder do they rest? Economically, their futures are uncertain and without wealth they lack liquid capital, which can be used to form other types of capital (Orr, 2003). As a result of this, a Black student emerging from a middle class background may be admitted into a PWI with no financial aid and end up dropping out due to financial problems.

However, what is even more undiscovered and underresearched is how that very same student is culturally identified by the university and how he or she cultural identifies him or herself. In their particular neighborhood they may be perceived in a certain way, maybe upper middle class and may even fit into what Marable describes as the "Black Elite" (1983), but once they enter the PWI are they are simply a Black face, forced to discover a new cultural identity or modify an existing one? What brand of "Blackness" do they exhibit? Are they influenced by the predisposed scripts placed on Black bodies?

Most scholars up until this point have grouped cultural capital somewhere between human and social capital but this research intends to distinguish of cultural capital as a separate entity.

### Conceptual Framework and Review of Literature

In order to build a conceptual framework for the correlation between socioeconomic status, cultural identity and the college persistence rates of African American students at predominantly white institutions, the review of literature is sectioned into four main areas: 1) the current socioeconomic state of Black America; 2) historical theories of African American identity and higher education; 3) theoretical perspectives on college persistence; 4) and incarnations of cultural capital theory in educational settings. Each piece of literature contributes theoretical ideas that help to shape an overall conceptual framework for this study.

### The Current State of Black America

There are currently two Black Americas. Manning Marable writes of a "Black elite...a privileged social stratum, who were often distinguished by color and caste; who praised the master publicly if not privately....who sought to accumulate petty amounts of capita; at the expense of their Black sisters and brothers; whose dream of freedom was one of acceptance into the inner sanctum of white economic and political power," (Marable, 1983).

Marable speaks of a divide within the Black community that pits the Black majority against an elite minority. This divide has been more recently concretized by Bill Cosby in his infamous *pound cake* speech, in which Cosby lambasted people of lower economic standing for everything from giving their children “names like Shaniqua, Taliqna and Muhammad” to berating parents for not parenting “properly” (Dyson, 2005). Dyson continues much like Marable to describe how the alienation of one segment of the Black population over another leads to disunity within the Black community and only serves to further perpetuate negative stereotypes. Dyson even subtitles his book the “Afristocracy Versus the Ghettocracy.”

The division between Blacks is indicative of the latest economic development within Black America. Desegregation, the Brown V. Board decisions and America’s commitment to superficial de-racialization has led to the largest African American middle class in history. However, in the last forty years there has simultaneously been the largest development of the African American underclass (Wilson, 1987; Gates, 1998). This is the same underclass that Cosby criticizes and that Dyson defends upon the basis of systematic racism. The debate as to whether or not the socioeconomic problems associated with Black people are systematic or self initiated is the debate that scholars have waged entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### ***The Socioeconomic Issues***

The socioeconomic problems associated with African American’s are headlined by three major problems: the income gap, the wealth gap, and the educational achievement gap between Black American’s and White Americans (Wilson, 1987; Gates & West, 1996; hooks, 2000; Dyson, 2005).

Recent research has shown that, depending on the data source used, white households in the United States have somewhere between five and ten times the net worth of Black households (Barsky, Bound, Charles, and Lupton, 2002). However, white households are *only* earning twice the income of Black household, suggesting that the racial wealth gap is too vast to be purely attributed to disparities in income. The reason this gap exist is still under speculation, but the answer will stem from one of three sources. The first is the aforementioned difference in income levels of whites and Blacks. The second can be attributed to the transfer of wealth from generation to generation and the result of past economic conditions disproportionately affecting Blacks. The last is the efficiency in which savings are converted into wealth, for example converting savings and income into property (Charles and Hurst 2002).

The majority of most American’s money is tied into property; homes and commercial property (Charles and Hurst 2002). However, the Federal Housing Authority has played a major role in disallowing Black’s access to the housing market through discriminatory practices such as redlining and loan deferments. Black’s were essentially shut out of the housing market until the mid 1960’s when the legislation was passed to drastically reshape the FHA (Gotham, 2000). And even after reshaping, Blacks were still systematically shut out of the suburbs and cornered into congested urban areas (Gotham, 2000). From the time after the Revolutionary

War until the 1960’s whites essentially owned all the land in the U.S. and as a byproduct all of the wealth of the nation. This wealth has since been passed down through the generations to create the gap that is now present (Charles and Hurst, 2002).

Many argue that the educational achievement gap is a result of the wealth gap (Orr, 2003). However, the academic achievement gap offers its own independent set of issues that often feed back into the widening wealth gap in somewhat of a never ending cycle. The achievement gap is mostly measured by test scores. Black’s routinely score in the lowest quartiles on standardized test, are more likely to drop out than white students and go to college at lower rates than white students. Even though Black’s are attending college in record numbers they are only graduating forty percent of the time (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2004).

John Ogbu has championed since the 1980’s that the reason African American’s lag behind in school is the notion of intelligent behavior equating to “acting white.” In his most recent research experience, Ogbu (2003) examines African American students from an affluent Ohio suburb to see what variables play into academic failure. He found that “these kids who come from homes of doctors and lawyers are not thinking like their parents. They are looking at rappers in ghettos as their role models,” (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, (2003). Ogbu much like Cosby, places the blame on Black parents. He found that parents did not spend sufficient time on homework with children and did not pay adequate attention to their educational progression.

Conversely, students from impoverished neighborhoods with lower levels of capital, social, human and financial tend to fair worse in school than their white peers for similar reasons and some directly related to poverty. Bordieu (1986) created theories regarding the convertibility of capital. Some capital is more liquid than others. Financial capital can easily be converted into other forms such as social and cultural capital. Financial capital can easily expand ones access, network, place, and chances of success. Orr (2003) theorizes that the given two families of similar incomes, the children belonging to the wealthier family are more likely to attend college. Orr bases her theory off the fact that wealth is often related to homeownership and the ability of homeowners to take out a second mortgage to afford tuition. Orr gives further examples of the liquidibility of financial capital and its role in educational success.

As a result of the disparities between the different segments of the Black population it must be noted that Black students are entering predominantly white institutions with wildly different cultural identities. There is no longer the same sense of unified cultural identity that once permeated through Black America. After desegregation some Blacks pushed forward and others lagged behind leading to the disparities that Marable (1983) describes. This assumption is critical to guiding this research because as defined by Lareau and Weininger (2003) the cultural capital theory is hinged on the belief that some culture is valued more than others.

## Historical Theories of African American Identity and Higher Education

“One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder,” (DuBois, 1897, p. 194.) W.E.B. DuBois’s prediction at the end of the nineteenth century regarding the future of the Negro in America rivals Aristotle in its accuracy. African American’s have always struggled with how to portray authentic Blackness and still be an American. This notion of double consciousness still persists for African American students as they struggle to formulate an identity at PWI’s. DuBois is credited with pioneering the study of Black educational experiences on PWI campuses. In 1900 he published a social study, *The College-Bred Negro* (1900) along with a follow up study *The College-Bred Negro American* (1910), in which he sent a comprehensive survey to African American students, African American college graduates, and administrators at various types of institutions to access their experiences in higher education. He posed questions regarding the hindrances that they faced on campus and asked white administrators questions regarding the institutions attitude toward African American students. DuBois found as would be expected considering the time in which the study was administered, that prejudice and lack of acknowledgement of Black students was the main problem Blacks faced. For its time this research was groundbreaking because it was the first to elicit responses from African Americans discussing the psychosocial barriers to higher education.

### Racial Identity Formation

The Cross (1991) model of psychological nigrescence suggest that there are five distinct stages in the formation of Black racial identity. These stages are preencounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment. The *Preencounter stage* as described by Cross (1991) is the individual seeking assimilation into the dominant culture by absorbing the beliefs and values of the dominant culture. The individual deemphasizes their own culture looking to seek acceptance into the dominant culture. The *Encounter phase* is spurned by the social rejection of the Black individual by the dominant culture which causes them to then seek visible symbols of ones own racial identity. This in turn leads to the *Immersion/Emission stage* in which the African American individual actively seeks African American peers that exhibit what one believes to be authentic blackness (Cross, 1991). During the *Internalization stage* the individual exhibits a level of comfort within their own racial identity and is able to respect and acknowledge the culture of other racial groups. The last stage is the *Internalization-Commitment* phase in which the individual has found ways to use racial identity as the “point of departure for discovering the universe of ideas, cultures and experiences beyond blackness in place of mistaking blackness as the universe itself” (Cross et al., 1991, p.330). This process described by Cross is what many Black students face at predominantly white institutions where the struggle to find their racial identity.

## Acting White and Stereotype Threat

*“Ethnic identity development is a complex, multifaceted, and dynamic process. It has both public and private, individual and communal, conscious and unconscious, positive and negative, past and present, cognitive and emotional, expressive and symbolic dimensions” (Gay, 1987 p. 35).*

The above quote illustrates the unique problem Black students face when forming cultural identity on PWI campuses. In addition to the general assimilation into campus life, Black student deal with the perceived notion of Black racial inferiority linked to the history of discrimination. This leads to what scholars have deemed “the burden of acting white” or “stereotype threat” (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). In deference to the social norms theory, individuals will adapt their behavior to conform to perceived norms (Berkowitz, 2000). The particular behaviors that are ascribed to a certain group distinguish the group from others and act as a congealing mechanism providing the group with a collective identity (Miller, et. al. 2000). This establishes the norm of the in crowd or in other words, authentic blackness as defined by the group itself.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) claimed that a major obstruction to Black academic success is the inclination for Black students to fulfill their stereotypical roles and to avoid academic success because of its association with whiteness. This cultural opposition has been one of the leading theories for explaining the Black-White achievement gap. Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) research was particularly groundbreaking due to the discovery of surprisingly low SAT’s scores for Black students compared to whites even when controlled for socioeconomic status. This led to the development of the cultural ecological theoretical framework which asserts that the historical context and conditions of an ethnic group’s incorporation into a dominant society shape the way the minority group views what is associated with the dominant group. When this framework is applied to Black Americans they represent the involuntary minority and are “cynical and embittered” because relative to Whites they do not receive comparable returns for their hard work (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). As a result of this, Blacks develop an oppositional social identity that defines “certain activities, events, symbols, and meanings as not appropriate for them because those behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings are characteristic of white Americans” (Fordham and Ogbu 1986 p.181).

At predominantly white institutions scholars believe that it is possible that Black student’s success is being undermined by the pressure from peers to underachieve to preserve their blackness. However, Horvat and Lewis (2003) have shown how the burden of “acting white” can be used in a positive manner. As a result of the alienation experienced by high achieving Blacks at the hands of low achieving peers, there emerges a subculture of students who value education. Students can then find a way to manage their academic success and receive encouragement from supportive peers, allowing them to maintain normal social lives as well as excel academically.

In addition to the possible rejection from peers for “acting white” many high achieving scholars also carry the burden of stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is “being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one’s group,” (Steele, 1995). Aronson and Steele find that stereotype threat affects high achieving Black students in two ways. It adds pressure to students that may directly hinder academic performance and if it is “a chronic feature of the school performance domain it may force the affected students to disidentify with that domain,” (Aronson and Steele, 1998). Aronson and Steele (1998) argue that stereotype threat mostly affects those who care the most about school. Those who are not achieving may not care much about being stereotyped or behaving stereotypically.

Stereotype threat is purely a psychological impediment to African American academic success. The threat of being stereotyped leads many students to question their academic ability and to fear social marginalization. Social marginalization cannot be overlooked because as a result of the stereotypes associated with “blackness” many members of an institution expect Black to be portrayed in a certain way. Implying that in a lot of ways being an intelligent African American with a mind for school and not having stereotypically Black attributes can lead to alienation from members of all social groups, including ones own.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on College Persistence**

Quite possibly the first scholar to develop a theory regarding college persistence was William Spady (1970). Spady theorized that students withdraw from college due to a lack of shared values and normative support. He noticed that a lack of reverence for the value of education and the lack of family, close friends and emotional and financial support led to the departure of many college students before attrition. Bean (1980) building on Spady’s ideas developed a model that focused on how students background variables such as socioeconomic status and “organizational determinants” such as staff/faculty relationship, housing, and campus organizations influenced a students commitment to an institution. He confirmed that a students level of commitment was the most important variable related to drop out rates, (Bean 1980).

Bean later does studies focusing specifically on under represented minorities in college. He finds that the approval and support of parents and the community is integral for the African American attrition, (Bean, 1990). “When parents approved of students attending school, the students had a greater sense of academic and social integration, perceived their education to be of greater utility, and felt less alienated on campus” (Bean, 1990, p.167).

However families can be an asset or a liability (Guiffrida, 2005). If parents are not emotionally or financially supportive African American students have a higher tendency to drop out. Herndon and Hirt (2004) point out that as an asset parents are the original source of educational persistence. They are the first to instill the motivation and the expectations for what it will take to be successful in college. Herndon and Hirt point to guidance in the form of an older relative, a mentor,

or a college administrator as the number one variable most necessary for African American’s to graduate from predominantly white institutions.

Building even further on Bean’s Model of Student Attrition, Tinto’s research (1975, 1987, and 1993) focuses on the separation from the family and the adaptation of a new learned set of values during the early years of college. Tinto begins with the idea that students enter college with values that are shaped by the family that include social skills commitment to academics. These attributes are then shaped and reassessed by the formal and informal experiences of “the academic and social systems of the institution,” (Baber, 2007). Tinto shaped his model into a three stage process for students; separation, transition, and incorporation. The separation stage is the stage in which the student begins parting with past habits and values. The transition stage is when the student begins to cope with the stress of leaving what is familiar and has not quite fully integrated into the new environment. The final stage is the incorporation stage in which the student is now recognized as an institutional member. Tinto’s model does not allow for any variation such as voice, religious values or beliefs, or strong familial ties.

### **Cultural Capital Theory in Educational Settings**

In a society based upon the ideals of the American dream, in which anyone can achieve any level of success they choose, the education system is entrenched in the idea of meritocracy. Ones own merit and individual effort is supposed to be enough to achieve success. However, there are many non merit based factors that uneven the playing field such as the strength of ones network, inheritance, access to education, as well as race and gender. These factors illuminate meritocracy in the higher education system as the myth that it is. Certain people from certain places have certain advantages that ultimately play major roles in their success or failure.

#### ***Defining Cultural Capital***

Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory is a framework most often used when assessing power within a social structure. Cultural capital can exist in three states: embodied (disposition of mind and body), objectified (cultural goods), and institutionalized (educational qualifications), (Bourdieu, 1998). The embodied state of cultural capital is personified within the individual. This is the culture that is inherited from family, traditions, and socialization and is linked to one’s habitus. The objectified state represents things that can be transmitted physically in exchange for financial capital or symbolically as cultural capital. For example owning a Van Gogh painting signifies a certain degree of symbolic or objectified cultural capital but interpreting its meaning requires a level of embodied capital. The institutional state of capital is usually used in relation to academic credentials or qualifications. Having a certain degree implies a certain status which can be easily converted into financial capital in the labor market (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) claim that institutions unevenly draw from certain cultures more than others causing the use of a particular linguistic style, rhetoric,

or curriculum which children from higher social strata may already be familiar with before entering the institution to be positive cultural capital. These cultural resources that are learned at home serve the student at the institution enabling the student to be ahead of other students based entirely on embodied capital alone.

Bourdieu's cultural capital theory is often criticized when used to explain the academic disparities between Blacks and Whites (Yosso, 2005). Some feel that the theory offers a pessimistic view of Black communities, portraying them as places full of cultural disadvantages instead of praising the culture that exists. These scholars base their criticisms on the fact that socially marginalized people do possess skills, knowledge and ability, some of which may even be more substantial than other more well off groups. However, as Celius and Oyserman (2001) argue, African Americans are not a homogenous group and those stemming from the Marable (1983) defined "underclass," possess different cultural attributes than the "Black elite." As a result of this, the cultural capital model can be adeptly applied to the study of the academic achievement gap because it accounts for the differences between classes of African Americans.

## Research Methods

This research attempts to capture the "socio-psychological" process of developing identity as an African American at a predominantly white institution. In your typical study of educational persistence there is a process of statistical analysis that weighs input versus output to come to a sort of conclusion or finding. This type of quantitative data is useful when assessing trends but is very limited when examining the interpersonal relationships amongst students and the relationship between students and an institution. For this reason this research will require mostly qualitative research focused on descriptive data.

### Research Design

This research will include focus group interviews, supplemented by the analysis of preexisting data and life history interviews. Focus group research allows for the researcher to study people in a more natural setting than a one on one interview. Focus groups allow for group interaction and the fostering and expansion of new ideas and concepts. In addition to this focus group are low in cost and produce results very quickly (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). A limitation to focus group research is the tendency for the discussion to lose focus and for participants to wander off topic. It is easy for the researcher to lose control of a focus group discussion.

The life history interviews will allow the researcher to delve deep into the past of the participants to determine how their original cultural identity was defined. The participants will be asked to paint a picture of who they are by detailing important themes in their lives that reflect the development of their personalities and relationships with others. These interviews will add substance and context to many of the answers to the focus group discussion as well as allow show the socioeconomic variation amongst participants.

## Unit of Analysis

This study asks the participants to think back into their past and recollect certain memories of themselves. Whenever doing research based on subject recollection it is imperative to provide context in which they can compare two distinct forms of themselves. The participants of the study are all seniors who culturally identify as Black and they are asked to recall how they culturally identified as seniors in high school four years ago. For the purposes of this research I will provide three constants to provide context for the participants to compare themselves; a) their relationship with parents; b) their relationship with close friends; c) their relationship with boyfriends/girlfriends.

### Institutional Context

The institution selected for this study is a public, four-year, doctoral research institution located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The campus is located less than ten miles from one major metropolitan area and approximately forty miles from another. The school is located in a county rich with affluent African American's however contrary to conventional wisdom is still rife with crime and poor public grade schooling.

Eastside University (pseudonym) has an enrollment of over 36,000 students. The school admits 4,000 first year students and approximately 2,200 transfer students yearly. Eastside has been dubbed a "public ivy"<sup>2</sup> because it is said one can achieve an ivy league education for a public school price there. Most college ranking publications deem the University to be "mostly selective."

Eastside University is a premier research institution offering 127 undergraduate degrees and 112 graduate degrees in thirteen different colleges and schools, including a high ranking business school, journalism school, and the top ranked criminology school in the country. The school has research partnerships with NASA, the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Health, the Department of Homeland Security, and the National Security Agency.

Eastside University provides ideal context for conducting this research. African American students admitted to the University generally have demonstrated the ability to excel academically. The school is predominantly white, having a 32% non-white population. Additionally, the diversity of the socioeconomic status of the many students on campus provides for valuable research opportunities.

## Data Collection Procedures

When conducting qualitative research it is most important for the researcher to select participants who provide the investigator with the best insight into the stated research question (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). For the purpose of this research only six participants were chosen because as Patton (2002) suggests the sample size

<sup>2</sup> [The Public Ivies: America's Flagship Public Universities](#)  
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depends on what the investigator is researching and what resources the researcher has to conduct the study. “The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (p. 245).

Sufficiency and salience are used to determine the number of interviews/participants needed in a qualitative study (Stage and Manning, 2003). “Sufficiency” is achieved when the number of interviews accurately reflects the range of experiences in the field. “Saturation” is achieved when information begins to become redundant and when multiple respondents repeat similar information throughout the interviews.

The focus group includes three boys and three girls, of varying socio-economic status. Respondents were selected from a pool of twenty survey participants. On June 15th, 2008 a criterion guided convenience sample was distributed at the Stamp Student Union. The Eastside University students that were chosen for this study all met the following criteria:

- Of African American descent (or culturally identify as Black)
- A senior in class standing
- Signed and returned a consent form

### **Validity**

Validity is the strength of qualitative research because; the researcher is the collector and the interpreter of the data. What the investigator perceives to be reality can be documented as reality, as opposed to purely examining quantitative data that contains narrative support. However, there is always the question of whether what the researcher is interpreting is what is really occurring. One can reduce concerns of internal validity by regularly checking with the participants to see if their feelings and beliefs are accurately reflected through the data. Pershkin (2003) suggests that it is impossible for qualitative researcher to remove themselves from the data collection process as they are the instrument. As a result of this, true objectivity is impossible to obtain and subjectivity must be acknowledged and monitored throughout the research process. As an African American college student researching other African American college students I pose a critical threat to internal validity. However, in my best attempt to minimize my bias I will attempt to be reflexive in my analysis of the data. My data will be peer reviewed and member checked; allowing participants to review raw data samples to judge the accuracy of my interpretation.

### **Triangulation of Data**

Triangulation of data allows for the merge of several data sources to check for validity and consistency (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). This research uses three data sources, ethnographic interviews, focus group discussion, and Baber’s (2007) case study. The ethnographic interview poses mostly semi-structured, open ended questions relating to the participants past. The responses given by most should contextualize the answers received during the focus group discussion. Baber’s

(2007) case study is an example of similar study done at a PWI on first year Black students only. His data will close out the triangulation strongly because if I were to find vastly different answers from his research to mine then an error would be most likely the reason.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Because I will be utilizing the actual responses from my participants to formulate my data, it is imperative that I devise some sort of coding system to categorize responses. This is still in the developmental phase but I do acknowledge that this must be done. For example I can match a theoretical pattern such as double consciousness (Dubois, 1897) with an empirical pattern that emerges in my research. For example every time a participant mentions having to bear the burden of being a student and a “Black student” I would record it in some sort of coded form. It is quite possible that I will display these codes in table or chart form in my raw data but for the polished product, the data will be presented in narrative form with quotes used as support. I will also include the life history interviews for each member of my focus group.

### **Limitations**

I expect to find that some participants will have difficulty divulging sensitive socio-economic information. However, the ability to define a concrete socio-economic bracket to place each one of my participants is crucial to the completion of this research. I also may have to explain to the participants the different types of capital in order for them to truly be able to tackle some of the focus group discussion topics. I will also ask some gender specific questions in the focus group discussion which may make some uncomfortable, but I expect nothing more than a slight rivalry of the sexes to occur.

One issue that may arise as a result of this research is the institutions role in hindering African American student graduation. Students may label certain professors, other students, administrators, or advisors “racist,” which would represent the university in a poor light. For this reason in the final paper the name of the institution will be a pseudonym. Private information may be disclosed during the data collection process and all of the participant’s names will be fictitious as well.

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## Minority College Students' Perceptions of College Preparation Experiences and Their High School Counselors: One Year Later – A Revised Perspective

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### Abstract

There are major problems with high schools preparing minority students for college. These problems stem from many issues, one being the lack of school counselor training in college preparedness. The need for this research is shown by the lack of literature on this topic. This paper will present the results of a study examining minority college students' high school experiences related to college-going and their perceptions of high school counselors in the process of college admission and preparation. A survey was given to the scholars of Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate program at the University of Maryland College Park. The participants (n = 15) completed the online 68-item survey. The survey included items that asked the students about their high school college preparation courses, activities that prepared them for college, and their high school counselor's involvement in their college readiness process. The results from my research demonstrated that current college students did not feel that various high school experiences and courses prepared them for college. The results also found that parents/guardians and high school counselors were considered the most influential in current college students' decisions regarding college preparation and overall decision to further their education.

### Purpose and Research Questions

The statement of the purpose of this research was to identify contributing factors in minority high school students' decision to attend college or some form of higher education. While identifying these contributing factors, the researchers of this study addressed the following questions:

1. What types of college preparation experiences (academic, social, and family) did minority college students experience in high school?
2. What are minority college students' perceptions of their high school counselors' role in preparing them for college?

The purpose for this study is to find possible reasons why academic achievement may be challenging for some urban African American high school students in choosing to continue on with education after high school. This study will also show