

# The Voices of African American Male Students with Disabilities Attending Historically Black Universities

\*Joy Banks

*Bowie State University*

Simone Gibson

*Morgan State University*

*The purpose of this study is to discuss findings that investigate the experiences of postsecondary African American male college students with disabilities attending a moderately sized historically Black university in the mid-Atlantic region. Qualitative interviews were conducted to elicit responses related to family involvement in selecting a university, importance of academic and social belonging, faculty support, and unique culturally-based disability support services. Data findings demonstrate the importance of institutions actively constructing environments that facilitate academic engagement while being intentional in the development of an inclusive curriculum that addresses issues of equity and cultural difference for African American students with disabilities.*

*Keywords: African American, disability, campus climate, Historically Black College and University*

## Introduction

Inexplicably absent from the discussion surrounding the College to Career Initiative, President Obama's policy plan to raise the nation's college graduation rate by 60% in the next 10 years, have been the voices of college students whose identities reflect those of multiple nontraditional groups, such as African American college students with disabilities. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to discuss the lived experiences of 12 postsecondary African American undergraduate students labeled with disabilities attending a Historically Black College/University (HBCU). Through the analysis of these findings, family members, special educators, transition specialists, and administrators can better understand the educational context in which some African American students with disabilities thrive. Thus, they might be able to increase the pool of such students desiring to transition to college, retain and graduate students at a much higher rate, and, subsequently, meet President Obama's goal to raise the nation's college graduation rate.

\*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Joy Banks, Bowie State University, Department of Teaching, Learning, and Professional Development, Email: [jbanks@bowiestate.edu](mailto:jbanks@bowiestate.edu)

### **Postsecondary Enrollment of African American Students with Disabilities**

Increases in enrollment of students with disabilities in rigorous academic tracks are observed in virtually every state across elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). The percentage of students with disabilities enrolled in colleges and universities has grown nearly fivefold in the last three decades. Results of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) indicate there was a 12% increase in African American and 10% increase in European-American college students enrolled in 4-year institutions. Although results from the NLTS-2 (2011) have provided data to demonstrate increases of enrollment of students from culturally diverse backgrounds, disparities in postsecondary enrollment and retention trends between European American and African American youth with disabilities remain disproportionately high. The credit hours earned and college degree attainment for African American students with disabilities is significantly less than that for European American students with disabilities (Newman, et al., 2011). In addition, postsecondary students with disabilities enroll in a variety of 4-year institutions. Approximately 54% of attend public institutions, 42% attend independent colleges and universities, and 4% percent select HBCUs (NLTS-2, 2005). Simultaneously, 22% of all African American students choose to attend a historically Black university or college (Pierre & Welch, 2012). In short, the underrepresentation of African American college students with disabilities in 4-year institutions underscores the need for systematic examination of school and non-school variables that influence students' transition to college and retention during the college years.

### **School Factors Affecting African American Students' Postsecondary Transition**

Multiple complex factors contribute to the lower postsecondary enrollment trends for African American students with disabilities. One potential explanation to account for low postsecondary transition for African American students with disabilities is the precarious nature of membership in at least two historically marginalized groups. Hill Collins (2000) wrote about the ways that various social constructs, such as race, class, and gender, interact to produce varying degrees of oppression for individuals; her framework is called the matrix of domination.

While this framework is often associated with feminist epistemologies, disabilities are an additional component of the matrix as people's views influence the ways that they interact with and either empower or disempower individuals who have disabilities. For example, Haughton (1993) maintained that many with disabilities are oppressed because of a socially popularized stigma which entangles disability with intellectually inferiority; this assumption may have greater consequences for African Americans who suffer a "double whammy" due to negative stereotypes based on both their racial and disability status. Other researchers propose that African American students who experience the confluence of racial and disability status may experience lowered self-worth, social avoidance, and defensiveness (Johnson, 2006), which can deter them from pursuing postsecondary education.

Harry and Klinger (2006) reasoned that students with disabilities from multicultural backgrounds and those from low-income backgrounds are systematically placed into more restrictive academic settings, isolating them from the general education curriculum and steering them away from college preparatory classes. Complicating the issue of course selection is the concern that K-12 counselors may be steering college-able culturally and ethnically diverse students toward alternatives to college preparation diplomas due to their disabilities rather than

an actual lack of academic ability (Pellegrino, Sermons, & Shaver, 2011). Lending support to this argument are the findings of Trainor (2005) who conducted a qualitative research study to examine the perceptions of African American, European-American, and Hispanic American male students with learning disabilities during their high school transition planning.

Trainor's (2005) findings indicate clear disconnects between students and counselor expectations during the Individual Transition Plan to prepare students for postsecondary and career options after high school. In the study, each African American and Hispanic student had explicit goals of pursuing education after high school; yet, each student was enrolled in vocational track courses and was exempt from taking the standardized state-wide exams. Moreover, students relied more heavily on facilitative efforts from parents to assist with career goals and transition planning. Given that access to effective, high quality instruction is associated with positive postsecondary outcomes, it is important to consider the effect of limited exposure to quality instruction on individuals' ability to develop self-advocacy and academic skills necessary for college attainment.

### **The Role of Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

HBCUs are "hidden gems" that are often absent from conversations about strategies to promote career readiness for diverse students and high-need communities. Over the years, these institutions have remained committed to their important mission of educating African Americans, other nontraditional students, and an increasing number of European-American students with the goal of integration and educational equity for all (Bakerville, 2010; VanCamp, Barden, Sloan, & Clarke, 2009). Research has consistently shown the resulting campus climate as one that provides an intellectually challenging environment with increased peer and faculty interactions, as well as academic support to those who need it (Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010; Pierre & Welch, 2012; Tobolowsky, Outcalt, & McDonough, 2005). Moreover, these 100 or so institutions have attracted students who are single-parents, low-income, first-generation college students or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007). HBCUs also continue to draw a number of transfer students and those who desire part-time enrollment.

Despite the frequent enrollment of students from nontraditional backgrounds, these institutions continue to meet their mission of rigorous curricula and high graduation rates. For example, HBCUs represent only 3% of all American universities yet they successfully award approximately 30% of all recipients of African American Bachelors degrees (Baskerville, 2010; Pierre & Welch, 2012). In addition to the high percentage of undergraduate degrees awarded to African Americans, HBCUs boast of preparing a large percentage of African American students who go on to complete professional degrees at other institutions (Top 100 Degree Producers, Graduate and Professional, 2010). Allen, Jewell, Griffin, and Wolf (2007) estimate that approximately 15% of Masters degrees, 10% of doctoral degrees, and 15% of professional degrees are awarded to African American students who attended HBCUs. Undoubtedly, the unique contribution of HBCUs among institutions of higher education cannot be underestimated for African American students and other nontraditional students.

In addition to the tradition established by HBCUs, it is important to examine variables that contribute to campus climate and cultural congruence between the students and the institution. Fries-Britt (2010) reported that the cultural incongruence that often exist between African American students and traditionally European-American college campuses frequently

results in higher levels of stress which may be enhanced by perceptions of being less accepted; feelings that are likely heightened by negative connotations associated with being an individual with a disability. Several other studies have examined how African American students' academic self-concept and racial identities are shaped by attending an HBCU. In particular, qualitative research has focused on a number of variables which include reduced emotional strain associated with their ethnic identity and increased feelings of belonging and cultural pride (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Freeman, 2005; Van Camp, Barden, Sloan, & Clarke, 2009).

In a qualitative study of 11 African American male college students, Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2010) revealed that the influence of the institutional climate of the HBCU, exposure to culturally similar academic role models, and racial homogeneity had a positive effect on their academic persistence, campus involvement, and overall college satisfaction. Van Camp, Barden, Sloan, and Clarke (2009) reiterated Palmer, Davis, and Maramba's (2010) research by concluding that many African American students consciously attend HBCUs for reasons of cultural affirmation and to have opportunities for self-development in that environment.

The revealing accounts of racial composition of the campus on students' academic self-concept, racial identity, and college persistence point to a fundamental role of HBCUs for African American students and other historically marginalized students. In sum, these trends show promise that HBCUs can continue to serve their unique role among institutions of higher education by continuing to "act as social equalizers for groups who have been denied equal opportunity in education and in the society at large" (Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007, p. 273).

### **Methods**

#### **Researcher Positionality**

Qualitative research is the process of pursuing deeper understandings of the experiences of the individuals themselves and the community or people under investigation. Milner (2007) described research positionality as the researchers' awareness of their racial and cultural consciousness as it influences qualitative research processes, especially where issues of race/ethnic and cultural diversity are concerned. Thus, qualitative frameworks reject investigative procedures in which researchers detach themselves from the research process and assert that they are neutral and unbiased scholars (Ford, Ford, Moore, Whiting, & Grantham, 2008; Milner, 2007).

Therefore, within qualitative research, the positionality of the researcher must be taken into consideration during all interpretations of the findings. As an African American woman, my racial identity may have afforded me an insider position for much of the interview process. These racial and cultural similarities provided unique opportunities for candid conversations about the role of race/ethnicity in college selection and retention. On the other hand, I am not a graduate of an HBCU or an individual with a disability which simultaneously contributed to my position as an outsider.

As an attempt to minimize the effect of the outsider status, I took great care to share my experiences as an African American college student and former high school teacher of students with learning disabilities. To gain an in-depth understanding of the students in the study, I strove to have them share personally stories, examples, illustrations, and interpretations of their learning experiences in the context of the university. Throughout the interviews, participants appeared

increasingly comfortable as the interviews progressed and often commented about how the interview allowed them to reflect in new ways on their college experiences.

### **Participants**

The data analyzed in this study are part of a larger research investigation on the intersectionality of race/ethnicity and disability identity as experienced by twelve postsecondary African American male students with disabilities. The participants were successfully recruited from Disability Support Services at a 4-year historically Black university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Students in the study had a history of academic support from the disability services office and documentation to substantiate their disability.

Students reported a range of specific types of disabilities including learning disability (LD), attention deficit disorder (ADD), hearing impairment, cerebral palsy, and anxiety disorders. Participants had a mean age of 23.3 years with a range of 19-28 years of age. Table I provides the age, disability and major for each participant. Participants successfully completed at least one semester of course work and were enrolled in college-level courses during the time of the interview. Despite their diverse disabilities students shared a similar desire to have their collective voices and experiences heard in order to improve the educational outcomes for students like themselves. In an effort to respect each student's confidentiality, pseudonyms are used.

### **Data Collection**

The general interview guide, or semi-structured approach to individual interviewing, was the primary means of data collection for this study. Twenty-five open-ended questions were developed prior to the interview; however, not all questions were asked of all students. The open-ended questions included the following sample questions: Can you tell me about your high school experiences? What were your postsecondary goals when you were in high school? Who or what motivated you to attend college? Who or what influenced your college selection? The researcher engaged each student in individually scheduled 90-minute audio-taped interviews. The individual interviews intentionally establish the context of participants' experience. For instance, each interview began with an examination of participants' family, community, and perceptions of their high school experiences as it centered on transition.

In the second portion of the interview, participants were asked to reconstruct the details of their educational experiences within the context in which it occurred; participants were asked to reflect on the specific transition events, assessments, and coursework that reinforced their decision to attend college, specifically an HBCU. In the final portion of the interview, participants were encouraged to reflect on the ways the university intentionally cultivates their identity as academic achievers and provide evidence of the way in which faculty may, or may not, create an environment which fosters an atmosphere of "openness and opportunity" (Perry, Steel, and Hilliard, 2003, p. 99) for individuals with a disability.

*Table 1: Participant Demographic and Disability Information*

Name	Age	Disability Label	Major
Nicholas	20	Learning Disability	Criminal Justice
Brandon	24	Attention Deficit Disorder/ Learning Disability	Communication/Media
Dwayne	27	Cerebral Palsy	Communication/Media
Edward	21	Learning Disability	Communication/Media
Bryce	21	Learning Disability	Social Work
Jonathon	19	Learning Disability	Sports Management
Gregory	21	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder/Dysgraphia	Business Administration
Hakeem	22	Hearing Impairment	Business Administration
Imir	23	Anxiety Disorder	Communication/Media
Jackson	19	Learning Disability	Business Accounting
Kelvin	19	Learning Disability	Graphic Design
Larry	18	Learning Disability	Graphic Design

### **Data Analysis**

Multiple listenings of the interviews were conducted by the researcher prior to the analysis of readings and coding (Gilligan & Brown, 1992). Multiple listenings calls for four listenings of the interviews by the researchers which brings the voice of the student to the forefront of the study (Gilligan & Brown, 1992). The purpose of the four listenings was similar to those of the interviews -- to establish the participants' personal history, develop details on their interactions in postsecondary environments, and allow for reflection upon those details. Transcripts were read and audio recordings were listened to simultaneously. Ongoing coding and interview data analysis resulted in emergent themes which were retained or eliminated based upon the reoccurrence, or lack of occurrence, through the data analysis. In this manner, after each interview, an analytic memorandum was completed to summarize the interview, identify emergent themes, assign initial coding, and identify areas for further investigation. Member checking allowed students to validate the findings and ensure that emergent themes were accurately identified and that students felt secure in the initial analysis of their experiences (Patton, 1990).

## University Context

Data were collected at a mid-Atlantic Historically Black 4-year university. The university continues to honor its heritage by being a higher education doorway for qualified persons from diverse academic and socioeconomic backgrounds who seek high quality and affordable public comprehensive university. The commitment to this mission is evidenced in the diversity of the student and faculty body. In 2010, the university enrolled over 5,578 students (4,401 undergraduates and 1,177 graduate students).

The university places particular emphasis on excellence in teaching and research methodology that can improve the teaching-learning process for a diverse student body. Moreover, the university's Office of Disability Support Services provides services to approximately 108 students with disabilities. Disability Support Services is closely associated with the Academic Advising Center which provides academic tutoring, counseling, and career placement. Additionally, the department has activities, such as philosophical and political debates, in which students discuss poetry, literature, and historical issues related to race/ethnicity and disability identity.

## Findings

Several significant themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis that provided insight on how postsecondary African American students with a range of disabilities perceive their transition to college and attendance at a historically Black university. The emergent themes formed four broad categories: (1) familial influence; (2) supportive faculty; (3) campus belonging; and (4) the unique role of culturally responsive disability support services. The following provides poignant accounts of the participants' experiences relating to cultural congruence on college campuses. In addition, connections to the existing research literature are applied to provide recommendations for supporting and retaining racially/ethnically diverse students on *all* campuses.

### Family Influence in HBCU Selection

There is substantial evidence in the educational literature about the importance of parents and families in the education of students of color (Howard, 2003; Trainor, 2005). It is no surprise that with considerable frequency participants reported family members as being a powerful influence in their college selection. As students were questioned about their transition from high school to college, there were frequent discussions about their parents' expectations for them to attend a historically Black college. Gregory, a graduating senior and student with attention deficit disorder, discussed his mother's involvement in selecting the university:

My mom pushed me to attend. I really didn't want to come to [name of university], for whatever reason. I don't even remember why [I didn't want to attend]. I think because it was [a] small [university]. My mom did the research about the university and she talked to the disability support specialist. She figured out who could help me deal with these issues (having a disability) and she pushed me to attend.

## THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE

Several students expressed very similar experiences of having parents or family members initiate contact at a variety of college campuses. Parents eventually made the final decision in the students' college selection. In addition, adult family members were often the primary person to initiate contact with disability services. Larry, a first-year student with a learning disability, proudly explained that during his transition to college his aunt encouraged him to make use of disability services.

My aunt contacted disability support services when I first enrolled in the university and she found out about their services and then after that we came and met with Dr. Height (disability support specialist), and we have been on the journey ever since.

Although transition specialists and special educators continue to have an influential impact on adolescents with disabilities, according to the findings in this study family members significantly contribute to the decision making process for African American students with disabilities as they transition to college. Their statements further reiterate the importance for family participation in the transition process for students with disabilities, especially for culturally diverse families that may not share the views held by some high school personnel related to college attendance.

Trainor (2005) also confirmed prevailing notions found from this research that African American, and even Latino/a, students are more likely to discuss their college aspirations with family members than with high school educators. Moreover, their statements demonstrate that African American family members in this study valued a college environment that would reinforce their cultural identity, offer a supportive environment, and shield them from potentially deleterious effects of racial and disability stereotypes. Larry's statements affirmed that his family members brought a unique cultural perspective to his college transition experience:

My aunt and my grandmother played a big part in me going to an HBCU. That is all they instilled in me when I was growing up. They said, 'you have to get your education as a Black man, as a Black child, you have to get your education.' So, I made my way to an HBCU.

Many scholars have drawn attention to the significance of faculty and family members from marginalized backgrounds sharing personal narratives, or stories, which highlight meaningful strategies that allow the individual to remain successful while confronting day-to-day experiences of the subtle impact of race and disability as intellectually inferior (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). For example, Bryce explained that his father encouraged him to complete school despite having a learning disability, "That's one thing my dad talks about. That's why he wants me to finish school. We actually talked about this, Black males going against the stereotype." Bryce continued by stating:

[My dad] is the reason I am here to be honest. I guess he wanted me to finish school so I could have better opportunities with the situation I am going through, with having a disability...his thing is, if I do well I will be able to prove to myself that I will be able to finish whatever I want to do. [He told me] it's not a big deal that I have a learning disability because a lot of people have it in different areas.

### **Importance of Faculty Support**



## THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE

Issues such as self-determination and faculty willingness to provide accommodations have become pervasive themes in the research literature as students with disabilities articulate their views of campus climate (Denhart, 2008; Walker & Test, 2011; Trainor, 2005, 2007). Yet, a number of studies about African American students have pointed to the importance of mattering as a factor in students' overall campus satisfaction (Durodoye, Combes, & Bryant, 2004; Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010). Rosenberg and McCollough (1981) defined mattering as "motive [and] the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned about our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension that exercises a powerful influence on our actions" (p. 165). Both factors proved to be important links to campus climate and academic persistence for these students.

Participants maintained that their interactions with faculty reinforced an educational community in which faculty expressed a genuine interest in their personal and academic well-being. Further, participants determined that faculty members' demonstration of mattering significantly contributed to feelings of academic self-esteem and self-confidence; thus, enhancing their positive perceptions of the campus climate, fostering stronger connections with faculty, and igniting a deeper commitment to academic persistence. One of the participants characterized faculty's demonstration of matter in this way:

It's important just for me to have one-on-one conversations [with faculty] like I have here with my professors. I feel like if I have any types of problems or questions that need to be answered I can just go to them. I think if I was going to a White university, I wouldn't get that type of help from the professors. At an HBCU, you know, I would get the most help and the one-on-one conversations I need. (Byron, a student with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder)

Again, comments related to race/ethnicity and gender began to surface when questions related to interactions with faculty were introduced in the interviews. Edward, a graduating senior with a learning disability, shared how his interactions with faculty members and their high expectations contributed to his academic persistence:

As a Black male, I get a lot of support here. You're at a place where there is a lot expected from you. So you want to give your best, and you want to know what you are doing, so that is a big deal for me, doing my assignments and stuff like that, I [want] the professors to know that I know what I am doing.

Five of the 12 students were transfer students. These students contrasted their interactions with faculty members at traditionally White universities/institutions (TWI) with those at the HBCU. In this investigation transfer students perceived that faculty at HBCUs offered more constructive feedback. They perceived that some faculty at TWIs questioned their ability to succeed based upon their ethnicity, and, consequently, offered excessively harsh criticism on course assignments. Further, participants who were transfer students often complained that faculty members at their previous institutions were not available to offer additional time to assist the struggling students. In contrast, Brandon, a student with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, believed faculty at the HBCU wanted him to be successful and provided students with feedback to help them improve their academic skills:

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I felt there was some type of resistance to helping students there (TWIs), but at an HBCU I feel as though faculty point out your faults to help you so you can meet the standards of the world and fight on a level playing ground.

It is also important to acknowledge that many of the transfer students did not initially aspire to attend an HBCU. For some students, attending a HBCU was viewed as counter-intuitive to their philosophy of social integration and was not reflective of the communities which they were most familiar. Hakeem, a transfer student with a hearing impairment, explained that upon graduation from high school he preferred to attend a TWI. Hakeem stated:

The culture [of the HBCU] definitely had a big impact on my decision [to attend]. When I was younger, I did not want to go to a Black school at all; because when you're growing up in a predominately White area, you are always most comfortable with your peers with whom you grew up. Then I went to Hokum Community College for two years, I saw the favoritism that was going on between faculty and students. And I thought to myself, 'You know what, I might try to go to a Black university to see what it's all about.' I reviewed the history [of the university] and I said, 'Let me take a chance to come here.' It has been a big change and after a year of being here, I saw the good [disability] support services at the university could offer me, and that is what I really liked.

While student responses do not permit conclusions regarding faculty members' beliefs toward ethnically diverse students attending TWIs, their statements indicate that they experienced heightened levels of stress associated with their racial and disability identities. As a consequence, these students withdrew from their first college to transfer to what was viewed as a more encouraging academic environment. Their attendance at an HBCU allowed for reduces levels of stress related to their racial identity and disability status. Students' decision to transfer out of TWIs also has implications for the need for campuses to intentionally facilitate environments in which faculty members not only resist stereotypes but actively embrace diversity thereby reducing the chances that students will withdraw from the university.

### **Academic and Social Belonging**

Multiple studies of campus climate provide evidence of academic and social belonging as central factors in the attrition of students of color and students with a disability (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). For example, DaDeppo's (2009) study found that beyond students' high school achievement and background characteristics (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status), academic and social belonging were both unique variables that predicted the intent to persist for college students with a learning disability.

She concluded that if students of color with disabilities are able to feel authentically connected to the campus culture, then this may lead to the increased potential of college campuses to retain diverse and underrepresented students. Similarly, when asked about academic and social belonging, participants' commented that "the culture of the university makes [them] want to strive to do better" (*Larry, a first-year student*). Another student explained how the HBCU campus climate was more supportive even amongst peers. His assertion was that everyone on campus was there to help each other meet the goal of college graduation.

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[The HBCU] definitely makes me feel comfortable academically because, well, what I notice about African American culture is that we don't judge one another. We help one another and we don't compete with one another.

As it related to academic belonging, other students expressed a preference for smaller class sizes which they believed were best suited for their learning styles. Student narratives often highlighted that smaller class size contributed to their lowered anxiety, willingness to verbally participate during class discussions, and increased desire to seek assistance from the instructor. Freddie, a sophomore with a learning disability, explained it this way:

Academically I feel comfortable here because the size of the classes really meets my needs. The professors are nice, there are good students here, there are a couple students who are trying to get where you are.

Other students equated the term campus belonging with cultural representation of African Americans within the course curriculum. The participants suggested that course materials reflected African American cultural and heritage which increased their feelings of academic and social belonging. Moreover, students found that the content within the courses allowed them to make considerable connections to their personal lives and home communities. For this reason, learning was perceived as an important task that extended beyond one dimensional course content which may be useful only for the course or specific profession. Learning, on the other hand, was viewed a tool to improve their immediate community. Dwayne, a nontraditional student with cerebral palsy, reiterated this point:

We are presented in the forefront, from the plays that the theatre department puts on, to the campus activities. Nikki Giovanni was here not too long ago. The university takes pride in things about our community. That helps a lot. The things I learn here, I can take back to my community. It feels that the people here speak about us and talk about us. They know about us. They know what they are saying. It doesn't just come out of books.

A subcategory of the participants included nontraditional students who were older than traditional college-aged students. An additional response from Dwayne was reflective of the comments from the nontraditional students:

I am coming to college 10 years later, so I had no idea what to expect. Professors at this university kind of understand. Also, they give a great deal of help and they understand that everyone sitting in the classroom is not 18 to 21 years old.

Although there has yet to be extensive literature on ethnically diverse nontraditional college students with disabilities, the NLTS-2 (2005) reported that students with disabilities transition to college and universities 3 to 5 years after graduating from high school. The findings in this study along with national data become critical in understanding another aspect of the experience of nontraditional students with disabilities.

### **Disability Support Specialist as an Institutional Agent**

Stanton-Salazar (1997) described the role of an institutional agent as one who intentionally assists students of color to develop social networks that provide informational resources and mentorship within the educational system. In this regard, the disability support specialist acted as an institutional agent by intentionally providing participants with support services which assisted them in effectively navigating the academic terrain while also allowing them to understand the unique intersectionality of their race/ethnicity and disability status within an educational context.

For instance, through various workshops, evening programs, poetry slams, and bulletin boards the disability support specialist encouraged students to explore the lives of successful individuals with disabilities. In these workshops African American movie stars, celebrities, and historical figures with disabilities were highlighted as reputable role models. As an example, the actor Danny Glover was highlighted for his ability to graduate from college despite having a learning disability. Also, Harriet Tubman, who suffered from seizures, was highlighted as being a notable historical figure with a disability.

As a consequence of these experiences, students regularly compared their personal challenges in the college environment to the experiences of African Americans who successfully overcame oppression and societal challenges. Many participants' statements accentuated the underlying theme of the programs, which was emphasized in the following statement from Imir, a senior with an anxiety disorder:

There were numerous individuals. A lot of [famous] people I look up to had a disability. No one would ever suspect that they had a disability. What they did is, they took their strengths and the things they were good at and they worked through the things that weren't strong in—things like having a learning disability, and they worked to become who we know them as today. That keeps me motivated.

Overall, the students began to offer more revealing accounts of how understanding the complexity of race/ethnicity and disability identity influenced their willingness to overcome academic challenges and self-doubt. In sum, the campus climate and the efforts of the disability support specialist contributed to a college experience in which students were encouraged to persist toward academic excellence, were provided the tools to do so in a culturally responsive method, where the curriculum positively reinforced their cultural identity, and where the negative impact of disability stereotypes were minimized.

### **Discussion**

The experiences of African American students with disabilities are problematically absent from the literature which limits their opportunity to voice the complexities of their college experiences. This study highlights the multiple contextual factors that contribute to the successful academic persistence of African American students with disabilities. In this study, it is critical to recognize the role that race/ethnicity, gender, and disability status play in the attrition and persistence of racially/ethnically diverse postsecondary students with disabilities. Several students discussed the ways in which family members often influenced their decision to attend a historically Black university.

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These family members assisted participants in the construction of personal narratives that debunked negative stereotypes related to race and disability status. Another important theme included students' interactions with faculty members. Many of the students made reference to their race and ethnicity, especially within the context of their sense of belonging and connectivity with university faculty members. These cultural perceptions greatly influenced how they perceived faculty interactions as well as faculty members' beliefs in their ability to successfully navigate the college environment.

In addition, nontraditional students who were above the average age of traditional first-time college students found faculty members to be supportive and the campus culturally inviting. It should not be overlooked that students emphasized the small class sizes as a benefit to their academic retention. The intentional culturally relevant services provided by disability support services offered students a place to explore their dual identities related to race/ethnicity and disability. Overall, the findings of this study are consistent with the findings of other studies on HBCU campus climate and student retention (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010). However, this study contributes to a previously unexplored population of postsecondary students with disabilities attending HBCUs.

What is abundantly clear from the data findings in this study is for transition specialists and postsecondary disability support specialists to give greater consideration to the ways in which cultural congruence on college campuses impacts student attrition and retention. As the number of African American students with disabilities continues to increase, it is imperative that research consideration is given to the ways in which African American students with disabilities perceive various college environments.

What also became clear is that the African American students in this study continued to rely on the feedback from family, faculty members, and the disability support specialist to fortify their identity as capable postsecondary learners. Several students made mention of faculty members caring about them as if they were an extension of their family, while other students claimed faculty members were willing to offer support even in areas of personal concern. Participants' perceptions of their interactions with faculty members also suggest that the instructor's ability to demonstrate personalized attention has a significant effect on the way students characterize the college climate, their academic and social belonging, and their academic potential.

This qualitative study provides a small glimpse into the ways some African American students with disabilities view their college learning experiences. Stated differently, this research underscores the ways in which culture is mediated through the teaching and learning experience for postsecondary African American students with disabilities attending an HBCU. Future research may examine the inclusiveness of HBCUs for students with disabilities who are not African American.

In addition, this investigation examines the experiences of those students who have remained enrolled at an HBCU. Other studies may be required to determine the experiences of those students who transferred to TWIs. A limitation of this study is that data were collected at only one campus and with only African American males. There is a need to investigate the experiences of students with disabilities from more diverse backgrounds. Nevertheless, the resulting data contribute to the need for collaboration between HBCUs and traditionally White campuses to develop such support systems for *all* students regardless of their ethnicity or the racial/ethnic composition of the campus. Responding to this unique examination of campus

inclusiveness through the lens of the student could contribute to the positive experience of all students with disabilities on HBCUs and on TWIs.

### **Implications for Practice**

The students in the study continuously mentioned the importance of pursuing their education in a supportive academic environment. Feelings of academic and social belonging were enhanced through their critical relationships among faculty members and the disability support staff and peers who served as institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Therefore, strategies that could be used to encourage supportive campus environments include the establishment of institutional agents within disability support services and campus-wide. Evidence is provided through multiple studies that having such an individual helps to buffer students against the negative impact of stress related to race/ethnicity and disability identities.

In particular, faculty members, staff or administrators who take on this role must be easily accessible and able to acknowledge the indelible messages surrounding race and disability status. Equally as important is the need for institutional agents in disability services and across campus to establish venues, individualized or open forums, for students to have honest conversations about the intersection of race and disability status in academic and workplace environments. Faculty members, staff and administration must also evaluate their understandings and the philosophical underpinnings that influence their actions toward diverse students with disabilities on the college campus.

### **Conclusion**

The themes reported in this investigation show promise that “the direct involvement of HBCUs is essential if America is to achieve greater success in empowering African Americans with disabilities to achieve their full potential to live full, active lives” (Haughton, 1993, p. 62). Furthermore, as we listen to the voices of African American students with disabilities attending HBCUs, and as universities strive to achieve the goals established in the College to Career Initiative, it is important to further attend to the words of Clayton Haughton, former Director of the Department of Defense Equal Employment Program and an African American male with cerebral palsy and blindness:

[HBCUs] can open doors of opportunities for numerous Americans with disabilities to become college graduates, employees, taxpayers, and welcomed participants in the life of their communities. Nobody said it’s going to be easy, but those who dare not, do not. (1993, p. 64)

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