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In Their Voices-Retaining African American Students at a Predominately White University: An Examination of Theoretical Implications and Student Cerntered Practices

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IN THEIR VOICES - RETAINING AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS AT A
PREDOMINATELY WHITE UNIVERSITY: AN EXAMINATION OF
THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND STUDENT CENTERED PRACTICES

BY

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DISSERTATION

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THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND STUDENT CENTERED PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

This investigation is a study on the impact of a researched based holistic developmental retention plan for African American students who attend a predominately White institution (PWI). The strategic praxis connects theoretical implications and student centered practices to enhance positive retention outcomes. This study examined the impact of student centered retention offerings used in the Office of Multicultural Relations (MCR) at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Founded in 1997, the expressed mission of MCR was to address the challenges of the University's largest minority population, placing emphasis on the retention of its African American students.

The focus group interview sessions provided transcribed contextual data which served as a foundational praxis of the research. The focus groups were homogenous and represented African American students, actively engaged in the MCR retention holistic developmental retention design. Focus group number one was comprised of current undergraduates and focus group number two was comprised of recent graduates. Transcripts from the focus groups' interviews served as a foundational praxis of the research. Variables suggested by Tinto's retention theory, Swail's student centered model, and Jordan & Hartling's relational-cultural theory were affirmed in the MCR focus groups' analysis.

A qualitative method, using open and axial coding, allowed for the examination comparison, and categorizing of the transcribed interview data. Furthermore, the voices of the students were evidenced in the open coding process (Strauss and Corbin, 1994).

Thematic analysis of the contextual data allowed for emergent themes which are found in retention and relational-cultural theories. The emergent themes were security,

positive academic achievement, the building of relationships-trust, having a voice, and

leadership. Additionally, a recurring theme of relationship building was important to the

African American student attending a PWI in the MCR focus groups. The impact and

benefits of the MCR retention praxis are discussed.

DEDICATION

To Arthur and Charlene DeLoach, my parents

who exemplified hard work, integrity and faith.

To my children, Brittany Noel and Ronald Barrington,

You are my best cheerleaders. Thank you for believing in Mom.

To my sister, Dr. B. Ann Langford; Your strength for me was amazing.

You are a wonderful role model.

To Rev. Ronald L. Bobo, Sr., for commitment to supporting me

to the completion of this project.

To my entire immediate family,

Whose love is unconditional.

And finally, to my late husband,

The Rev. Ronald B. Packnett,

You were a scholar, a visionary, and above all, my best friend.

Thank you for life shared together.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

Table

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

For decades now, establishing a reasonably balanced cultural image in America's institutions of higher education has been of primary concern to administrators, teachers, and the public alike. As the Civil Rights era ran its course, colleges and universities began to engage in recruiting strategies to encourage and welcome African-American presence and participation in the education process on their respective campuses. The landmark case of Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka clearly paved the way for African Americans to matriculate in White institutions. While the transitional pangs initially proved to be challenging, the commitment to cultural diversity in higher education speaks to a more accurate depiction of our multi-faceted, diverse society as a whole.

Institutional commitment to diversity was essentially marked by opportunities of access resulting from legislation known as The Higher Education Act of 1965. This legislation proved fundamental in fostering increased enrollment. According to the U.S. Dept. of Education, (NCES 2009), a steady increase in the percentage of students of color enrolled in higher education. In 1976, fifteen percent were students of color, compared to thirty-two percent in 2007. Though Hispanic, Asian and Pacific Islander students attributed to this increase, African American enrollment also increased from nine percent in 1976 to thirteen percent in 2007.

While institutions of higher learning have since embraced the notion that diversity is essential to a well-rounded school populous, achieving and retaining a diverse student population, namely African American students at predominately White institutions

(PWI), yet remains a challenge for most. According to Swail, Redd, and Perna (2003), institutions of higher learning have since become more concerned with retention strategies essential in establishing effective outcomes; these strategies "rely on proven research, established retention programs, are sensitive to students' needs, and target the most needy student populations" (pp. 116-118). This type of research can well serve PWIs in retaining African American students.

Background of Study

The literature regarding the retention of African American students attending PWIs abounds with an examination of theories. To be sure, researchers (Bennett & Okinaka, 1990; Rottenburg & Morrison, 1993) examined psychological variables (feelings of social isolation and alienation on the college campus) and their impact on student retention. Other researchers acknowledge the correlation between economic factors and student retention (St. John, Cabrera, Nora and Asher, 2000). Sedlacek (1996) posits it is the non-cognitive variables (self-esteem, self-concept, etc.) which impact retention for African American students at PWIs. Mallinckrodt (1988) suggests it is family and community support that serves as great predictors in retaining African American students, attending PWIs.

Despite the examination of more recent theories, the historical context on student retention is rooted in landmark studies by Tinto (1975) whose work embraces the ideology, theoretical perspectives, and studies of Durkheim (1951) and Spady (1970). While Tinto's work serves as a model examining the academic and social integration of college students, other scholars have taken exception, deeming Tinto's model as culturally limited in scope (Tierney, 1992; Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson, 1997).

Swail's (1995, 2003) research challenges Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) theories, and includes a framework to address retention factors pertinent to African American students who attend predominately White institutions (PWIs).

To be sure, Swail (1995, 2003) asserts a society that is rapidly changing culturally, socially, and economically, must invest in the academic achievements of African American students if equity is ever to be achieved. He explains despite societal transformations, retention-to-degree-completion for African American undergraduate students continues to be a troubling impediment for these primarily White venues. Ironically, the retention-to-degree completion rates for students of color have markedly declined while it is expected the U. S. will become more ethnically diverse over the next 50 years (Swail, 2003). Without question, it can be said that the enrichment of colleges and universities, and the healthy survival of a diverse and successful society depend upon the unfailing development of minority education along with a strategic approach for retaining African American students.

In September, 1994, Dr. Blanche Touhill, former Chancellor of the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL), and the researcher met to discuss this growing trend within the UMSL milieu. According to Dr. Touhill, while African American student enrollment was at a steady increase, maintaining these same students had become progressively more challenging for the institution. The University was clearly attracting students of color, and the goal was to retain them until degree completion but the grades of this group reflected less than favorable achievement indicators for many who remained. To that end, the Office of Multi-Cultural Relations (MCR) was established to offer a solid and

viable response to these developing occurrences, and to directly impact retention toward successful degree completion for this specific population of students.

The Office of Multi-Cultural Relations (MCR) officially began servicing the university in 1997 with staffing that included a Director, Assistant Director, Counseling Psychologist, Tutorial Coordinator, and Counselors; all were assigned with the responsibility of scheduling one-on-one weekly meetings with students. Administrative support personnel, student mentors, tutors and work-study students are also part of the MCR operation.

To enhance retention efforts, the MCR mission placed emphasis on fostering collaborations within the entire campus community to impact institutional buy in relative to retention. Relationships were firmly established between MCR professional staff and other campus staff, each representing a unit, department, and division from academic and student affairs. Likewise, MCR professional staff fostered relationships with each MCR student, as this proved vital in implementing retention efforts. Through this seminal context, much has been observed and exposed about the larger learning experiences of African American students who pursue an education at UMSL. Indisputably, UMSL has much to offer students of every cultural orientation and academic pursuit; its well earned reputation is indicative of such. The challenge at hand as recognized by administration, was to effectively address the unique needs of African American students attending the university.

Since 1997, the Office of Multicultural Relations has sought with intent to focus on the raison d'être of this lingering quandary, and with critical evaluation and insight, provide a doable remedy to resolve this on-going challenge. With over fifteen years of

service focused on this communal malady, the researcher believes a holistic strategic

developmental approach to retention efforts must become systemic within the campus

environment, and should include components that address the needs of its targeted

population; that is, African American students attending a PWI. Germane to this

population is the importance of including mentoring, tutoring, financial aid support and

workshops (Swail, 2003; Guiffrida, 2005). Moreover, critical relationship building or

growth-fostering relationship building between the assigned professional staff person and

the student can serve as the foundation or premise for enhancing successful retention

outcomes (Miller, 1986).

To be sure, the social constructivist model (Bruner 1990) advances learning

through human interaction and critical relationships. Bruner states, "to understand man

you must understand how his experiences and his acts are shaped by his intentional

states, and that the form of these intentional states is realized only through participation

in the symbolic systems of the culture" (p. 35). Other theorists acknowledge the validity

of this assertion by acknowledging the importance of connecting the student to the

college environment in ways that evoke comfort and cause the student to discover a

commonality between the new college culture and their own cultural experiences

(Jalomo, 1995; Rendon, 1996; de Anda, 1984).

A correlation between learning and the inherent sense of value—how one fits into

a society within the context where learning is designed can also impact retention efforts

(Fleming, 1984). This notion of cultural experiences, and learning through enhancing

relationship building and human interaction becomes particularly important in working

with the African American student attending a PWI (Fleming, 1984). Hence, the

researcher asserts a deliberate relational praxis which fosters relationship building, must be brought into the discussion.

Problem Statement

Clearly, declining retention rates for African American students attending PWIs are unacceptable. While there is a need to change this reality, we must first examine factors which garner transformational results for African American students attending PWIs. Much of the research speaks to academic and social integration as primary factors to improve retention, while other theorists have concluded support service offerings are critical to improving students' grade point averages which improves retention outcomes. While there is a large amount of research on student retention in colleges and universities, fewer studies have as a primary focus, retention systems, inherent to the college setting. Much of the research often presents frameworks or models not systemic within the institutional setting and are often not transferrable for implementation at other PWIs seeking solutions. Resulting from this void is a need to examine a theory-to-practice systemic approach in conquering the retention challenge for African American students attending PWIs. This study will examine retention theories and student-centered models of retention practice. This study will further examine other key factors, including the merit of relational-cultural theory and its impact on increased retention for African American students attending PWIs. While the aforementioned remains the primary focus of this study, a comparative analysis of the 2001-2007 MCR freshmen cohort will examine GPA and graduation data and outcomes.

Purpose of Study

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the impact and effectiveness of research based support service offerings and retention strategies for African American students attending a PWI, namely, the University of Missouri-St. Louis. In moving from theoretical implications towards student centered practices, the researcher was interested in the impact of retention offerings through the Office of Multicultural Relations/Academic Affairs (MCR) at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. The Office of Multicultural Relations has as its mission; the retention of students. The institutional leadership of Chancellor emeritus, Touhill, has placed primary emphasis on the retention of its undergraduate African American population. The researcher has also examined the grade point averages and graduation rates of a cohort of African American students who participated in the MCR support service offerings and compared their data with those from the same cohort who did not participate in MCR retention praxis. Of equal importance was an examination of the role of relational theory and retention. Finally, the study included a discussion concerning institutional and systemic ownership of retention for African American students at PWIs.

Research Questions

Specifically, the researcher was interested in retention outcomes for African American students and posed the questions:

(1) What is the impact of MCR support services which are provided through a mentoring component, financial aid support, specified workshops, and on-going individualized sessions with designated professional staff? Another concern and question posed in this study:

(2) What key factors (identified by students participating in MCR support services)

have contributed to their degree completion at UMSL? In examining the impact

on the established relationship between the MCR professional staff counselor and

students, the researcher posed the question:

(3) What (if any) impact did the MCR professional staff counselor have on your

retention? A final concern was:

(4) What were MCR students' GPAs and number of years to degree completion when

compared to those who did not remain engaged in the same retention 2001-2007

MCR retention praxis?

In understanding the MCR holistic strategic developmental plan for positive

retention outcomes, The MCR campus integration process begins with laying a

foundation for relationship building for African American students admitted to UM-St.

Louis (UMSL). This process begins with an introductory letter that both welcomes and

congratulates students as their developmental journey unfolds. Additionally, an invitation

is extended to participate in summer orientation. In this forum, students become formally

a part of MCR. Each is assigned a designated student mentor and is introduced to the

entire MCR staff. Additionally, students meet with professional staff which they will

confer with weekly and throughout the correlated semester. The orientation, in essence

becomes the seminal opportunity for establishing a structured relationship plan that MCR

is committed to pursue.

To learn more about the academic and social skills of each student, The Noel-

Levitz Inventory is also administered and provides diagnostic and supplementary

knowledge about the student. This analysis provides excellent insights concerning the

strengths, attributes and personality style of the student. The inventory is scored by Noel-Levitz Retention Specialists, and the feedback provides relevant information for the MCR professional staff to create an Individualized Personal Plan (IPP). The purpose of the individualized plan is to ensure the student's overall progress and development. Files are kept and updated during each meeting; it is important to note all information remains confidential unless written permission is given to share.

Additionally, parents of these same students receive communication, detailing the MCR's mission and its commitment to encouraging student success. To be of further support to parents, the MCR Parent Support Group was established. According to many parents, this type of outreach has proved helpful to transitionally-challenged parents experiencing difficulties as their student moves closer towards independence. The MCR Parent Support Group also provides financial support to students through organized fund raising projects. Typically, financial support is shown in assisting with the purchase of books, food stipends, etc. It is the blending of each of these components that creates an infrastructure for the establishment of MCR. Additionally, peer tutoring and mentoring, financial assistance, workshop programming, cultural enrichment and one-on-one relationship building meetings are a part of this twelve year old infrastructure.

Hypotheses

The researcher proposed that African American students attending a predominately White institution (PWI) are best retained when the institution of higher learning embraces a retention model to include, a structured relational methodology or retention praxis, designed to establish an on-going relationship between the student and the student advocate professionals. For the purposes of this study, the professional

student advocate is the MCR professional staff counselor. This individual can build a

trusting relationship that impacts the academic and non academic experiences of the

student; thereby affecting student retention and institutional commitment. While research

confirms the necessity of support service offerings, including mentoring, workshops, and

financial support services, the researcher believed that an assigned professional student

advocate can provide a important role which extends beyond academic or intrusive

advising. The student advocate professional could serve as the catalyst in creating a

strategic holistic developmental retention plan which can foster institutional commitment

and a spirit of belonging for the student experiencing a new cultural setting.

Such a systemic concept is in contrast to Tinto's (1987, 1993) retention theory, which

suggests the student is responsible for fitting into the academic and social settings of the

campus environment, or Swail's (1995) retention framework, (though a student centered

concept), negates a point person, or the inclusion of an intact, identifiable professional,

essential to fostering relationship building, thereby impacting retention. The researcher

believed that without defined and assigned roles to ensure plans for retention

implementation, a void would exist in building an institutional retention plan.

It should be noted the researcher is distinctively an African American educator

who attended PWIs for a period of fifteen years (including undergraduate and graduate

experiences). Currently, she has been employed as an administrator at a PWI for the past

fifteen years. While the researcher's personal journey lacked the aforementioned support

services, several factors contributed to this clear exception. First, no comparable support

services were available during the researcher's undergraduate experiences. Secondly,

scholarships and grant funds were more readily available to students at that time. Thirdly,

as a relational praxis was not a part of the college experience, the extended family of the greater African American community (outside the institution) created opportunity for meaningful relationships that gave valuable nurture during the educational process. Additionally, some faculty and of color and others committed to educational excellence for African American students, became the voice and support system for many.

Research Design and Methodology

The mixed methods study relied on data derived from the qualitative thematic coding of two focus group interview sessions. The groups were comprised of undergraduate and graduate students who were randomly chosen from a convenience sample connected with the MCR. African American students were engaged in discussions of their experiences while attending a PWI and participating in the retention support service offerings of MCR. Each participant was integrated into the support service offerings which include one-on-one structured relational interaction on a weekly basis (or as deemed necessary by the professional staff), mentoring, tutoring (if requested), workshops/seminars and financial aid support.

Additionally, a quantitative comparative analysis will examine outcomes of the GPA and years of degree to completion for an African American cohort that participated in MCR support service offerings; this data will be compared to members of the cohort who did not. The cohort is comprised of a number of students who began as freshmen and attended the university from 2001-2007.

It is important to note the researcher did not knowingly have an established structured relationship with the MCR students who were selected for the focus groups. Finally, it remains important to note the researcher was in a unique position to gather this

data as some students might have felt uncomfortable sharing such information in another setting. The researcher created open ended questions and informed the students in the focus groups that all information was confidential and inconsequential. The grounded theory model was used to decipher the data, and the researcher used both open and thematic coding. Finally, the researcher examined the outcomes of a comparative analysis of data gathered from the Office of the Registrar at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UM-St. Louis). The GPA and graduation data of completers and non completers of the 2001-2007 MCR retention praxis was compared.

Delimitations

This study was conducted on the north campus of UM-St. Louis. The location is convenient for residential students utilizing the campus shuttle service, and also for those living off-campus who prefer the metro-link public transportation adjacent to the campus grounds. The research conducted focused on two separate groups. Focus group one consisted of randomly selected undergraduate students who participated with the Office of Multicultural Relations (MCR). The second focus group represented students who have graduated, but consistently participated in MCR offerings during their undergraduate experience. Both focus groups were comprised solely of African American students and alumni from UM-St. Louis.

The two focus groups contained no more than 10-12 students per group. The size limitations were deliberately imposed in order to allow for designed group cohesion and effective conversation flow for maximum participant engagement. The researcher functioned as group moderator during the set plenary sessions and posed impartial

questioning to avoid the potential of any biases or predispositions which could be brought into the discussion.

Limitations

As previously mentioned, MCR freshmen in the 2001-2007cohort, provided data used in the comparative analysis. Although all first-year African American students are invited to experience the MCR component, many accept the invitation while others will doubtlessly appear later in the semester; yet, others choose not to respond to the invitation all together. It is important to note while the groups' moderator, the researcher, and MCR administrator were one and the same person, every effort was made to ensure no biases or preconceived notions were factored into the research while working with the students at UM-St Louis. It is important that any and all assumptions were wisely discarded in order to help guarantee credible results in the formation and compilation of this data.

Definition of Terms

Several definitions related to the discussion on college student retention are dispersed throughout the study. The following terms as they appear in the literature, are unique to various models in the retention research. These definitions are found in the psychological and sociological models of college student development, planning for educational programs, organizational and institutional development regarding retention strategies, socioeconomic implications and retention outcomes, and more. The terms and definitions used are therefore standard according to college retention research, and will assist in clarifying terminology used in throughout this specific study (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). In the body of literature on college retention, the term **cognitive**

factors, is used in many sociological models to describe attributes which relate to a student's academic ability as determined by such factors as the level of coursework mastery, study habits, learning styles, technological skills and others (Tinto, 1993, & Swail, 2003). Tinto (1993) infuses cognitive factors throughout his research on academic and social integration theory. While Swail (2003) views cognitive factors in the same vein, he suggests cognitive factors lend great insight into the academic skill set students bring to the university from prior experiences and are therefore illustrated as an essential part of his geometric model on impacting retention strategies for African American students in higher education. The term **cultural norms** is defined as the attributes and characteristics used in describing the unique background and personal experiences of students; these experiences and attributes examine ethnicity, social economic status, educational attainment, etc. (Spady, 1970; Tinto 1987).

More recent research examines key issues impacting **first-time/first generation college students**; these students are the very first in their family to attend college as neither parent of the student has pursued and/or completed an Associate's or Baccalaureate degree (Faye Carter, 2006). In much of the literature on college retention, **institutional factors** are defined as services within the educational setting (academic and non- academic) which affect student success and achievement (Tinto, 1993).

Findings suggest a strong institutional emphasis on supportive personal services (advising, mentoring, tutoring, the development of academic survival skills,) are linked positively with effective retention results (Pascarella, 1980; Kulik, Kulik, and Schwalb, 1984; Abrams & Jernigan, 1984; Titley, 1985; Wilkie & Kuckuch, 1989; Swail, 2003). The term **social factors** is key in the examination of student retention and offers insights

into the social and psychological attributes students demonstrate when attempting full acceptance into the campus culture and its various student groups and organizations (Tinto, 1993). This term describes the social-emotional characteristics of a student, and includes their cultural norms and values (Tinto, 1993; Braxton, 2000). The researcher used the term **institutional integration** throughout the review of literature. Institutional integration was coined in the 1990's and 2000's to emphasize the importance of institutions of higher learning connecting and involving students in the educational experience (Fleming, 1984; Redd, &Perna, 2003). **Institutions of higher learning** were defined as two or four year colleges, including technical and vocational colleges (Swail, 2003). The term in this study was used to describe the four year college experience. PWI refers to predominately White institution. Typically, retention was measured as the percentage of students who return to their original campus after one academic year; the researcher used this term to refer to students remaining at the original campus until degree completion. The researcher will also examine the **Cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA)** of the 2001-2007MCR freshmen cohort.

Definition of Terms

- **Cognitive Factors**- the attributes and characteristics related to a student's academic ability as determined by such factors as the level of coursework mastery, study habits, and learning styles.

- **Critical Race Theory (CRT)-**term used to acknowledge the voices of African Americans, their journeys, and personal experiences; process used to give credence to real life situations often borne out of cultural and racial experiences.

- **Cultural Norms**-the attributes and characteristics used in describing the unique background and personal experiences of an individual.

- **Cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA)- grade point average** - a measure of a student's academic achievement at a college or university; calculated by dividing the total number of grade points received by the total number attempted.

- **First time/First Generation College Students-** students who are the first in the immediate family to attend college.

- **Institutional Factors-** services and provisions made available to students within the campus setting; they are both academic and non academic.

- **Institutional Integration-**term coined in the 1990's and 2000's to emphasize the importance of institutions of higher learning involving its student population in the educational and institutional decision making process.

- **Institutions of higher learning-** two or four year colleges, including technical and vocational colleges.

- **Office of Multicultural Relations-**campus office established at the University of Missouri-St. Louis in 1994. Its primary mission is to provide retention support services to students, namely students of color.

- **PWI** refers to predominately White institution.

- **Social Factors-** attributes and characteristics of students related to their background, family setting, and other unique cultural norms.

- **Thematic Analysis** -a format used to code qualitative information and can include a number of explicit themes or patterns, including: (1) a way of seeing (2) a way of

making sense out of seemingly unrelated materials (3) a way of analyzing qualitative

information (4) a way of systematically observing a person, an interacting group, a

situation, an organization or a culture (5) a way of converting qualitative information

into quantitative data.

Significance of the Study

Colleges and universities continue to recognize an increase in the enrollment of

students of color. While federal funds have been committed to establishing this

accessibility and affordability, (Higher Education Act of 1965), the challenge remains to

retain these same students. Despite in-depth research, retention continues to be a

persistent problem in institutions of higher education for African American students

attending PWIs. Though many institutions have responded with the development of

campus-wide programming, less thought has gone into the sustainability of effective

retention programming or the implementation of a retention model.

Furthermore, less evident, is retention programming deliberate in the incorporation

of a relational praxis, or model designed to establish a continuous relationship (between

the student and a committed campus professional) to enhance dialogue and the building

of trust, all while enhancing degree completion for students. This study has added to the

body of knowledge as it not only focused on specific factors used in implementing

retention to degree completion model for African American students attending PWIs, but

also established a deliberate relational praxis as a premise for sustainability. If such a

factor is missing, the researcher believed the effectiveness and success of retention

programming can be compromised. The information from this study may be used to

modify retention programs to include the deliberate implementation of factors which

foster a positive campus experience and high quality customer services to African

American students attending PWIs. College administrators, faculty and staff may come

to rely on the evidence-based results worthy of the creation of systemic implementation

or at the very least, a prototype in working with African American students in producing

positive outcomes, including degree completion.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

Increasing the number of African American undergraduate students to degree completion and reducing the dropout rate remains a challenge for institutions of higher learning. According to the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (2007), while the graduation rates for African American students have shown a slight increase, within the past few years, the national graduation rate is currently 43% for African American students when compared to 63% for White students attending predominately White institutions (PWIs) of higher learning. Various theoretical perspectives have been postulated in an attempt to explain differences in the retention to graduation gap. These differences include economic influences, social/cultural challenges, institutional factors, and academic preparedness (JBHE, 2007). Since the 1970's several theoretical critiques have emerged in an attempt to offer conceptual coherence to the voluminous research on student departure (Spady, 1970; Kamen, 1971; Tinto, 1975). Subsequent to the 1970's, studies on student retention include a more comprehensive examination of unique factors which impact minority student retention. The review of literature for this study examined the theoretical models on student retention, including sociological and psychological theories and a student centered framework for retaining African American students attending predominately White institutions. Attention was given to specific support services used at PWIs to retain and graduate the African American student population.

Additionally, this study highlighted support services impacting African American student retention. These factors include economic influences (financial aid), peer mentoring and tutoring, one-on-one relational experiences between professional staff and

students, and student seminars/workshops. Finally, a synthesis of past research and studies on student retention outcomes at various PWIs was provided; these studies recognized the paucity of relevant research and theoretical concepts.

The purpose of this study was to examine and analyze retention theory and student centered practices for African American students attending a PWI, the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Dialogue concerning retention strategies and their impact were analyzed through thematic coding. African American students in their own voices shared personal experiences of participation in MCR retention offerings, with emphasis placed on impact and outcomes. The comparative analysis on GPA and retention-to-graduation data provided information on impact and outcomes of a freshmen cohort who participated in the MCR offerings and those who did not, though a part of the same cohort. This study further examined the impact of relational experiences between professional staff and students and its implication to retention. All of the participants were actively engaged in the support services of The Office of Multicultural Relations/Academic Affairs, (MCR) a retention based department located on the campus of the University of Missouri-St. Louis or (UM-St. Louis), a selective public research institution with a sixteen percent African American student population, according to recent data from the 2009 UMSL Institutional Research. Finally, a synthesis of past studies regarding retention based services was provided to establish a comprehensive look at the retention of African American students attending PWIs.

The Sociological Theoretical Framework of Student Retention

In any scholarly discussion on retention, one cannot overlook the pioneering work of Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987) and his theoretical critique on student departure.

Tinto asserts students who are academically and socially integrated within the campus milieu, greatly enhance their ability to persist to degree completion. Tinto's frame of reference for this sociological construct was grounded in the work of the 1960's Dutch anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep. Van Gennep studied the journey of tribal persons from youth to adulthood as they transitioned from one tribal society to another. An analysis of these rites of passage led him to conclude, the more socially integrated individuals become in a new found setting or within the tribe, the greater the opportunity for acceptance and incorporation into the new environment (Braxton 2000). He believed disassociating with one's indigenous group or culture would eventually become essential if true integration would occur; in doing so, the individual could become integrated in the new environment and experience acceptance. Van Gennep (1960) believed this transformation occurred in three stages known as separation, transition and incorporation; the individual must separate from their familiar customs, culture and associations and transition into the new setting by forming new friendships and practices. Finally, the individual becomes incorporated into their new setting, acceptance of the norms and cultural attributes of their new environment.

This theoretical paradigm of transformation and transition largely influenced the critique espoused in Tinto's, (1975) student departure model. He surmised when students' separate from familiar norms, customs, and associations, they can better transition into experiencing full social integration and academic success within the college/university setting. Tinto (1975) posits a student is less likely to leave the institution of higher learning once they have become incorporated into the new culture. His theoretical analysis of student departure was further influenced by Spady's (1970)

perspective, borne out of Durkheim's suicide theory. Spady believed departure or egotistical suicide was possible if students were not fully committed to the shared norms and values of the institution of higher learning.

Furthermore, institutional commitment and student retention were not mutually exclusive, but served as predictors of student outcomes. "In Durkheim's view, individual integration into the social and intellectual life of society and the social and intellectual membership…that integration promotes, are essential elements of social existence in human society. Societies with high rates of suicide are those whose social conditions constrain the membership" (Tinto, 1993, p.102). Durkheim, a French sociologist, demonstrated an expressed interest in the study of suicide and individual behavior, and the individual's response to the intellectual and social attributes within the social environment (Braxton 2000). Tinto theorized that students who experience feelings of alienation, disassociation, and are disengaged within the college setting, are more likely to leave (commit egotistical suicide) the institutional setting when compared to students who become socially engaged and accepted. When the latter happens, the student is more likely to integrate and persist to degree completion into the setting (Tinto 1975). Tinto's expansion of Spady's model provides institutions of higher learning with a greater understanding of the connection between a students' upbringing, or social experiences and college preparedness, or academic ability and their impact on the academic and social integration of the student within the context of college retention. This longitudinal model of student retention outcomes makes the claim that pre-entry attributes are very important to the student and the journey which can lead to persistence or departure.

The Psychological Theoretical Framework of Student Retention

As sociologists, both Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975) offered sociological perspectives on student retention. While these perspectives provided foundational information in unlocking the complexities concerning student retention in higher education, other theorists, (Bean, 1982; Stage, 1989; Peterson, 1993; and Bean 2000) proposed the importance of analyzing the impact of psychological theories and how the behavioral and developmental process can impact student retention. Bean and Eaton (2000) outlined four psychological factors which impact student retention. These psychological factors include attitude, coping mechanisms, self-efficacy, and attribution, and further expanded on the works of psychological theorists, (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Lazarus, 1974; Bandura, 1986; and Weiner, 1986). According to Bean and Eaton, the students' attitude regarding the institution of higher learning can dictate retention outcomes. The choice to be retained or to leave an institution is based on the individual's ability to process their circumstances, and in doing so, the students' attitude or belief about the institution of higher learning will have a powerful impact on student retention. Likewise, how the student copes with the stressors of the environment, especially those deemed an uncomfortable institutional fit, can adversely impact retention outcomes. In expanding on Bandura's (1986) psychological model known as self-efficacy theory, Bean and Eaton (1995) proposed how a student perceives himself and his ability will impact academic achievement, social interactions, and emotional stability; the more positive his self concept, the greater the investment and the greater the persistence. Bean and Eaton (1995) supported Weiner's (1986) perspective called the attribution theory which examines the students' sense of ownership or personal control within their environment.

These theorists suggested having a sense of personal responsibility is viewed as internal locus of control, meaning the student assumes responsibility for what they attribute to their academic and social outcomes. Unlike external locus of control, where the student sees external challenges as being the reasons for poor achievement, and concluding it is the fault of others for their poor academic outcomes. Without question, the attribution theory is parallel to Tinto's position regarding academic and social integration and retention outcomes. Tinto's purports the student must become an institutional fit to experience positive retention outcomes otherwise student retention is in jeopardy.

The revision, enhancement, and expansion of Tinto's student departure model to include theoretical psychological paradigms, provides greater insight into the student retention discussion. According to Bean "The purpose of doing so was to help others visualize how individual psychological processes can be understood in the retention process." (Bean and Eaton, 2000) (p. 55).

Challenges to Tinto's Theoretical Framework

Despite a critical analysis of psychological theories, Tinto's sociological model (which emphasizes academic and social integration), remains the widely held frame of reference regarding retention and higher education (Swail, 2003). According to Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan (2000) Tinto's theory on student departure is the most widely cited theory for explaining the student departure process and has reached "near paradigmatic status" in the field of higher education. Researchers (Pantages and Creedon, 1978; Bean, 1982; Nora and Cabrera, 1996) provide further expansion of Tinto's (1975) model, while acknowledging the merit of his studies. Yet, other researchers remain confident in their resolve to challenge Tinto's premise on student retention. Braxton and Lee (2005) and

Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson (1997) have suggested Tinto's (1975) model offers

modest empirical research to validate the effectiveness of the retention to degree

completion theoretical premise. Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora and Hengstler (1992) have

concluded Tinto's theoretical work fails to consider any external factors (such as pre-

collegiate data) in examining academic and social integration and retention; they further

conclude Tinto's work lacks in-depth data and sound analysis on retention studies of

minority populations, namely African American students attending PWIs. The relevancy

of studies including minority populations could provide institutions with unique

theoretical and methodological approaches in its response to retention challenged,

growing populations. To be sure, Tinto's student departure model which mirrors the

social anthropological framework of Van Gennep (1960) suggests students must

disassociate themselves from their familiar experiences and customs in order to

assimilate and receive full acceptance, is worthy of a second look which fully examines

what is arguably skewed in its presentation, narrow in scope and assumes much

concerning African American college students (Valentine, 1971).

Valentine contends that African Americans are already inherently assimilated into

the dominant culture as a result of their historic realities, suggesting they simultaneously

live in two worlds; one ascribed and the other prescribed. To further expand on

Valentine's theory known as biculturalism, de Anda's (1984) theory of dual socialization

also brought challenge to the assertions of Tinto (1975) and Van Gennep (1960). De

Anda posits that there exists a majority culture, a minority culture, and a culture of shared

values and norms. Hence,

> Dual socialization is made possible and facilitated by the amount of overlap
> between two cultures. That is, the extent to which an individual finds it possible to

understand and predict successfully two cultural environments and adjust his or her behavior according to the norms of each culture; it depends on the extent to which these two cultures share common values, belief, perceptions, and norms for prescribed behaviors (p. 102).

De Anda further surmised an overlap in the cultures promotes an appreciation for both, and offers an opportunity to learn of differences while having an appreciation for one's own. This insightful concept could possibly afford a new paradigm for institutions of higher learning as they work to become more deliberate to support and engage with a culturally diverse student population (de Anda, 1984).

Other critics soon joined the discussion and would later postulate their own concepts and theories concerning student retention in higher education. For example, Levy-Warren (1988) and Rendon (1996) assert the student and campus community become enhanced when institutions of higher learning invest in a gradual transition process with their incoming students. Essentially, the college student continues to embrace his/her own cultural norms and values, while gradually adapting to the new campus environment. Levy-Warren suggest this approach can positively impact student retention and avoids a feeling of cultural displacement for the student, while allowing time for mental, social, and emotional adjustments to the new environment.

In further examination of Tinto's theoretical stance, William Tierney (1992) was convinced Tinto's (1975, 1987) research had become rather obsolete and negligible, omitting a diverse student population or a community of inclusion. Tierney further asserts Tinto's theoretical perspective, in essence, affirms the dominant culture, while dismissing the importance of another's community and cultural norms which is an unrealistic. Hurtado (1997) also believed minority groups could maintain their distinctiveness while embracing new experiences within the college community. To

conclude minority groups could not maintain a balance between familiar norms and the norms of another culture, gives little credence to minority groups.

Hence, the challenges to Tinto's student departure model are clearer as other researchers (Oakes 1985; Brint and Karabel 1989; Nieto, 1996) acknowledge the lack of data to address systemic barriers and challenges that arise from skewed research with a mono-cultural institutional perspective in lieu of embracing a multicultural perspective (Hurtado, 1997 & Zambrana, 1988). Tierney also acknowledges the importance of viewing retention as action oriented, thereby moving it from theory to practice (Tierney, 1992). He insists, "The search for an understanding about why students leave college is not merely of theoretical interest: if a model may be built that explains student departure then it may be possible for colleges to retain students" (p. 604).

<center>*Student Centered Theoretical Framework*</center>

More than twenty-five years later, student retention remains a much debated and researched topic in academe. During the 1970s and 1980s, the primary focus centered on institutional access; but in the decade of the 1990s the attention turned to college choice, college persistence, and affordability (Swail 2003). Just as the retention conversation evolved from separation, integration, and transition, there must be a similar transformation regarding the institution's approach to retaining African American students within the college context (Guiffrida 2005). Guiffrida concluded a crucial and more relevant conversation must move from an institutional fit to a student centered approach in retaining African American students and other minority populations.

It is important to note that during the 1970s, the emergent research on minority student retention was still in its infant stages of development (Braxton 2000). Clearly,

more information currently exists, resulting from increased African American student enrollment along with other minority populations attending PWIs. While earlier research often provided a limited view on minorities in higher education, Tierney (1992) states, "This relatively recent research not only lifts the knowledge base of student retention and development theories, it advances policy and practice and calls into question the predominant ways of structuring student development services employing research that included few, if any, minority students" (p. 130). His observation validates recent models and adds credence to the premise of this study regarding the implementation of institutional retention praxis for African American students attending PWIs.

According to Swail (2003), institutions must connect retention theory and practice to establish a viable student centered approach. Swail asserts this takes place when institutions of higher learning seek to understand the cognitive and social attributes of its diverse population and how their cultural norms are received within the institutional setting. To that end, Swail developed a model known as the "Geometric Model of Student Persistence and Achievement" (see figure 2). This model is considered a student centered approach as it includes a greater examination of both the student and the institution. The student persistence model is composed of cognitive, social and institutional factors. The cognitive factors, according to Swail, are the attributes students bring to the University from their high school experience such as their academic course selection, critical thinking skills, decision making ability, intellectual aptitude and more. Cognitive factors impact college retention and can be an indicator of academic preparation for college and how well prepared one is; cognitive factors also have an impact on a student's motivation to persist to degree completion (Swail 2003).

Social factors, on the other hand, include many external supports such as family, friends, one's social coping skills, cultural values and more (Swail 2003). Social factors can have a great influence on a student's college choice, major, and more. Swail (2003) concludes the more supportive and grounded a student's social setting, the better their chances at adapting to a new social environment, like college. Social factors can essentially influence a student's decision to remain or leave an institution of higher learning.

Of equal importance are the institutional factors which Swail views as being germane to student retention. Institutional factors acknowledge how the University treats its students, the institutional academic offerings, financial counseling and assistance, and more. Institutional factors also include a myriad of support services. Swail asserts it is this factor on which all else hangs and believes institutions must work to accommodate all of its students instead of the student working to become an institutional fit. He explains institutions must have a myriad of academic, social and institutional offerings that are attractive to a wide range of cultures; this will both help to attract and retain a diverse student population.

An awareness and understanding of cognitive, social, and institutional factors empower PWIs with useful information to be applied when working with students from a variety of backgrounds. In balancing theory to practice, Swail identifies support service offerings where cognitive, social, and institutional factors can be implemented and impact the persistence and retention of African American college students (Swail, 1995). Of those mentioned, this study will examine the support services established in the Office of Multicultural Relations at UM-St. Louis. They include: (1) financial aid support (2)

one-on-one advising (3) workshop programming (4) peer mentoring and tutoring. The review of literature will further examine how each relates to the retention of African American students attending PWIs.

Factors Influencing the Retention of African American Students

One of the most important factors in retaining African American students at PWIs is adequate financial aid (Swail, 2003). According to Gladieux and Swail (1998), financial aid is a vital means to increased access to undergraduate opportunities—a fact that must not be underestimated. Faye-Carter (2006) explicates this point. She posits that there is an intense correlation between socioeconomic status and student persistence in college for African Americans, meaning when students receive enough financial assistance for college, academic persistence is enhanced as students are motivated to persist.

In looking at the historical progression of financial aid and the retention of African American students attending PWIs, financial aid has been given a prominent place in the college retention literature as it relates to the attrition of students and moreover, the attrition of African American students (Bowles & DeCosta, 1971). Sowell (1972) noted that with the onset of established educational legislation in the 1970s, African American students were given a choice of attending HBCUs, where high self-esteem and psychological well-being permeated the culture, or they could have academic and financial resources at the expense of social isolation at a white institution (Bowles & DeCosta, 1971; Sowell, 1972). With the opportunity for accessibility and affordability, PWIs became the choice for a large influx of African American students (Allen, 1987). To better understand the relationship between financial aid and persistence to degree

completion, Cabrera, Stampen, and Hansen (1990) postulated several factors much be taken into consideration, when investigating its impact. These theorists examined students' college experiences instead of their ability to pay, believing the former was the motivation to remain in college. They concluded more than the college experience, financial aid plays a essential role in whether or not a student is retained in college. If indeed the student is pleased with their experience, however, they are motivated to persist to degree completion.

Research prior to 1990 shows scholarships, especially when given to low-income students, have a more positive influence than all other forms of aid (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Astin's (1987) research supports this claim, as students who received grants and scholarships were more likely to persist in college versus those who received financial support in the form of loans and work study programs. The 1989-90 National Beginning Postsecondary Student Survey and the 1992 follow-up study of the same name revealed students receiving financial aid were more likely to complete a degree than those who were not receiving comparable financial aid (Cuccaro-Alamin, 1997).

Inadequate Financial Aid and Student Retention

More recent research has shown that financial aid is identified as a major component of student persistence for African Americans. In outlining the issues involved in a student's decision to persist in school or stop their enrollment, Jones (2000) identifies the need to receive adequate financial aid. He notes,

> The contribution of adequate amounts and types of financial aid to the successful persistence and graduation of African American students cannot be overly stressed. Financial aid is often the primary consideration in making the decision to continue or leave... Anxiety as a result of financial stress becomes even more pronounced when added to the student's general feeling of alienation and dissatisfaction. (p. 3-20).

Jones (2000) contends that inadequate financial assistance is often a chief factor in the decision for many African American students to leave college, and that financial aid can be a difficult terrain for many African American students to navigate successfully. Often, families are unfamiliar with the financial aid process and are often found guilty of drawing erroneous conclusions.

Paulsen and St. John (2002) examined a financial nexus model, linking college choice and persistence with financial background and financial need. The model asserts students' perceptions of college costs and the actual cost of college, may impact persistence decisions, as many students believe that college is unaffordable prevents them from persisting. In accordance with such findings, a study (The Pell Institute, 2004) concluded students' "financial aid literacy" is often times very low. (p. 30-45). Many students are first generation, while other potential students fail to apply, believing they will not qualify; in other instances, parents of potential students are challenged in filling out forms or refuse to supply adequate information.

Financial aid issues do not only reveal themselves when a student cannot afford to pay their tuition. Additionally, other issues also exist within the fiscal realm that can add stress and anxiety to the student's life, as well as prevent them from spending adequate time on academic pursuits. Tinto (1987) states that rising costs incurred during the college years can be just as stressful and can cause some students to withdraw from college. In some cases the withdrawal from the university is permanent and students never find their way back onto the degree path (Tinto, 1987). For those who return to college after their hiatus, however brief or extended, the anticipated degree can be even

more difficult to attain after time away from the cultural setting and academic rigors of college.

In the African American community, financial woes are exacerbated. Green (2000) reports that institutions must provide adequate financial assistance in order to encourage African Americans to attend and complete college. In examining the pertinence of African American college students, he asserts that the:

> ...poor socio economic status and lack of available family resources continue to be severe deterrents to higher education... Approximately thirty-one percent of African American and non-Hispanic families in the United States live below the poverty line. Fifty-three percent of these families are female-headed households. (p.45-58).

Green (2000) reveals that not only are these students enrolling in college without the family and fiscal safety net that many White students benefit from, but that most likely, these students are not as academically prepared for college coursework and higher education-level academic expectations, handicapping their success from the very start of their college careers.

Redd, Perna & Swail (2003) support Green's (2000) research, stating that for most students, persistence is based on the potential financial return earning a degree will yield. However, for many students of color, persistence decisions are determined by the availability of financial assistance. For families with college-age children, African American families have an average income almost $35,000 less than their White counterparts (Redd, Perna & Swail, 2003). "Thus, by definition, African American…families will require financial assistance to attend and persist in college" (Redd, Perna & Swail, 2003, pp.67-68).

Issues of financial fortitude can only be solved by a better understanding of the financial aid process, adequate financial assistance, and financial assistance which mirrors the economic climate in order to equalize the social and academic landscapes created on college campuses. These social and academic landscapes can further isolate the already racially alienated African American student population (Bean, 2005).

Putting theory into practice, Colleges and Universities that have eased the financial aspects of college for African American students have found success in retaining them until graduation. Bowie State University has experienced great success in implementing financial support structures through their "Model Institutions for Excellence" (MIE), a program intended to produce quality trained minority graduates in the fields of science, engineering, and mathematics. In addition to the other five key components of this program, the primary component is the awarding of adequate financial aid to the program participants. During a five-year study of program participants, retention for first year students increased from 52 percent to 80 percent, and, for second year students, retention increased from 26 percent to 62 percent. Moreover, the graduation rates of science, mathematics, and engineering students increased by 62 percent, from 56 percent to 91 percent (Redd, Perna & Swail, 2003).

The success at Bowie State University reflects other studies on the importance of financial aid to retention. According to Hu and St. John (2001), minority recipients of financial aid persist at higher rates than minorities who were non-recipients. This proved especially true when scholarships grants and loans were combined as the main components of the financial aid package.

Non-Faculty Mentoring

In addition to financial aid, mentoring is another factor vital to African American retention at higher education institutions (Fleming, 1984). The review of literature suggests the term is over 3000 years old with Greek origin, meaning wise counselor (Kelly& Beck, 1992). A mentor relationship is typically defined as one between an experienced and less experienced person in which the mentor provides guidance, advice, support and feedback to the protégé (Jacobi, 1991). The mentor is familiar with the environment in which the protégé wishes to become successful. From a higher education perspective, mentors can assist students in adapting to the culture of the institution and provide encouragement and support as students develop habits and attitudes, leading to academic and personal success (Jacobi, 1991). Such strong relationships have a strong positive impact on academic achievement, in addition to overall student satisfaction and retention outcomes. Katz (2001) asserts that established relationships between people enhance and influences effective communication in every sphere of life. Guiffrida (2005) concludes mentoring African American students is more important for those attending PWIs. Connecting students with mentors who are both invested in the students' well-being and familiar with the institution's expectations, can have a keen impact on the academic and social integration for the student. Tinto (1993) concurs with this notion, explaining that while mentoring programs are often effective in increasing undergraduate retention for all students, having a "like-person role model" is more essential to the success of students of color (p.186). Conversely, Lee's (1999) research on the like-person role model dictates race is not as important in a minority-student mentoring relationship as the quality of the interaction; asserting that effective mentoring yields positive

retention outcomes. He describes mentoring as an act of going above and beyond for the student; it's not only academic in nature but often personal and non academic.

Guiffrida (2005) conceptually agrees with Lee's premise, using the term other mothering to describe the mentoring relationship. The concept is a holistic approach and is concerned about the overall well-being of the student. Guiffrida (2005) asserts that the lack of African American faculty at PWIs can be viewed as an opportunity to professionally train staff and establish effective mentoring programs with a holistic approach.

In viewing the practical aspect of mentoring, Hall (1999) conducted research on African American students at one of the largest Catholic Universities in the United States. In reporting on the benefits of support services to students, Hall shared that students expressed their gratitude to those who served as role models, mentors, friends, facilitators and in some cases surrogate fathers. Students felt comfortable interacting with mentors, and sought them out for advice, support and assistance, often outside the confines of their official campus roles (Hall, 1999).

Another campus mentoring program was found at Villa Julie College, a PWI in Stevenson, Maryland. VJC was acknowledged by Noel-Levitz for its outstanding student-centered mentoring program known as Partnerships and Student Success (PASS). Faculty, staff and administrators provided holistic support to students. Mentors and protégés met weekly to reinforce effective study habits and skills. Mentors were provided manuals which outlined their responsibilities and were also given contact and resource information (Brotheron, 2001). The goal of this partnership was to produce student success and resulted in more than 70% of the students who participated earning a

GPA above a 2.0. The retention rate from freshmen to sophomore year improved by 73%

(Brotherton, 2001).

Workshop Programming

In addition to mentoring, student centered advising and academic advising,

workshop programming enhance both academic and social experiences for students

(Dervarics & Roach, 2000; Belgarde & LoRe, 2003). The aforementioned researchers

believe PWIs with significant African American enrollment; can implement specific

workshops and programs aimed at retention and persistence, while providing social

integration experiences. In addition to boasting successful outcomes, the value of many

of these programs has been supported by the federal government through various grants.

Such grants range from first year experiences for students that are college bound, to

workshops for Minorities in Math and Science, Summer Bridge Programs for college

bound students, Minority Pre-Engineering programs and workshop, etc. A study by

Good and Halpin (2002) noted the level of self-confidence and sense of connection

participants associated with being involved in a particular engineering workshop for

Minority students. Student integration into the campus environment increases the

likelihood of successful academic outcomes which in turn can impact retention

(Washington, 2005).

Workshop programming is vital in the retention efforts of African American

college students and is another of the primary responsibilities that often befalls support

personnel (Szelenyi, 2001). Many successful support services begin their work at the

start of college, identifying students who could potentially experience difficulty in

college. Szelenyi (2001) points out those African American students who participate in

freshmen workshops earn higher grade point averages, complete more credit hours in the first semester and increase their persistence and graduation rates. Increasingly, colleges and universities have orientation programs which are important in a student's transition from their high school experiences to their college experiences (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Colton et al., 1999; Fidler,1991; Tinto, 1993). Amongst other goals to orientation programming is addressing retention concerns early on. Programs for first year experiences influence persistence, academic outcomes, and graduation rates (Tinto, 1993).

Other workshop programming focuses mainly on academic skill sets. The academic development program (ADP) portion of the "risk point" service at The University of Texas at San Antonio focuses on these skills in particular—and with impressive outcomes. Should a freshman earn probationary status after their first semester, they are required to participate in Phoenix, a probationary recovery workshop that focuses on study skills, course advisement and training in the use of university academic resources. Participants in the ADP program have double the first year retention rates of non-participants, and Phoenix participants are retained at a higher rate than non-participant probation students, who are dismissed at an 8-12 percent higher rate than Phoenix probationary students. (Redd, Perna & Swail, 2003).

Further examination of the research suggests African American students are often more comfortable communicating in group settings rather than one-on-one interaction Bangura (1994). Workshop settings provide such an opportunity. Uri Treisman, and colleagues at the University of California at Berkley established mathematics workshops to enhance the academic success of students (Duncan & Dick, 2000). They found that

African American students often studied alone and would not seek academic assistance. This type of social and intellectual isolation often led to, (among other findings), an increased dropout rate or the decision to switch from a math or science major. Conversely, he noticed Chinese students typically formed academic study groups which provided social interaction and support.

Treisman (1985) created a program for African American and Hispanic students known as the Mathematics Workshop Program in which 20 to 25 students worked together in small groups. While the groups were facilitated by graduate instructors, students had "ownership" of the math challenges as they worked together to solve math problems. An evaluation of the first seven years of the program found that 56% of the African American students who attended the workshop, earned a B- or higher in first year calculus, in comparison to 21 percent of those who did not participate in the Mathematics Workshop Program. Additionally, four times more workshop participants graduated with a math based degree, than African American students who did not participate. The focus on student-centered learning and student community through workshops and programming Treisman's research (1985) has proven successful in academic outcomes, social integration, and persistence to graduation.

Peer Mentoring and Tutoring

As noted earlier, peer support is a central portion of any college students' experience. Astin (1993) concluded that a students' learning, academic performance, and retention are positively linked to peers, faculty relationships and their academic pursuits. Activities such as student-faculty interaction, student-student interaction, institutional emphasis on diversity, participation in extra-curricular activities, and quality relationships

with peers, aid in student persistence and educational attainment (Graunke and Woosley, 2005). Peer tutoring and mentoring practices from yet another support network for students. As noted, earlier, this is vital for the African American student attending a PWI, as the number of "like" faculty is usually low; additionally, African American students often experience a less than positive interaction with many White faculty at predominately White universities in comparison to African American students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), (Fleming, 1984). Peer mentoring programs can be formal in nature, providing a well developed institutionalized plan Jacobi (1991). Their goal is to enhance student development, retention and degree completion. It can also be informal, originating from informal relationships that may evolve as a student experiences different stages where other students have common interests and goals (Jacobi, 1991).

Other recognized benefits of peer mentoring are the economic benefits and proven results for the Mentor as well as the Mentee or Protégé. Peer mentoring and tutoring are cost effective to the University budget, while satisfying increased academic improvement, greater social interaction, study skills, and on-going relationships (Gaither, 2005). Additionally, research shows the retention rates for mentors and tutors increase as they work to impact the retention of the students they served (Gaither, 2005). The Michigan Tech research data corroborates this finding with successful outcomes for both the mentor and protégé. Michigan Tech experienced the national trend of declining retention rates of its African American student as well as other students of color. In response to this challenge, GUIDE (Graduate and Undergraduate Initiative for Development and Enhancement and ExSel (Excelling in Science and Engineering

Learning) programs were established (Hein, Monte and Sleeman, 2007). Results

revealed an increase in retention rates and GPAs of the mentor and protégé; additionally,

many protégés later became mentors. Over a five year period, the GUIDE program

retained 86 percent of the students, with a mentor retention rate of 97 percent.

Another successful peer mentoring program known as Project AFFIRM (African-

American First-Investment Return Module) was established to build the self-esteem of

African American college students. Kangas (1993) described the elements of the

program provided support through peer mentoring, tutoring, and learning strategies, as

well as financial aid to African-American students. There was a noticeable difference in

grade point averages for those who received help from the program when compared to

non-participants.

Tutorial components are also vital to academic support programs and are often a

part of such programming for students of color at PWIs. Supplemental Instruction is

designed to improve student achievement in "high risk" courses. Peer to peer interaction

takes place as the content of the course is discussed. Arendale and Martin (1994)

conducted studies between 1982 and 1996. In sum, Supplemental Instruction students

averaged a considerably lower percentage of poor grades and course withdrawal grades in

comparison to non-Supplemental Instruction students. This explains why HBCUs and

institutionalized academic support programs at predominately-White institutions have

incorporated peer mentoring and tutoring components as part of their retention strategy

(Fleming, 1984).

Other research noting the success of peer mentoring and tutoring programs is

FLighT. Southeast Missouri State University instituted their FLighT (First-Year Learning

Team) program to increase African-American retention at a PWI. In the program,

freshman students are paired with a peer mentor, "a veteran student" who works closely

with the student to assist them in navigating the college terrain. Students met with peer

mentors weekly and were also placed small group settings of peers with like major

(Redd, Perna & Swail, 2003). The retention rate of these first year students after the first

two semesters was 89 percent (Birk and Myers, 1998).

Grade Point Average

For both White and minority students' retention is closely related to the pre-

college and the first year grade point average (GPA). A study of over 300,000 students

found that those with a higher GPA were more likely to persist (Ziomek & Harmston,

2004). Studies focusing specifically on African Americans, however, have validated the

importance of GPA in retention, while also stressing the concurrent need for other

variables in persistence to be considered. Tracey and Sedlacek (1980) report that GPA is

an important factor in predicting retention for students of color, but it is not the only

factor involved. House (1996) concurs; pointing out that academic background,

academic self-perception, and high school curriculum are key predictors of African

American undergraduates' GPAs.

A study conducted by Steward and Jackson (1989) sought to determine the

relationship between a student's perceived personal competency, first year GPA, and

academic persistence over a four-year collegiate period. The study followed 40 African

American freshman enrolled at a predominately White university. The findings showed

that the students in the study who received higher freshman GPAs, and who perceived

themselves as being more personally competent, persisted academically at a greater rate.

From these findings, Steward and Jackson (1989) recommend that colleges and universities provide support services that focus on assessing academic skill levels and personal competencies of African American freshmen; this would indeed aid in retention. Tutoring recommendations could follow the assessments, and other services could then be provided to improve any self-perceived deficiencies in personal skills. Steward and Jackson (1989) also stress the need for cooperation of several offices across PWIs to ensure that minority students' needs are met.

The question to be considered is: do minority students benefit from support systems that focus on GPA above all other elements? Losak and Morriss (1983) looked at the outcome when an institution gave significant attention to a student's GPA. According to this research, a Florida community college changed their policy to include academic warning, probation, or suspension for students with low GPAs. The regulations required that the students raise their GPAs and take fewer credit hours during the semester in which the disciplinary action applied. This focus on GPA actually proved beneficial for African American students, as their persistence increased with the academic regulations being enforced.

Students placed under academic warning status were more likely to improve their academic standards and improve their GPA for the rest of their college career. The GPA regulations proved to motivate students to work harder to increase their GPAs, giving students ample time to obtain academic assistance and help with time management (Losak and Morriss, 1983).

Johnson and Molnar (1996) compared the retention factors for Anglo, Black and Hispanic students at Barry University in Florida between 1991 and 1995. Results showed

that first year GPA was the strongest factor affecting retention. African American students GPAs were also affected by whether or not they were satisfied with the opportunities for academic help outside of class. The research revealed that African American students who persist generally utilized campus support. The recommendation was also made that support services be "especially friendly and attractive to minorities without stigmatizing them" (Johnson and Molnar, 1996, p. 32).

The *Pell Institute Report for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education* (2004) compared institutions with higher graduation rates to others with lower graduation rates in an effort to identify factors contributing to student persistence. It showed that students who enter the university with lower SAT and ACT scores and high school GPAs are at greater risk for attrition. However, institutions which provided support services such as summer bridge programs were "almost unanimous in showing positive effects on college retention" (Muraskin and Lee, 2004 p. 36). Also, institutions with higher graduation rates tend to follow their students' academic performance closely and have stricter policies for academic probation for those with low GPA.

A historically Black college cited in the study sent out lists of students with GPAs less than 2.0 to their retention counselors. Students were then required to write an essay about why they did not perform well and how they would improve their performance before they were permitted to register for the next year. This helped students get needed services. Overall, it was found that the higher retaining schools recognized the usefulness of the GPA as a tool to identify students less likely to persist, and to connect retention counselors to give extra assistance to these students.

A Critical Analysis of Tinto and Swail

The researcher's contention with Tinto's student departure model is clear; while he later recognizes the unique attributes of the African American college student, their influences, and norms (Tinto,1993) his original premise remains the most explored and is considered by most, the theoretical foundation regarding retention. This point of view is expressed in volumes of research as previously shared. Indisputably, as institutions of higher learning mirror the changing complex of a diverse society, the researcher believes Tinto's dissociative methodology becomes a real challenge for both the student and institutions in this millennium. The rationale for such a claim takes into consideration several observations: (1) many of today's consumers, that is the current student, are experiencing interactions with diverse populations prior to college admissions and could expect this reality to exist, particularly in public higher learning institutions (2) the current workforce not only benefits from the academically astute, but considers of equal importance those who can effectively interact with a diverse community within the workplace. It is here that Tinto's posture on social integration is seen in a different context, yet as important as academic achievement. (3) Different than Tinto's position that the student must be an institutional fit, perhaps the retention model must fit a diverse society as society reflects those in it, and institutions of higher learning are a microcosm of society.

While Swail's argument of a student-centered approach takes into consideration a holistic effort, it remains a generalized framework as Tinto's model is more generalized than empirical. Both models fall short of establishing a set agency for implementation or execution at institutions of higher learning. Different institutions employ different

methods, which could go away when leadership changes. This may be why Swail

insightfully acclaim his model is indeed a "framework" (Swail 2004, p. 20). With the

focus of both models defining studies to enhance research and retention, a model on

persistence should offer a structured developmental strategic plan for systemic

implementation if indeed this is the goal. This notion became both relevant and systemic

for institutions that once grappled with the challenges of enrollment management.

Today, larger institutions of higher learning have incorporated enrollment

management as part of the institution's fabric. They have employed professionals to

address this challenge which is now embraced and systemic, affording campus wide buy

in. This type of buy in helps to establish offices that can evaluate progress and

accumulate data for assessment purposes; otherwise these offices simply become

programs void of measured results or campus respectability. This becomes all the more

important is moving from theory to practice in establishing retention services with true

campus buy in.

Perhaps of prime importance then, is the need for a systemic developmental

strategic plan, but one that emphasizes relationship building to enhance retention. The

latter is important as it is vital in retaining African American students and other student

of color. As noted in the review of literature, the family concept, or community influence

is essential in the African American community; this translates into established

relationships.

The researcher posited, conceptually, a theory or framework regarding retention is

ultimately most effective when relationships are formed between the student and campus

personnel. Indeed this is one of the best ways to advance its institutional positioning.

While it is true that retention should be a campus wide mission, the researcher asserted

the importance of having an identifiable location where students are convinced of their

acceptance and can receive the academic and non academic support needed. To have

such is no different than other offices designed for specific groups within the campus

setting. Additionally, the researcher believed such an office embraces a student's voice

or self expression in addition to providing a nurturing atmosphere; both important to the

African American experience and more importantly, retention.

It should be understood that structured relationship building (SRB) herein

described, is not in any way intended to baby sit—enable—*needy* collegiates; but, rather

to offer strength and empower them for greater productivity while pursuing their

respective courses of study. Incredibly, some prefer to dismiss this kind of nurture

because it is seen as hand-holding. In one of their occasional papers, Noel-Levitz,

renowned retention specialists, take great issue with this assumption. They write,

> Personally, we are hard pressed to understand why nurturing concepts
> implied by words such as hand-holding, coddling, and befriending, take on
> such derogatory tones when voiced on some campuses. These concepts,
> which are not only acceptable but highly desirable when we have our own
> children in mind, suddenly become unnecessary and undesirable when
> dealing with someone else's college-age children (Noel-Levitz, 2000, p.
> 5).

Within the UMSL campus community, nurturing (as commonly understood by

many African American students), is synonymous with encouragement and

empowerment, and establishes effective, trustworthy relationships that support the

student to degree completion. Guiffrida (2005) sees this concept as other-mothering as

shared earlier in the review. It is holistic in scope and takes into account the importance

of fostering a viable relationship between the professional serving as a role model and

students.

Relational – Cultural Theory

Nell Noddings (1984) suggests that caring and relationships are educational goals, and are fundamental to education. She defines education as "a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding and appreciation" (Noddings, 2002: p. 283). Noddings further points out, "Dialogue is such an essential part of caring that we could not model caring without engaging in it." (Noddings 1998: p. 192)

To be sure, Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) as determined by (Jordan & Hartling, 2002), suggests everyone has a need to be inherently connected in order to experience relational mutual empathy, and likewise, mutual empowerment. These experiences can aid in supporting cultural sensitivity in addition to helping persons experience a real sense of belonging, build self-esteem, and connect individuals to each other and to the experience itself. Miller (1986) equally supports this notion and posits growth-fostering relationships can impact social/cultural disconnections such as racism, classism, sexism etc. by allowing one to view an experience through a different set of lenses which can aid those groups that have inherently felt left out.

The deliberate nurturing of relational interaction between campus personnel and students can address a litany of challenges that African American students often experience at PWIs. Confirming this notion, Jacqueline Fleming (1984) studied 2,591 African American students who chose to attend HBCUs and predominantly White institutions. Her findings concluded that African American students were more at ease and achieved greater success and a sense of belonging and connectedness within the HBCU environments. Furthermore, African American students at HBCUs performed at a

greater level academically, while experiencing overall greater college satisfaction. Also, of key importance was the mention of rewarding relationships experienced by students at HBCUs compared to African American students attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs).

Stewart noted that HBCUs offer students "a solid education in a nurturing environment—one in which the intellectual ability is not automatically questioned, and their presence on campus is not part of an acrimonious debate and acceptance was in order" (Stewart, 1997, p. A24). Parallel to this observation, Ladson-Billings (1998) purports genuine respect through engaging the voices of African American students in dialogue, responds to their concerns and empowers them to self-sufficiency. In doing so, the educational institution embraces the students' stories or social factors, inherent to persistence and retention for African American students attending PWIs, according to Swail (2003). This aspect of critical race theory (commonly referred to as CRT), gives credence to the voices of African Americans, their journeys, and personal experiences. It is these personal experiences, brought to the unfamiliar setting of the institutions of higher learning. The analysis of this observation suggests Swail's observation concerning social factors and retention for African American students attending PWI are indeed inseparable. The researcher has witnessed the impact of the aforementioned within the MCR setting as students of color, namely African American students have been capable of moving toward a dialogical relationship with campus personnel when given the opportunity to share their perspectives (their voices) and in essence, their journeys. These students soon become a part of the campus family, while achieving academically and becoming more socially engaged; retention is enhanced.

Hence, in referencing Tinto's assertion on student retention, and Swail's geometric model of a student-centered retention framework, the researcher postulates that aspects of Tinto's model and academic and social integration (theory) can enhance Swail's framework; they cannot be mutually exclusive or effective in practice or without a systemic plan. This plan must include an identified location, or clearing house, a point person (s) skilled at implementing a foundation which fosters growing and enhancing relations between students and institutional personnel in order to increase the retention of African American students attending PWIs.

The Geometric Model of Student Persistence and Achievement
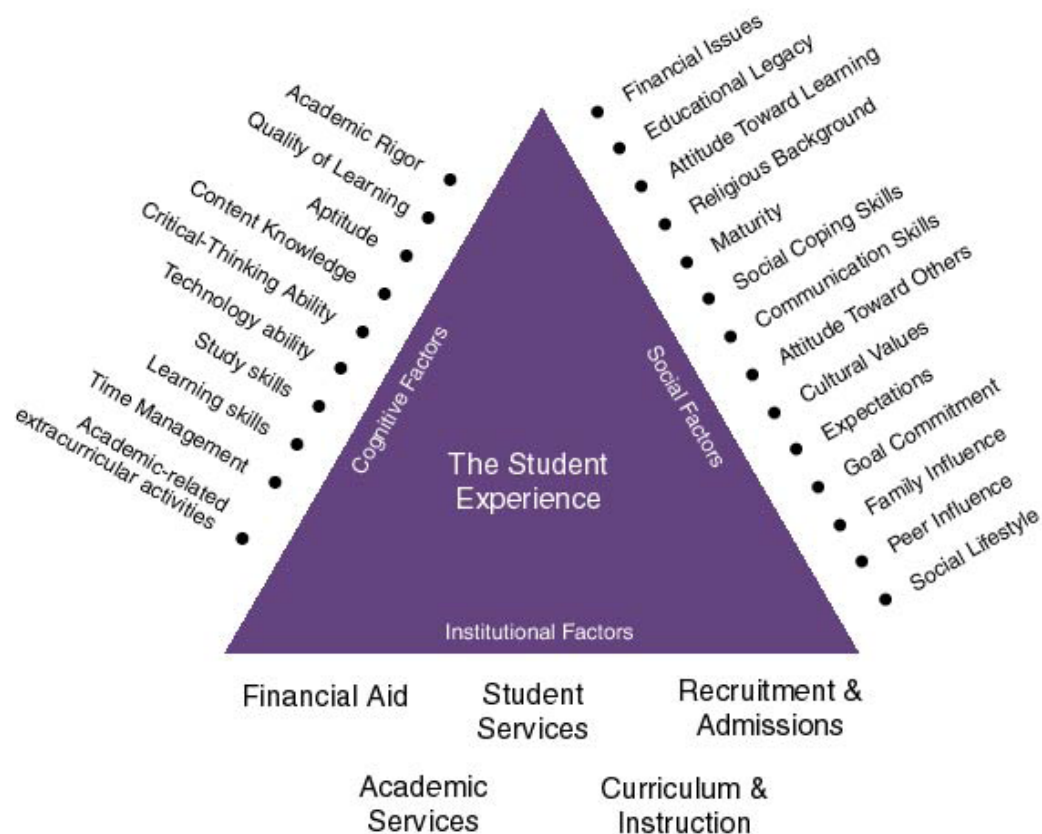
Reprinted from ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report: Volume 30, Number 2

The primary focus of this research was to examine retention theory and the impact of its theoretical implications on student centered practices. The researcher was also interested in examining the impact of MCR support service offerings and also the examination of relation-cultural theory and its impact on African American student retention attending a PWI known as the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Design and Methodology

Far too many students are leaving college without evidence of degree completion. Despite the research that abounds on student retention, the national attrition rates have increased by more than 50 percent for all students, with a national graduation rate of 43 percent for African American students compared to 63 percent for White students. Researchers have offered a variety of explanations, including sociological and psychological theories, motivational and economic theories, and more. Researcher, Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), posits academic and social integration are great predictor of student departure. He concludes students must fit the institutional setting and those who are academically astute and socially involved, are most likely to persist to degree completion.

Tierney, (1992) has challenged this perspective and believes Tinto's rationale is limited in scope and does not include a diverse population of students nor their cultural context in his research. To be sure, studies have shown increased persistence when African American students are engaged in effective academic support programming (Churchill and Iwai, 1981; Pasacerella and Terenzini, 1991). In addition to academic improvement, students become motivated to achieve, displaying a higher level of self-efficacy. Additionally, African American students (with) a connection to academic support programs experience a sense of belonging or bonding according to (Swail, 2003). This experience is crucial for African American students attending a PWI.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of research based support service offerings and retention strategies for African American students

attending a PWI, namely, the University of Missouri-St. Louis. In moving from a theoretical approach to student centered practices, the researcher was interested in the impact of the MCR strategic and holistic retention plan as expressed by African American students who engaged in the MCR retention praxis. While the MCR retention strategy included researched based support services, the concept of relational-cultural theory is relevant to the MCR retention praxis.

The researcher was seeking to answer the following questions:

- What is the impact of MCR support service offerings provided through a mentoring component, financial aid support, workshops, and on-going individualized sessions with the designated MCR professional staff counselor/?

- What key factors (identified by students participating in MCR support services) have contributed to persistence (current student) or degree completion (alum) at UMSL?

- What if any impact did the MCR professional staff counselor have on student retention?

- What was the cumulative GPA and the number of years to degree completion for African American students who remained engaged in the 2001-2007 MCR freshmen cohort when compared to students in the same cohort who did not complete the MCR retention praxis?

Research Design and Site

The qualitative research strategy in this study was shaped by the research

questions developed from the literature review.

> Qualitative research is inquiry that involves the researcher gathering data   in a
> face to face setting by interacting with participants to examine beliefs, actions,
> thoughts perceptions, experiences, etc. Qualitative research is more concerned
> with understanding the social phenomenon form the participants' perspectives.
> Qualitative studies are important for theory generation, policy generation, policy
> development, improvement, improvement of educational practice, illumination of
> social issues and action stimulus (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p.12).

Specifically, the researcher did thematic coding upon completion of the focus

group interviews using the tools and techniques utilized in grounded theory. The purpose

of coding was to discover the various themes and acknowledge other shared information

from both MCR focus groups. Additionally, the researcher provided a comparative

analysis of grade point averages and years to degree completion of the MCR 2001-2007

African American freshmen student cohort. A comparative analysis will examine the

above stated information and note outcomes for those students who remained a part of the

MCR cohort and outcomes for those who chose to discontinue receiving the MCR

support service offerings.

Site

Like other Universities, the mid-western University selected, expressed interest in

improving the retention rates of its undergraduate population. The University's strategic

plan, *Gateway to Greatness,* prioritizes retention as follows:

> Recruit and retain an outstanding and diverse student body.
> As the most diverse public research university in the state of Missouri, we enjoy
> the benefits that diversity of cultures and perspectives provides. We embrace the
> opportunity this diversity provides to enrich our campus culture and student,
> faculty and staff experiences. We are committed to recruiting the best and the

brightest students from all cultures, backgrounds, and viewpoints, and will make every effort to retain them successfully to graduation (George, 2008, p. 3).

As for background, this mid-west University is a part of a four campus system whose main campus was founded in 1839 in the geographic center of the state. In 1870, a second campus was established and in the late 1950's, there was community pressure to establish two more campuses. This pressure was due to a population shift from rural to urban within the general metropolitan region. The urban dwellers of the region increasingly insisted on reasonably priced state-supported higher education (Touhill, 1985). As a result, the third campus was acquired and the fourth campuses were established in 1963 and are located in urban settings. Today, the 21st century population shifts constitute an even greater need to hear and better understand the voices of people from different backgrounds (Bell, 1992).

Students selected were given generic pseudonyms in order to protect the confidentiality of all involved. This University services a large commuter student population, meaning that a large portion of the school's student body reside within a metropolitan area that includes a large city, outlying suburban areas, and rural regions, as well as the greater bi-state area, which includes many portions of the adjoining state. This public research institution enrolls more than 15,500 students from 46 states and 77 countries. Of this population, approximately sixteen percent are African-American (Institutional Research, 2009).

Participants

The MCR participants in this study were randomly selected by their student numbers in order to insure objectivity. The researcher referred to their student number as the student's pseudonym. The study was comprised of two focus groups; each group

consisted of ten to twelve participants. The first focus group was comprised of African American undergraduate students currently attending a PWI. They were actively engaged in the retention and support services of the Multicultural Relations Office. Actively engaged is defined as:

1. Attend workshops designed by the support services office.

2. Are assigned tutors and or mentors as needed or requested.

3. Meet with professional staff on a weekly basis or as agreed upon.

4. Receive additional financial assistance from support services office.

The second focus group was comprised of African American students who have graduated and were actively engaged with MCR during their undergraduate experience. These students were selected based upon the same criteria as MCR undergraduate students.

Convenience sampling (Krueger & Casey, 2000) guided the selection of students and alumni. Convenience sampling, in this study, represents a homogenous population, which is this case are the African American students engaged in the MCR support service offerings. The convenience sampling was selected by an assigned student number, given by the University. From the anonymous selection, a random sampling was done. Each student selected from the random sampling was assigned a number which they referred to each time prior to speaking into the microphone connected to the recorder. For example a student assigned number one would share, "This is participant number one, and I . . ."

Focus group interviews are the most appropriate method of investigation since this process provides detailed information about a particular topic-retention and the impact of support services for African American students attending a PWI. As telling

one's personal story is an important part of the focus group approach, the interview will allow for the exploration of feelings and attitudes the researcher could discover. In addition to the above, using the focus group approach offered results in a relatively reasonable period of time, while allowing for social interaction in the group amongst the students. This interaction allowed for freer and more complex responses (Steward, 1990).

Graduates of the Multicultural Relations Retention Support Services

Ten-twelve graduates of the university who were actively involved in the offerings of the MCR Retention Support Services were interviewed. They provided personal information regarding the impact of receiving support services from a group of professionals; they were asked to share their observations in the context of what these experiences were like as an African American student attending a PWI. One of the key benefits to interviewing graduates receiving the retention services was the time afforded them away from the university as graduates. This allowed them the opportunity to view their educational experiences in retrospect; thus providing the possibility for more detailed and complex responses.

Current Students of the Support Services

MCR students who are currently enrolled and are actively engaged in the MCR retention support service offerings participated in this study. They provided personal information regarding the impact of receiving support services from a group of professionals; they were asked to share their observations in the context of what these experiences were like as an African American student attending a PWI. One of the key benefits to interviewing current students receiving retention services was their familiarity with the details of the wealth of offerings provided by professionals.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was focus group interviews. Providing

students with the opportunity to share their personal insights and experiences provided

the researcher a chance to capture the individual's point of view. The researcher was the

individual exercising primary oversight of MCR services, thus it was expected that the

researcher and other administrators and faculty would value this context of critical theory

to hear the voices of a segment of the student populations and ones who can become

advocates of new paradigms which speak to a myriad of retention challenges for African

American attending PWIs. Van Manen (1990) asserts that the interview serves two

distinct purposes in hermeneutic phenomenological research; it can be used as a means

for exploring and gathering experiential narrative data that may become resourceful in

developing a deeper understanding of a human phenomenon, or it can be used to establish

a relationship based on a specific conversation between the interviewer and the

interviewee. As such, the interviewer must be disciplined and focused on the actual

questions that help maintain the context of the interview.

The focus group interviews allowed for expansive interaction between the

researcher and the participants. The researcher, per research protocol (Schensul &

LeCompte, 1999), utilized questions that were not ambiguous or abstract in nature.

The researcher gathered updated information on the graduate and undergraduate

students prior to the interviews and the schedule for all interviews were mutually

established. Permission to record everyone was given to the researcher by each of the

participants, with the knowledge that the data would be transcribed for common themes

and coding prior to analysis. The protocol used in coding the qualitative research was

open coding which serves to name, categorize and identify relationships within the text (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Additionally the interview is noted in the appendix of the study, though the set of questions are located throughout the study.

Each participant was informed that the purpose of the study was to hear (in their own voices) about their experiences as African American students actively engaged in MCR Retention Support Services at a PWI. The researcher shared that their names will remain anonymous and a pseudonym will be used instead. The researcher also shared that the information would be used to lend credence to the importance of having effective support systems in place as seen through the eyes of the consumer, that being the student.

Each participant was informed that the schedule mutually agreed on would allow equal time for each interviewee, though the researcher might need to get clarity on questions if necessary. In that case, there was a minor adjustment in the allotted time.

Data Analysis

When the focus groups were identified, an e-mail was sent to explain the study and purpose of the research once again. The e-mail also included the informed consent for the student's signature**.** Each participant in the MCR focus group chose their seat at the conference room table. A very sensitive recorder was placed in the center of the table, though at times, some students would move the lightweight recorder closer to their proximity. Prior to speaking, each participant would state the number she/he had chosen before the interview session began. Each student signed their consent form and turned it in to the researcher. Participants received instructions prior to the interview session and were reminded they should freely share their comments and needed to only answer those questions they chose to answer.

Each subject participated in focus group interviews. All information was gathered, and subsequently reviewed, compared, and categorized. Next, the researcher looked for emergent themes and also contrasting themes within both groups. The researcher engaged in thematic coding of the data to be summarized. Such coding included the use of open coding which recognized relationships, names and categories within the transcript. This grounded theory supported the development of deductive data from which thematic coding and analysis was also done.

<div align="center">*Validity*</div>

According to Howell (2005*) v*alidity refers to the degree to which a study accurately reflects or assesses the specific concept that the researcher is attempting to measure. While reliability is concerned with the accuracy of the actual measuring instrument or procedure, validity is concerned with the study's success at measuring what the researchers set out to measure (Howell, Miller, Park, Sattler, Schack, Spiery, Widhalm and Palmquist, 2005). The researcher was keenly aware of the importance of transcribing, so as not to weaken the interpretation of the transcripts. Hence attention to this possible phenomenon was given to the transcription process.

<div align="center">*Researcher's Experience*</div>

The researcher is a graduate student who had completed qualitative courses while completing the Master's degree and pursuing the Ph.D. As an employee of the university, the researcher has also established relationships with many of the participants over the years. Hence, there is an established level of comfort. Additionally, the researcher has worked with the targeted population of students for fifteen years. The researcher has

made a conscience effort to not bias the results, despite her relationship with the students

or as a result of her years of service at a mid-west land grant public University.

The researcher's personal educational background does not include the assistance

of effective support services during her undergraduate or graduate experiences; however,

she was mentored by faculty and staff professionals.

The researcher is an African American female who attended a PWI for both

undergraduate and graduate work. She has also been employed as director of the Office

of Multicultural Relations (MCR), at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL), a

PWI for the past fifteen years. The researcher's work includes working with minority

students, of which a majority is African American. As the primary focus and mission of

MCR is student retention, the researcher and the MCR staff have implemented variables

that are grounded in retention theory and research in relational-cultural theory.

Engagement in the Research Process

The involvement of the researcher was integral to the program administration and

design of this research process. All data collected was reviewed to the greatest extent

possible for accuracy in representing the voices of the participants.

Reliability

Hensel (1998) notes that reliability is the consistency of your measurement or the

degree to which an instrument measures the same way each time it's under the same

condition with the same objectives. In an effort to be certain of the reliability, each

interview was conducted the same way each time and in a consistent manner. The

interview questions were consistent for each participant and techniques did not vary.

Assumptions and Limitations

This study was based on ethnographic research consisting of two focus groups. The groups were comprised of African American students at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, a predominately White institution (PWI) located in the Midwest. The two focus groups were limited to ten-twelve students each: group one, undergraduate students; group two, graduate students. The study was limited to African American Freshmen students who:

1. Attend workshops designed by the support services office.

2. Are assigned tutors and mentors as needed/requested.

3. Meet with professional staff on a weekly basis or as agreed upon.

4. Receive additional financial assistance from support services office.

The second focus group was graduate students formerly connected to the support services office prior to degree completion. These persons were selected because they were compliant with the same set of criteria as current students in the first focus group.

Data used for this study came from one representative institution of higher learning. The data spanned over a six-year period, and did not account for students who transferred, had disconnects in enrollment, or took longer than six-years to obtain their bachelor's degrees.

Each student had received financial assistance, one-on-one professional support, the opportunity to attend workshops and seminars, mentors, and free tutorial service that was provided on request. The time needed to complete a Baccalaureate degree is four to six years, with 120 credit hours completed. As many students work and have families, six years is often the time of completion.

Summary

The study carefully followed the research design and methodology outlined in this chapter. All participants and individuals of influence met the guidelines for participation and human subjects' concerns and regulations were adhered to throughout the study. The data collection process was also carefully conducted and monitored to guarantee participant confidentiality. All instruments and interview questions included in this study effectively obtained information related to academic issues, psychological problems, socioeconomic issues, relational issues, and critical race theory. Once data was gathered relating to these factors, data was transcribed and coded for themes. A colleague examination was also completed. A statement of the researcher's experience and involvement in the research experience was utilized to ensure the validity of the study.

Chapter 4 contains the results gathered from conducting this study as outlined in Chapter 3. A discussion of the sample population and participant background information is followed by a presentation of the data. Data for the focus group interviews will be presented based on the thematic coding and summarized. Chapter 5 contains a discussion of the research data and a summary of the discussion. Included in the discussion are implications and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER FOUR

Purpose of the Study

This study intended to examine the impact of support service offerings in

retaining African American students who attend a predominately White institution (PWI),

namely the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL). Additionally, this study sought to

understand the retention impact in building dialogical relationships between these

same students and their assigned professional staff person (in the Office of Multicultural

Relations (MCR). Finally, the researcher expected to discover the level of effectiveness

of MCR support service offerings by a comparative analysis of both grade point average

(GPA) and retention-to-graduation data; the data examined compared the GPA and

retention-to-graduation of an African American freshmen cohort who participated in

MCR support service offerings and those who did not.

Description of Analysis

This study presents an analysis for themes, grounded in contextual data on

retention and the personal experiences of African American students who participated in

the MCR support service offerings. The two established focus groups included African

American undergraduates currently participating in MCR support services and MCR

graduates within recent years. An e-mail invitation, explaining the research project was

sent to current students and recent graduates who participated in MCR offerings.

From the convenience sampling of participants who responded in the affirmative, a

random sample of 10 undergraduates and 10 graduates were selected by a

university assigned student number. It is important to note the researcher had no

knowledge of the names of student's chosen prior to the interview process. Students in

the two focus groups provided non directive disclosure to the questions posed by the

research. They appeared very comfortable in adding to the dialogue and commenting on

the observations of one another. Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest a benefit to focus

groups is the emphasis placed on listening to the thoughts and feelings of those

participating in the interview process; each person is heard as they discuss the topic at

hand. To be sure, the researcher felt it imperative to hear the voices of the students in

response to the questions posed in chapter three.

Ladson-Billings (1998) suggests it is the power of these voices that can shed light

on critical race theory-giving credence to the African American experience while aiding

in awareness for others. Jordan and Hartling (2002) assert everyone has a need to be

inherently connected in order to experience relational mutual acceptance; it is no different

in institutions of higher learning. The two focus groups were audio taped

and interviewed approximately one hour and fifty minutes each. While twenty

students were invited from a random sampling of the students, seventeen responded; ten

in the first group or the undergraduate focus group and seven in the graduate focus group.

Transcribing of the focus group interviews in order to denote emerging themes, provided

extensive data for the purpose of thematic coding and analysis.

Additionally, a comparative analysis of GPA and the number of years to degree

completion examined outcomes for African American students who chose to participate

in MCR support services and those who chose not to participate. The students represented

in the comparative analysis were 2001-2007 African American freshmen students who

were MCR orientation participants and had acknowledge their desire to remain actively

engaged in the MCR support service offerings as a student enrolled at the University.

The comparative analysis provides a summary of outcomes for the 2001-2007 MCR

African American Freshmen cohort.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a format used to code qualitative information and includes a

number of explicit themes or patterns (Boyatzis,1998). According to Boyatzis, "thematic

analysis serves many purposes, including: (1) a way of seeing (2) a way of making sense

out of seemingly unrelated materials (3) a way of analyzing qualitative information (4) a

way of systematically observing a person, an interacting group, a situation, an

organization or a culture (5) a way of converting qualitative information into quantitative

data" (p. 5). For the purposes of our research, thematic analysis is used to address

numbers one, three and four.

Table 1
Focus Group Interview Research Questions

- What is the impact of MCR support service offerings provided through a mentoring

  component, financial aid support, workshops, and on-going individualized

  sessions with the designated MCR professional staff counselor/?

- What key factors (identified by students participating in MCR support services)

  have contributed to persistence (current student) or degree completion (alum) at

  UMSL?

- What, if any, impact did the MCR professional staff counselor have on student

  retention?

Themes from Focus Group Analysis

Specifically, the transcript from the focus groups revealed themes found in research questions located in chapter three. An examination of research questions in chapter three include: What is the impact of support services provided through a mentoring component, tutorial assistance, financial aid support, specified workshops and on-going individualized sessions with designated professional staff? What key factors contributed to your decision to continue your education to degree completion at UMSL? What if any impact did your professional staff people have on your decision to remain at UMSL? What are the MCR student GPA's and graduation averages for a cohort of freshmen who participated in the retention praxis when compared to those who did not participate?

Revealed were several explicit themes for analysis. To be sure, students not only commented on the actual support services, but what each meant to their college experiences and in many cases, their personal experiences. Contextual analysis suggests the transcript revealed themes of retention theory immersed with sociological and psychological variables as indicated in focus group dialogue. Students provided commentary about security, trust, family/home, relationship, acceptance, awareness/ familiarity, exposure, relationships and peer identification, self-esteem, academic ability, study habits, biculturalism and learning styles. Theories discovered during the retention discussion with students included Durkheim's suicide theory, Bruner's (1990) social constructivist theory, Wiener's (1986) Attribution Theory, Guiffrida (2005) Other Mothering Concept, and Fleming's (1984) research on the retention of African American students. Discussion on relational-cultural theory, Jordan and Hartling (2002), Noel-

Levitz retention practices and Nodding's working on education and nurture, were all a part of this fascinating discussion.

Mentoring Component

In referencing the mentoring component and its importance to retention, students spoke about peer identification and the significance of relationships when noting the impact of this specific MCR support service. Student one (undergraduate) commented on the importance of a relationship with her mentor and its impact on a specific academic challenge; her comments are expressed from the vantage of a new student. Student one commented on his mentoring experience, stating,

> As a freshmen, when you are coming in, there's a lot, you don't know...this is a whole new world for you and just being able to have somebody there to mentor you and to show you the ropes, especially another student is like leaps and bounds. It's like home for me and having someone care about you and your problems… I really learned one night ...I was really having some troubles and some problems...and I knew I was in the right place with the program when my mentor at that time, called me, or rather texted me. And I think it was 1:00 a.m. in the morning when we were having conversation. I was able to have help finishing up my paper, and you know, and just the help that was there for me...it really spoke leaps and bounds and I was able to get a successful grade on that paper and pass the class. I really, really am thankful for that.

Student # two (undergrad) expanded on comments made by student # one,

> I would actually have to concur. I definitely took advantage of the mentoring and I remember as well entering to the first office I was introduced to...in fact, I did the orientation for this office. I forgot to do it over in the Honors College where I was supposed to do it as well as here and I know my mentor definitely opened me up to a lot of things that I wasn't even aware of that was on campus. As far as professors and everything, she advised me as to which ones were thumbs up and which ones were a thumbs down and everything and I took her advice and I am really glad because I...earlier a participant asked me if I cried because of one of my classes and I have had a smooth ride with my classes and I can say it's been a blessing. I definitely have my mentor to thank for that.

In Focus group number two (graduate student) commented on retention theory - security, relationships, and family were also acknowledged concerning the mentoring

experience. Recurring sociological variables were prevalent in both groups. Student# 13

(grad) shared she was a recent grad and has vivid memories of experiences with her

mentor; she was very anxious to share how much she was impacted. She explained,

"And the mentoring.... because there were times when the work just got too much and I

had someone there to sit and ... to just to get that extra stress off." Another graduate

student quickly chimed in to discuss this place called "family" was a real place known as

the mentoring center located within the Office of Multicultural Relations. His experience

noted friendships, acceptance, and relationships formed that were genuine; she

commented:

> The mentoring center is one of the places that you encounter a lot of positive
> conflict and I would define that as interaction between students that at first might
> seem slightly heated, but ultimately come out to an improved understanding of
> any issues that we may discuss at the current time. One issue was the discussion
> about contraceptives and sexual education, which lasted roughly an hour and
> fifteen minutes; it was a very long discussion; but ultimately, we came to an
> understanding of the differences between sex education in relation to generations.
> This is a place I can freely make my comments.

Student # 12 (grad)…

> What I've learned from the Multicultural Center or rather MCR is that they taught
> me that I wasn't shy, and I always thought that I was. I was kind of hang backish,
> but when they assigned me to mentor other students, I was able to interact with
> them and I saw within them some of the same problems that I had lived through.
> And I was able to help them, and also encourage them, because many times
> they'd think that, oh, this is wrong and that is wrong… and I would tell them
> nothing is wrong that you believe in.

Like the previous student, student # 17 spoke about her feelings concerning her

mentoring experiences and relationships formed. She desires to personally embrace other

students after her experience. Student # 17 stated:

> I served as a mentor for the Star's program that is sponsored by UMSL. And the
> Multicultural Relations office really helped, because when I come here I see
> people take time out to help others who are in need. I received great help from the

secretary to the entire staff and it felt real good; so even though I am busy and have a lot to do working on the Ph.D. I just have this mentality that you should never be too busy to share what you have. I think the Multicultural Relations office had a lot to do with, not just that they instilled that, when I first got started here as a mentor, also in my class. In one of my classes I took as an undergrad, there was a particular student who was having difficulty adjusting in class and she was referred by the professor to contact me to get some tutoring. Eventually, of course, she was also connected to the Multicultural Relations. So it was easier for her to have heard about me, and to meet her over here, and of course eventually I was able to see her graduate. Also it doesn't just give you the feeling of giving back, but it makes you feel that you are responsible for others. And I will always believe that because as much as you receive you want to give back. I think that is one of the core things that the Multicultural Relations is able to emphasize.

Student two (undergrad) agreed with the importance of the relationship established between the mentor and the student. These experiences are often defining moments in fostering on-going relationships which speak to success or lack thereof. In addition to the academic results, trust and support were a part of the experience for both students. Such variables are essential according to Tinto's (1987, 1993) research on retention.

Students' comments reflected a discourse which acknowledges the attributes of effective retention practices as noted in chapter three. Interestingly, while Tinto (1975) posits the need for students to disconnect from familial settings and cultural comforts to effectively embrace the college experience, these students acknowledge a setting within the college context which is reminiscent of family and its comforts. As noted in the literature on retention, students discussed experiences that affirmed and validated their self worth.

Finally, Tinto's premise on attrition theory suggests students are more likely to complete college if they possess institutional commitment; connecting students in non-

conventional ways can indeed connect them to the larger goal as shared by students in the transcript.

It should be noted that freshmen students were primarily offered the support of a mentor; one with the same choice of major or shared common interests. Not all freshmen felt the need for this aspect of the support service offerings. Quite often, the MCR professional staff person would at times strongly suggest a mentor to those freshmen who seemingly experienced difficulties during the semester. The researcher noticed some freshmen students were eager to share their story as if it was uniquely original and none other had a similar experience; there were looks of both surprise and confirmation with the nodding of heads and the arching of eyebrows around the table.

Leadership Component

In discussing the mentoring component, the next student (undergrad) seemingly connected her mentoring experience to helping others in the "family" prior to her graduation. She commented on leadership opportunities made available through her mentoring relationship. It is interesting to note that a leadership theme was noted throughout the focus group discussion. Students connected mentoring and leadership when the discussing retention support services.

The connection between retention and leadership permeated the discussion. Student # 6 shared,

> I was involved in a leadership position on campus. This is my senior year, so I decided to just opt out and focus more on my studies. But the first leadership position I was involved in was Helping Hands and that was through this office as well. I started off as just a member and then my MCR counselor and as well my mentor, (at the time) talked to me about different leadership positions and things that I did in high school that I didn't know that I could use in college. They talked to me about it; they guided me through all the little things that I needed to know in order to be a leader on campus and gradually I found myself walking up the

ladder, climbing up the ladder from member, to secretary, to treasurer, to SGA
rep, vice president of another organization. So it really did help me and everyone
talking to me, guiding me, showing me the different resources that I needed to be
a leader on campus and just to be a leader in life and not just on campus. Those
experiences that I've learned from, being a leader on campus, has helped me in
everyday life with my family, friends, and my job; so it really is a great program,
and everything I've learned is through some of the students I have encountered
from here and the faculty and this office staff.

Student #13 was a graduate student who acknowledged her leadership role as a

result of her relationship with her counselor. She touches on psychological variables

which impact retention. Such variables include: self concept, self esteem and ability, all

key factors to the retention of students, especially in diverse settings.

I have never had a traditional role in leadership in any organization, but being a
part of Multicultural Relations, and speaking with people, and having one-on-ones
with my counselor, it caused me to believe in myself more, and step up to the
plate more, which in turn, started taking place in the classroom and therefore, I
began taking a lead role with other classmates and other peers. And I didn't realize
how much effect until graduation to see how many people that you are actually
affecting. And I know until I became a part of Multicultural Relations I was like,
stand offish, I was to myself, just doing what I had to do to maintain the grades
that I needed, but I was not leading anyone or affecting anyone other than myself.
I'm so glad that it's different now 'cause it helped me so much.

Student # 3 commented on personal growth in the area of leadership and people

around him believing in his ability. Interestingly, he credits his being retained at the

university to his involvement on campus. Tinto (1987-1993) emphasizes academic and

social integration as equally important in retaining students.

I guess to add to what everyone else has said, I definitely would have been
missing. And to add on top of that, just personally what I would be missing… I
don't know to what capacity… but what I've learned in terms of who I am and my
leadership roles that I have been in… I don't know if I would have been able to
learn that anywhere else or been able to achieve what I have achieved through any
other school. I don't know if that's possible but definitely a part of who I am I
think would be missing, because what I have learned from this office and what
people have taught me and exposed me to, even my internship that I currently

have, that would be missing, because I got that through this office. So definitely a lot, in terms of my personal being would be missing without this office.

Student #13 expressed feelings of empowerment and the desire to encourage others to take on a leadership role. She encouraged others to take on leadership just as she had been encouraged to do. She also connected her role of leadership to degree completion.

Student # 13

> I have taken on leadership responsibilities, and it's been very beneficial to have the Multicultural Relations office, knowing that I have support there, as well as I have somewhere else to go. Being in leadership in a different organization, I know I can pull from them and say, you know, what you guys think about this, do you mind partnering up with this organization that I am with? I can also encourage some of the people I've met to think about the organization and I can mentor them and help them learn the ropes. And so it was very beneficial they would tell the groups and individuals here in this office about what was going on in different organizations regardless of the color, age range, traditional, non-traditional, they would just pass the information on to them, and that was very beneficial as well because I was able to meet other students who joined some of the groups later. Since I like finishing what I start, I will finish my degree and am checking into a Masters degree.

Student #17 expounded on what impacted his decision to complete his degree at UMSL. He too talked about wanting to give back to the UMSL family as a result of the opportunities he received. Student # 17 commented:

> I was a student marshal at graduation and the staff that I have encountered, has been extremely helpful, both in and outside of the office assisting me in any type of endeavor that I engage in, whether it be looking for a job on or off campus, different events on or off campus, different academic endeavors. Anything that I really aspire to do I have had an extreme amount of assistance to do it. I am determined to complete my studies out of sheer will and I have people who believe I can do it. I am going study abroad because of a workshop where MCR and the study abroad people invited students to hear testimonials about their travels. I will be a politician and I will remember this school.

Student # 12 spoke about how she benefitted from support services and as well, her desire to give back. Student 12 is an elderly female who graduated at the age of 76.

She is the mother of four adult children and would often volunteer to assist students in the

mentoring center with their writing assignments.

> Okay, through MCR I received guidance and settled down in a direction, and
> through their encouragement I graduated in '09. And I am now going to continue
> going because what I want to do is, is I want to represent, be a spokesman for the
> elderly. Because they tend to be kind of pushed into a corner and forgotten about,
> with no one to speak up and say, look, although they're elderly, they need this,
> they need this, they need this, and we need to take care of them, because they've
> been here a long time and they don't deserve to be shoved to the side and
> forgotten about. I'm so glad these pretty ladies didn't do that to me; in fact I
> graduated because of all the help I received from them. Oh yes, you must give
> back…they need their jobs and we need them!

The student reminded the researcher that we would continue to see her as she

prepared for graduate school; she commented, "Because I intend to take courses in

sociology, not social work, because the social workers are the ones I'm watching! I just

want to be sure that the elderly are comfortable." The researcher responded, "Yes, and

always remembered." "Absolutely," she stated. She was thanked again for her

comments as the researcher attempted to move forward with other students sharing

personal experiences or key factors that impacted their retention decisions.

Student# 15 connected a current leadership role to a past experience which

influenced her decision to complete her degree and enroll in graduate school. She

appeared eager and seemingly pleased to let everyone in the focus group hear about her

journey.

> When I was a junior and a senior, and as an undergrad at UMSL, I had an
> opportunity to be a student mentor, or maybe it was just one of those years. But
> now I am actually a mentor in my Optometry School as well, and I feel that the
> opportunities to work with students who were freshmen in MCR is somewhat of
> an opportunity to work with first years; it gave me some perspective while I was
> working with first years; it was a little bit easier-that transition was this time, than
> it was before; it gave me some respect for, you know, I was there before and I
> need to remember where I was. It's a little easier to relate with people if you can
> still remember when you were in their shoes. It gave me some opportunities to

grow, to tutor a little bit; to have good conversations with people that I might not have ever had. The opportunity to tutor was invaluable, because now I am actually a tutor as well so that, I kind of see how the leadership role works as well. I try to be understanding and try to get people to understand things that are maybe hard concepts, or understand what the teachers are not getting across. My experience…it still helps me today. Because well, financially, and with encouragement, with the guidance to the classes that were most beneficial to me and the warmness I received because when you come you are never a stranger. And I could, just to sum it up, from their encouragement and the warmth of the relationship that we built together.

Financial Support Component

Another support service offering, the MCR tuition remission award, is a financial incentive that students can earn, based on GPA and meeting the eligibility requirements. The requirements for sophomore and above are: completion of 24 credit hours, attendance at four workshops designed to enhance academic retention, completion of the FAFSA or Federal Aid For Student Assistance Application, achieve a 2.0 or higher, and meet regularly with their assigned MCR professional staff person, often referred to by students as their counselor. The frequency of meetings is determined by the MCR professional staff person. Freshmen eligibility is the same; the exception being a GPA requirement of 2.5 at the completion of the first semester. The intent of the award is to lessen the student loan amount or to help with the purchase of books. The award becomes a conduit for connecting students to services provided through the office. In connecting the award to the participation of MCR support services, over 90% of the students fulfilled their obligations. This information is made available at the end of each academic year. The average amount is $500.00 per semester and varies at times, depending on credit hours enrollment, financial need, etc. The support service offering of MCR Tuition Remission Awards made for insightful discussion. Without question, finances are fundamental to college students and have a keen impact on student retention as noted in

the research. As shared in chapter three, research indicates students from low income

backgrounds are more likely to persist to graduation if they are awarded grants over

loans. As the researcher, I was also curious about the impact of the MCR Tuition

Remission Award on persistence or retention at UMSL. Included in this dialogue were

phrases such as, financial necessity, financial appeal, helpful to family/parents, created

connections, gratitude, and economical savings. As noted, it became apparent that

connecting MCR Tuition Remission Awards with other MCR expectations, aided in

fulfilling the MCR mission of the holistic strategic student developmental plan; it often

was the carat which brought students into the office, but led to a greater experience.

Student (undergraduate) was very candid in her comment concerning the financial

impact, but interestingly enough, connected the award to other help she had received. In

the research, Gladieux (1998) acknowledges the connection between socioeconomic

status and student persistence.

Student #8 explained:

> I mean I hate to just put it out there like this, but MCR has offered me a
> scholarship! This is an awesome and huge fringe benefit. MCR has also offered
> me time. What is very important to me is they make sure they have time for their
> students; I know my counselor knows I'm not always there at the time of my
> appointment because I have classes far away and can't get here on time. My
> classes are so bunched together it's hard to make time but she always makes sure
> to make time for me and again. Let me go back to money; that is a huge asset I
> mean, like my parents…. I do want to help them in the best way that I possibly
> can and I have MCR to thank for that.

The first student to speak on this led to others being transparent in their comments

about their financial situation. Student # 7 (undergraduate)

> I am not eligible for any grants, Pell grants or anything. So everything I do I have
> to do it with a student loan or out of pocket. And books can be expensive. The
> first year I got, the first semester I got $400.00 that covered all my books and a lot
> of people might think $400.00 is not a lot of money, but that's $400.00 I don't

have to pay back or that I don't have to put on my credit card because I didn't want to take out an excess amount of student loan and $400.00 might not be a lot because I am only a part time student. I don't know what others get.

Student # 11 (focus group-two graduate)

I have been here for some time. I'm in the process of completing my second Bachelor's and initially when I began my second program I was not aware that financial aid did not cover you if you had already received one Bachelors, so then I had to fall on the shoulders of Mr… you know, federal loan and all that so getting tuition remission assistance came in quite handy because that knocked down what I had to take out in student loans. And it also, you know, with tuition on UMSL's campus going up as the economy declines you know tuition goes up and that's more money you, as students that we have to take out. So I know for me having that little cushion knowing that okay the tuition remission is going to knock out a portion of my bill that has really, has you know, less of a burden on me because I have outside things going on and to worry about how I'm going to pay for a class or what have you, or textbook is one added thing and, you know, tuition remission has negated that for me. It is a lot to me; that is a lot. That's something that I don't have to pay back with interest at all."

I noticed at this point in the conversation, an equal amount of emphasis not only placed on receipt of the award, but also the sheer desire to stay away from loans and help out the family. Loans were viewed as the last option but were given consideration if it meant being able to attend school.

Student#5 (undergrad)

Tuition reimbursement has been very, very, very helpful to me. I am one of eight children. Do the math. Three of us are in college. One is trying to do engineering, one is doing information systems, and I am doing a business degree with a whole lot of other things with it. Without the help of Multicultural tuition remission and tuition reimbursement, I would have to take out more loans than I need to do…than I need to take, cause I'm going for my Masters and I'm already going to have to take out loans for that, so and I don't want to have too many loans on me. I don't want to have that my parents worry 'cause they would have to be the ones to take out the loans. They already have massive amounts of loans on them from my brothers, my other brothers in college. I don't want to add the additional burden to them. And then my younger siblings that are still coming up; there's even more financial burden. So this really does help, the tuition remission really, really does help because without it sometimes I wouldn't be able to get my books. I don't have a full time job, I'm a part timer and that just gets me my gas, and clothe me and maybe a class occasionally. So it really does help me out.

Student #2 acknowledged that tuition remission was a help but not the final decision in being retained. Commentary was made in connection to academic pursuits.

> Does tuition remission help? My answer is obviously, yes. If the question is, without   it would I still be here? I would have to say, yes, as well. 'Cause, I mean, I'm not going to sit here and say that I wouldn't be where I am right now without it. Like, I would find a way, I would make a way and but I don't mean it doesn't benefit. Tuition remission hasn't put me where I am right now, but it has been a tremendous benefit to my academics.

Student #1 was in agreement with her peers and shared her gratitude for the financial benefit, shaking her head in affirmation of the previous comment, though not specifically linking it to the impact on retention.

> I simply want to say that, as far as does tuition remission help? Yes it does. If you are a college student you know that every dollar, nickel, dime helps and you know whether you have the money or whether you don't, it's money that is offered to you. Be thankful that you have it. I look forward to taking advantage of every nickel, dime, dollar, and penny, whatever I can get. So, thank you for this.

Students expressed gratitude for the monetary support; like mentoring, receiving MCR tuition remission took on a personal meaning for each student in accordance with their financial situation. Also like mentoring, it was seen as an essential support service to those in the focus groups. Yet, it wasn't always seen as the deal breaker regarding a student's persistence.

Student #2

> You know… the tuition remission has really helped because I don't think there has ever been a semester where my books were not over $500 and so every amount of money that I can get that is not part of paying for my tuition helps. Through this office I have basically been able to like either cover my books completely or I have been able to like only have to pay maybe $100 and that's, that's really helpful. So, so I don't know what else to say. It's really helpful and thanks.

Student #4

I agree with the tuition remission covering the cost of books. Those books are really expensive. But they don't exceed the amount of the remission, so that's great and without the tuition remission award, I do believe that I would still go to school and still… like the others.. I would find a way. I also want to add that it also helps as far as reducing the cost of tuition so that my job, at the time when I first started here, could pay for the rest of my tuition so it kind of helps a lot at the end when you couple it with your employee tuition reimbursement.

Student #16 (graduate)

The tuition remission helped a lot with my education journey because there was a semester when I didn't have enough money to get books and all that, and the money came in handy. It came right in, right on time. So I think that was the biggest help for me.

Students (grad) introduced Wiener's (1986) attribution theory; to be certain, they took on the personal responsibility of financial management, operating in what Wiener (1986) coined the internal locus of control; connecting personal responsibility with persistence.

Student#17 (graduate)

Once I started receiving tuition remission, I started reducing the amount of loans that I accepted, because prior to that, being that I was taking out loans, I wasn't eligible for any grants and I was applying for scholarships but they weren't flowing. So it helped to reduce the amount of loans that I had to accept which is going to help out in the long run when it's time for me to start paying them back.

Student#1 (graduate) offered a perspective that had not been part of the discussion, he connected health insurance and tuition remission; following his comments, others nodded in agreement. As was the case with some others, this support service offering was seen in some cases, essential to being retained, while in other cases, helpful but not large enough to make a real difference relative to retention.

So it helps with the health insurance because I have to get health insurance…it's mandatory. When I started, I had a lot of loans, so each semester, I got tuition remission, and it just reduced the amount of loans I had to get because I have like more than $50,000 in student loans which is a lot.

My notes suggested students were beginning to veer a bit from the discussion regarding what impacted their decision to complete their education at UMSL or why they were determined to do so. What I readily realized is they were indeed responding to the question with how they were made to personally feel and less about the specific support service offerings though their importance was clear. To be sure, Student # 3 did, however, comment on the tuition remission award as having greater than monetary value. Swail (2003) suggests retention support services must speak to the whole person in meeting their needs.

> MCR has offered me; let's say…relief and….and guidance, spiritually, mentally, and financially. Financially, as said; MCR just help us with as far as paying for school and helping provide for me where I couldn't and spiritually, just in keeping the faith and staying strong that kind of stuff; and mentally to just have someone to talk to and express my problems and how to deal with them. Like I said, being as new to the whole college scene, that really has helped. And that's how I have been helped.

Student #15 also acknowledged the significance of financial support, but initially spoke about how her sister received help at a moment of crisis which could have impacted retention outcomes for her.

> On the monetary side, this office also helped me a couple of times. My sister actually had an unfortunate event where someone stole her book bag and while it was a small amount of money, the office actually helped her get her books back and stuff like that; they helped me and my sister who is a nurse and I am in the College of Optometry and they helped us when we had a financial crisis. It was a big deal for us, my parents couldn't afford it; we couldn't afford to fix what was going on and that actually helped me to finish school that year. So I really appreciate it.

It should be noted that the awarding of MCR tuition remission had a direct impact on attendance at various support service offerings; based on the attendance roster signed by students during each event, professional staff could determine the numbers in attendance. I was amazed at the level of commitment to a relatively small amount of

money. It spoke volumes in that a little became a big deal. The discussion also mirrored the research on financial assistance, suggesting its worth as a factor in retention outcomes, especially for African American students; several students had commented on being at a crossroad regarding their education if they had not received the award; others, however, noted they would have found a way to make it no matter how tough. At the helm of the concerns expressed were not burdening parents and the desire to not take out loans. Students' responses to MCR financial support mirror that of the research. That is, scholarships and grants impact a more positive outcome relative to retention. Loans are least effective in linking the two.

Linking the MCR tuition remission award to workshop attendance has exposed students to a myriad of academic and non-academic offerings. Students were introduced to workshops that ranged from job interviewing techniques and mock interviews, to GPA savvy, by the Dean of Arts and Sciences, to achieving a 4.0 through a study technique, offered by a researcher with extensive knowledge . Aspects of retention theory were again apparent. However, new insights included being given a choice, and having a voice; aspects of critical race theory were introduced into the discussion; it was not about hearing, but being heard.

One student then announced,

> Well, I'm number 9. And a part of being with the retention scholarship is you have to attend four workshops. At first I was like, okay what will I learn? But they were so awesome with the free massages I will never forget that. You get the free massages during mid-terms. But the thing I like the best is my counselor. We meet periodically and we sit down and we talk. We just don't talk about school, we talk about everyday life and they actually care about what your grades are, what you are doing, do you need a tutor? Where are you? How are you feeling today? What's going on in your life as a whole?   That's what I have taken from this entire experience. I have been at UMSL for three years. And I have been a part of the Multicultural Relations… I love it, I just love it. I just love it.

Workshop Component

When I inquired about the impact of workshops as a support service offering, according to student #8, the workshops helped her in school and external to school, she shared:

> I have not graduated however; I do feel that the workshops that MCR offers are geared to not only my future, but my education. Some of the job seminars, the different outside agencies that they get to come in, like State Farm. There was a workshop for government jobs that filled up so quickly, I missed it. However, I ended up getting a government job later on, from getting some information from someone that was able to attend. So I think that the workshops are geared toward, to help you better yourself, as well help you become more productive in your career and in your future.

Student # 10 also agreed the workshops were informative, though admitted she was hesitant to become engaged due to a rigorous schedule.

Students are aware that attendance at each workshop is a commitment; they agree to and sign a contractual commitment. Student # 7 explains,

> I would like to say that since I have been involved with the Multicultural Relations office that the services that have been offered have helped me attend the workshops. First let me say that I was a little bit hesitant when I did sign up because I was given a list of different activities that I had to complete during that semester. And by me working full time and attending school in the evenings, I really had no play room to attend some of the workshops which I believe they were very interesting, but I just had no time to do some of the ones that I was really interested in. So after I talked with my job and kind of made arrangements, I was able to attend my first one and I want to say it had to do with Black History Month. And when I attended I must say that I really enjoyed it and it made me want to attend the ones that followed. And this is my third, my second year I believe attending some of the workshops. And I really enjoyed them… each year is something different. One year they had the career services workshop and I attended that one. I got to do a resume and I signed up for more help in our career services office which I did not know was offered. So I can say that by me being a part of the Multicultural Relations office, I have been able to explore some different things that I probably would not have done if I had never joined this area.

Student #3 viewed the workshops as an opportunity for self improvement, stating,

> I really believe that the workshops provided a great opportunity for me to enhance my educational experience. There are excellent workshops each semester that added to the quality of my educational experience.

In needing a bit more than what seemed to be a general comment, I asked student # 3 for more information. She responded by saying "The workshops helped me to be able to go to professors and now know how it works; I can talk to them and just get the extra stress off."

In addition to being helpful, beneficial, and informative, Student #6 saw the workshops as a tool to connect her with other students. She said,

> But the workshops, they benefitted me in the sense that prior to becoming a part of the Office of Multicultural Relations, I only came to school and left. I was not connected to anything. I was not a part of anything. In attending the workshops it allowed me an opportunity to meet different people…to start being a part of the college experience instead of just going to school, work, and home. Also, just knowing that when classes got rough that I had a support system because that kept me going when I thought that maybe I would drop a class I knew that I could always go and get some help if need be.

Students #4 and #7 saw the workshops as an opportunity to have a say so in what they chose to learn. The research in chapter three references Treisman's research on study communities for African American students. They were considered effective because of student ownership or students having a say in how they work. In the words of student #4,

> In addition to the seminars, being able to just to be free spirited and choose the kind of workshop you wanted felt great. I mean…you can't do that in your major or not most majors; there is a path of required courses and that's even with the electives, you still have a category or required area to fill.

Student #7 explained emphatically,

> I know that's right because if I could choose all of my classes I certainly would! Not just the electives…ALL my classes… Now, I do know we have to take some

of our workshops that are recommended by our counselor…but I figure since she knows what I need since I see her all the time…then that's cool.

The mentoring, MCR Tuition Remission Award, and workshop offerings were deemed as beneficial by the students. Not only did students articulate the outcomes from support service offerings, the discussion evoked expressions of emotional depth; how it made them feel. Fleming (1984) and Guiffrida (2005) posit the importance of the concept of the nurturing environment in which a connection and acceptance exits. Fleming (1984), emphasizes these attributes and their impact on college choice for many African American college students who attend HBCU's. According to Tinto's theory on student integration, student integration was achieved when MCR students became connected to an office that in turn, connected them to institutional commitment, enhancing opportunity for persistence or retention to graduation. More will be shared about this in the chapter five.

 It became apparent in my field notes that overlap existed between research question one and research question three: What if any impact did your professional staff person have on your retention? However, I was deliberate in separating this support service offering from other support services, as it represents the essence of our critique. If I purport that establishing a dialogical relationship is of prime importance to the retention of African American students, all the more to give close scrutiny to the research question. I believed it was essential to hear the voices of African American students in order to effectively code and analyze themes which speak to this premise as well. Ladson-Billings (1998) suggests that an element of critical race theory provides a method in which to share personal experiences that can sensitize and bring awareness while educating.

Critical Race Theory

Student #16 saw the counselor relationship as someone representing his voice, he

shares,

> I think above and beyond being retained I think you feel there's an advocate for you here on campus. Somewhere you can go, or somebody that's speaking out for you or somebody represents you as a body, as a formal body, a formal part of the university body. So I think there are several factors that are involved, but overall, I think Multicultural Relations did allow me to have a more acceptable college experience.

Student # 16 made note of having a collective voice for students which is the

premise of critical race theory. The idea of representation for the less powerful and

speaking to their personal issues was noted in her comments. Interestingly, she also tied

her comments to what an educational institution needs in order to be a success. This

graduate student noted…

> I think most of all what would be missing would not just to say myself or one or two other people, but I think most importantly the collective voice of the minority. This department represents the voice of everybody who is not in the majority going here. And   just to have like I said just to have somebody to listen to us and speak on our behalf and understand us and what we have to go through in everyday struggles and in the world, it really, really does mean a lot. And if you really don't have that… you know the minority, whether it's Black, Hispanic whatever, I believe they really have a struggle, because they really don't have anybody to relate to them and to speak on their behalf and to understand their views and their culture and so forth and so on… which I believe is the reason why this department was founded and without that, I believe you lose that, you know… that sense of exclusiveness, that sense of somebody just being there to back us up. And that right there is very, very important to any university's success.

Student # 5 more or less repeated an earlier observation she had made in group

one, but clearly wanted to make her declaration heard by the group:

> Okay, I'd have to agree with almost everyone else at the table I would certainly not be here. Uh, as I spoke before I did not like UMSL and MCR was my deciding factor for staying, because I really did not have a connection until I joined the office… at all other universities that I visited, I also, I never felt the

connection so I'd probably be, you know, another brown face in the sea of the masses at some other university. So, you know, MCR really has made me, I guess…retained me here… so that's where I would be if they did not exist.

In listening to several students comment on students of color needing "these kinds of services," I inquired to the group in general, do you think students of color need these kinds of services? Collectively, the group commented in the affirmative.

I asked, "How so, and don't move the mike… just how so? I mean…why would you say students of color need these kinds of services? Student # 1 responded:

> We need these kinds of services, because without them, you know, there's no voice for us. It's kind of like this is the attorney for us where we have somebody to come counsel us, somebody to come talk to us, somebody to represent us if we have problems and somebody to help go about…. who knows the system already…t o help go about and to help direct and help us, hopefully, and help us change things…. without that it's really kind of tough for minorities already, you know, 'cause sorry to say we're expected to just come right in the door and walk right out…. you know, without this a lot of that would happen. We would just come right in and go right back out into the world. But the whole point of this department here is to help us walk in the door and walk back out with a piece of paper and a cap and gown in our hands and, you know, you really do need these types of programs here in order to help more walking in and walking out with the paper and robe rather than walking in, walking out with down face and a stack of bills yea high."

Student # 10 briefly commented on the need to have a voice on the campus and emphasized the importance of others having high expectations of you which resonated for her from the previous comments.

Student # 10 stated,

> I just want to back up on what participant one was saying how about students of color are expected to walk in the door and walk back out and it happened, and lot of the reasons that it happened is because of the expectations. And it's not to say there wouldn't be any African American students here because of this office, but there are definitely a lot more because of that…because you see people who have hope in you. You see people who want you to succeed, as opposed to walking in the door and seeing people who expect you to fail. So it's definitely something that puts a positive attitude inside of you, which everybody needs.

Student # 13 also commented on high expectations as a factor in his retention at the university. While he saw the importance of the office giving a "voice" to students of color, he believed student retention was impacted by the family like atmosphere. He shared:

> I guess to add to what everyone has said, besides just having someone, or a group, or an office to just represent us this program is also I feel has put us together and kept us together. So, yeah, this office makes me feel as though yes, even though I'm a minority, I'm still someone who they care about, I'm still someone who they want to see succeed in every possible way. They want me to utilize every resource that there is to utilize on campus and both off campus. So I feel as though this office is really needed because you don't only just get to network with people on campus, you network with people outside of campus. You make relationships, you build friendships, and you build a lot of things. As I said, my first group of friends was though this office. My first group of learning was this office. My first class I chose was advised in this office. Everything was this office. And this office was what and is what has kept me in this university. And I do think that it also has kept other students and kept us with each other, hang with each other. I guess you can call it a click, whatever, but well, it's become a family. You build family, you become, you know people and hopefully those friends that you make now from this office will be people that you grow up with and you see later, you invite to different things, and which for me is what I've been doing so far, because this office has just kept us together. Even times, it has even become, what you call a mediator when we have issues with each other. This is the place to come to squash all of that and talk and make sure before we leave, either we know we are okay or we know we are just done. This is the office, and this is the place, the program that puts us together and keeps us together. Besides, having a voice, it keeps us together, in my opinion.

Participant # 15 agreed as she talked about her own personal journey.

> Currently I am Biology major and I want to go into Botany. Botany is a very, I have to say, it's a very white male dominated field. And every time I try and I talk to someone who's in the field, I just feel like they're looking like, "oh, you're not going to make it, so don't even worry about it." It's just not Biologists that feel this way. And then, I also took foreign language and my foreign language was Chinese. And in all my classes I've always been the only black girl; when I went to China, of course, the only black person. When I was in Taiwan, I was one of the only black people. And I'm always in this sea of no one really cares and you're not like us. But when I'm here, I feel welcomed, and I don't even think, I don't really think it's the color of my skin, I don't think that at all. I just think that everyone has felt this unacceptance somewhere and we all are here and we understand each other better than everyone else. And none of us are looking at

each like oh; you're not going to make it. We're all saying, you can succeed and you're going to do this. And I think that these types of programs are very important not only to help us succeed, but for the mental health of those minority students, minority faculty, anyone. Because like I said, if you're always in this sea of you can't do it, you're not like us, after a while, I'm quite sure it will have a toll, it will take a toll on your health, your mental health. And so I think having these offices, they really help to prevent like things like that.

Relational - Cultural Theory

Student #10

The first office I knew when I came to this university was this office. My first group of friends was from this program, one of them is right there. Everything, I have taken advantage of everything. And the counselors are awesome. My counselor is great we talk about life, school, my decisions, and what my graduate school is, my family issues, things that I hold dearly, that I don't share with other people, I feel comfortable enough to share with the counselors because they've opened up to me, and made me feel welcome, and like they care, they worry about me, they care about me, they call me to see what's going on, what I'm doing, they go to my thoughts, just, it's awesome. I have learned a lot from everything that I have done here, and taken advantage of everything, including the free massages during the Mid-term stress relief workshop.

Student # 8 injected,

MCR offered me a place to go that I can talk and I know it's in confidence. I meet my counselor and I'm always thinking it's going to be for 30 minutes, but sometimes it's way past 30 minutes. And they listen to what you're doing and they give you feedback. Good, bad, or indifferent. They let you know that you are a person, that you are not just someone passing through, spending money, building a loan, and getting any type of grade. They care about your grade and you can always, always know that when you come to MCR that you can leave your burdens there and you can walk away because you're going to feel much, much better after you're gone.

Student three commented:

Yet again, the MCR has offered me a lot. While I do concur with everyone, they offered me a scholarship. They offered me mentoring at the time, a counselor. They've also offered me a place on campus that I can call I guess a home. You never really...when you go to college, really see a place as home, especially your office on campus as a place I call a home versus your dorm or your friend's room or something. But when I'm on campus, this is the place I call home. This is where I come to do my homework, to do studies, to do research, do whatever, talk to someone and you will have debates...a friendly conversation with friends. This is it,

'cause that's the same thing I do at home. So I feel comfortable whenever I walk in here. I know that whatever stress or relief I have, I leave it at the door and once I walk in it's like I'm walking into my room, shut door, and do what I want to do. So that's something that they've offered me.

While Student # 2 commented on retention; she felt MCR had not assisted in

retaining her, but helped her think through a major that cause her to stay. She shared,

I kind of want to repeat, as a college student, have they retained me? No. My major, they have definitely kept me with my major; my counselor has kept me with my major. I remember coming into college and everyone saying oh you know most college students change their majors like about five or six times before they decide like what they want to do. And I, I just thought for sure I was going to be one of those students. Like there's no way I'm going to be able to keep with my major even though I felt I know what I want to do, there's just no way I'm going to stick to it. And then coming to this office and you know all the counseling and questions that I've had is definitely made me more aware of what's around me, and made me more aware of what to do with my major, made me more aware of what classes to take and things like that. What would keep me interested, what would keep me focused on my goal? It just helped me stay with my major.

As a graduate student, Student #14 expressed a need for fulfillment not found at

home, that was found in his counselor.

I have to honestly say that the whole office has been a big help. Especially the one-on-one with my counselor… not having a lot of support, family wise, not real close, so having the one-on-one was real good. Being able to talk to someone personally and say, you know, these are my issues, this is what I'm concerned with, I'm facing these, you know, dealing with this class, or this professor, how do I handle it, how do I handle myself? You're just scared and nervous. You know, I don't think I can handle it, I think I'm gonna drop. You know, having someone to share that information with that knew the system; it was very helpful that they knew the system better than I did… if it wasn't for them knowing the system there would be information that I would have, therefore, lacked.

Student # 15 also agreed with some previous students, noting the counselor was a

person they could talk to.

I would have to say that my favorite services in the office of Multicultural Relations, is basically, just having someone to talk to. I'm a very emotional person and at times things will really get me down, and they will affect my study habits and, you know, my ability to even concentrate. And having someone to go to, whether it's my counselor or somebody else, has been invaluable to me. There

have been times when I was upset about a test or I was upset how something was just going in general, and they gave me a better perspective.

Student # 15 connected the counselor with the security of knowing you are not alone in your experience. I noticed a theme of not being left alone in the comments. She shared,

> I have to say one of the reasons I grew so much as an undergrad, and as a graduate student as well is because of having someone, meaning, you know, the counselor, I believe contact you, set up meetings every so often, throughout the semester I mean, that really made a big difference because I didn't feel, I felt I was not being left alone I know if I had this,   how my classes are going… having someone who really cares that much means a lot especially when you're in school, in college because I didn't feel left alone to do this on my own. You know, I had this appointment that I had to attend and it just gave me something to share when I did attend. Someone to ask me how was I doing, how my classes were going, if there were any problems I had. I mean to have someone that really cared that much about you means a lot; you don't get that all the time, especially when you're in school or in college…you don't expect anyone to really care; you're grown now and you're on your own.

 Student # 11 affirmed what the previous student shared about feeling cared for by others…She noted,

> So that means a lot to me personally. I am 27 1/2 years old with four children and they take all of my energy…so to have someone to energize you because they really do care, it means a whole lot to me.

Both graduate and undergraduate students saw the counselor as the "mother" figure, one that expressed concern for their personal well being and kept them focused and on track. The relationships established appeared to have made student appointments prime uninterrupted time, allowing for a one-on-one exchange between the student and MCR professional staff person, often called a counselor by MCR students. Students expressed feelings of being tended to, cared for, heard, advised, and given a since of direction. Other times, students clearly sought to be validated and have their comments and expressions valued. The role of the counselor could be compared to the glue that not

only cemented many relationships but foster patterns of trust, advising, being a confidant,

mother figure and friend. I became keenly aware of the impact of such when students

continued to dialogue, giving insightful comments on research question two: What key

factors contributed to your decision to continue your education to degree completion.

I was interested in knowing what this group of student saw as their motivation to

remain at UMSL until receiving their degrees. I was personally hopeful to learn of the

"bottom line" to their decision. The responses were very telling as student # 3 answered.

> I would say that MCR has helped me . . . I wouldn't say they have necessarily
> been the reason to keep me in school at UMSL; I would just have to say that they
> are the people that have help to make me active and participating in student
> activities at this university. I probably would have to change that, because the
> office *does* make me feel as though I have someone I can communicate with.
> There are people here that I belong with . . . that I'm not an outsider. So I think in
> *that* aspect MCR helped retain me because I probably would have changed
> schools to another school where I felt like I had my fellow students; my fellow
> people that I could talk to and relate with. But this school has, this office, has
> helped me feel like I belong; that there's a place that I can come and say I am a
> part of this school, I am a part of this university. I have a voice. I can do what I
> want to do. I can be a part of whatever I want to be a part of, and this helped me
> accomplish that. And in that aspect they have retained me.

Student # 5 emphasized care, acceptance, and others having high expectations of

her as deciding factors about where to attend college; she agreed with previous student

and also shared how UMSL almost "lost" her to (unnamed school). She explained,

> I agree with participant number three. MCR hasn't kept me in college but I will
> say that they have retained me at UMSL. I remember when I was a freshman, I
> really did not like UMSL, and I wanted to leave extremely bad. And I looked at
> all these other universities, I did campus tours I even did a student exchange with
> a local university, (unnamed school) and I wanted to go there. But then I realized
> at (unnamed school), nobody really cared about me; everybody thought I was just
> a number I was just another brown face in the place of everyone else. And I just
> did not feel welcome and then I would always come back to this office either
> before I would leave to go to (named school) or either when I came back. And I
> always I felt like I belonged. I felt like there was someone here who was saying
> you know, you can do it yeah they don't care about you, and they really could care

less if you dropped out, but we care. And I didn't feel like I would get that at any other university.

Student # 6 made comments which spoke to acceptance, identification, and

representation or "fitting in".

One thing that would be missing would be myself, because friends of mine tried to get me to go to (unnamed school) School of Social Work. I think I would be missing, because it hasn't always been easy and since I've been here and coming to MCR that has made it much, much easier. And, I think I would be missing. I'm almost sure I wouldn't be here.

Student # 2 echoed the sentiments of # 6 and declared,

Well, actually I would be missing as well, only because I, like I said, not as a college student all together, but here at UMSL, because I was introduced to UMSL, I was directed here through this office uh and I think that if it weren't for me coming here and visiting and seeing this office and hearing about it, and talking to people here, I just don't think I would be led here the way I was. And I do believe that… you know, as well as participant six, and myself, I think there is a larger percentage of minorities that would be missing from UMSL as well.

The discussion continued to draw comments on my inquiry about what support

service if any, had a bearing on contributing to persistence and degree completion at

UMSL; it remained clear from the answers that in many cases, relationships with people

and having a connection were high on the list.

Student # 8 also commented on the importance of socialization or involvement in

her college experience; these are key components in research on retention theory.

In my opinion, I think, what would be missing would be the connection to the University. Being that UMSL is predominantly a commuter campus the thing that encourages students to participate or get involved in either leadership roles or in the various activities or even opportunities is the fact that a lot of it is promoted through MCR or MCR has some affiliation be it through, you know, Black History Month, or, you know, student activities, and expos, or what have you… if I was not informed by MCR, then I would just be a non-traditional commuter student as I intended. I intended to come to this campus and get lost. But once I got connected with MCR that was just not acceptable, and it wasn't even a possibility. So I think the connection to the campus would be greatly at a disadvantage if MCR was not a part of it.

Student # 9 echoed,

> I would say like the other two said, I probably wouldn't be here. Only for the simple fact that through my high school I took college courses at UMSL, and I didn't do too well because I didn't feel a really good connection, you know, with the campus or whatever. Uh, I did not know about MCR at the time… but later in my first year in college, I got connected with the MCR I actually stayed on campus and felt like I had a purpose to stay here and to learn and to go forward with my major even though it changed a couple of times and I ended up staying here seven years, I felt like that had the MCR, had I not been directed to the MCR, I probably would not have finished, or probably would go to a community college, or just fall out.

Student #13 noted the impact on her being retained came from the advice given by her MCR counselor; according to her, she saw her counselor as trustworthy once they got to know one another. During a scheduled meeting, she shared her dilemma and talked about it in the focus group. Relational Cultural theory asserts that trust is the fundamental equation in building a dialogical relationship as noted in chapter three. She asserted,

> I probably wouldn't have been retained, had I not come to the Multicultural office, because my GPA was really low after my first semester. So my advisor here suggested that I talk to the professors who I had taken those classes with to see if they could excuse the grades, and they did because I had proof of my health crisis and it affected my grades…and so once they did that, my GPA just soared because it was it was low, it was low. So if had I not talked to my advisor here in Multicultural and had those grades taken off my transcripts I probably would not be here anyway. I had to go to the head of the department to have those classes removed. And had I not had those classes removed I probably be still an undergraduate right now. So….

Student # 4 believed trust was clearly important to him but needed someone to believe in him and encourage him on the journey. It also became clear that he may have had unrealistic ideas about college grades and needed to trust the advice of someone.

> I would probably, oh, I don't know if I would have made it, in all honesty because I probably would have made it slower because you want to be connected… you want to be a part… you want to know that, or you want to feel you can do it and

everybody can tell you that, but when you don't feel it, it does something to you; so when I got my first C, it was like someone had ran over me. And that's right when I was introduced to Multicultural Relations office, so that helped me to keep pressing forward and making a difference because it was a C, which to some people was nothing, but I felt like a failure. And then when you have no one else to tell you that that's a C and you passed, now move forward, you know… I know I would have slowed down, because I was feeling like I had already failed. I felt like I was already done. So, I would have slowed down and probably still be an undergraduate.

In noting what impacted her being retained at the university, Student #17 spoke to attributes of retention theory, that of being connected and accepted; and also mentioned having a safe place to which she could retreat. Despite those feelings, interestingly enough, she admitted she would remain a student at UMSL without the presence of MCR She asserted…

> If the office of Multicultural Relations was not around, would I still be here at UMSL, yes…. because it was a main goal for me to graduate from UMSL. So I would have still been at UMSL. Would I have graduated at the time line that I felt that I wanted to graduate…probably not, in all honesty; because like someone else said, I wanted to… I had a place where I felt that I belonged, and that was a real gripping point of the whole academic experience. You know, if nothing else, even if I tried different organizations and just well… I liked them but I don't really feel like I fit in, I could always come to this office and knew I fit, regardless-regardless of who was in the office. Even if it was people in the room that I did not fit with per say, I could go back to the advisors and say, do you have a moment, can I talk to you about this, or can I just sit back here? I don't have anything to talk about. So that was also an option. So I felt that I fit, and that just kind of made the school work a little easier, it also allowed me to build those relationships, so that, you know, that network got stronger and it also got broader. So it helped out a lot." And if they weren't here, I probably would have stayed at UMSL, but I probably wouldn't have graduated when I did.

Student #11 made the connection between relationship building and financial aid in the retention equation.

> In retaining me, it was partially because of the mailing about becoming a student at this University. I did have other universities to go to but because of the financial assistance that this office gave me I chose to come here. Yes, this university will retain me because it helped me in my decision of my change in major. I did lose money when I changed, and that was really bad, and obviously,

the office came to my help. Yes, the office did assist me and allowed me to be retained within the university. I believe it's important that offices like this exist because it can be extremely intimidating at times and I could relate my problems about my major when there was really no one around to relate to. It becomes a serious detriment when you don't have some help; a group such as this should exist in every university.

Student # 16 provided insight into remaining at UMSL and the retention aspect of being connected. She continued to visit the office after graduation and made the following observation:

I have to concur with everyone else as far as the mentoring, and the counseling portion, and, uh, the caring portion which is really good. Even though I graduated in December 2008, I still maintain contact with the MCR. It was the first place on campus that I knew of as far as offices and resources. I had quite a few classes my first year and it was a great place to come in between the classes; as far as studying in the mentoring center, people were there to help me if I needed it, needed it.

Student #11 shared comments, connecting her being retained at the university to feelings of emotional security, support and acceptance. She also noted what Gruifrida (2005) calls other mothering when speaking about her relationship with people in the office.

For me, MCR has given to me is a sense of relief. Whenever I'm frustrated, like I have been frustrated due to classes or outside things of that nature, I can…you know, I can come to talk to someone in MCR. If my counselor is not accessible then there is someone else that's there you know even if it is just another fellow student that says hey let's you know let's just talk and you know MCR is that place to come to where they can be that stress relief it may not be mid-term stress relief but it's almost equivalent to that because of the help that they give you even if it's just a shoulder or an ear you know or just a beanie toy to punch on they have something that's going to help you so that's what they've given to me is a sense of control and stress relief that makes me want to stay at this school because even after the office is shut down…I only leave cause I have to.

Student #15:

Okay, I wanted to say that MCR has given me cheerleaders and there's been many times where I just felt horrible and I just wanted to just like change my major, I wanted to maybe give up, but I'd come in here and I'd talk to someone and they're like, you can't do that and they would just push me and I you know I'm really thankful for that because, because they've pushed me I've been able to succeed

with so many different things. So if I wasn't a part of MCR I think I don't know, I don't know where I would be right now uh so I uh I really appreciate that. And then also you know, I agree with everyone else, you know they give you financial support and they give you, like, mental stability they give you someone to talk to. It's just a really good office to be a part of. So I was representing a department on many levels and a lot of opportunities, it actually came through Multicultural because my name came up through people here and it was suggested to somebody in graduate school, and so that's how it came about. So I held that role, and I have to say it was an experience, I enjoyed it a lot.

Table 2
Summaries of themes from focus group interviews:
Sociological variables of Swail's retention theory from focus group thematic coding:*

Theme	Categories
Security	Peer Identification Family/home Cultural awareness Relationships Acceptance Coping skills Values and habits
Psychological variables of retention theory from focus group thematic coding:	
Ability---academically prepared/challenged	Coping skills Self-efficacy Determined Goal oriented Responsible Persistent Completion of task
Cultural Relational theme of retention theory from focus groups thematic coding:	
Relationships------------Investment	Sensitivity Nurturing Caring Belonging Sense of purpose Accountable Social integration Competence High expectation of self and others
Critical Race Theory theme from focus groups thematic coding:	
Voice for self and others **Critical Race Theory** (con't.)	Awareness Expression Experiences Informational Feelings Representation Advocate Support Connection Freedom Optimism Transparency

	Bridging
New theme from focus group thematic coding:	
Leadership	Opportunities Respect Self Esteem Accountability Expectations for self Effective work ethic Helping self/others Beneficial Choice Involvement Open minded Confidence Retention

***While the recurring theme throughout the interview data was grounded in relationship building, leadership was also an important variable. Each of the above themes was noted in the discussion. They are connected to Swail's persistence model for student retention theory. Also include are relational cultural theory and critical race theory.**

SUMMARY

The recurring theme established was grounded in the fostering of relationships or a relational praxis; this was clearly crucial to the students' experiences. Each component, that is to say, mentoring, financial support, leadership, and workshops carried themes which students connected to their MCR relationship with a counselor. Also, the two focus groups consistently provided parallel data from their undergraduate and graduate experiences as students who participated in the Office of Multicultural Relations (MCR) support service offerings at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. As there were seventeen participants in total, undergraduate responses were marked by numbers one through ten and the graduate numbers were marked numbers eleven through seventeen. I was deliberate in illustrating the parallels throughout the thematic coding. As previously noted, the recurring theme was the importance of a relational praxis this was apparent throughout the contextual data. Five themes were consistent in the coding: (1) security (2) ability (3) relationships (4) voice for others and (5) leadership. Again, it should be noted that leadership was a new theme that permeated the discussion; it too was grounded in a relational praxis and connected to the retention of the students interviewed in the focus groups. It appeared more students became aware of the idea of leadership through peers or professional staff persons rather than by self motivation. Resulting from this awareness, peers encouraged other peers to become more involved within the campus community. Another revelation which sprung forth were the number of new found leaders who were interested in continuing their higher education pursuits or becoming leaders external to the campus. The qualitative analysis provided useful information for critical reflection on institutional practices and institutional culture relative to retention

strategies and implementation;   this especially becomes relevant for African American students attending predominately White institutions (PWIs).

Merriam (1998) describes the goal of qualitative research as a journey of "discovery rather than confirmation" (p. 19). Yet, the researcher's job is to balance the discovery process with a process of internal confirmation of the data. Thematic coding, "mostly developed from the text but…also received from the literature" (Flick, 2006, p. 316), allowed analysis of the focus groups.

The Office of Multicultural Relations (MCR) provided gradual transition into the campus community, ideally, allowing students to embrace their own values while adopting a new experience; research posits that retention is enhanced when acceptance occurs. Despite the diversity which exists in most of our public institutions, students are often introduced to operationalized mono-cultural systems. Students at the University of Missouri-St. Louis are fortunate to experience a campus community which promotes a spirit of multi-culturalism or an appreciation for one's own culture while learning and experiencing another's. When this happens, movement is made in a direction of being a student centered institution and one that has implemented the five themes extrapolated from the transcribed data according to the African American students interviewed in the MCR focus groups and are/were students at UMSL.

Additionally, the researcher believed quantitative data would provide further useful information. The researcher collected data from the Office of the Register at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL). The data represented the GPA and graduation year of a cohort of 46 students from the MCR freshmen cohort in 2001-2007. The

researcher examined the outcomes for those students who remained with the MCR

offerings until graduation and those who chose not to. The results are illustrated below.

Table 3
2001 – 2007 MCR Freshmen Retention Cohort of Completers
Cumulative GPA and Year of Graduation Data
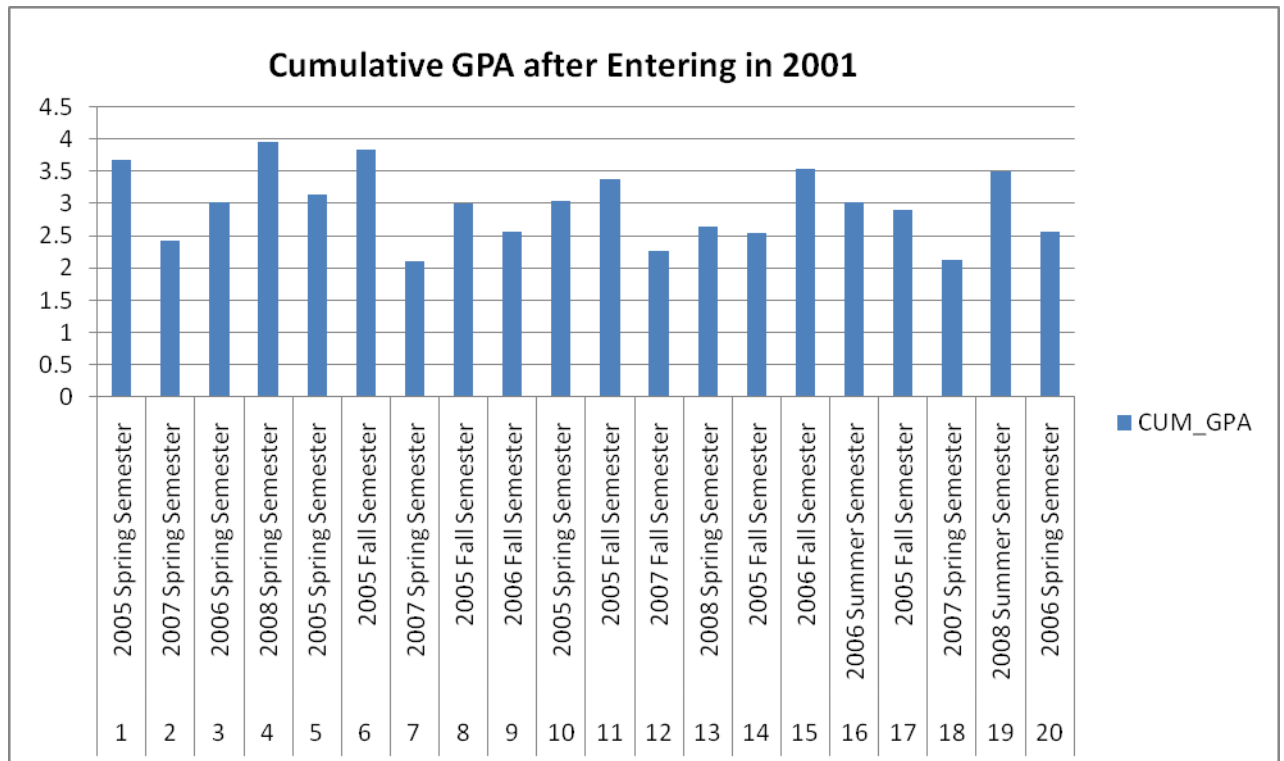
Summary of table three

The table represents the cumulative grade point average and graduation year for

twenty of the forty-four African American students who comprised the 2001-2007 MCR

Freshmen class. The right side of the table represents the range of grade points on a 0 to

4.5 scale, and reflects the lowest GPA as 2.2 and the highest, a 3.8. The bottom numbers

have been assigned to each student and denote the year each graduated. For example,

student one graduated in 2005, Spring Semester, with a cumulative GPA of 3.5.

Close examination of the retention data from the graph reveals a total of eight

students graduated in 2005 or a four year time period; a total of five graduated in 2006 or

a five year time period. A total of four students graduated in 2007 or a six year time period, with three completing their course work within a six and-a-half to seven year time period. The MCR non participants are defined as those students who initially visited the office and chose to occasionally, or rarely, become engaged. Staff would often see this group during moments of crisis or concern or if they had questions.

It should be noted that many in this group really felt they could take care of their own matters and didn't need the assistance; they were used to handling their own affairs and making independent decisions. Still others represented the financially challenged student who didn't see MCR modest financial assistance as enough. Some transferred and others remain a bit of a mystery. Some of the non-participants had also discontinued their enrollment at the University. Specifically, of the twenty-four non participants, sixteen discontinued at the University. As a result of a transfer, stop out, (those student who stop attending the University for various reasons but return at a later date and time to complete their studies) or drop out, this information is somewhat inconclusive.

At the same time, it should be said that two MCR students transferred to another school, graduated and have returned to as graduate students, currently enrolled at UMSL. Two others were stop outs and have since returned; they are currently enrolled at the University. While this data is not the primary focus of the study, it gives some indication of MCR retention outcomes for a specific group of African American students attending UMSL, a predominately White institution. The researcher believes it deserves closer scrutiny for further discussion, future dialogue, and research.

Table 4
2001 – 2007 MCR Freshmen Retention Cohort of Non-Completers

Student A	Completed 8/5/2006	3.029	
Student B	Discontinued 5/15/20055	1.557	Sophomore
Student C	Discontinued 5/17/2002	2.540	Freshman
Student D	Attended Spring 2009	2.078	Less than half time Sophomore
Student E	Discontinued 4/17/2003	1.043	Freshman
Student F	Discontinued 5/11/2008	2.623	Senior
Student G	Discontinued 12/17/2006	2.144	Sophomore
Student H	Discontinued 12/21/2001	No grade	Freshman
Student I	COMPLETED Fall 2005	2.837	Enrolled in Graduate School GPPA
Student J	Discontinued 5/17/2002	2.957	Freshman
Student K	Discontinued 5/17/2003	3.421	Sophomore
Student L	Discontinued 5/17/2002	1.880	Freshman
Student M	Active Enrolled SP2010	3.197	Senior
Student N	Discontinued 12/17/2006	1.642	Junior
Student O	Discontinued 12/17/2006	1.260	Freshman
Student P	Discontinued 12/21/2001	0	Freshman
Student Q	Enrolled SP 2010	1.332	Sophomore
Student R	Completed 8/4/2007	2.939	Enrolled Optometry Level Prof 3
Student S	Active Attended SP 2007	2.288	Senior

Student T	Discontinued 8/06/2006	2.432	Senior
Student U	Discontinued 5/17/2003	1.573	Freshman
Student V	Discontinued 5/17/2003	2.171	Sophomore
Student W	Discontinued 5/17/2003	2.830	Sophomore
Student X	Completed 8/5/2006	2.849	

CHAPTER FIVE

Introduction

Chapter four provided an analysis of mixed methods data. The qualitative data was established through the transcribing of the responses of two focus groups and an examination of the findings through thematic coding. I presented and analyzed the data from my study. In preparation for the quantitative data, I collected information on GPA and retention-to-graduation outcomes for an MCR cohort of freshmen from 2001-2007. A comparative analysis of GPA and graduation data was examined, looking at outcomes for those students who actively participated in MCR offerings from freshmen year to graduation and those from the same cohort who did not. The outcomes for participants are detailed in graph form and an analysis of the non participants is also provided. This chapter consists of a summary of the study and a discussion of the findings, implications for practice, recommendations for further research, and conclusions from the study.

The purpose of this chapter is to expand discussions on the themes articulated by African American students connected to retention based offerings in a university setting. The discussion will also include outcomes from the quantitative data. This final chapter aims to highlight the relationship between participants, researcher, and readers in achieving a greater understanding and commitment to fostering the implementation of systemic and dynamic student centered retention practices, reflective of solid retention outcomes for African American student attending predominately White institutions.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of support service offerings and retention strategies for African American students attending a PWI, namely, the University of Missouri-St. Louis. In moving from a theoretical approach to one that is both theory and practice, I was interested in the impact of retention offerings and the measured outcomes of that impact. I was equally curious of the implications for institutions of higher learning as they continue to attract a more diverse population of students. I also wanted to examine the grade point average and graduation rates of a cohort of African American students who participated in the MCR support service offerings and compare their data with non participants from the same cohort. Of critical importance to me was an examination of the role of relational-cultural theory and retention. The study sought to answer four questions related to retention practices and outcomes. Finally, I expected to discover from the consumer of support services, (the student) the institutional effectiveness, impact, and gaps in retaining and meeting the needs of African American students attending a predominately White institutions.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks for examining retention theory and student centered practices utilized research grounded in the work of Tinto, Swail, and Jordan & Hartling. Additionally, sociological and psychological variables of retention theory were closely examined. In-depth research and examination was necessary for a holistic understanding of retention theory and retention practices on various levels. Frameworks are grounded in Tinto's (1987, 1993) concept on academic and student integration, Swail's (1995, 2003) position on evolving from retention theory to retention practices, and Jordan and

Hartling's (2002) notion of relational-cultural theory, suggesting everyone has an inherent need to be connected in order to experience mutual empowerment. Adding commentary to this critique are aspects of critical race theory and an examination of the sociological and psychological variables connected to the retention of African American students attending PWIs. Bean and Eaton, 2000, Valentine 2000, Wiener, 1986, Tierney 1992, Gruiffrida, 2005, Pascarella and Terenzini,2005, Astin, 1990, Cabrera, Stampen and Hansen,1990, Flemimg, 1984, Ladson-Billings, 1994, Arendale and Martin, 2000, Miller, 2001, Noel-Levitz, 2000, Rendon, 2003, Seidman, 2003, Gladieux,1998.

Methodology

The methodology I used was grounded in contextual data on retention and the personal experiences of African American students who participated in the MCR support service offerings. The two established focus groups included African American undergraduates currently participating in MCR support services and MCR graduates within recent years. An e-mail invitation, explaining the research project was sent to current students and recent graduates who participated in MCR offerings. From the convenience sampling of participants who responded, a random sample, consisting of undergraduates and graduates were selected by their university assigned student number in lieu of name recognition. Once established, the focus group interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and thematic coding done. In addition, a comparative analysis of GPA and graduation data was examined and summarized. This data was derived from the Office of the Registrar and includes the GPA and graduation year of the 2001-2007 Office of Multicultural Relations freshmen cohort. A summary of the findings was provided.

Findings

As noted in Chapter One, the researcher was interested in the impact of retention support service offerings on African American undergraduate students who currently participate in MCR support service offerings and also African American graduates who participated in MCR offerings during their time of enrollment at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

There were a total of four research questions posed:

(1) What is the impact of MCR support service offerings which are provided through a mentoring component, financial aid support, specified workshops, and on-going individualized sessions with the designated MCR professional staff counselor/?

(2) What key factors (identified by students participating in MCR support services) have contributed to persistence (current student) or degree completion (alum) at UMSL? In examining the impact on the established relationship between the MCR professional staff counselor and students, the researcher posed the question:

(3) What (if any) impact did the MCR professional staff counselor have on student retention? In examining both the GPA and number of years to degree completion for those African American students who participated in the MCR 2001-2007cohort, a final question was:

For question one: (1) What is the impact of MCR support service offerings which are provided through a mentoring component, financial aid support, specified workshops, and on-going individualized sessions with the designated MCR professional staff counselor/? The findings evidenced a recurring theme, that being the

importance of a relational praxis in retaining African American students at a PWI; this finding was noted throughout the MCR focus group discussion in impacting successful retention outcomes.

Additionally, a new theme arose from the contextual data. It became apparent that leadership was an outgrowth of the impact of retention support service offerings when it is connected to a relational praxis. Furthermore, stemming from the recurring theme were descriptors used to acknowledge the impact of support services offerings and a relational praxis, or an assigned professional staff person/counselor. These sociological variables are found in the chart on page 66 and include feelings of security, academic support, peer identification, acceptance, cultural awareness, academically prepared, a setting reminiscent of family, caring goal oriented, self-efficacy, nurturing, a sense of purpose, and someone to represent the voice of the student. While students were very clear about receiving academic support through the retention offerings provided, when speaking about the impact of support service offerings, students spoke less about their impact on academic rigor and its connection to retention, and more about the impact of personal growth and development as a result of support service offerings and the importance of a relational praxis as being key to their retention as African American students attending a PWI.

Questions two (2): What key factors (identified by students participating in MCR support services) have contributed to persistence (current student) or degree completion (alum) at UMSL? The primary findings identified by the focus groups as key factors to persistence and degree completion were grounded in relational-cultural theory; specifically, developing a relationship of trust with the MCR professional staff

counselor, or a peer mentor, viewed as important to persistence and degree completion. According to the MCR focus groups, the trust factor in the relationship brought about feelings of acceptance, high expectations of self, and a sense of feeling connected to the campus community. MCR Tuition Remission or having financial support was also key factors which contributed to student persistence and degree completion. MCR focus groups included in their dialogue the impact of workshops as a support service offering. They noted the workshops enhanced their academic knowledge, i.e. a workshop on How to maintain an acceptable GPA or the workshop presentation known as the 4.0.

Additionally, MCR focus groups acknowledged that attendance at workshops provided a social outlet and cultural opportunities in meeting and learning about other students, cultures, and countries. Of notable importance was the theme of leadership and involvement. MCR students who experienced an on-going relationship with their MCR counselor or a peer mentor, became more involved within the campus community, and encouraged other students to do likewise. Resultant from this experience, leadership was seen as a key factor in persistent and degree completion at UMSL; the desire to run for an office or join a student organization aided in retaining students, as shared in their focus group exchange. The theme of leadership also permeated throughout the MCR focus group discussion.

Question three (3) What if any impact did the MCR professional staff counselor have on student retention? In responding to this question several students commented on exercising their options to consider other institutions of higher learning if they were remiss of an MCR relationship which helped in fostering their personal growth and development during their college experience at UMSL. While others admitted they

would have been retained despite such a relationship, their expressed concern was the length of time it might have taken to complete their degree if not having an advocate or a supportive relationship while a student at the University.

Findings in the MCR focus group discussions strongly suggested that the impact of the MCR professional staff counselor represented the voice of the students and is seen as a genuine advocate for MCR students. Interestingly, some students in the MCR focus groups mentioned having such an advocate is the essence of what a predominately White institution needs successfully retaining its African American population; it was suggested both the students and the campus community as a whole would benefit. The researcher should note that MCR focus group students, (during their discussion), would often draw parallels between the presence of the physical office of MCR and the presence of the MCR counselor; their importance was seen as one in the same and therefore the unique and essential addition to retention support service offerings within the campus setting.

The findings to this question also offered insight into how the students often saw themselves as being less than powerful within the University setting; yet, feeling empowered in knowing their MCR counselor was a safe person to talk with about academic and non academic challenges. MCR focus group students articulated feelings of being nurtured and having a home away from home. While the MCR professional counselor was viewed by the focus group as being helpful in assisting students with University challenges, the MCR focus groups expressed also viewed the counselor in the role of a parent or advisor, interested in their holistic development. In turn, MCR students marketed the office to other students, encouraging them to become connected. The

recurring theme of a relational praxis was a part of each research question though most pronounced in the discussion when referencing the counselor/student interaction.

The researcher examined the cumulative GPA and the number of years to degree completion of the African American students who remained engaged in the MCR Freshman cohort. The 2001-2007 MCR Freshmen cohort was comprised of forty four African American students who participated in the MCR freshmen orientation. A comparison was made to non-completers in the same cohort. In examining the data, twenty of the forty-four students remained actively engaged, which included meeting with their assigned MCR professional. All twenty graduated within a four to six year period, and with a GPA range of 2.2 (lowest) and 3.8 (highest).

Conversely, the 2001-2007 MCR non completers were students who initially visited the office and chose to occasionally, or rarely, become engaged. This group of students did not keep appointments with the MCR counselor and seldom engaged in MCR support service offerings. Specifically, of the twenty-four non completers, sixteen discontinued at the University.   (It should be noted some transferred, stopped out or dropped out.) Two transfers have returned as graduate students; two returned as less than half time students. Two are currently Seniors and two graduated without engaging in the services of MCR.

During the orientation, each of the forty-four students was assigned a MCR professional staff person, often referred to as the MCR counselor by the students. Once paired with the MCR professional, a weekly meeting schedule was mutually agreed on; this was always done with the student's course schedule in mind. The researcher does believe it is cause for closer scrutiny and warrants further discussion for future dialogue.

Hypothesis: The researcher proposed that African American students attending a predominately White institution (PWI) are best retained when the institution of higher learning embraces a, structured relational methodology, or deliberate retention praxis is designed to establish an on-going relationship between the student and the University student advocate professionals. For the purposes of this study, the professional student advocate is the MCR professional staff counselor. This individual can build a trusting relationship that impacts the academic and non academic experiences of the student; thereby affecting student retention and institutional commitment.

While research confirms the importance of academic and non academic support service offerings, including mentoring, financial support services, etc. an assigned professional student advocate professional provides a crucial role which extends beyond academic or intrusive advising. The incorporation of such a plan is a holistic developmental retention process and is strategic in its approach; it also advances the notion of creating an institutionalized model which is essentially vital to the campus infrastructure.

Such a systemic concept is in contrast to Tinto's (1987, 1993) retention theory, which suggests the student is responsible for fitting into the academic and social settings of the campus environment, or Swail's (1995) retention framework, (though a student centered concept), is remiss of the professional student advocate who is, key to building an on-going relationship of trust and connects the student to the support service offerings within the campus setting. The researcher believed that without the defined and assigned role of a professional student advocate to ensure retention implementation for African American students attending a PWI, the academic and social integration of students in a

new environment experiencing a new culture, could be overwhelming. There could be a void in establishing a systemic institutional retention plan reflective of a growing and diverse population of students attending a PWI. Additionally, support service offerings could become less impactful as some students will attempt to make challenging financial decisions, self advise, choose majors without a full scope of understanding all the requirements and make decisions reflective of a limited view and understanding of the campus culture and all of its offerings.

It must be stated that many of these students are bright, talented, and motivated, but without general working knowledge of their new campus environment. The researcher's findings affirmed the importance of the structured relational methodology as being essential in connecting African American students to the support service offerings in the Office of Multicultural Relations and noted the impact that the MCR professional staff counselor or student advocate had. While some MCR focus group students declared they would remain at the University despite MCR support service offerings or a MCR professional staff counselor; they admitted remaining at the University for a longer period of time due to a lack of direction, according to their observation. Interestingly, the researcher was very surprised that a large number of students in the focus group defined the impact of the MCR support service offerings in relation to the support received from being connected to a MCR professional staff counselor. Their expressions and responses were less about academic retention outcomes and more about the impact of the relationship that had developed between the student and primarily, the MCR professional staff counselor. According to the focus group

interviews, the relationship was the primary retention factor, which led to high expectations and self efficacy.

Finally, a new theme of leadership arose from the contextual data. Revealed in the focus group interviews were students who credited their being connected to having a desire to become involved with the campus setting. It appeared that more students became aware of the idea of leadership through peers or professional staff persons rather than through self motivation. Resulting from this awareness, peers encouraged other peers to become more involved within the campus setting.

Additionally, as noted in chapter four, an examination of the GPA and graduation rates of the MCR 2001-2007 cohort reflected a higher GPA average for students who consistently participated when compared to the non participants from the same cohort.

Findings indicated the recurring theme of fostering an on-going relationship with African American students throughout their University journey was important. It became apparent that all experiences academic and non academic were impacted by this revelation. In establishing student centered practices, this was seen as essential. Also, the two focus groups consistently provided parallel data from the undergraduate and graduate students who participated in the Office of Multicultural Relations (MCR) support service offerings at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. The themes indicated were grounded in variables founded in retention theory and relational-cultural theory. As there were seventeen participants in total, undergraduate responses were marked by numbers one through ten and the graduate numbers were marked numbers eleven through seventeen. The researcher was deliberate in illustrating the parallel themes from both groups throughout the thematic coding.

As previously noted, the recurring theme was the importance of establishing a relational praxis which is consistent throughout the university experience for African American students who attend a PWI known as UM-St. Louis. Also, five themes were consistent in the coding as the researcher looked at the mentoring component, financial support, workshops and one-on-one MCR professional staff counselor; the themes from each category were: (1) security (2) academic ability (3) relationships (4) having a voice (5) leadership. Again, it should be noted that leadership was a new theme that permeated throughout the discussion; it too was grounded in the fostering of an on-going relationship with the MCR professional counselor and in many cases, a peer mentor.

Discussion of Findings

The discussion of the findings is organized to first link my interpretation of the themes expressed in the results with theoretical frameworks of retention and relational-cultural theory. In particular, the theme of security and academic ability warrants closer scrutiny. I highlight additional observations on retention theory and relational-cultural theory as a way to express my interpretations on that theme and on the viewpoints of the research subjects. Later in this section, I examine the limitations of theoretical frameworks. Those limitations are further explored in the sections of this chapter on implications for practice and recommendations for further research.

The researcher recognized the recurring theme as the importance of a relational praxis or the fostering of an on-going relationship as being a viable part of the college experience; additionally, resultant from the trusted relationship, students expressed five themes from the support service offerings which impact retention – those being (1) security (2) academic ability (3) relationships (4) having a voice (5) leadership. These

themes impacted the retention of African American students attending PWIs as shared in the findings. The focus group gave less attention to academic outcomes of support service offerings; emphasis was placed on the impact of such offerings relative to the impact of the MCR relationship. As well, it is important to note that the discussion of the tutoring component was practically nonexistent during the focus group interviews as students referenced this component when speaking about a mentoring/tutoring experience at times.

The summary of GPA and graduation outcomes for the 2001 MCR freshmen cohort reflected positive outcomes for those freshmen who were actively engaged in the MCR support service offerings. The data examined, revealed the average GPA for the participants as being slightly below a 3.0. The retention rate for the active completers in the MCR freshmen cohort was 100% with a graduation span of four to six years. Conversely, the MCR non completers are defined as those students who initially visited the office and chose to occasionally or rarely become engaged; this group of students did not keep appointments with the MCR counselor and rarely used MCR support service offerings. Specifically, of the twenty-four non completers, sixteen discontinued at the University as a result of a transfer, stop out, or drop out. (This information can be found in Table 4). While this data gives some indication of retention outcomes, and is not the primary focus of this work, the researcher does believe it is cause for closer scrutiny and warrants further discussion for future dialogue.

Links to Theoretical Framework

The themes of security and ability are expressed throughout the students' observations. These findings are grounded in the sociological and psychological

framework of retention theory. The students' contextual data suggests the correlation or connection between feelings of security and persistence. Acceptance and incorporation into the new environment (Bandura, 2000) are important in to enhancing student integration.

Students in the focus groups expressed that having an identity with MCR as one of their first points of connection, aided in their security within the campus environment. Of equal importance is the notion of having a physical place to associate and to identify with others. Conversely, Tinto's (1975, 1987) theory on retention, asserts students who disassociate or aren't connected tend to become alienated and eventually disregard the college setting. African American students in the focus groups connected their security to their association with several entities, including peer mentors, the family and home-like environment, cultural identification, established relationships, acceptance, coping skills acquired through MCR association, and an identity with familiar values and norms. It became quite apparent in listening that students were connecting their association with MCR to their own gradual association and acceptance of the larger campus experience. The researcher came to believe retention services must connect the new college culture with some familiar cultural experiences of students.

Fleming (1984) asserts that the process of learning and understanding how one fits into a society are mutually inclusive. Perhaps more security is first found in a greater discovery and appreciation of oneself before effectively embracing new challenges within new settings. Perhaps this is best done in a safe place prior to embracing the larger picture. The notion that Tinto believes a student must separate, transition, and incorporate new norms and values before they are fully accepted, dismisses a fundamental need and

overlooks the connection made between security and association. It dismisses the worth of what is provided when security is inherent in the college experience for African American students attending predominately White institutions. As noted in the research in chapter four, this security is found in support service offerings such as peer mentoring, faculty and non faculty mentoring with committed and assigned professional staff persons, in workshops where relationships are often established or other settings where connections are made that provide a sense of acceptance by association. Theorists who support these notions are found throughout the research literature on retention. These theorists include, Jacobi, 1991, Astin , 1993, Katz, 2001, Dervarics and Roach, 2000, Belgrarde and LoRe, 2003, Guiffrida, 2005, Gaither, 2005, and Graunke and Woolsley, 2005.

The psychological framework of retention theory was of equal importance in the focus group discussion. Insightful comments about personal achievements were often explained in students' perceived levels of abilities. The students described their ability to persist and attain a degree, using phrases such as: needing solid coping skills; being goal oriented; having a spirit of determination; and being responsible for their outcomes. What the researcher heard was not only their personal perceived levels of abilities, but self efficacy or what Bandura (1994) suggests is one's self system. According to Bandura, self-efficacy is "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (1995, p. 2). In other words, self-efficacy is the student's belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular situation. Bandura described these beliefs as determinants of how people perform or behave in order to attain their desired goals.

Students in the focus groups were clear that their desired goal was indeed graduation; though admitted not always being sure of how it would happen when looking at financial stressors, academic challenges, comfort level and challenges of acceptance within the campus environment. Steward and Jackson's (1989) study revealed those students who achieved higher GPA's had perceived themselves as having the ability to achieve academically. To be sure, House (1996), suggests that academic background, academic self-perception, and high school curriculum are key predictors of African American undergraduates' GPAs; a factor in student retention. Other theorists whose work embodies the connection of ability with successful retention outcomes include Tracy and Sedlacek (1980), Szelenyi (2001), Good and Halpin (2002), Seidman and Gladieux (2003), and Swail (2003).

The researcher contended that many African American students who attend predominately White institutions (PWIs) are often faced with slanted views of their own ability; this can be both positive and challenging. It can be viewed as a positive if students are equipped with a larger world view that has exposed them to a more competitive rigor both inside the classroom and in social experiences different that their own. Students in the focus groups were initially incredibly disappointed in their academic performance and their lack of involvement within the college setting; their achievements in high school didn't reflect the same in their scholastic and leadership abilities in college. In paralleling the "A" achieved in high school to having the same set of expectations in college, students often set unfair expectation for themselves, thus seeing this as a negative experience. Having an intentional support system to assist students with acquiring college savvy in the transition, can enhance academic skills

through support service offerings, and provide a good student with a greater chance at successful completion of college.

Another theoretical framework in the research speaks to a theme of relationships. The researcher viewed the theme of relational-cultural theory as relevant to retention outcomes. The student exchange in the focus groups bore this out. The fostering of on-going relationships throughout the college experience is relevant in creating a holistic developmental approach, used in serving students in MCR. Again, this type of approach is intentional in not only connecting students to academic and social resources, but equally intentional in fostering on-going relationships among MCR students, faculty and staff. As previously shared, Jordan and Hartling, (2002), concluded that everyone has an inherent need to be connected in order to achieve mutual empowerment.

Nell Noddings (1984) suggests that caring and relationships are educational goals, and are fundamental to education. She defines education as "a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding and appreciation" (Noddings, 2002, p. 283). Noddings further points out, "Dialogue is such an essential part of caring that we could not model caring without engaging in it." (Noddings, 1998, p.192). The researcher found that the focus group dialogue affirmed this notion as students emphasized the importance of dialogue with their professional staff person, peer mentors and their MCR peers in general. Some of the descriptors or phrases students used in referencing relationships established in MCR were: sensitivity to the student's concerns, nurturing environment, caring, and a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose, ownership and personal accountability. The students felt this support enable them to better socially integrate and

become more involved within the campus setting. These same students suggested this type of support enhanced their level of confidence in their own ability to achieve, and helped them to set realistic expectations of self. In seeing these connections through the eyes of the students, the researcher concluded that MCR was seen as connecting the student's cultural relevance to the culture of a campus setting. Hence, MCR was providing a secure and gradual transition into unchartered territory for some. It appeared students felt validated by their own norms while anticipating and adapting to new norms and values within the college context.

The researcher believed the overlap in both cultures provided an opportunity for learning new expectations and the norms of the campus setting, while validating the personal experiences and norms of one's familiar environment. The researcher also realized the connection students made to critical race theory. Ladson-Billings (1998) conclude genuine respect is achieved through engaging the voices of African Americans in dialogue and serves as a vehicle for others to hear the voices of those often deemed powerless. This aspect of critical race theory (commonly referred to as CRT), gives credence to the voices of MCR African Americans students, their journeys, and personal experiences. It is these personal experiences, brought to the unfamiliar setting of the institutions that students are encouraged to share in the MCR milieu. All the more that the researcher was drawn to do an analysis that allowed for the voices to be heard regarding the impact of retention support service offerings on African American students attending a PWI. Students welcomed the opportunity to dialogue about their varied experiences while going above and beyond my expectations in answering the questions, that is to say, it seem as though it was a cathartic moment for some to get a few things off their chest!

Students expressed the notion of seeing MCR as the voice for them and others. MCR was credited for being connected to the larger system and was therefore in the know. As a result of this perception, words heard in the discussion suggested students felt they were aware and up to date on issues and events concerning the campus setting; they expressed feelings of having an advocate, being supported, and having a sense of optimism about their college experience. Students also felt they could better trust the University system, as they have/had an advocate in MCR. It appeared that MCR served as a bridge that is sometimes seen as connecting the African American student to the campus and the campus to the student. One other outgrowth seen in African American students was that of being engaged in more leadership roles on the campus and in the community. This observation was expressed in the focus group discussion by the undergraduate and graduate students.

Finally, the researcher, admittedly was rather surprised to learn that leadership and the desire for leadership opportunities were essentially a byproduct of the MCR retention support service offerings; and establishing of relationships with professional staff and peers that encouraged students to tread new paths within the college setting, was clearly the recurring theme throughout the discussion. Indeed, a holistic developmental approach should encourage experiences that transcend the undergraduate experience. Students spoke about giving back to the university and to the community. Others placed emphasis on becoming a mentor as a result of having been mentored. Still others in the discussion acknowledged personal growth found in becoming involved in activities beyond the familiar. The researcher believed de Anda's theory of dual socialization was at work as previously shared. That is to say, many of the students have seemingly

evolved to a place of effectively moving in circles that are both familiar and ascribed, to the less familiar or prescribed. That is, acceptance of new experiences while acknowledging their own values.

Limitations of Theoretical Frameworks

In this part of the discussion, the researchers explored the challenges of retention theory and practices and offer an understanding of best practices for prescribed outcomes, as shared by students in the two focus groups. Historically, the appearance of retention theory for African Americans and other diverse populations was admittedly slanted and narrow in scope. The research was myopic in nature as the foundational premise was exclusive of a broader society. It is only recently that research has begun to examine a larger society, especially the relationship between students of color and their relationship with predominately White institutions. The researcher was cognizant that each institution has its own culture and therefore its list of priorities. Clearly, retention measures should be considered a priority as higher education institutions are grappling to not only get the students but keep those same students. A closer examination of the foundation of retention theory suggests it is remiss in its inclusion of a more diverse society.

The researcher agrees with Tierney's (1992) assertion which suggests that the foundation of retention theory is indeed obsolete in many ways and speaks only in part to the real challenges institutions are facing. As posited by Hurtado (1997), it affirms the dominate culture while dismissing the value of other cultures. Resultant of this limiting scope, are the established and widely held views of other researchers who've embellished similar theoretical research. The researcher therefore envisions this challenge as an opportunity to begin a new phase on retention, making the paradigm shift that truly

embraces retention theory towards student centered practices. Such practices will embrace a global society with increased numbers of students of color entering PWIs. In order to achieve this, paradigm shift must redefine what we are looking for and how we go about finding it.

The student centered focus groups offered insights which suggest tailoring the exploration of effective retention practices to fit the profile of the student and not the perceptions of the ideal student. Students have clearly shared this happens when relationships are formed and effective support service offerings are in place which can produce measurable outcomes for the institution.

Implications for Practice

The researcher viewed the recurring theme of the relational praxis established between the MCR professional and the student as being essential according to the findings. The researcher derived from the focus groups, the noteworthy implications for higher education practices in retaining the African American student at a predominately White institution. The thematic coding from focus groups suggests three critical factors are essential in establishing solid and viable retention practices. These factors included (1) researched and culturally based support service offerings which promote academic and social integration for African American students, thus connecting the institution to the students' experiences (2) A structured relational praxis to include culturally astute professional staff, earnest in their commitment to student success and (3) a retention plan designed to advance institutional awareness and implementation to engage the entire campus community. When these occurrences are evident, four areas of the institution can be positively impacted; these areas include the reputation, recruitment, retention and the

revenue of the University. Institutions of higher learning are indeed known for their

academic rigor and ranking, but also for their reputation. As expressed within the focus

groups, the reputation of the institution can aid or inhibit the recruitment and retention

outcomes for the university. Several students expressed a decision to attend one

university over another based in part, on its alleged reputation towards African American

students. Students noted they enrolled in the institutions that care about students and

being accepting of them is evident. Once enrolled, if other variables are in place,

including academic, non academic support, along with financial support, these students

persists.

      The successful retention to graduation practices of institutions can produce

leaders that are responsible individuals, connected to the campus beyond the four-six year

experience. Emphasis must be placed on a culturally competent staff; as students

articulated the importance of their connections and relationships, only second to financial

aid support. Though students were clear in benefitting from the academic offerings, what

seemingly kept them focused were established relationships, inherent to success and

feelings of acceptance within the campus environment. As shared throughout the

research, retention is enhanced when this happens.

Recommendations for Further Research

The researcher believes there is merit in giving scrutiny to retention challenges for all students who may be in a less dominant role within the institution. That said, for the sake of this research our focus was on the African American student attending a predominately White institution. It became evident during the discussion that students were more focused on acceptance, opportunities, relationship building, and having a successful college experience which would lead to graduation. This notion of enhancing retention should become all the more global in scope.

The researcher would further recommend more research which would lend credence to institutional evaluation of retention strategies for campuses with diverse populations at PWIs. These retention plans, programs, and strategies are as equally important as recruitment strategies and deserve similar campus wide buy in. While funding would undoubtedly be a real concern, the benefits of investing in an institutional retention plan, affords great results for a campus community. Very often legacies evolve from positive experiences; and committed alumni remain connected. There exists justifiable cause and respected rationale for this type of investment for the present and future of our institutions of higher learning.

This study could also be replicated with a broader institutional mix, by a person disassociated with the programs being evaluated. There is also perhaps a need for a quantitative study that compared the persistence and success rates of African American students who chose not to available themselves of this kind of opportunity at all (never expressed an interest) with those who initially entered a program of this type.

Conclusion

This study posed three questions grounded in retention practices. The questions posed were: What is the impact of support services provided through a mentoring component, tutorial assistance, financial aid support, specified workshops, and on-going individualized sessions with designated professional staff? What key factors contributed to your decision to continue your education to degree completion at UM-St. Louis? What if any impact did your professional staff people have on your retention? What are MCR student GPA's and graduation averages when compared to those who did not participate in the MCR retention praxis?

The researcher had anticipated that students would offer more dialogue concerning the academic rigor. While students addressed the academic challenges, they linked their responses to the notion of knowing support was in place to meet their needs, and they could choose to accept it. This support spoken of was in referencing their on-going relationship with their MCR counselor. From this overarching theme flowed five sub themes as previously noted. The researcher also anticipated dialogue concerning relationship building, as students have articulated the importance of this factor prior to the discussion. This expectation was made so. The relationship factor dominated the conversation. Students connected it to how it made them feel and the impact it had on their retention. This for me was very telling. While I knew there was a level of influence connected to fostering relationships between assigned professionals and students, admittedly, it was rather surprising, the level of emphasis placed on it. Clearly, the fostering of an ongoing relationship throughout the college experience was paramount to African American students attending a PWI.

A new theme of leadership was also an element of surprise in light of themes built around retention. Students began to identify with their appreciation for the office, the university's support and the desire to graduate in order to give back, help out, attend graduate school or network to meet and form new relationships.

Based on the transcribed focus group interview responses, it became apparent that the benefits of solid student centered retention practices are worth the financial investment and also the people investment. A deliberate investment in African American students attending a PWI moves the institution from foundational retention theory to established student centered practices. African American students, who participated in MCR retention offerings at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, clearly acknowledged the rationale to do so. The researcher believed this study offered a viable method for retaining a diverse population of students at predominately White institutions.

Additionally, the contextual data assist in establishing arguments for leadership growth and development and the bridging of institutional relationships. The building of these relationships can have a very real impact on the institutions' reputation in diverse communities; this can add to or diminish both the recruitment and retention of students. When this happens, and institutional buy-in becomes a given, academic institutions of higher learning are on course to respond to a challenge in the 21st century, the retention of African American students attending PWIs.

Finally, African American students and other diverse populations are changing the face of predominately White institutions (PWIs) of higher learning. These myriad of changes include both institutional infrastructure and curriculum. Student services offerings have expanded to transfer students from the two and four year universities and

colleges; retention support services offerings are multi-faceted in their presentation, and organizations are in place which offer support to ethnic/racial groups as well as organizations that are supportive of gender issues, sexual identification, and orientation. Moreover, higher education curriculum includes required courses in cultural diversity, and degree offerings in African and African American Studies, Social Justice Studies, and Women and gender studies. Amidst the changes in institutional infrastructure and curriculum development, however, exists retention challenges for students; namely, African American students attending PWIs.

While theoretical implications for student retention is an important discussion to academe, such scholarly dialogue and research should transcend conceptual modifications to theoretical implications. In essence, students will choose to stay or will be retained in college not so much because of theoretical implications, but because paradigm shifts have been made deliberate in institutional governance and policies, student support services, and other institutional dimensions that impact the lives of students. Connecting retention research to student centered practices that involve collaborative relationships and institutional commitment and practices, can offer long term benefits to the entire campus community; especially in retaining African American students attending a PWI.

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<u>APPENDICES</u>

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.   What is the impact of MCR support service offerings provided through a mentoring component, financial aid support, workshops, and on-going individualized sessions with the designated MCR professional staff counselor/?

2.   What key factors (identified by students participating in MCR support services) have contributed to persistence (current student) or degree completion (alum) at UMSL?

3.   What, if any, impact did the MCR professional staff counselor have on student retention?

TUITION REMISSION AWARD

INTERVIEW WORKSHEET

Name of Student _____

Interviewer_____

Date_____

Interview Questions

1) What about college do you find challenging?

2) How have you paid for your college expenses?

3) What are your educational goals? How do they relate to your career goals?

4) Who are the individuals who support your educational goals? Please describe the type of support you receive from them.

5) Why should you receive the Tuition Remission Award?

6) Is there anything else you would like to add?

Rating_____

Comments:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

January 29, 2010

«AddressBlock»

«GreetingLine»

Congratulations! After reviewing your information, I am pleased to share you are a recipient of the Multicultural Relations Tuition Remission Award for spring 2010. Your accomplishments are ones to be proud of.

As a Multicultural Relations Tuition Remission Award recipient, you are expected to do the following:

Make appointments with the Multicultural Relations counselor to:

- **Complete spring 2010 Tuition Remission Contract by Friday, February 5, 2010 in the Office of Multicultural Relations.**
- **Participate in at least four (4) Multicultural Relations workshops/activities per semester. (Failure to complete required workshop/activities will revoke eligibility for Tuition Remission awards.)**
- **Meet with MCR staff on a regular basis during the academic year enrolled at UM-St. Louis. If you do not have a counselor, call the office at 516-6807 to make an appointment with professional staff.**

You will receive $«Award» for the spring 2010 semester, provided you are enrolled at the University of Missouri - St. Louis. Successful participation in MCR activities as noted above, will also place you for consideration for the Spring Multicultural Relations Tuition Remission 2010, provided all other eligibility requirements are also met. Your account will be credited for the amount awarded. Please note, awards are made to either decrease your current balance or decrease your loan amount. Once again, congratulations.

Sincerely,

OFFICE OF MULTICULTURAL RELATIONS
TUITION REMISSION APPLICATION FORM

All application information packet must be submitted to MCR no later than April 15, 2010

* Criteria for Tuition Remission Award
1. Complete FAFSA (Free Application for Student Aid)
2. Cum g.p.a. of 2.0 or higher
3. Minimum of Sophomore standing (30 credit hours)
4. Agree to participate in at least (**4**) Multicultural Relations workshops/activities per semester. Failure to complete required workshop/activities will revoke future eligibility for Tuition Remission awards.

Biographical Information

Name: _____

Student #:_____ E-mail_____

Address: _____City _____State ____Zip____

Home telephone: _____Cell#_____

Major: _____

Expected date of graduation: _____

Number of credit hours completed: _____

Cum UM-St. Louis g.p.a.: _____

Current g.p.a., i.e., transfer students _____

Current enrollment status: **Full-Time_Part Time___**

Anticipated enrollment status Fall 2010:   **Full-time__Part time___**

Number of hours working per week:_____

Number of credit hours enrolled in this semester:_____

Application Checklist

Make sure all items requested have been completed before submitting

your application. Student interviews will be scheduled at a later date.

Incomplete applications will not be considered.

_____ Completed Application Form

_____ Copy of your 2010-11 FAFSA Student Aid Report (SAR)

Signature: _____

Date: _____

*Special circumstances will be taken under advisement

Office of Multicultural Relations/Academic Affairs

RELEASE OF INFORMATION

I, _____, give permission to the

Multicultural Relations Advisory Committee to discuss my grade point average,

all financial aid and other information deemed necessary to determine my

eligibility for a Multicultural Relations/Academic Affairs Tuition Remission

Award.

_____

Signature

_____

Date

Office of Multicultural Relations

Tuition Remission Recipient Agreement

MANDATORY

- Must meet with Multicultural Relations staff on a regular basis during the semester(s) enrolled at UM-St. Louis. If you do not have a counselor, call the office at 516-6807 to make an appointment with professional staff.

CHOOSE FROM THE FOLLOWING TWO OPTIONS

- Must participate in a minimum of (four) of the activities listed in the Multicultural Relations Upcoming Calendar of Events each semester enrolled at UM-St. Louis, academic, professional and cultural.

  OR

- You may participate in a combination of academic, professional, cultural or social activities to meet the requirement of a **minimum** of (**four**) activities each semester. **You are strongly encouraged to attend as many events as possible.**

  I agree to adhere to the MCR Tuition Remission Requirements stated above.

  Name (signature)_____

  Date_____

  N/TTRecptagreement 60206

June 13, 2009

Dear Student,

Greetings! We know it is a busy time for you as you get ready for college. **The Office of Multicultural Relations** at the **University of Missouri - St. Louis** is here to help! We would like for **you** to attend our freshman orientation designed **especially for you.** The student segment of our Multicultural Relations Freshman Orientation begins at 8:30 a.m. on **Saturday, July 25**[th]**.** The parent segment begins on **Saturday** afternoon **July 25**[th] at 3:00 p.m. Orientation will provide valuable information about campus life including:

- **Meeting Multicultural Relations (MCR) staff**
- **Learning about campus resources and services**
- **Meeting with UM-St. Louis students and learning about student organizations**
- **Parent Orientation (MCR Parent Support Group)**

We are enclosing a schedule of events for Saturday. In addition to the Multicultural Relations Freshman Orientation, you must also register for the New Student Orientation (NSO). You should have received the campus registration packet in the mail. However, if you have not received an NSO registration packet, please contact the Welcome center or orientation@umsl.edu.

At the bottom portion of the schedule, you will find a tear-off **Student and Parent Registration form** and a postage paid envelope. The Student and Parent Registration form will let us know **if you plan to attend the Multicultural Relations Freshman Student Orientation. Please complete the Student and Parent Registration form and return it to us in the postage paid envelope as soon as possible.**

To highlight the importance of the Multicultural Relations Freshman Student Orientation, we have included comments from students who have benefited from the Office of Multicultural Relations.

C. Thomas, a 2007 freshman student says:

"Boldly going where no man has gone before."

"This quote has been a major part of my life and became much clearer when I walked off the stage of my high school graduation and into college life. I really had no idea where to go from there. The Office of Multicultural Relations was there to help and guide me from being a student that didn't know how to find the book store to a 3.6 GPA Dean's List Student preparing to start their own student organization. I owe a lot to the Office of Multicultural Relations."

A. Armstrong, a 2007 freshman student says:

"Like many first year students, I soon realized the journey through college is not only costly but granted, a learning experience. Though college is an adjustment process, it is solely dependent on the mindset of the individual. Knowing that I have a counselor whose interest are in my well being and ensures that I am well aware of programs UMSL has to offer shows their greater interest is in their students. I can say the Office of Multicultural Relations strongly supports their students whether it is financially or academically. I cannot express enough my deep gratitude for their consideration of others. Furthermore, I know that I can only continue to improve as a scholar."

As you can see from the above comments, our office provides valuable services to UM-St. Louis students. Please come out and learn more about us so that we can help you to achieve a great start and successful college career. If you have any questions, call Linda Sharp at 314-516-6807.

We look forward to seeing you on Saturday, July 25th to begin your orientation to the Office of Multicultural Relations and UM-St. Louis.

Sincerely,

June 11, 2009

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Greetings! We know it is a busy time for you and your son/daughter as you get ready for college. **The Office of Multicultural Relations** at the **University of Missouri-St. Louis** is here to help! We would like for **you** and **your son/daughter** to attend our freshman orientation designed **especially for you.**   The student segment of our Multicultural Relations Freshman Orientation begins at 8:30 a.m. on **Saturday, July 25th.** The parent segment begins on <u>Saturday, July 25th</u> at 3:30 p.m.   Orientation will provide valuable information about campus life including:

- **Meeting Multicultural Relations (MCR) staff**
- **Learning about campus resources and services**
- **Meeting with UM-St. Louis students and learning about student organizations**
- **Parent Orientation (MCR Parent Support Group)**

Please mark your calendars for the Multicultural Relations Freshman Orientation. More detailed information will be forthcoming. If you have any questions about this orientation, please call Linda Sharp at 516-6807. We hope to see you in July!

Sincerely,

Director, The Office of Multicultural Relations

June 11, 2009

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Greetings! We know it is a busy time for you and your son/daughter as you get ready for college. **The Office of Multicultural Relations** at the **University of Missouri-St. Louis** is here to help! We would like for **you** and **your son/daughter** to attend our freshman orientation designed **especially for you.** The student segment of our Multicultural Relations Freshman Orientation begins at 8:30 a.m. on **Saturday, July 25th.** The parent segment begins on Saturday, July 25th at 3:30 p.m. Orientation will provide valuable information about campus life including:

- **Meeting Multicultural Relations (MCR) staff**
- **Learning about campus resources and services**
- **Meeting with UM-St. Louis students and learning about student organizations**
- **Parent Orientation (MCR Parent Support Group)**

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Sincerely,

Director, The Office of Multicultural Relations

June 13, 2009

Dear Parent or Guardian:

Greetings! We know it is a busy time for you and your son/daughter as you get ready for college. **The Office of Multicultural Relations** at the **University of Missouri-St. Louis** is here to help! We would like for **you** and your son/daughter to attend our freshman orientation designed **especially for you.** The student segment of our Multicultural Relations Freshman Orientation begins at 8:30 a.m. on **Saturday, July 25th. The parent segment begins on Saturday afternoon July 25th at 3:30 p.m.** Orientation will provide valuable information about campus life including:

- **Meeting Multicultural Relations (MCR) staff**
- **Learning about campus resources and services**
- **Meeting with UM-St. Louis upper classman students and learning about student organizations**
- **Parent Orientation (MCR Parent Support Group)**

We are enclosing a schedule of events for the

Multicultural Relations Freshman Student/Parent Orientation

on Saturday, July 25, 2008. At the bottom portion of the

schedule, you will find a tear-off **Student and Parent**

Registration form. This form will let us know whether your

son/daughter will attend the Multicultural Relations

Freshman Orientation. The form will also let us know

whether <u>you</u> will attend the Multicultural Relations Parent

Orientation on Saturday, July 25th at 3:30 p.m. Your

son/daughter also received a letter about the orientation,

as well as the tear-off Student and Parent Registration

form and a postage paid envelope. **Please make sure that either you or your son/daughter complete the Student and Parent Registration form and return it to us in the postage paid envelope as soon as possible.**

In addition to Multicultural Relations Freshman Orientation, you must also register for New Student Orientation (NSO). You should have received the campus registration packet in the mail. However, if you have not received an NSO registration packet, please contact the Welcome Center or orientation@umsl.edu.

At the Parent Orientation, you will get a chance to meet other parents who have sons and daughters attending UM-St. Louis and learn from their experiences.

We have included some comments from parents whose sons/daughters have benefited from the Office of Multicultural Relations.

Parents from the Parent Support Group says:

"I wish that my son had known about the valuable services that your office provides when he first arrived at the University. I am sure that he would have done better in his classes if he had received free tutoring from the beginning of the semester."

"My daughter receives good academic advice from the counselors in Multicultural Relations."

Courtney S., a junior MIS major, says:

"My time here at UMSL has been pleasurable and assuring knowing that the Office of Multicultural Relations has helped develop me into the young woman I am today. I have grown through the many programs they offer ranging from the inspirational Guaranteed 4.0 to the Mid-Term Stress Relief Fair. They promote growth, talent, inspiration and provide strong support of those who may stumble. If it weren't for Multi-Cultural Relations, I would not have had an internship on my resume, A's on my report card, and the pride and dignity of knowing that people truly care as I journey through the trials of college life."

BaNika C., a 2007 graduate with a Biology/Chemistry degree, commented:

"I was a Biology major/Chemistry minor in pursuit of a Bachelor of Science degree. The Multicultural Relations office has been a support system. It was comforting having a counselor who is concerned about my progress. I also benefited from the scholarship program offered through the office."

As you can see from the above comments, our office provides valuable services to UM-St. Louis students. We strongly encourage you to come out and learn more about us

so that we can help your son/daughter get off to a great start and a successful college career.

Please remember to send your Student and Parent Registration form in as soon as possible. If you have any questions, please call Linda Sharp at (314) 516-6807.

We look forward to seeing you and your son/daughter on July 25th!

University of Missouri, St. Louis

Multicultural Relations Center Review

Final Report

Dwyane Smith, Ph.D., Assistant Vice President of Academic

Affairs

Avila University

External Reviewer

June, 2006

Preface

This is the final report of the external review of the Multicultural Relations Center that took place on May 12, 2006. This report consists of a brief overview of Multicultural Affairs Centers and its evolving purpose in higher education. The report continues with an overview of the charge of the Review team, External reviewer and general observations of MCR. There were four focus groups interviewed—Campus units, Community leaders, a student group, and the director—and a summary of their comments are included. Finally, five recommendations are offered to enhance the status of MCR.

Background of External Reviewer

Dr. Dwyane Smith has over 20 years of progressive administrative and faculty experience in higher education. Dr. Smith earned his Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis with emphasis areas in Multicultural Education and Black Studies from the University of Missouri, Columbia and completed the Management Development Program at Harvard University. He is quite versed in issues related to Multicultural Affairs Departments. He created Truman State University first Multicultural Affairs Department in 1983, and over the years, provided insight and consulting services to other emerging Multicultural Affairs departments. Under his leadership, Truman's Multicultural Affairs Department earned Truman's Office of The Month honors as well as a Missouri Multicultural Affairs Office of the Year Award. Dr. Smith also received the Missouri Multicultural Affairs Director of the year. In 1988, he, along with Dr. Bonita Butner, then Director of Multicultural Affairs at Central Missouri State University, founded the Missouri Minority Affairs Workshop with the goal of enhancing

the quality of Minority Affairs Offices in the state. He was also one of the founding members of the Missouri Association for Blacks in Higher Education and served as a First Vice-President.

Dr. Smith has conducted research and presented globally on issues of multiculturalism, diversity and cultural pluralism. He currently serves as a U.S. Diversity consultant to Black Britain Online and an International Editor of the Journal of African-Centred Discourse and Practice. In addition to his position as Associate Dean of Multicultural Affairs at Truman State University, he has served as a Clinical Associate in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Missouri, Columbia, and the Associate Vice-President of Enrollment Management at Park University. He currently serves as an Assistant Vice-President of Academic Affairs at Avila University. His awards and honors include Who's Who in the Midwest, Who's Who in American Education, Truman Multicultural Alumnus of the Year Award, and the Access Award from Chicago's Introspect Organization. He will be honored as Truman State University's 2006 Alumnus of the Year in October.

Introduction:

Multicultural Affairs departments on college campuses were established initially to enhance the quality of life for students of color at predominately white institutions. Originally called Minority Services on many campuses, its direct mission was to serve as a buffer between students, primarily African-American, and the university. Many attempted to provide the academic and social integration necessary for college success for these students. The reporting line was usually to Student Affairs; however, depending on the specific mission of the department and the politics of its establishment, it could have a

reporting line directly to the University President or an upper level administrator in Academic Affairs.

As the demographics of America's college students shifted, many Minority Services departments changed to Multicultural Affairs to reflect an awareness of this shift and to be more inclusive of other ethnic groups. Research conducted on student of color persistence and graduation rates indicated that students who feel connected and have a sense of purpose are more likely to be retained. This research justified the existence of these departments and expanded its mission to include providing campus leadership in diversity initiatives and the recruitment and retention of students of color. This expanded responsibility usually did not come with expanded resources. Some of the issues these departments face included vague or unclear missions, unreasonable expectations of performance, limited budgets and resources, and low campus visibility.

Multicultural Affairs departments are seeing somewhat of a resurgence due to a greater emphasis placed on diversity issues and a shift in America's culture that now list Latinos as the largest ethnic group in America (surpassing African-Americans for the first time in U.S. history). This new emphasis now includes sexual orientation and disability. As a result, many of these departments had to reinvent themselves or evolve to include other groups to maintain their relevancy.

Multicultural Relations Department at UM-St. Louis

The External Reviewer and the Campus Review Team met on Friday, May 12, 2006 with various campus groups and stakeholders in a series of meetings to evaluate the Multicultural Relations Office (MCR). Prior to the meetings, the External Reviewer received various documents in preparation to the site visit. These documents included the

department's Self Study, the Chancellor's Action Plan, and various examples of events sponsored by MCR. These documents were informative and insightful and gave a historical context to the process.

Observations:

The Multicultural Relations department is situated in the Millennium Center, an impressive campus structure. The department occupies part of the first level which gives it good campus visibility. Physical visibility is one of the issues that Multicultural Affairs departments contend with on some college campuses. The physical space appeared to be spacious, though students were not present due to finals week. The offices were well furnished and appeared to be on par with the other campus offices. This is important to note since some Multicultural Affairs departments cite inequitable facilities as an ongoing issue. The office was tastefully decorated with ethnic art and prints from previous programs offered by MCR. A majority of the art was African or African-American. The staff was warm and engaging and proudly showcased the office. It was evident that there was a sense of pride in working at MCR. This emanated during the various discussions with the staff throughout the day.

The Review Process:

The Review team and the External Reviewer briefly met and determined that there would be one question that would begin each of the focus group discussions: *What are the strengths and what are the challenges of MCR?* Listed below are the perceived strengths and challenges of MCR by the various focus groups.

Campus Units

Strengths
- Staff works closely with other campus units
- Nurturing to students, particularly African-American students
- A welcoming environment in which the department "mirrors" the students.
- Assist with recruitment activities, particularly college fairs
- Assist with study abroad and instrumental in increasing awareness of study abroad opportunities for students of color
- Positive results in retention activities. College of Arts & Sciences witnessed a significant decrease in the six year suspension rate by half, through the efforts of MCR
- Motivate students to take advantage of support systems and services such as the writing lab and disability services
- Dr. Jenkins (psychologist) participates in units' meetings

Challenges:
- Duplication of services that's provided by other units
- Need to "let go" and partner with other campus units
- Need to be connected to other "student success" units for a larger focus
- No silos
- Need more of an early alert system as it relates to retention
- Need to be more inclusive of other ethnic groups
- Need more visibility so more students can know about its services.

Community Supporters

Strengths
- Willing to engage the community
- Provide exposure of students to the community and develops linkage with community
- Students need a place to go and MCR provides that
- MCR is very reassuring to parents with children at UM-St. Louis
- Provides an important link between UM-St. Louis and the African-American Community
- Strong recognized leadership in MCR
- Partnering with issues of diversity
- Largely responsible for building the relationship with UM-St. Louis and the African American community that was previous one of distrust
- There is accountability regarding the valuing of all cultures
- Put students in the center (inclusion)
- Leadership (Gwen Packnett) has a broad range of contacts

Challenges:

- Inclusion of other groups
- UM-St. Louis will need to address the "inclusion" issues
- Better define itself to the public/better interpretation of its purpose
- Needs an external advisory group
- The ability to formulate policy and "have teeth behind it"

Director of MCR

Strengths
- MCR works as a team
- Culturally competent environment
- Sincerely care about the students
- Holistically strategic design and plan for MCR
- Relationship building is at the heart of MCR
- Programming
- Retention efforts

Challenges
- Inadequate Budget
- Getting Institutional attendance support of MCR's events
- Waiting list for students to see a staff in MCR

Student group

Strengths
- Ms. Bond a great resource
- Personable
- Staff goes the extra mile
- Will not give up on students
- All the staff members connect to students and genuinely care about students' well-being
- Persistent with students
- MCR give students a sense of purpose and direction
- MCR is hands on with students and their issues

Challenges:
- Not enough space to serve students
- Equipment particularly computers are not good
- If MCR gets larger it will lose its mission
- Needs greater visibility

Summary:

A common thread emerged from the focus groups discussions. The strength that was most common was the department being a warm and open place for students of color to connect. What is evident is the "student" focused mission of MCR. The office was lauded for its collaboration efforts with other campus units. Study Abroad, the Admissions Office, Arts & Sciences and the Tutoring Office specifically spoke highly of this collaboration. Most gave anecdotal evidence of the impact of the collaboration. For example, the Director of Study Abroad stated that there was an increase in study abroad interest among students of color, but did not have the data to support this. She did state that she could provide this information. The Associate Dean of Arts & Sciences did provide data that supported the assertion that its collaboration with MCR was beneficial. According to the Dean, the suspension rate of African-American students in the College of Arts & Sciences decreased by 50% through activities of MCR.

Some challenges cited included the need for MCR to be more inclusive of other ethnic groups. It was mentioned in the campus unit focus group that some white students asked if they could participate in programs offered by MCR. This did not appear to be a pressing issue presented, however, by the campus focus group. What did emerge was that perhaps MCR was duplicating services provided by other offices and MCR could expand its operations by joining an umbrella unit. Representatives from Student Affairs specifically spoke of the need for MCR to be part of the larger vision for student success at UM-St. Louis and to be less territorial in its approach to providing student services.

The student focus group took an opposite position. These students felt that MCR has a distinctive mission and if the department would be connected to a larger campus

unit, this mission would be lost or diluted. Students cited that through MCR they took advantage of other services provided by the institution and were involved in campus activities and leadership opportunities. One student shared that he was apprehensive when he came to UM-St. Louis as a first year student, but through the outreach of MCR, he was able to thrive and now is a campus leader, involved in many campus organizations.

The professionalism of the staff of MCR was cited often as being a strength of the department. Each staff member was cited in this area. The director, Gwen Packnet was cited on numerous occasions as a strength of the department, particularly by the community supporters and the student focus group. Ms. DeClue, Ms. Bond, and Dr. Jenkins were cited by the campus units and the student focus groups as having a significant impact and being a strength of the department.

Six Recommendations

1. Continue to gather and analyze data to support the assertion that MCR contributes to the retention of students of color and to determine through the data those students who are in need of the services that MCR provides.

The mission of MCR, is to "work deliberately to retain students of color and contribute to campus diversity" and to "infuse a multicultural perspective in services and programs to meet the needs of a diverse UM-ST. Louis campus community." It appears that MCR is meeting its mission of retaining students. Information given by the Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Science substantiates this. Other anecdotal information given by the student focus group also supports the premise that MCR is responsible for the social and academic integration that is critical for student of color

success. According to a MCR report, the first year retention rates for African-American students are higher than those who do not utilized the services.   The first year retention rates of those students who utilize MCR were 73% in 2001, 95% in 2002, 81% in 2003, compared to 70% in 2001, 67% and 68 percent in 2003 of those who did not utilize the services.

MCR does an excellent job of compiling data on those students who utilize the services provided by the department. This data along with other data on students of color and subcategories should be compiled and studied to determine priorities. In this manner, the Department and the University can determine where to focus limited resources. For example, what are the retention and graduation rates of African-American males versus African-American females? Is one student of color group excelling at a higher rate than another? This comprehensive research should be conducted in collaboration with the University's Office of Institutional Research.

2.   Utilized MCR's reporting status to Academic Affairs to strengthen relationships with faculty.

It appears that student academic development is a much stronger component in MCR than faculty development. The reporting of MCR to academic affairs presents a unique set of opportunities for faculty development in the areas of multiculturalism and diversity. Faculty interaction is *key* to student retention and persistence. Having faculty members who are inclusive in their approach with students is paramount to this retention.

A majority of UM-St. Louis faculty members are white, which might present some perceived barriers to cross-racial mentoring. However, these faculty should be encouraged to serve as mentors and become involved in MCR. This mentorship will

bode particularly well for those students who are undecided about their major and usually have the highest attrition rates. Developing and encouraging this mentorship process must be the priority of the Provost office and done in collaboration with MCR since MCR more than likely would not have the political power to exert this type of process to faculty.

In the MCR review it states that it routinely "persuades students to engage in research and expand their learning experiences…" by "…encouraging students to consult with their departmental faculty to obtain research experience…" This is an excellent opportunity to connect faculty to students and to MCR and should be expanded.

3. Strengthen collaborations with other campus units to aid in recruitment and retention efforts

MCR can play a significant role in the University's goal of increasing its enrollment of students of color to 26 percent. MCR should be an integral part of campus visitations and orientations and should be visible in UM-St. Louis image pieces. For example, prospective students of color should be offered the opportunity to visit MCR. In addition, there should be a continued emphasis in interfacing with other campus units that has retention as its focus. According to MCR's Review, the office interfaces with these units. What could not be ascertained is the extent of the collaborations.

4. Diversify the students who utilize the services of MCR.

It appears that the largest student ethnic group that utilizes the services of MCR is African-American. This certainly should not be diminished, it is a testament to the success that MCR has with these students and should serve as a prototype for other campus units. However, as the University grows more diverse the goal should be to

increase the diversity of students who utilizes MCR. This can be accomplished by offering diverse programming and taking advantage of various celebratory months—i.e., Hispanic Heritage Month, Native American Month, Asian History Month. This diversification means that more resources would need to be allocated for the department to meet this objective.

5. Provide resources that are equitable and that allows the department to serve existing students as well as expand its mission.

One of the challenges cited in the MCR Review and the director's focus meeting was an inadequate budget. According to the staff in MCR, there is a waiting list of students wanting to utilize the services of MCR but are unable to due to the lack of appointment times. The MCR Review listed an additional staff person as part of its strategic plan to increase the services provided by the Office. This request should be seriously considered. As a result, the Office can provide existing services to those students who request them. If and when MCR expands its mission to include a greater percentage of other ethnic groups and more faculty development, there will be sufficient personnel.

The student focus group voiced its concern regarding the computers in MCR lab not being equitable to other campus computers. According to the director, the computers are refurbished and they are not linked to the University computer system. Since this lab is utilized on a consistent basis, computers and printers should be upgraded and linked with the University system.