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Spirituality, Religion, and Pursuing Purpose: Connecting African American Males' Educational Pursuits to a Higher Power

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Within postsecondary institutions, Black men have lower levels of college enrollment and graduation rates, which means fewer conferred degrees, especially compared to White men (Harper, 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2012; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2013). Regarding college enrollment in the United States, Black men comprise only 5% of the population, while White men make up 27% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The six-year college graduation rate for Black men is 34.6% compared to 57.5% for White men (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2013). Also, 10.3% of the overall amount of degrees conferred in the U.S. went to Blacks (with over half of the degrees going to women), in comparison with 72.9% going to Whites (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). These statistics can be viewed as an extension of how this population performs nationally along the K-12 educational continuum. For example, nationally, the graduation rate for Black boys from high school is less than half at 47%, compared to 78% for White boys (Holzman, 2010).

The status of Black undergraduate men's college performance can be attributed to various historical, academic, social, and personal issues (Cuyjet, 2006; Cuyjet, 2009; Gavins, 2009; Hall & Rowan, 2000; Harper, 2006; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Stiff-Williams, 2007). Although there are several negative factors that have adversely impacted the performance of Black men in college, in recent studies, scholars have noted many areas that influence positive outcomes (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2005; Harper, 2006; Harper 2012; Harper & Harris, 2006;

McClure, 2006; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010). One influential aspect of Black men's experience in college that can be explored even further is the role of spirituality and religion. Researchers have identified many areas that contribute to success for this population, including their identification with spirituality and religion (Herndon, 2003; Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012).

Black culture holds strong ties to both spirituality and religion (Cuyjet, 2006; Gavins, 2009; Shelton & Emerson, 2012; Taylor & Chatters, 2010; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Studies reveal that spirituality and religion can have a positive influence on Black Americans' transition from high school to college, college adjustment, academic performance, persistence, retention, and degree completion (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Herndon, 2003; Holland 2014; Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Walker & Dixon, 2002; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012). Research has indicated that students in the southern part of the United States tend to be more religious (Taylor & Chatters, 2010; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). However, none of the surveyed literature contained studies that explicitly examined Black men from a large public university in Texas. Therefore, the setting of this study differentiates it from that of its contemporaries.

In addition to examining Black men at Lone Star University (LSU), a large and research-oriented institution in Texas where the largest racial group in the

student population is White, this study also contributes to Herndon's (2003) expressions of spirituality regarding retention. The themes that emerged from Herndon's study were first used as a conceptual framework by Wood and Hilton (2012), where they extended the framework to view academic success. This study broadens the breadth and depth of the conceptual framework by exploring student success in the form of persistence,defined in this study for participants as continuation toward the bachelor's degree and enrolled at at least the academic level of junior, instead of only seeking factors of academic success (as sought by Wood and Hilton) and retention (as sought by Herndon).

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of Black men at LSU a large and research-oriented institution in Texas. More specifically, the study is designed to examine spirituality and religion as potential mechanisms for achieving student success, defined in this study as persistence, especially by understanding students' purpose. The study addresses the following research question: How does purpose, expressed through spirituality and religion, influence persistence among Black undergraduate men? Considering Black men's past and status as students at the postsecondary level of education, it is worth furthering the research on identifying areas that have the likelihood of bettering their performance in college.

Spirituality and Religion: A Review of the Literature

Spirituality and religion have been found to help foster different elements of student success in college for African Americans (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Herndon, 2003; Holland 2014; Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Walker & Dixon, 2002; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012). The two terms (spirituality and religion) are separate constructs that are greatly connected and intertwined. It is imperative to define the terms before delving further into the literature to understand how they have separate meanings, yet deep connections.

Watson (2006) defined the two, stating "spirituality is a belief in some external, animating force, whereas religion is the adherence to an established system of beliefs and practices grounded in spirituality" (p. 113). Koenig, McCullough, and Larson (2001) go a step further in their description. Spirituality involves a personal journey for understanding life's questions, relationships with a higher power, and meaning. They stated that spirituality is more individualistic, subjective, and emotional, yet less systematic, formal, and visible. Religion is an organized structure of rituals, practices, and beliefs in place to promote closeness with God. Religion is described as formal, organized, community oriented, and based largely on behaviors. Another definition came from Holland (2014), who stated that religiosity (or the state of being religious) "will refer to formal, organized, and publicly recognized beliefs and practices of individuals, and participation in collective worship" (p. 4). He went on to describe spirituality as

"more individualized and less structured practices with a more intimate, personal, and private connection to a sacred source that provides inspiration, motivation, and opportunities for introspection and self-development" (p. 4). For the sake of this study, I will defer to the definitions of spirituality and religion that are provided by the aforementioned authors**.**

Spirituality, Religion, and Black Culture

Spirituality and religion have had a tremendous influence on Black culture as a whole (Baer & Singer, 2002; Battle, 2006; Bridges, 2001; Cuyjet, 2006; Gavins, 2009; Shelton & Emerson, 2012; Taylor & Chatters, 2010; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). The majority of African Americans, or about 70%, claimed to be both spiritual and religious (Taylor et al., 2004), whereas only about 20% claimed to be neither spiritual nor religious.

African American religious expressions were rooted in a hostile society (as during slavery and segregation) in the U.S. and, therefore, were important in addressing issues that were harmful to the well-being of Black Americans (Baer & Singer, 2002; Bridges, 2001; Taylor et al., 2004). Also from a historical perspective, Black religious traditions have taken on issues of civil and human rights, social and economic justice, and issues of emancipation (Baer & Singer, 2002; Battle, 2006; Bridges, 2001; Taylor et al., 2004). Similarly, Shelton and Emerson (2012) examined the intersections of race and religion among Black and White Protestant Christians. The authors express how deeply important religion is

to the culture and also noted how the relationship between Blacks and religion is deeply rooted in historical social obstacles such as slavery, racial discrimination, and inequality.

Black people have tremendous support systems at their religious institutions (Taylor et al., 2004). Clergy (ministers and pastors) are an important resource in the Black community (Battle, 2006; Bridges, 2001; Taylor et al., 2004). Bridges (2001) noted that one important aspect of an African American preacher was that he or she be called by God to serve the community. Clergy provide/oversee services that include youth programs, anti-poverty aid, programs and care for the elderly, and health screening and awareness (Taylor et al., 2004). Clergy also provide individual and family counseling on matters such as marriages, unemployment, health issues, legal problems, and drug abuse. Battle (2006) wrote, "the Black Church became known for its preaching because of the power of proclamation in relationship to political mobilization" (p. 68). In other words, clergy had strong social and political influence. Taylor et al. (2004) also claimed that church members provide a source of social support. The authors also mentioned Black people feel close to their church members and believe they would assist them in times of need. Church members are a very useful coping resource, as is prayer (Taylor et al., 2004). They provided assistance such as money, food, transportation, spiritual support, fellowship, companionship, and emotional support. They provided encouragement and a sense of belonging (Taylor et al.,

2004). These were especially important during critical times such as illness, death, financial woes, and family matters such as childbirth (Taylor et al., 2004). Thus, clergy, church members, and deep church community and social roots have been vastly and historically instrumental to African Americans.

Spirituality and Religion Among Black College Students

Spirituality and religion has been found to influence college adjustment, student development, and degree attainment for a broad range of students demographically (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011a; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011b; Kneipp, Kelly, & Cyphers, 2009; Lee, Puig, & Clark, 2007). More specifically, researchers have found that identification with spirituality positively correlates with academic performance for African American students (Walker & Dixon, 2002). Additionally, the social support associated with religious participation was more influential on academic performance for all races, but for Black Americans, "the beliefs as well as the implementation of those beliefs appear to be important" (p. 117). Donahoo and Caffey (2010) examined the impact of the church on African American college students and found that church involvement had a positive influence on students. Maintaining church involvement was important for student success in college because it positively influenced the transition to college, academic performance, coping with stress, spirituality, and career selection. Similarly, Holland (2014) found that that religiosity, spirituality, and/or places of worship influenced the participants' aspirations, engagement, and

achievement regarding access to college and success in college. The actual place of worship and members were very influential to African American students as they sought to have success in college. The influence of spirituality and religion is especially significant for Black students.

Spirituality and Religion Among Black Men in College

Perhaps a seminal study on this topic is that from Herndon (2003), where the purpose was to explore how spirituality related to African American males' ability to stay in school at a PWI using grounded theory as the framework. Herndon found that, in the college setting, spirituality served as a source of comfort and support, and there were three main themes that emerged around this concept: spirituality bolstered resilience, spirituality provided a sense of purpose, and spiritual support was provided by Black religious institutions. As it related to resilience, Watson (2006) conducted a study to identify where spirituality is positioned in the lives of Black male college students and how it contributes to their ability to survive in college. The main finding was that belief in a higher being and their use of resistant soul force (or ability to overcome barriers) "completes the sense of spirituality these African American male students use to sustain themselves in the college environment" (p. 124). Furthermore, Watson (2006) found that responses indicated the participants could handle what came their way through the grace of a higher being.

In an attempt to duplicate Herndon's (2003) study in a different environment, Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon (2008) sought to examine the role spirituality plays for Black males enrolled at a historically Black university as it pertains to them staying in school. Grounded theory was used as a framework, just as it was in Herndon's (2003) study. Three major themes emerged to describe the role of spirituality among Black men attending a historically Black university, which were 1) prayer was used as a coping mechanism and for guidance, 2) spirituality was used in a social context, and 3) religious institutions were a form of social support. The findings of spirituality in relation to prayer, guidance, and support from religious institutions were parallel with Herndon's study.

In another study related to Herndon's (2003), Wood and Hilton (2012) explored spirituality as a factor of academic success. As a conceptual framework, the authors used Herndon's (2003) three expressions of spirituality, in an attempt to further the research in this area. Wood and Hilton (2012) did find that spirituality was identified as a mechanism for academic success. First, students saw God as a confidante, which aided their academic success. God was with students at all times, and they could engage in a dialogue with Him about challenges and successes. Students felt less isolated. Second, spirituality inspired excellence in school. The participants who identified as Christians were expected to perform at their highest level in everything they did. Third, spirituality promoted academic success by providing purpose and a sense of direction. Students had direction regarding what

to major in and what careers to pursue, and their direction was based on the idea that they had a destiny to fulfill. Fourth, spirituality supported students' abilities to overcome barriers through prayer and knowing that God was there for protection. Lastly, spirituality helped to reduce relational distractions. Students were able to stay away from negatively influential peers and events, especially those that went against their faith.

The studies on Black men specifically have a lot of similarities, especially regarding overcoming barriers, surviving school, prayer, and purpose (Herndon, 2003; Riggins et al., 2008; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012). Additionally, as with some of the other studies regarding Black participants (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Holland, 2014), the church served as a tremendous form of support (Herndon, 2003; Riggins et al., 2008). Spirituality and religion have been shown to have a positive influence on how students perform in college. These two constructs that are very much connected and well embedded within Black culture. Research has shown their influence on Black students, especially Black men (Herndon, 2003; Riggins et al., 2008; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012).

Conceptual Framework

The theme of purpose from Herndon's (2003) and Wood and Hilton's (2012) research, more thoroughly detailed in the previous section, will be used as a conceptual framework for this study. More specifically, the research in this study will use spirituality and religion in relation to a sense of purpose for Black men in

college as a lens to view the data. This framework informs my work because findings from Herndon's and Wood and Hilton's studies both revealed the influence that spirituality has on Black male college students.

While authors in the previous paragraph only focused on spirituality, I explicitly examined both spirituality and religion for this study. Although these constructs have different meanings, they are deeply intertwined (Mattis, 2000; Taylor et al., 2004). For example, religion is used to obtain spirituality, while spirituality can be achieved through following certain ritualistic behaviors (Mattis, 2000; Taylor et al., 2004). The framework will be extended with persistence as the focal point, in addition to academic success and retention. The role of spirituality and religion may influence these metrics of students' success, areas where Black men have not performed well.

Method

For this study, I used a general qualitative approach in route to answering the research question. One definition of qualitative research is as follows:

> Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (Creswell, 1998, p. 15)

This study was designed to explore the problem of academic performance (enrollment and persistence) in higher education for Black men and how their connection with spirituality and religion may influence their success. The experiences of the participants were examined on the campus in which they attended school, and detailed reports of their identification with spirituality and religion were captured and analyzed to provide a comprehensive perspective.

Participants

Participants of the study included 10 Black men (Apollo, Charles, Derek, Eddie, John, Lovehall, Pierre, Sonny, Steve, Wade) who attended Lone Star University (LSU). Eight of the participants identified themselves as Protestant Christians, while two did not (one Catholic and one Unitarian). The number of participants aligns with Creswell's (1998) writings about qualitative sample sizes. This relatively small amount of participants was due to the depth of the interviews; thus, the wealth of information is robust (Creswell, 1998). I used criterion sampling to obtain the desired number of participants for the study. According to Creswell (1998), criterion sampling consists of identifying and selecting participants who meet certain criteria, mainly those who have experienced the phenomenon.

It was imperative that the participants identified with spirituality and/or religion as it related to their time as undergraduates striving for success as Black men in college. Therefore, the criteria for selection were: 1) racially identify as a Black/African American man, 2) be at least 18 years old, 3) be enrolled as a junior

or senior student at Lone Star University, and 4) self-identify that spirituality and/or religion is important for striving toward graduation. It was important that the participants have at least a junior classification to indicate a measure of persistence.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection methods included a pre-screen survey, a demographic information questionnaire, and in-depth/semi-structured interviews. The survey, demographic questionnaire, and interview questions are included as Appendix A, B, and C. The breadth of data collected came from the interviews. This study was conducted at Lone Star University (LSU), a large and research-oriented institution in Texas where the largest racial group in the student population is White. Only one interview was conducted at an off-site location due to the participant's lack of transportation. In this case, I interviewed the participant at a park less than two miles away from the campus. All participants were enrolled students at this institution. LSU is located in North Texas within the Dallas/Fort Worth (DFW) Metroplex. The university has an enrollment of 33,329, with 25,690 of that being the undergraduate population (*College Navigator*, n.d.).

The data collected were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis processes outlined by Creswell (2003). Creswell noted that qualitative data analysis involves "moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data" (p. 190). This understanding was accomplished mainly through thoroughly

reviewing interview transcripts, listening to the audio recorded interviews, and memoing.

I employed respondent validation, also known as member checking, and the use of rich data to enhance trustworthiness. Maxwell (2013) described that with member checking, the researcher solicits feedback about the data collected from the participants. With member checking, participants have the opportunity to offer feedback as to whether the data presented is an accurate representation of their experiences. During the interview process, I continually asked follow up questions to make sure that I captured participants' responses correctly. I also offered summaries of some responses that seemed a bit unclear while the interview was still in process. Additionally, I followed up with students via email regarding any further information that was unclear based on the collected data. Rich data were collected through the interview and transcription process. Maxwell (2013) noted that rich data are derived from interview studies where "such data generally require verbatim transcripts of the interviews, not just notes on what you felt was significant" (p. 126). The interview protocol was designed to pull detailed descriptions from the participants about their experiences. These experiences are highlighted later in the findings, including lengthy quotes that help describe the themes that emerged throughout the data collection process.

Findings

The relationship between purpose and spirituality and religion among Black college students has been highlighted in the scholarly discourse as a positive relationship that guides students toward their degrees, majors, and careers (Herndon, 2003; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2013). For the participants in this study, spirituality and/or religion was a key component for helping them pursue their purpose. This overarching identification with purpose was directly in line with the framework set forth by the studies of Herndon (2003) and Wood and Hilton (2012). This section focuses on four themes that emerged from the participants' experiences of how spirituality and religion influenced the pursuance of purpose.

Purpose is Directly Related to College Major and Career

Several participants affirmed that their spirituality and/or religion influenced their major choice and career path. The connecting piece between spirituality/religion and major/career was purpose. The participants' faith had an effect on what they wanted to study and/or pursue as a career based on what they felt their purpose was, mainly due to what they felt God had set out for them to accomplish in life.

Sonny mentioned that the Lord had instilled in him such a deep interest in his major that he felt strongly compelled, because of his religion, to finish school. He felt obligated to God to study his passion of human behavior through the field of economics. In fact, this spiritual and religious connection to his major and the

strong internal desire to study human behavior prompted him to change his major from mechanical engineering to economics. Always connecting religion and spirituality, he noted that his spirituality influenced him in this way "because I'm interested and I truly have a passion for the things I'm researching in my major, I feel like the things that used to be challenging, I don't mind reading and putting the work in." Therefore, through understanding his passion and purpose set forth by God, he went from not enjoying mechanical engineering to satisfaction with economics based on the passion that he found within.

Sonny's passion, through his purpose, caused him to question his peers' reason for studying their fields. He recalled instances where he interacted with business majors to find out what they ultimately wanted to do with their degrees. A common response from them was a basic desire to just "work in business." Just working in business was not Sonny's desire, as he believed quite the contrary:

> I just kind of leave them alone, not to offend them. But, for me, I'm here not to [just] get the degree. I'm here to get the knowledge that's gonna provide me with insight for my future. That's the reason I'm here. Where I feel like some people are here just to get that…just to get that degree to show the world that hey I did this, now you can pay me this salary. I'm not here for that reason. I'm here for the reason I want to be able to go…I want to find things that I'm passionate about, and so that passion I believe is directly related to

> my spirituality. Or to say it better, my passion…my drive for my major is my passion, which is connected to my spirituality.

That passion for studying human behavior was rooted more deeply in the purpose that was so compelling, through his relationship with God.

Similarly, John felt the need to change his major because having both a spiritual and religious foundation gave him a better sense of purpose which directly influenced what he wanted to study. He stated his sentiments on this matter:

> I guess an example for me was, my purpose was not to be an architect, so being spiritual and religious helped me gain my purpose or what I think I know my purpose is - that civil engineering is my purpose and it helps you in a way where if you feel like quitting you know there are scriptures and stuff that helps you maintain focus and stay motivated.

Spirituality and religion helped John recognize his purpose, while also providing a platform of resilience through focus and motivation. John stated that prayer, reading scriptures from the Bible, meditation, and talking to God all contributed to him being able to find his purpose, which directly related to his major. He offered, "If you have those spiritual and religious backgrounds, they help you know what you wanna do and what God has put you on this earth to do." Therefore, he felt that God put him on the earth to study his major and finish college.

Derek was guided to the major of history with secondary teacher certification after first majoring in business. This decision was not at all popular with his parents and friends. Derek was a member of a highly reputable and prestigious business leadership academy at LSU. After the time and effort that Derek invested in his business studies, changing his major seemed to others as a step in the wrong direction. However, Derek underwent a "spiritual reformation" after growing up in a more Baptist/religious setting. He felt more compelled to more closely examine the Bible and, thus, was prompted to live a more spiritual Christian life. Through this reformation, Derek felt that his spirituality altered his journey for the better:

> My spirituality played a big role in determining what I wanted to do as far as my academic pursuits later. One of the big things that I'm really interested in and one of my life goals is that I want to inspire others to do what inspires them. And so I felt that it's particularly important with young people. And so I want to be very involved with young people. And you know, I guess I see it as a way that I can change or alter or motivate young people.

Ultimately, Derek realized that his purpose was to help empower young people and be in a position to share his spiritual beliefs with them. In that case, he decided that business was not the right major and that it was more purposeful to major in a field that would place him in front of children where he could have a positive influence

on them. Derek also added that his spiritual connection helped shape his discussion in his major class and also his perspective on the way he viewed history.

Steve (spiritual only, and not religious) changed his major more than once and noted that his spirituality had a "1 to 1 role" with his majors. He ultimately chose his philosophy major because of his intellectual interests and desire to understand the world through his spirituality. Spirituality could also be aided "academically with science, with literature, with music, all kinds of other things that we can do in the scholastic world that can aid that very same purpose. And so then I decided to become a philosophy major." He felt philosophy was the best field for him to use his intellect to understand the world through philosophical thoughts and theories.

Steve was the only participant to mention graduate school. He wanted to pursue philosophy on the doctoral level in the form of a Ph.D. in mystical studies. Pursuing a philosophy degree to him was pursuing spirituality within academics. Steve offered this thought on the mixture of spirituality and an academic major:

> Let's intertwine your philosophy and your spirituality because philosophy is one of the best things you can intertwine spirituality with because it's… only that and religion…but a religion degree is only a philosophy degree in a certain area. It might be one of the only areas of academia that says, hey, go ahead and like practice and try to understand your spirituality because everyone else in the

> world wants to understand it anyway, but none of them have the time. So if you're gonna spend your time doing that, go ahead, and get paid for it.

For Steve, being able to study spirituality, which was such an immense portion of his life, was akin to academic fuel. Though he did not articulate this, it was evident that Steve's extensive sense of spirituality greatly influenced his desire to study spirituality in the form of philosophy, which served as a purpose for his academic and career trajectory.

The Relationship Between Purpose and College Degree

Purpose was a major catalyst for major choice, but perhaps more importantly, for the sake of this study, was its relationship with the participants' actual quest for their bachelor's degrees. Many of the participants discussed how pursuing their purpose had a positive relationship on their drive to obtain their degree. The spiritual and religious understanding of purpose was a stimulant for persistence toward graduation.

In some instances, obtaining a degree was considered a tool for moving in the direction of achieving purpose. For example, Wade knew that his purpose was to ultimately help people become better people. He didn't quite know what that meant regarding how it translated to a major. In fact, he was torn between changing his major from industrial engineering to education. Also, he had thoughts of preaching. He felt that his form of preaching may not be from the altar to a

congregation, but more of a personal/one-on-one form of ministry. Nevertheless, Wade felt that finishing his college degree was part of God's plan. He felt that God put him in college for a reason, and that it wasn't necessarily the key to success in his life, but it was a great tool to have on his tool belt. He viewed the degree as a resource, but God as the main source. Speaking of a college degree, he said "I just view it as one of the things that I was given - this opportunity to achieve in part of my greater purpose, whatever it may be. I have an idea, but not 100 percent clarity." Though he had not quite figured out his specific purpose, he knew the degree was a component of successful completion of God's plan for him.

Speaking further of the connection between purpose and degree completion, Wade recalled deadly instances in his life. When he was about 13, he was shot in the head with a pellet gun. The doctor said that a major blood vessel was barely missed. He was also saved from other situations, but he said that God sustained him for a reason. In the midst of those situations, he was still able to perform at a high level academically. He went on to add this about being saved from serious injuries and persisting academically on into higher education:

> So the idea of college and everything else and then knowing that God had a purpose for my life, being sustained through so many things, you know, it's been my motivation for acquiring the degree and then whatever comes in life after that, just trying to be the best at it.

Again, Wade did not quite know with clarity what God's purpose was for him, but he knew that he had made it to the point where he was in college for a reason, which was just the motivation that he needed to understand the importance of obtaining a degree.

Lovehall also felt as if obtaining a degree was a tool on the tool belt to be able to pursue his purpose. He ran his own communications company already where he pursued his purpose professionally. His purpose, similar to Wade's, was to help people identify and maximize themselves. "People often conform to society, but rarely do they take the time to find out who they really are and what they were created to do in life," he said. However, Lovehall was only in school to further develop his talent and establish credentials that would be accepted by people. He articulated his point with this statement:

> Trust me; I wouldn't be in school if I didn't have to hone my skills and cultivate my skills because people, no matter how great you are, they always wanna see credentials. And that's all that school is really about. We get a paper and put it on the wall so that when people come through they can say, ok, because he did that and he has that on the wall then he must know what he's talking about.

Lovehall imparted that his spirituality and religion told him that he had to go to school to show himself approved. He added, "Now granted, I can go out there and do what my purpose says, but I think anyone who has been given a great gift, you

should cultivate it." Therefore, God compelled him to obtain a degree to live out his purpose in a manner that is acceptable to the public.

Additionally, Lovehall spoke about how his spirituality and obtaining a degree complement each other by saying "I know my spirituality. I know where my foundation is. And to obtain a college degree would be to complement that. Again, if for nothing else, when I talk to people, I don't necessarily need the college degree." He only really needed what God had bestowed upon him to relay to clients, but from his perspective, society needed credentials. The degree was a form of societal validation to display that formal, institutionalized knowledge had been attained. Nevertheless, the quest for a degree was influenced spiritually as a feature needed to fully pursue his purpose, which was established by God.

Strikingly similar to Lovehall's ideas about why the degree was needed were Pierre's thoughts on the same matter. Pierre identified that his purpose was "to completely revamp the way African Americans conduct, support, and market businesses. I plan to do that with the tools of motivational speech and business consultation." He knew that he needed to obtain a degree to live out his purpose but viewed it as more a formality as seen in this statement:

> Truth be told I just, I really just look at the degree as a check mark. The only reason I'm even in college honestly is because at the end of all of this I wanna be a motivational speaker. And in motivational speaking, you're only as good as your opening and you're only as

> good as your introduction is. So in this particular world, in this particular society…saying that you are magna cum laude at DeVry…ha ha…doesn't go as far as saying you're magna cum laude at Harvard. Saying that you worked for 22 years for a particular firm without having some letter behind your name just doesn't put you in this position that you want to go to in regards to touching both the top and the bottom. So to me, it's a check mark. It's a stamp of approval in some aspects.

Pierre added that as an entrepreneur, he was not in college to get a job; he was there so that he could learn to create jobs. He went on to add that he had a big vision, but had some hills to climb to get there. This vision was set by his purpose that, though reluctantly, required a college degree.

Pierre added that God's purpose for his life provided comfort. He reflected on being a being a fifth-year senior and felt that regardless of test scores, academic shortcomings, and man-made constructs created to withhold his ability to qualify for certain things, that God had a purpose for his life that he would fulfill. He felt that, ultimately, he would be successful, realize his purpose, and knew that God would make way for him to complete his degree. God gave him peace in allowing him to know he had a purpose and that he would finish college.

The Church's Connection to Purpose

The two previous sections of this study highlighted the participants' academic connection to purpose via spirituality and religion. This connection was an important one in particular for Wade, especially since he was still in the process of seeking his purpose. His church was the main impetus behind his infatuation with purpose. In fact, he said that helping individuals find and pursue their purpose was one of the main missions of the church. Therefore, the church was somewhat of a conduit for helping him select a major and finish college to be in a position to have employment that was purposeful in the eyes of God.

Lovehall's deep connection to the church played a significant role in a major transition in his life. He had identified what his purpose was (to maximize people's lives), but that needed to be centered on the church. He wanted the church to be his "central core location." After being in the workforce and making good money, he knew that to pursue his purpose he needed to go back to school. He recalled, "If I'm going to go back to school for it, I want the church to be my central core location, so everything that I do, I want to be wrapped around my church." Within a matter of six months and with some internal fright, he quit his job, took a lower paying job, moved out of a nice apartment and moved into a three-roommate situation. He did this to be close to LSU and to be able to afford tuition, but more importantly to be close to his church, which was instrumental to his success. This

entire transition was all a great leap of faith for him. However, he needed to do it to pursue his purpose. He articulated that thought here:

> My spirituality said, ok, I want to do this because I know there is something greater. But I know that this has to be taken care of as well. And so I did it. And within a year's time from wanting to do it, everything that I set out to do I did it. My church was ten minutes down the road. I go to school, live, and work within a two-mile radius. But all that was based off because I said I want to put my spirituality first. And it happened. So yeah, without spirituality, I wouldn't be here at [LSU]. It was definitely my driving force.

His church was the motivation behind the big move and humble lifestyle that he underwent in order to be in a position to complete his degree and pursue his purpose. Additionally, his involvement with the broadcast ministry at his church prompted him to pursue that as a second major.

Student Organizations' Connection to Purpose

Purpose also emerged as the participants spoke about the student organization setting. Charles mentioned how Faith and Inspiration, a faith-based student organization/campus ministry (co-lead by Wade), drove the importance of purpose through their Bible study. The organization emphasized "how God acts with purpose so we should, too. We wake up every day to do things. It's just our journey to learn what we're supposed to do, why he keeps waking us up." The idea

was that purpose was important to life overall and even more tedious to every waking moment. The emphasis on purpose was important because the organization implored that the members understand why they were getting up and going to school every day, which was to ultimately get to the point of fulfilling their purpose.

Speaking of Faith and Inspiration, John exclaimed that the Bible study they put on had a huge influence on his persistence in college. He explained the reason why understanding purpose was such a tremendous focus for the organization:

> Just to make sure you know why you are doing, make sure you are not just going into a major for…say money or something like that. But just making sure you know where you are going and if it's the right plan God has for you.

Faith and Inspiration were instrumental in helping the members find a spiritually rooted aspect to their studies and college experience. Helping people like John understand the spiritual component of college served as motivation to persist and graduate.

Summary

The participants' pursuit of their purpose, in relation to major, degree, career or with influence from a church or student organization, was a driving force in the process of their success (persistence) as a student. For some, their purpose steered them toward a major and future career, which is a primary step in the degree-seeking process. The degree was perceived as either a tool or simply a

benchmark in the process of gaining progress toward achieving their purpose. Also, external entities, such as churches and organizations, prompted thought about the importance of understanding purpose and its connection to education. Therefore, spirituality and religion influenced the participants' desires to persist through a realization of purpose.

Limitations

The current study is limited in certain areas. The first limitation is that the study is based on only a small number of participants. Two studies very similar in scope were those of Herndon (2003) and Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon (2008). Both studies had 13 participants, where this one had only 10. Additionally, there was a lack of diversity in the religious affiliations/backgrounds of the participants. Eight of the participants identified as being Protestant Christians, one did not identify with any one religion, and one was Catholic. I specifically communicated with representatives of non-Protestant student organizations, such as Catholic and Muslim groups through emails and phone calls. Despite the immense email solicitation to broad groups of people, class visits, and student organization meetings, the response from students of other religious groups was minimal.

Discussion and Conclusion

The participants in this study indicated that spirituality and religion had a direct relationship with major and career choice based on what they perceived as their purpose. Completing their degree was an important step in reaching their

purpose. Also, external entities such as church and faith-based student organizations served as catalysts in enforcing these ideas.

Purpose has a tremendous influence on African American males graduating from college. Participants changed their major once they discovered what their purpose was. Changing majors is common for college students, yet in this case, the participants changed their major based on a spiritual perspective. Their perspective offered a substantial rationale for changing majors, which were rooted in spirituality. For most participants, God guided the decision for their major choice, despite their thoughts, which gave them the comfort to know they could be successful. In some instances, a passion that was instilled in them was the first step to understanding what their purpose was. Their ability to understand their purpose and comprehend what their plan was for the future put them on the path to persisting in college.

Ultimately, attaining a degree was necessary for the participants to be in a position to live out their purpose. In some cases, going through the process of attaining a degree was a hindrance. However, the participants were willing to endure that hindrance to achieve that life purpose, which mostly manifested as a career. The degree was also a benchmark in the process of moving toward their purpose. It was something that needed to be checked off as complete and served as motivation to get to the goal. However, some students were also passionate about their major and enjoyed their classes on the way to obtaining their bachelor's

degree. Nevertheless, regardless of whether or not the student wanted to go through the process of college and classes, the spiritual urge to move toward purpose, whether through internal or external means, was reason enough to encourage students to persist toward the degree.

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Appendix A

Pre-Screen Survey

Demographic Information

- Name:
- Age:
- Racial/Ethnic background:
- Country of birth:
- Religious/Spiritual denomination or affiliation:
- Enrollment Status: (Part-time Full-time)
- Classification (e.g. freshman, sophomore, junior, senior):
- Major(s)/Minor:
- Current G.P.A:

Contact Information

- Email Address: _____
- Phone Number: _____
    - Phone Type (Home Cell Work)
- Home Address: _____

Appendix B

Demographic Information Questionnaire

(Note: This questionnaire was adapted from Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon, 2008**)**

Demographic Information

a) Participant's name:

b) Age:

c) Racial/Ethnic background:

d) Country of birth:

e) Religious affiliation:

f) **Financial aid status** (*e.g. dependent or independent student*):

g) **Marital status** (*e.g. single, married, divorced, domestic partnership*):

h) Number of children:

i) **Ages of children** (*if applicable*):

j) Hometown:

k) **Distance from family** (*e.g. local, another city in state, out of state, outside of the U.S.):*

l) **Frequency of contact with family** (*e.g. daily, weekly, several times a month, monthly, several times a year, never*):

m) **Type of contact with family** (*e.g. phone, email, Skype, Facetime, Google Chat, travel [e.g. car, bus, plane*]):

College Information

a) **Are you a first generation college student?:** Yes No

b) **When did you enter LSU?:** first time freshman___ transfer student___ other ____

c) Major(s)/Minor(s):

d) Current G.P.A:

e) **Classification** (e.*g. freshman, sophomore, junior, senior*):

f) **How are you paying for college?** (e.g. financial aid, grants, loans, scholarships, work [on campus, off campus, familial assistance, foster care youth, etc.]):

g) Extracurricular Activities:

a. On Campus:

b. Off Campus:

h) Future Career Goals:

Residential Information

Do you live on or off campus?

a) If you live on campus:

→Type of housing: (residential halls/ apartment/ house/other):

→ Number of people living in house:

b) If you live off campus:

→Type of housing: (apartment/ house/other):

→Number of people living with you:

c) Do you live with your family members:

If yes,

→Type of housing: (apartment/ house/other):

→Amount of family members living in the household:

→Amount of family members living outside of the household:

Contact Information

a) Mailing address:

b) Telephone number:

c) E-mail address

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

(The Interview Protocol was adapted from Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon, 2008)

Participants Name:
Pseudonym:
Interview date:
Interview time:
Interview location:

You are here to participate in a research study about how spirituality and religion plays a role in your experience as a college student seeking to persist and graduate from LSU. The questions that will be asked are designed to capture your experiences as a Black male college student who identifies with spirituality and/or religion.

1. Can you briefly tell me about yourself? (Prompts: hometown, family background (e.g. familial structure, income level, etc.), educational background (e.g. first generation college student, entered LSU as a freshmen or transfer student, extracurricular activities involved in on and off campus, etc.)? Why did you choose to attend LSU?)

2. What does spirituality mean to you? or how do you define spirituality?
3. What does religion mean to you? or how do you define religion?
4. In your opinion, is there a difference between spirituality and religion? If so, please explain. If not, why not?
5. Describe the role spirituality and/or religion plays in your life overall.
6. What acts of spirituality and/or religion do you practice (e.g. prayer, attending church/temple/mosque, fasting, etc.)? How often do you pray? How often to you attend worship/service?
7. How do spirituality and/or religion affect your experience as a Black/African American man at LSU?
8. Describe the role of spirituality and/or religion in your academic life.
9. Can you tell me about the role of spirituality and/or religion in your social life?
10. What role does spirituality and/or religion play on your ability to remain in and persist through school? If it does, please share an example? If not, why not?
11. Can you tell me about the relationship between spirituality and/or religion on your quest for a college degree (i.e. graduate from college?
12. Describe the influence your religious institution(s)/ organization(s) may and/or may not have on you regarding your college persistence and graduation?

13. Do you have anything else to add/share that we may have not discussed during this interview?

Thank you for your time and support. I will contact you soon for a possible follow-up interview.