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# Taking the initiative: Exploring the usefulness of faculty-student interaction based on validation theory

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**TAKING THE INITIATIVE: EXPLORING THE USEFULNESS OF  
FACULTY-STUDENT INTERACTION BASED ON VALIDATION THEORY**

by

Fidel Wilson

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education  
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Doctor of Education  
at  
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March 23, 2018

Dissertation Advisor: MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.



## **Dedications**

This dissertation is dedicated to:

My wife, Christyn Wilson

My children, Mikayla & Mikenzie Wilson

My mom, Janice Stevens

My dad, Grant Wilson Sr.

My dad and mentor, Cedric Miller

My church family, Living Word Christian Fellowship

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## **Abstract**

Fidel Wilson

**TAKING THE INITIATIVE: EXPLORING THE USEFULNESS OF  
FACULTY-STUDENT INTERACTION BASED ON VALIDATION THEORY  
2017-2018**

MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.  
Doctor of Education

The literature is replete with studies that establish a nexus between student success outcomes and faculty-student interaction (Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2008; CCSSE, 2001; Cole, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2001). Faculty-student interaction involves discussion between faculty and student regarding the student's academic and social development. In this qualitative study, faculty were trained to use strategies based on validation theory in the classroom to enhance their interaction with the Black males. Validation theory involves someone intentionally taking an active interest in the academic and personal development of a student serving as a source of encouragement and support (Rendon, 1994). The findings in this study revealed that faculty found the validating strategies useful in making a connection, establishing accountability, and giving affirmation.

*Keywords: Faculty-student interaction, Validation theory*

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Over the last 20 years, there has been a considerable amount of research done to improve the student success of men of color in postsecondary education (Brown, 2006; Bush & Bush, 2010; Carter & Wilson, 1997; Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Harris & Wood, 2013; Haycock, 2001; Wood & Palmer, 2013). This research is necessary because Black and Latino men consistently trail behind their White male counterparts when analyzing common student success indicators like enrollment, engagement, persistence, and degree attainment (Cook & Cardova, 2007; Harris & Wood, 2013). Despite the fact that a substantial amount of research on the student success of Black males has been done over the last two decades, much of the scholarship has excluded the experiences of those who enroll in community colleges (Wood & Hilton, 2012; Wood & Williams, 2013). Consequently, there is a need for more scholarship to be done on the experiences of Black males who attend community colleges.

There have been studies done that suggest that the needs of Black male students, as they relate to strategies that can assist in their academic success, can vary based upon institutional context (Bush & Bush, 2010; Flowers, 2006; Hagedorn, Maxwell & Hampton, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Buvkley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). Hagedorn et. al. (2001) found that there were variables that were unique to community colleges like pre-college preparation, perceptions of the need for academic assistance, and age that impacted the social and academic involvement of Black males on campus. Similarly, Flowers (2006) found that the Black male students who attended four-year institutions were more likely

to report higher levels of social and academic integration than those who attended two-year institutions. Specifically, Black male students at four-year institutions reported having more student-student, student-faculty, and student-campus interactions at their colleges than students at two-year institutions. These studies suggest that researchers must consider the institutional context when seeking to understand the Black male experience in higher education. Moreover, these studies indicate that Black male students at two-year institutions may not benefit from the same experiences and outcomes as those students at four-year institutions. In order to develop appropriate interventions to engage more Black male students, student affairs professionals at two-year institutions, in particular, should not rely solely on the research done at four-year institutions.

### **Problem Statement**

The underachievement of Black students when compared to White students is evident in postsecondary education (Brown, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Haycock, 2001). However, not all Black students share the same experiences on campus. For instance, research on Black students often lacks disaggregated data, particularly by gender (Harper & Nichols, 2008; & Cuyjet, 1997; Kim & Sedlacek, 1996). Disaggregating the data on Black students by focusing on subgroups such as gender or socioeconomic status (SES) can assist researchers in gaining more insight into the experiences of Black students on campus (Harper & Nichols, 2008). For example, when comparing women to men, Black women have higher enrollment and graduation rates than their male counterparts (NCES, 2005; Walpole, 2007). Black males, in particular, have the highest college dropout rate among every racial/ethnic and gender subgroup (Wood, 2012). According to Harper (2006), more than two-thirds of all Black men who

start college do not graduate nationally. Black males not only enroll at fairly low rates but they persist at low rates as well. Consequently, while over one million students were conferred associate degrees during the 2015-2016 academic year, a little less than 14% of the awardees self-identified as Black (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Additionally, of the associate degrees conferred to Black students in that same academic year, only 33% of the degrees were conferred to males compared to females who accounted for 67% of the total number of degrees conferred to Black students. Cuyjet (1997) did a large study investigating this phenomenon using the College Student Experiences Questionnaire. In his study of Black students, he found that Black males reported spending less time looking for opportunities to get involved in campus activities, participated in fewer student organizations, and were less likely to serve on committees and hold leadership positions on campus than Black females. In other words, Black males were more likely to be disconnected from the activities that are positively linked to student success than their female counterparts.

The underachievement of Black males is evident in the K-12 sector as well. In a recent report put out by the Schott Foundation (2015), Black males had the lowest four-year high school graduation rates in 35 of the 48 states mentioned in the report, with Latino males having the lowest graduation rates in the remaining 13 states. Despite the progress made in increasing high school graduation rates for Black males, when compared to other racial/ethnic groups, they continue to rank at the bottom for most states in the country. Similarly, in the postsecondary sector, although there have been significant increases in college participation for nearly all racial-ethnic groups, disparities in college attendance and degree attainment continue to persist, particularly for men of

color (Cook & Cordova, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008). According to the 2014 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the gap in the number of bachelor's degrees conferred between Black male students and White male students has steadily increased since 1976 (NCES, 2016).

Also, it is important to note that Black males are less likely than their White male counterparts to complete school and are six times more likely to be incarcerated (Pew Research Center, 2013). Incarceration for many employers is a deterrent and, with almost every offense being a matter of public record, offenders with criminal records have an extremely difficult time acquiring a job once they have been convicted of a crime (Pager, 2003). More distressing is that of both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups, Black males account for the largest percentage of the prison population at 40% (Pager, 2007). Consequently, Black males are disproportionately over represented in prison and underrepresented in positive institutions like college, which foster employment. In an experiment done on the impact the stigma of incarceration has on employment, Pager (2007) found that Black males without a criminal record were less likely to get a call back from employers than White males with a criminal record. Pager's (2007) findings suggest that Black men have to deal with unique challenges when seeking employment and those challenges become more complex when having a criminal record. With the labor market requiring more education and skills to obtain a job and earn a living, it is extremely important that more Black males are successful in achieving some postsecondary education.

For many Black male students, community college serves as the primary pathway into post-secondary education (Bush & Bush, 2010; Perrakis, 2008). According to Wood

and Williams (2013), 54.9% of Black men who enroll in post-secondary education begin their academic careers at two-year institutions. While it is encouraging that community colleges have contributed to the increase of college participation for many Black male students, these institutions still struggle to graduate students (Rosenbaum, Deli-Amen, & Person, 2006). Engle and Tinto (2008) reported that minority students are seven times more likely to graduate with their bachelor's degrees if they start at four-year institutions rather than two-year institutions. Although not all students who begin at a two-year institution endeavor to obtain a bachelor's degree, many of those students, particularly the low-income and first generation students, do (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Approximately 58% of first-time, full-time students who began at a four-year institution in fall 2004 completed a bachelor's degree at that institution within six years, which is 150% of normal completion time. In comparison, approximately 28% of first-time, full-time students who began seeking an associates degree at a two-year institution in fall 2004 completed a degree at that institution within three years, 150% of normal completion time to degree (NCES, 2012). According to Wood and Williams (2013), approximately 11.5% of Black male students at a community college will depart after one year, 48.9% will depart after three years, and 83% will depart after six years without earning their intended degree or certificate. Community colleges must address the issue of producing poor graduation rates before laying claim to being an institution of opportunity (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). It is clear that community colleges should examine their practices and see how the institution can improve their support of Black male students (Bush, 2004).

In recent years, scholars have indicated that faculty-student interaction plays an important role in improving outcomes for students (Anderson & Carta-Falsa, 2002;

Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Frankel & Swanson, 2002), particularly for Black males in community college (Bush & Bush, 2010; Harris & Wood, 2013; Harrison & Palacios, 2014; Wood, 2012; Wood & Ireland, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2011). In a report by the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCCSE) in 2014, engagement with faculty was identified as the most important factor to the success of men of color in community college. The crux of this report was the data collected from a series of focus groups done at multiple community colleges, which indicated that there were four things the students considered most important to their success: personal connection with others at the college (faculty, students, and staff), high expectations with the belief in their ability to achieve, faculty who show interest in them, and engagement on campus. One of the hindrances, however, to faculty-student interaction (FSI) is the willingness to initiate such interactions on the part of the faculty as well as on the part of the student. Wood (2012) indicates that many Black males report taking classes with faculty who expect them to initiate the interaction by participating in class, asking questions, and attending office hours. Student initiated interaction can become problematic for introverted students in general, and Black male students in particular, when considering stereotype threat as a barrier. Stereotype threat is the fear of doing something to unintentionally confirm a stereotype, particularly one that is negative (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Historically, Black males have been portrayed negatively in the media, often viewed as violent and unintelligent. One way to reduce the likelihood of inadvertently confirming a negative stereotype in the classroom is to avoid interaction with faculty altogether.

In one study, if faculty perceived that a student was preoccupied with himself or herself and not interested in their viewpoints, the interaction was viewed as unsatisfactory



and was more likely to result in the faculty taking a more authoritative approach with the student (Frankel & Swanson 2002). Conversely, when faculty perceived that the student was friendlier, easy to talk to, and interested in their viewpoints, the interaction was viewed as satisfactory and faculty were more likely to praise the students and clarify course requirements. Consequently, the quality of the FSI was heavily dependent on the student's willingness and ability to engage the faculty member. Wood (2012) describes this approach to interaction as "approach-me-first"; it requires that students prove their interest in the class by participating in class discussions or attending office hours. To be fair, apprehension to engage in the classroom can occur for reasons that are not beholden to a particular race. For instance, some students report being apprehensive about interacting with faculty because they view themselves as introverted, are overwhelmed by the pressure of meeting high academic standards, or to avoid revealing their lack of focus in the classroom (Wood, 2014). Black male students however, have an added barrier of trying to avoid confirming negative stereotypes that exist about the social group they belong to. Putting the onus on the student to initiate interaction with faculty minimizes the challenges many students have to overcome in order to engage in the classroom. Some scholars believe that the institution should be responsible for creating an environment that is conducive to engagement or, in this case, interaction (Harrison & Palacios, 2014; Wood & Ireland, 2014). In the case of faculty, this would involve faculty members fostering a welcoming environment and sense of belonging within the classroom (Harrison & Palacios, 2014), thus, shifting the onus from the student to the faculty and having the faculty take the lead in creating a climate that encourages interaction with the students.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this action research study is to explore the usefulness of strategies, based on validation theory (Rendon, 1994), used to enhance faculty-student interaction with Black males in the classroom. Specifically, this study seeks to understand the utility of these strategies from the perspective of community college faculty participants.

The first cycle of this research project will involve educating faculty on the different strategies identified in the literature as ways to improve FSI with students, particularly Black males. In the second cycle, the faculty will be observed in their classrooms as they implement the strategies. After the faculty are observed over a period of time, focus groups will be conducted to discuss the effectiveness of the strategies. Based upon the responses of the faculty participants, strategies will be re-visited for potential adjustments to be made. The faculty will then return to the classroom to be observed further. In the third cycle, each faculty member will be interviewed at the end of the term to gain insight into their perspective of the usefulness of the strategies. Lastly, the interviews will be analyzed and coded for themes that may emerge. Historically, there has been a considerable amount of research done on FSI focusing on elucidating the perspectives of students, however this study intends to add balance to the literature on this topic by incorporating the perspective of the faculty (Bush & Bush, 2010; Chang, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2001; Wood & Turner, 2011). The data collected from the field observations, focus groups, and faculty interviews will be used to make recommendations for educational practice and inform policy.

## **Research Questions**

1. Which strategies used to enhance interaction with Black males in the classroom emerged as useful to faculty?
2. According to faculty, how did utilizing these strategies affect the interactions with Black male students?
3. According to faculty, what are the advantages and disadvantages to utilizing these strategies?
4. How does validation theory inform this study?

## **Significance of the Study**

Although there is a significant amount of research on FSI, few studies focus on the perspectives of faculty (Anderson & Carta-Falsa, 2002; Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Frankel & Swanson, 2002). In response, this action research study filled a gap in the literature by providing insight from faculty on the usefulness of strategies identified in the literature as ways to increase FSI with Black males in the classroom. This research has the potential to impact the educational policies and practices used at community colleges. More importantly, this study provides faculty with effective ways to promote interaction with their Black male students.

## **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is divided into five chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and conclusion. Chapter 1 introduces the literature on men of color and student success and includes the problem statement, purpose, significance, and overview of this study. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature on validation theory and FSI, particularly as it relates to Black males. Chapter 3 will outline the methodology used

to collect the data for the study. Chapter 4 will highlight the findings from the data collected. Chapter 5 will consist of conclusions and recommendations for future educational practice and policy.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

In Chapter 1, the challenges surrounding the success of Black males in college were addressed, giving attention to Black males enrolled at community colleges. Furthermore, it highlights the purpose of this study, which is to explore the utility of strategies, based on validation theory (Rendon 1994), to enhance faculty-student interaction (FSI). Specifically, this study seeks to identify strategies faculty members can use to enhance their interaction with the Black males in the classroom. This chapter is organized into four major sections. The first section gives an overview of FSI and its utility. The literature is replete with studies that establish a nexus between student success outcomes such as persistence, learning, retention, and academic achievement, and FSI (Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000; Cole, 2010; Endo & Harpel, 1982; Lamport, 1993; McClenney, Marti, & Adkins, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2001), particularly for Black males in community college (Bush & Bush, 2010; Harris & Wood, 2013; Harrison & Palacios, 2014; Wood, 2012; Wood & Ireland, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2011). Given the pressure community colleges are under to improve their outcomes in the areas of learning and retention (CCSSE, 2001), enhancing the quality of FSI at two-year institutions may be an effective strategy to address the challenges they face.

Section two highlights the influential role faculty can play in helping students achieve their academic goals. The role faculty play as contributors to student success is often overlooked and undervalued in the literature (Bensimon, 2007). By highlighting the impact of the interaction between faculty and students and its effect on how students view themselves and the institution, this literature review elucidates the significance of faculty

in the student success discussion (Fountain, 2012). The classroom is the primary meeting place where the social and academic experiences for college students intersect, particularly for community colleges where students have less time for social activities outside of class time (Tinto, 1997). Faculty are uniquely positioned to create an environment in the classroom that invites interaction with students. When faculty foster interaction inside of the classroom, it leads to interaction outside of the classroom (Cotton & Wilson, 2006). Conversely, when students perceive that faculty are not approachable or friendly, students are more likely to disengage (Cole, 2007). This is particularly true for Black males (Wood, 2014).

The third section introduces validation theory (VT) as the theoretical framework which is central to this study. Validation theory involves someone proactively taking interest in the academic and personal development of a student (Rendon, 1994). Validation is particularly helpful for students who have been invalidated and made to feel inadequate. Faculty, according to Lomport (1993), act “as agents of socialization” assisting students in their intellectual, career, and personal development. Validation theory has been used in studies to understand student intent to persist, faculty interaction, and learning (Barnett, 2011; Bauer, 2014; Lundberg, 2010).

The fourth section summarizes the literature on faculty-student interaction and identifies strategies and behaviors that are VT based, that faculty can use to enhance their level of interaction with Black males in their classroom. Multiple studies done on FSI have highlighted the need for faculty to employ behaviors and strategies that enhances their student interaction (Fountain, 2012; Frankel & Swanson, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2001; Thompson, 2001; Wood, 2014). Some studies have even stated

explicitly that more training for faculty is needed to enhance the quality of student interaction both inside and outside of the classroom (Cole, 2010; Harrison & Palacios, 2014).

### **Overview of Faculty-Student Interaction and its Utility**

After reviewing the literature, it is important to note that faculty-student interaction and faculty-student engagement are often analyzed and discussed interchangeably (Bauer, 2014; Fountaine, 2012; Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Lester, Leonard & Mathias, 2013) although they are independent concepts. For the purposes of this study, interaction is defined as the extent to which faculty and students communicate about academic performance, personal goals, career plans, course content, and assignments (McClenney, Marti, & Adkins, 2001). This communication can occur both inside and outside of the classroom. Engagement on the other hand, is the time and effort students put into participating in educationally purposeful activities (EPA) such as, but not limited to, collaborating with peers on a class project, studying, completing reading assignments for class, having discussions about course material outside of class, and faculty-student interaction. Faculty-student interaction has been found to be positively linked to engagement and as the levels of reported interaction increases so does the engagement (Harrison & Palacios, 2014; Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Wood, 2014). Simply put, students who find faculty to be approachable and easy to talk to are more inclined to engage in the classroom. If the interaction is perceived as negative however, particularly from the perspective of the student, that interaction may have an adverse effect on engagement and students may begin to disengage (Cole, 2007; Wood, 2014).

Faculty-student interaction is a very broad concept with widespread application. There are primarily two types of interaction that are generally discussed in the literature: formal and informal interaction. Formal interaction involves interactions between faculty and students that are primarily academic in nature: clarification of course material, feedback on assignments, and academic and vocational advisement (Kim, 2010). This type of interaction usually takes place in class or during office hours. Informal interaction however is more social in nature involving faculty being friendly and exhibiting concern for the personal, cognitive, and emotional growth of the student (Endo & Harpel, 1982). Informal interaction can occur within the classroom, however outside of the classroom provides more opportunity for this type of interaction, such as passing in the hallway or during extra-curricular events on campus. Although not all studies use the terms “formal” and “informal” when referring to the type of interaction in use, the connection can be made. For example, instead of using the terms formal and informal, the terms substantive and casual or academic and personal interaction are used to describe what could also be referred to as formal and informal respectively (Cox, McIntosh, Terenzini, Reason & Lutovsky Quaye, 2010; Kim, 2010).

There are studies to support the positive impact formal and informal interaction can have on student outcomes, however factors like institutional context can, and in some cases should, influence the type of interaction in use. Many of the studies that analyze interaction and its impact on student success outcomes take place at 4-year institutions (Kim, 2010; Frankel & Swanson, 2002; Lampton, 1993; Lundberg, 2010). A partial explanation for this is a large percentage of 4-year institutions have residential housing on campus making it possible for students to spend more time on campus to interact with



faculty. In contrast, most 2-year institutions are commuter schools and students typically spend less time on campus than 4-year students (Lester, Leonard & Mathis, 2013). As a result, more research should be done at 2-year institutions to appropriately address the unique needs of community college students (Deil-Amen, 2011). Formal interaction is often analyzed within the 2-year institutional context (Chang, 2005; Cole, 2010; Kim & Sax, 2009). Furthermore, students at 2-year institutions report placing more value on formal interaction than informal interaction with faculty (Deil-Amen, 2011; Tinto, 1997). This may be explained by the limited time 2-year students have to spend on campus interacting with faculty outside of class time. Consequently, the institutional context may influence the type of interaction students desire to have with faculty. Given the time constraints many students at non-residential 2-year institutions have due to work or familial responsibility, the classroom may be the optimal site for interaction, whether it is formal or informal. Community college students often work full-time, come from low-income families, have family demands, and are more likely to care for dependents (Berkner & Choy, 2008; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Horn & Neville, 2006; Lester, Brown-Leonard & Mathis, 2013). Given the multiple responsibilities that many community college students have, utilizing the time in class to interact with students is increasingly important for the community college context. When ascertaining the type of interaction needed to promote student success outcomes, it is important to consider the institutional context.

Informal interaction, which traditionally takes place outside of class, has been positively linked to intellectual outcomes such as math skills, problem-solving, and public speaking (Endo & Harpel, 1982). Additionally, informal interaction contributes to

perceived school-related competence, academic self-worth, and learning (Lampton, 1993; Lundberg, 2010; West, 1999). Informal interaction as aforementioned, involves faculty being friendly and approachable. This type of welcoming disposition can serve as a catalyst for formal interaction by making students feel comfortable interacting with faculty in class and on campus (Deil-Amen, 2011). Despite the benefits of informal interaction, this type of interaction can have conditional effects on outcomes when disaggregating the data by student characteristics such as gender and race (Kim, 2010; Seymour, 1995; Thompson, 2001). When examining the effect informal interaction had on the quality of student effort in math and science, Thompson (2001) found that men reported more educational gains in class than women. Additionally, the men in this study reported more interaction with faculty than the women. In a similar study, Seymour (1995) suggests that faculty may unknowingly discourage women from interacting and putting forth effort in class by conducting class in a way that caters more to the way men learn. Particularly, women may learn differently than men and faculty may need to adjust their approach to interaction to gain more female interest in classes like math and science (Thompson, 2001). What is important to note about the type of interaction, whether it is formal or informal, is that the impact it has on student outcomes is not the same for everyone. Attention must be given to student population as well as institutional context when interacting with students.

In a large study that sought to understand the patterns of interaction with students of different racial groups, Kim (2010) found that Black students reported higher levels of formal interaction with faculty than their White counterparts. Specifically, the type of interaction that Blacks reported having with faculty was academic in nature. Conversely,

the White students reported having more personal interaction with faculty than Black students. Although both interactions positively impacted GPA's in this study, there was a clear distinction in the type of interaction reported by race. Several studies support the phenomenon that there are conditional effects across student outcomes when analyzing the data on interaction according to race (Cole, 2007; Cole, 2010; Kim, 2010; Kim & Sax, 2009). Even though Black students are more likely to interact with faculty over course-related matters, they do not report experiencing benefits such as a higher GPA, enhanced critical thinking skills, and satisfaction like other racial groups with the same interaction do (Kim & Sax, 2009). One explanation for this offered in the literature is that faculty must be trained in the area of feedback, where performance is not equated with ability and students receive the message that their skills can be improved upon rather than receiving the message that their ability is fixed without the prospect of improvement (Cole, 2007).

Although interaction is cited as being linked to multiple student outcomes, few faculty and students report regular interaction (Chang, 2005; Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Cox, McIntosh, Terenzini, Reason, & Lutovsk Quaye, 2010). The lack of interaction reported by students and faculty is disconcerting, given the benefits that stem from regular interaction. While the need to increase interaction seems clear, what remains unclear are the factors that encourage and discourage interaction. By gaining a better understanding of these factors, colleges will be better prepared to launch initiatives that effectively enhance the interaction between their students and faculty. In the literature, there appears to be a disconnect in the expectations faculty and students have of one another as it relates to interaction (Anderson & Carta-Falsa, 2002; Frankel & Swanson,

2002; Wood, 2012). Specifically, there is a discrepancy between faculty and students over who should be responsible for initiating the interaction. In a study done on the perceptions Black male students had on engagement in the classroom, some students reported that they felt they had to demonstrate their interest in the classroom by initiating interaction with faculty (Wood, 2014). Furthermore, those students who failed to prove their interest felt regarded as not as committed to being successful in the class. In another study that sought to gain the perspective of faculty on their interactions with students, faculty reported the more a student was perceived to be uninterested the more likely they were to take a more authoritative approach towards the student. Conversely, when the student was perceived to be interested in instructor's viewpoint, the more praise and better clarification of course requirements the student was given (Frankel & Swanson, 2002). One way to address this disconnect is for faculty to initiate interaction with the students rather than the other way around. Some scholars contend that fostering a welcoming environment in the classroom where students feel comfortable interacting with faculty is a responsibility of the institution (Harrison & Palacios, 2014).

Another barrier to more interaction is the limited understanding students have of its benefits (Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, Martin & Castro, 2010). In a qualitative study done by Cotten and Wilson (2006), one student stated that "once you've established a relationship, you can't slack off; you've got to maintain performance." Some students may perceive the cost of establishing a relationship with a faculty member to be greater than the benefits and therefore avoid interaction altogether. Furthermore, as faculty members get to know students, they may be less inclined to ignore them and more inclined to hold them accountable, which may not be desirable by some students. While

accountability may sound positive, some students view the additional attention and expectations of faculty as negative. Some students are simply not paying attention in class and interaction would expose what Wood (2014) refers to as a lack of focus. Other students expressed only needing to interact with professors if they had a “problem with a grade” or needed a “letter of recommendation” (Cotten & Wilson, 2006). Oftentimes students view interaction with faculty as an intervention that is relegated to students having difficulty in a course rather than an activity that will enhance their level of engagement in class.

Gender can serve as a barrier to interaction with faculty as well (Wood, 2014). The literature on gender role conflict suggests that there are socially constructed male gender roles that have negative consequences for the person themselves or others (O’Neil, 2008). Many of the behaviors that American males are socialized to engage in, to achieve a masculine identity, do not support the notion of working hard in school (Swain, 2005). In fact, the behaviors of males that are praised involve physical dominance and those that do not fit the mold of masculinity are often criticized (Harris & Harper, 2008). Pollack (2000) refers to the code of boys, which is devoid of the expression of emotions. College men are apprehensive about engaging in student organizations or establishing interpersonal relationships with other members of the campus community and that apprehension can negatively impact their academics and their psychosocial development (Harris & Harper, 2008). Men in this country are socialized to see traits such as aggression, individualism, independence, and leadership as gender appropriate behaviors (Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, Martin & Castro, 2010). The problem with traits like independence and individualism is that it creates a conflict for

males who could benefit from seeking help on campus. Consequently, men vacate seeking out help in order to achieve masculinity even at the expense of experiencing failures in life and in school (Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, Martin & Castro, 2010). Gender identity development of males at community colleges is given insufficient attention (Harris & Harper, 2008). In a study of male community college students, Harris and Harper (2008) found that the four men from different ethnic backgrounds used in their study all experienced conflicts related to their masculine identities as students. Gender plays a role in the level of interaction faculty have with students and understanding ways to assist men in getting beyond this barrier would help to increase the amount of men who interact with faculty.

Some of the aforementioned barriers, no doubt, impact the frequency of interaction students have with faculty. Ironically, several scholars have found that Black students report more interaction with their instructors than other races (Chang, 2005; Kim, 2010; Kim & Sax, 2009; Fuentes, Alvarado, Berdan & Deangelo, 2014). Nevertheless, the underperformance of Black students in the areas of outcomes like GPA and persistence continues to be a challenge within higher education. After further examination of the type of interaction Black students often report having with faculty, it appears that the interaction is primarily academic in nature involving course-related discourse (Cole, 2010; Kim, 2010). This type of interaction, specifically if the feedback is negative, has the potential to cause students to be apprehensive about interacting with faculty. While frequent interaction is important, the quality of the interaction may take precedent over the quantity. Furthermore, frequency of interactions with faculty alone do not predict learning (Lundberg, 2010). Studies on interaction must account for student

characteristics like gender and race. To simply increase the frequency of interaction with students rather than examining the quality or nature of the interaction may not benefit students in general, and students of color in particular.

Similar to gender, race is another student characteristic that can contribute to the apprehension students have about interacting with faculty. Black males specifically, must not only contend with the challenges of gender identity they must also contend with the challenges of racial identity. A qualitative study done by Brown (2006) found that many Black male students perceived that they were negatively viewed by the rest of the campus, faculty, and their White peers. Whether the perception is real or imagined, there is a consciousness of one's Blackness that has an effect on how students experience college. Brown (2006) also found that dealing with the negative stereotypes that cast aspersions on Black males impacted the academic and social development of the students in his study. Some Black males in higher education are impacted by stereotype threat, which stems from the pervasive portrayals of Blacks being intellectually inferior and can cause a burden on students that results in them possessing a negative perception of their performance in academic settings (Steele, 1992; & Steele & Aronson, 1995). The Black male students who internalize the negative societal perceptions of themselves can lead to a painful experience (Brown, 2006). Many students develop a measure of self-doubt that contributes to their unwillingness to interact with peers, faculty, and staff on campus (Brown, 2006). Furthermore, those campuses that have a low Black male attendance and a low Black male presence in their personnel can lead students to feel more isolated and alienated on campus (Brown, 2006). Black males who choose to become members and leaders can sometimes feel the pressure of having to speak on behalf of all Black

students, and being tokenized can have an adverse effect on their willingness to interact and get engaged in class (Quaye & Harper, 2007). Many of the factors listed above can contribute to the intentional lack of involvement on the part of some Black male students and institutions can play a part in helping to mitigate some of them. Institutions that are committed to environments that will allow Black males to explore their identities and become comfortable with being Black males within a larger community of other races and gender groups, may experience more success with their Black male students.

What is essential in employing strategies to increase interaction is the understanding that, although interaction can positively impact student success, students do not all experience the same benefits as a result of having it (Chang, 2005; Cole, 2007; Fuentes et. al, 2014; Kim & Sax, 2009; Thompson, 2001). Rather than utilizing a homogenous approach to increase interaction with all students, practitioners should consider which strategies best fit their institutional context and the student population they are attempting to target. It is important that practitioners understand the types of interactions that are most influential in producing specific outcomes for target populations (Arredondo, 1995).

### **Overview of Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that is employed and is central to this study is validation theory. Validation theory (VT) was developed by Rendon (1994) after participating in a large qualitative study called the “transition to college project” with a team of researchers that were interested in understanding the influence that out-of-classroom experiences had on learning and retention. The group of researchers conducted focus groups at multiple institutions, both 2-yr and 4-yr, using Astin’s (1984) theory of



involvement as a theoretical framework. One of the key findings was that low-income students entered college with higher levels of self-doubt and lack of confidence in their ability to succeed academically than the more affluent students. In fact, the more affluent and traditional students in this study entered college with very little concern about their ability to succeed. However, for those students who expressed having a difficult time with making the transition to college due to a lack of confidence, the mitigating factor for them was a person reaching out to them and affirming their capacity to learn. Many students in the study cited a faculty member as being the person who validated them by taking the time to remember and reference them by name, giving them opportunities to demonstrate their abilities as learners, encouraging students with cheers of “you can do it,” and serving as mentors meeting with students outside of class as well. In analyzing the findings in this study, Rendon (1994) developed the theory of validation. Validation occurs when someone intentionally takes an active interest in the academic and personal development of a student serving as a source of encouragement and support.

Validation theory for faculty, per Rendon (1994), involves showing genuine concern for students, being approachable, creating learning experiences that reinforce students’ ability to learn, being willing to work individually with students who need extra help, and providing meaningful feedback. Validation is not limited to practices that only can take place inside the classroom, but these practices can occur outside of the class as well. The two primary objectives of validation are to encourage students to believe they are creators of knowledge and belong in the learning community and to foster personal development and social adjustment. Although this theory originally focused primarily on low-income, first generation, and adult students, it can be useful to all students (Rendon-

Linares & Munoz, 2011). Validation, however, was designed particularly to address the unique needs of students primarily from historically underrepresented populations like minority students and women. Students who are not accustomed to being affirmed and validated as students, such as minority, first-generation, and students from low-income backgrounds may experience even greater gains than others from being exposed to an institution that embraces validation. This has particular benefits for community colleges because they are open access institutions, which means students are not required to demonstrate proficiency via performance-based metrics to gain admission. Most four-year institutions however use metrics like standardized test scores and grade point averages to determine student ability, and those metrics serve as validation for students. For students attending a 4yr institution their acceptance letter to the institution serves as a confirmation that they belong at the institution. Furthermore, meeting admission requirements is proof that they are capable of doing the work. Community colleges however, regardless of prior academic performance, admit students who earned a high school diploma or the equivalent. Without having to meet entrance requirements to gain admission, community college students are not validated in the same way students receiving an acceptance letter from a 4yr institution are. In fact, community college for a lot of students is seen as less rigorous than a 4-yr institution, and those who attend are often regarded as not being college material (Rendon, 2009). For those students who question their academic ability and whether or not they even belong in college, the faculty can serve as a source of encouragement and support to raise their self-perceived academic ability. Through validating feedback on assignments and positive messages about the potential of their students, faculty can change the negative inner narrative a

student without a strong academic history may experience. Community colleges can benefit from more research being done on ways in which they can incorporate the VT framework into their institutional practices to enhance the college experience for all students.

Although there is a considerable amount of scholarship on VT (Rendon, 1994; Rendon & Jalomo, 1995; Rendon & Garza, 1996; Rendon-Linares & Munoz, 2011; Barnett, 2011), Bauer (2014) was the first to explore how validation impacts faculty-student engagement for Black males at a community college. Specifically, this study analyzed how validation and time status, whether a student was enrolled part-time or full-time, affected faculty-student engagement for Black males at a community college. Additionally, the amount of validation students received from faculty was analyzed by creating three levels: low, medium, and high. In this study, Bauer made two key assumptions: full-time students would report higher levels of engagement than part-time students and faculty-student engagement would increase for students who reported higher levels of validation from faculty. The results of this study revealed that there was a positive correlation between validation and reported levels of faculty-student engagement. The students who reported receiving a low level of validation from faculty expressed less engagement than those who reported receiving a medium level of validation from faculty. The same was true for those who reported receiving a medium level of validation from faculty, they reported having less engagement with faculty than those students who reported a high level of validation from faculty. In other words, the more validation faculty extended to the students, the higher the reports of faculty-student engagement. This indicates that the amount of validation given by faculty is important as

well. This study highlights the positive effect validation can have on faculty-student engagement for Black male students enrolled at a community college. Lastly, there was no positive relationship established between faculty-student engagement and time status. Whether a student was enrolled full-time or part-time did not significantly impact the level of faculty-student engagement reported. This finding has particular application for community colleges, which typically have a large part-time enrollment (Provasnik & Planty, 2008.)

The challenge for community colleges across the country is to identify practices that can be employed inside the classroom that can help foster and promote persistence. Studies have shown that there are in-class practices that promote persistence and learning as well (Deil-Amen, 2011; Tinto, 1997) particularly for Black males (Wood & Turner, 2011). By using the classroom as a case study, Tinto (1997) compared and contrasted students in a learning community called the Coordinated Study Program (CSP), with students taking similar classes in isolation at a community college. In this study, Tinto used a multi-methods approach to acquire data from surveys as well as interviews with the participants. The results from the quantitative portion of the study revealed that the CSP students reported having greater involvement in academic and social activities and greater perceived developmental gains than the students taking the class in isolation. Additionally, the CSP students persisted fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall at much higher rates as well. Of the five variables that were significant predictors of persistence, one of them was the student perception of faculty. The quantitative results indicated two important elements, amongst other things, to VT: there are experiences that take place in the classroom that positively predict persistence and learning, and that one of those

experiences involved the perceived interaction between student and faculty. More importantly, Tinto concluded that faculty mattered to persistence not just because of what is done outside of the classroom but because of what is done inside the classroom.

Much of the literature on student persistence emphasizes the importance of student integration and involvement (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 1997). In recent years, however, scholars have been critical of earlier works on integration and involvement claiming that the studies were based on a predominantly White audience and may not have the same application as it relates to students of color (Lundberg, 2010; Rendon, Jalomo & Nora, 2000). Rendon's (1994) work suggests that validation may be the most important factor in student persistence and success, particularly for non-traditional students like students of color, first generation, and adult students. Some scholars have reconciled the two theories of integration and validation by suggesting that validation may be a precondition to integration, particularly for non-traditional students (Barnett, 2011). In her study, Barnett explored the role faculty can play inside the classroom using validation as a predictor of academic integration and intent to persist for students at a community college. The purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which validating practices, as experienced by students, contributed to their sense of academic integration and whether those experiences contributed to their intent to persist. Investigating multiple hypotheses, Barnett made the following assumptions: validation has discernable components, higher levels of validation would predict a stronger sense of academic integration, higher levels of validation would predict a stronger intent to persist, and higher levels of academic integration would predict a stronger intent to persist. Validation, which is a broad concept, was broken down into four subconstructs: feeling

valued and known by instructor, caring instruction, appreciation for diversity, and mentoring. The results from this study revealed that the four subconstructs were discernable and had distinct effects on a student's intent to persist. For example, of the four subconstructs, being known and valued by the instructor is the highest predictor of intent to persist with mentoring being the second highest. This suggests that the type of validation used is important to the desired outcome. Another result was that validation was a predictor for a sense of academic integration for all students, however, when compared to White students, validation is a much higher predictor for Black, Latino, and Asian students. Overall, higher levels of validation predicted a higher intent to persist, but at different rates when comparing different race/ethnicity groups. For instance, Black and Latino students who felt validated by faculty expressed intent to persist at much higher rates than the White students in this study. It is important to note that although validation is an effective strategy to promote persistence and learning for all students, students of color tend to benefit more. Although validation predicted persistence, the highest predictor of validation was academic integration. Rather than view academic integration and faculty validation as competing concepts of student persistence, faculty validation can be used as catalyst for academic integration, which is a strong predictor of intent to persist.

Despite the many benefits integration can have on student outcomes like retention and persistence, much of the research on integration puts the onus on the student to take responsibility for facilitating that process (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 1997). The process of integrating into a dominant culture that may be significantly different from one's own culture can make the integration process challenging for many

students of color (Flowers, 2003; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Tierney, 1992). A paradigmatic shift in thinking is needed, in which the institution takes the responsibility of creating an environment that invites students of color to get involved and integrate into the culture of the institution (Rendon, 1994). Rather than abandoning one's own culture to integrate into another, Rendon (1994) intimates maintaining a sort of dual citizenship, in which the student can develop an understanding and appreciation for their own culture and that of the institution's. Validation theory does not dismiss the importance of involvement and integration rather, it places an emphasis on institutional responsibility to invite student involvement where traditional theories of integration and involvement have not (Lundberg, 2010). In combining what appears to be divergent approaches to learning, VT and integration or involvement, Lundberg (2010) conducted a study that examined the usage of both theories. In addition to utilizing VT, this study incorporated Astin's (1993) Input Environment Outcome (IEO) model to investigate how placing an institutional commitment on diversity and student involvement in academic experiences, particularly with faculty and staff, contributes to learning. IEO emphasizes the importance of the amount of time and energy students invest to attain desired educational goals. Consequently, in an IEO model as it was put forth by Astin (1993), the student was primarily responsible for getting involved in activities that ultimately contributed to their learning. Validation theory on the other hand, places the responsibility on the institution to create an environment that invites the involvement of students, particularly students of color (Rendon, 1994). In this study, there were four sets of variables: student and institutional background characteristics, student involvement in the college experience, which includes perceptions of the quality of relationships with

faculty and administration, perceptions of institution's emphasis on diversity, and measures of student learning. Three domains were used as measures of learning: general education, science and technology, and intellectual skills. The results of this study affirmed that an institutional emphasis for students of color predicted gains in learning in all three measures of learning. The students in this study all attended a predominantly White university and those students who perceived the institution as one that places an emphasis on diversity reported greater gains in learning than those students who did not. Students of color benefit from institutions that value diversity in a way that can positively impact their academic experiences on campus.

Additionally, perceiving the faculty as approachable, helpful, understanding, and encouraging was a predictor of learning in the areas of general education and intellectual skills. Consequently, negative interactions with faculty was an obstruction to learning. Faculty can assist the college in placing value on diversity by incorporating validating practices in their classroom that invite the participation and ultimately the integration of all students. The specific academic activities that took place in class that predicted learning for students of color were time spent on coursework that involved reflection and collaboration with faculty and peers. This result confirms Tinto's (1997) assertion that there are in-class experiences that can promote learning and integration, specifically as it relates to role of faculty and how students perceive them.

### **Faculty Role and Validating Strategies**

In 2014 the Center for Community College Engagement published a report on student success for men of color enrolled in community college. The report noted that engagement with faculty was one of the top contributors to success for men of color. The



literature is replete with studies that highlight the essential role faculty play in the success of students of color (Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Crooks, Collado, Martin & Castro, 2010; Deil-Amen, 2011; Fountaine, 2012; Harrison & Palacios, 2014; Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Lampert, 1993; Lundberg 2014). There are many factors that contribute to student success, both institutional and non-institutional. The non-institutional factors involve personal characteristics and environmental factors such as parents' level of education, family support, study habits, academic aspiration, and socio-economic status (Bush & Bush, 2010). Many scholars that see student engagement and interaction as a function of non-institutional factors (Chang, 2005; Kuh, 2003; Thompson, 2001). However, more recent studies suggest that interaction and engagement is a function of institutional factors, specifically, faculty involvement (Bush & Bush, 2010; CCSSE, 2014; Harris & Wood, 2014; Harrison & Palacios, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2011). This idea that the institution would be responsible for engagement and interaction is a complete departure from traditional paradigms, shifting the onus from the student to the institution (Wood & Turner, 2011). One of the main reasons for the need to shift the responsibility of interactions from student to faculty to faculty to student is because stereotype threat is real and all too often reported as a barrier to interaction by Black males. For men of color, one characteristic that is highly valued in faculty is care (Gardenhire-Crooks et al, 2010). There are multiple qualitative studies in which men of color have linked care shown towards them by faculty with increased interaction and engagement (Gardenhire-Crooks et al, 2010; Griffin, 2013; Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Wood, 2014). The challenge for faculty in trying to foster more interaction with men of color, however, is that the literature must move beyond using general characteristics like care, toward creating

tangible strategies that are both operational and replicable for the purposes of training more faculty.

Although care is a nebulous concept and difficult to operationalize, one way for faculty to demonstrate their level of care is by using validating practices (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Furthermore, the more faculty validate students by affirming their existence in the classroom, the more students are willing to interact and engage in the classroom (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). In surveying the literature on increasing interaction, there is a body of literature that identifies validating practices and behaviors faculty engaged in that had a positive impact on student success (Cole, 2007; Cole, 2010; Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Frankel & Swanson, 2002; Gardenhire-Crooks et al, 2010; Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Kim, 2010; Wood, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2011). For instance, when faculty initiate interaction with students rather than relying on the students to approach them, they are able to demonstrate through their actions that they care (Harrison & Palacios, 2014; Wood, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2011). Some faculty possess personal characteristics like being approachable, personable, friendly, smiling, and waving which serves as an indication to students that they are accessible (Harrison & Palacios, 2014, Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2011) and cause students to feel comfortable approaching them (Cole, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2001). Students of color in particular look for these types of accessibility cues as a way to determine their level of interaction with faculty (Kezar & Maxey, 2014).

Beyond possessing certain personal characteristics that promote interaction, there are specific behaviors faculty can use to make the classroom a welcoming environment that affirms that the students belong in the class in particular, and in college in general.

Moreover, by making the classroom a caring and validating environment for Black male students, faculty are able to reduce the negative effects of stereotype threat and promote interaction (Wood, 2014). There are several ways to make the classroom a validating environment for students. Wood and Turner (2011) highlight five practices that could promote interaction: being friendly from the onset, checking on academic progress, listening to student concerns, proactively addressing performance issues, and encouraging students to succeed. Other strategies include providing academic support even when it is not requested, providing feedback on written assignments where performance is not equated with ability, collaborating with students on research projects and providing mentorship and student praise (Cole, 2007; Cole, 2010; Frankel & Swanson, 2002; Fuentes et. al, 2014; Wood, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2011). Tantamount to the frequency of interaction is the importance of the quality of the interaction that takes place between faculty and student. Kezar and Maxey (2014) identified four high quality faculty interactions: being approachable and personable, demonstrating enthusiasm and passion for work, caring about students personally, and serving as role models and mentors. Despite the literature available regarding what students identify as validating behaviors, what remains unknown is whether faculty have intentionally applied these strategies in their classrooms. Furthermore, it is not known what strategies specifically faculty have found to be most useful in fostering interaction with their Black male students?

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to identify validating strategies that faculty can use to foster more interaction with the Black male students in their classrooms. This study enables faculty to address an area that is important to their everyday work by developing practices that are data-driven and classroom specific, rather than adopting practices that stem from research done at institutions other than their own. This chapter provides a rationale for the methodological approach I use in this study. Furthermore, this chapter outlines the process used to collect and analyze the data from this study. The chapter also provides a description of the institutional context as well as detail the process used to select informants for the study. Attention also was given to the process used to ensure the accuracy and credibility of this project. Lastly, the limitations of the study and role of the researcher are presented.

The informants in this study were the faculty members who teach courses at a community college. The goal of this study was to identify strategies that faculty deem useful in fostering interaction with their Black male students. As practitioners currently working in the field, the faculty served as the informants implementing validating strategies and relaying their perceptions to inform practice. The questions this study addressed are:

1. Which strategies used to engage Black Male students emerged as useful to faculty?
2. According to faculty, how did utilizing these strategies affect the interactions with Black male students?

3. According to faculty, what are the advantages and disadvantages to utilizing these strategies?
4. How does validation theory inform this study?

### **Methodological Approach**

A qualitative methods research design was selected for this study. Qualitative research is a form of inquiry that emphasizes subjective meaning and perceptions (Krefting, 1991). Specifically, this method of inquiry addresses the perspectives of the informants and how they view their roles in the phenomenon (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). One of the aims of this study is to give a voice to the faculty, and using a qualitative methods approach can help to understand the role faculty play in fostering interaction with their Black male students. Much of what is discussed in the literature regarding the interaction between faculty and students highlights the perspective of the student, however in this study I took a different approach. Although there is a tremendous amount of research published on the impact faculty have on students of color, particularly Black males, there is still much to learn about strategies faculty themselves have found to be effective in fostering the interaction that contributes to student success. Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative methods enable participants to describe the phenomenon in their own words without of the constraint of responding to a set of fixed survey questions that are interpreted by the researcher (Kozleski, 2017). Through the usage of different qualitative procedures like interviews and focus groups, participants are given a more active role in the research. Consequently, this methodological approach is useful in trying to understand why some strategies are more effective than others in fostering interaction with Black males within the college context. Qualitative research methods

positions participants in the role of narrator, encouraging them to make meaning of their experiences for the purpose of understanding some phenomenon (Kozleski, 2017).

To date there is much discussion amongst scholars regarding the validity of qualitative research. In part, this criticism stems from qualitative research being done without adequately substantiating why certain procedures are chosen over others (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Within the framework of qualitative research, there are multiple procedures that can be used to increase the validity of a study. Some of the more common procedures discussed in qualitative research are triangulation, member checking, peer reviews, external audits, and reflexivity. In order to determine which validity procedure is appropriate for a particular study, the researcher must consider two things: the lens or viewpoint being used and the paradigm assumptions of the researcher (Creswell & Miller, 2000). At the center of any good qualitative study is the lens of the participant. The participants are the primary source of data and consequently it is imperative that their voices be heard, understood, and accurately recorded in the study. The second lens I chose is my own. As the researcher, my influence, biases, perspective, and role had an impact on how I interpreted the data. Through methods such as journaling, observations, and field notes I was able to be more reflexive in the inquiry process.

The paradigm assumption used in this study is that of an interpretivist perspective. To an interpretivist, all knowledge is socially constructed and therefore realities are subjective (Hinchey, 2008). Rather than seeking to uncover a single truth, an interpretivist approach seeks to better understand how and why something occurs. In this study, faculty are empowered to make meaning of their own experiences in the

classroom, particularly as it relates to their interaction with Black male students. The interpretivist paradigm not only seeks to understand a particular phenomenon, it empowers and encourages action as a result of what is learned (Creswell, 2000).

### **Research Design**

Action research (AR) was selected as the research design for this study. In a general sense, AR is systematic inquiry conducted by researchers with some stake in the educational experience at the institution where the inquiry is taking place, whether the practitioner is a member of the faculty, administration, staff, or one that influences policy (Mills, 2011). In AR, the goal is to identify an action that brings about improvement in an area that the researcher deems important. What distinguishes AR from other types of research in education is that, in AR, the research is conducted by someone who is a member of the academic institution being examined (Hinchey, 2008). Action Research is typically conducted by someone with a vested interest in the outcomes of the study. Whereas with traditional research in education, the researcher is typically not a member of the institution that is being examined (Mertler, 2012), in AR, the researcher can address areas that may be unique to one's own institution. Specifically, for faculty, AR gives them the opportunity to insert themselves into the research by collecting their own data, incorporating their expertise, and making decisions about practices that impact their classrooms (Mertler, 2012). The theory developed in traditional educational research is often used to inform practice for academic institutions. However, theory at times can be highly philosophical and lack concrete steps for educators to take. Furthermore, when developing theory that has the potential to impact practice for multiple institutions, one must consider the intricacies and nuances that are unique to every institution. In relying

on traditional research alone, practitioners must account for the differences that may exist between their own institution and the institution used in the study that informs their practice.

Differences such as institution size, class size, student population, resources, and campus structure all factor into what strategies and practices can be used at a particular institution. One of the major advantages of using AR is that the researcher is able develop practice that fits the unique needs of one's own institution (Metz & Page, 2002). Action Research has the ability to bridge the gap that exists between theory and practice by empowering practitioners themselves to develop ground level practice that is data-driven and relevant to their institutions. As a result, there is a need for more AR, which has a direct impact on local practice.

The type of AR used in this study is classroom action research, that is, research that will be done in an educational setting, specifically the classroom (Hinchey, 2008). The aim of this research design is to train faculty in how to use validating strategies in the classroom. Additionally, the design has the faculty implement those strategies and then serve as informants for this study. There are multiple models available to choose from that identify steps or cycles that frame the inquiry process (Calhoun, 1994). I chose to use a generic version of planning, acting, evaluating, and reflecting. Regardless of the model chosen, AR involves constant reflection of what is being done, why it is being done, and a systematic analysis of its effect (Mertler, 2012). The process of reflection often leads to making adjustments to improve the results and then more action is required. For this reason, action research is viewed in the literature as cyclical because of the need to repeat the process (Hinchey, 2008).



## **Explanation of Cycles**

For the first cycle, the planning stage involved conducting a literature review on the chosen topic and then submitting a research proposal to my dissertation committee and the institutional review board. Prior to the start of the next stage each participant had to sign a consent form agreeing to participate in the study (see Appendix A). Next, for the action stage I put together a training session for the participants in my study. In the training session, the participants were taught the principles of validation theory and strategies they can use to foster more interaction with the Black males in their classrooms. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the seminar I debriefed with the participants to answer any questions they may have about what was presented and to get an overall sense of how they felt about the presentation. I then reflected on the training and documented my takeaways from the experience by journaling my thoughts. In the second cycle, I began the implementation phase of this study. Following the training session, the planning stage for cycle II involved writing down the strategies that were identified as helpful in fostering interaction with Black males in the classroom and providing a list to the participants for implementation in the classrooms. The participants were responsible for the action. The faculty implemented the strategies in their classrooms and had the potential of creating strategies of their own. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies, I conducted in-class observations of all the participants while they are implementing the strategies using an observation protocol (see Appendix B). Additionally, I brought the participants together for a focus group to discuss what things were working and what new strategies had been discovered (see Appendix C). I

reflected on this cycle by journaling my thoughts and perceptions of how things were going.

In the final cycle, I identified the strategies that emerged as useful, recorded them, and provided that list to the participants for them to implement in the classrooms. The action again consisted of the participants incorporating any new strategies that emerged while making adjustments to existing strategies to implement in the classroom. I evaluated the effectiveness of the new strategies by doing more observations and by conducting 30 – 60 minute semi-structured interviews with the participants (see Appendix D). I recorded and transcribed the interviews to identify themes.

### **Research Site**

The research site, is a public midsize community college, non-residential, 2-year comprehensive community college, with a total enrollment of 13,165 as of Fall 2016. Approximately 6,091 students are enrolled full-time and 7,074 students are enrolled part-time. The breakdown of students enrolled by race/ethnicity: 67% White, 13% Hispanic, 10% Black, 3% Asian, and 1% American Indian or Alaska Native. For the 2012 cohort, the graduation rate for first-time, full-time degree/certificate seeking students within a three-year period was 27% for White students, 20% for Asian students, 19% for Hispanic students, and 8% for Black students. The retention percentage from Fall 2015 to Fall 2016 was approximately 73% for White students compared to 50% for Black students who were first-time, full-time degree seeking students. As of 2016, there were a total of 215 full-time faculty employed at the college. Of the 215 full-time faculty, 11 of them identified as Black or African American. Additionally, of the 11 faculty, 5 of them identified as male.

This midsize community college was selected as the site for this research project mainly because action research requires that the researcher maintains a form of membership within the institution being studied. As a faculty member at this institution for 11 years, I, in consultation with other faculty members, was able to identify a research topic that is relevant and specific to the institution. Additionally, as a faculty member who works for the institution, the outcomes of this study not only benefits the participants, they benefit me as well. Furthermore, my relationship with faculty at this was useful in soliciting participants for this study.

### **Participant Selection**

The aim of qualitative inquiry is to glean rich and detailed data from participants; this often involves using a small sample size (Patton, 1990). In this study, participants were selected using a technique known as purposive sampling. This type of nonrandom sampling involves deliberately selecting participants that best inform the study based upon willingness to participate and are considered information-rich cases (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). For the purposes of this study it was important that the participant had a willingness to participate, had at least 5 years of prior teaching experience, and has Black male students in his or her class. The rationale for selecting participants with 5 or more years teaching is so that the participant was able to reflect on past experiences and the level of interaction they maintained with their Black male students and be able to compare past experiences to their experience after the study.

In order to identify participants for this study, I presented at a professional development conference on fostering interaction with Black male students in the classroom and at the end of the presentation invited any faculty member interested in

participating in a study on my topic to contact me via phone or email. From the list of responses, those responders that met the criteria of having 5 years or more teaching experience, and two or more Black males in their classroom were considered for the study. Lastly from that list of responders, the three participants with the most teaching experience according to years of teaching experience were chosen for the study. I believed that the more teaching experience the participant has, the easier it would be to determine if the strategies were effective relative to past years.

### **Faculty Profile**

There were three participants that participated in this study, all tenured professors at the college. Professor A is a White male and has achieved the rank of Associate Professor and teaches in the Communications Media department. Professor B is a White male and has achieved the rank of full professor and he teaches in the Speech Communications department. Professor C, is White female and she has achieved the rank of assistant professor and teaches in the Psychology department.

### **Data Collection**

Prior to the start of the Fall 2017 term, I conducted a 60-minute group information session with the participants to ground them in VT (Rendon, 1994) and identify some validating strategies. At this information session, participants were able to learn more about validating practices and ask questions for clarity. Participants were encouraged to utilize the strategies identified in the information session and to create their own validating strategies to foster interaction. Once the participants were comfortable with VT and have a working knowledge of what it entails, they were instructed to begin incorporating validating strategies in their classroom. The Fall 2017 term served as the

time period for data collection. Once the participants began teaching, data was collected from multiple sources including: observations, focus groups, and 30 - 60 minute semi-structured interviews towards the end of the semester.

Observation is a common method of data collection in a qualitative study involving carefully watching and systematically recording what is taking place in a particular setting (Schmuck, 1997). In this study, I used structured observations, which involves looking only for specific behaviors, reactions, and interactions rather than taking note of everything that is taking place in the classroom setting (Mertler, 2012). I conducted one observation per informant within the first six weeks of the term and then a second round of observations during the second half of the semester. One major advantage of conducting observations is that I can compare my own interpretation of what was observed with the participant's interpretation for validity. One major limitation of observation is the impact the presence of the researcher may have on classroom behavior and interaction.

The next method to be used to collect data was a focus group. Focus groups are a great way to get participants that are more comfortable talking in groups to open and share their experiences. A major challenge in using focus groups is to facilitate the group in a way that one or two participants do not dominate the session (Mertler, 2012). After seven weeks of instruction, the participants attended a one hour focus group to discuss what was working and what was not working. The goal of the focus group in this study was to give the participants an opportunity to learn from one another's experiences and to make proper adjustments mid semester.

Semi-structured interviews are also a common method of data collection for qualitative inquiry. Using semi-structured interviews enables the researcher to ask, at times, clarifying and follow-up questions that may not be present on the interview protocol (see Appendix D). This semi-structured format gives the researcher the flexibility to go after information that is unintended. Furthermore, this open-ended structure may result in the researcher exploring different information from different participants (Leedy & Omrod, 2005). The interviews resembled a one-on-one conversation in which the participants were encouraged to give detailed descriptions beyond what was directly asked of them in the interview protocol. In each 30 – 60 minute interview the I asked questions to evoke explanatory data in order to make meaning of the experiences expressed by the participants. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Follow-up interviews were not necessary for further clarity. The interviews took place toward the end of the term so that participants had sufficient time to implement the strategies, make adjustments, and then implement the strategies again.

I also kept a field journal during the inquiry process in order to document my thoughts, perceptions, and biases while conducting this study. The field journal was essential to the reflection stage, which is central to the AR design.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Once all that data was collected, I used multiple validity procedures to increase the credibility and accuracy of the data analysis. The goal of data analysis is to highlight patterns and themes that appear to common experiences (Hinchey, 2008). One of the procedures that was used to organize the data is a process called triangulation. This procedure involves using multiple sources of data to sort through and find common

themes (Creswell, 2000). Triangulation is effective in confirming that the narrative account is valid because it converges multiple sources and highlights areas of overlap and agreement. Specifically, it does not rely on once source of information but finds commonality among multiple sources. The sources used for acquiring data in this study are observations and field notes, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. Another procedure I used in this study is a process known as member checking. Member checking consists of sharing the data and interpretations with the participants for their review and agreement (Creswell, 2000). In using an interpretivist framework for this study, the accuracy of what is supposed to represent the voice of the participants is crucial. Focus groups provided the opportunity for me to share the data along with my interpretations to confirm the credibility of the data collected. Another crucial part of ensuring the credibility and accuracy of this study is establishing an audit trail. The audit trail is essentially the documentation of the inquiry process using techniques such as journaling and logging all of the activities that take place during the study (Creswell, 2000). Establishing an audit trail is important for qualitative research because it provides a detailed chronology for external auditors to review and understand the inquiry process.

### **Data Analysis**

The semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed for the purposes of coding. Coding involves sifting through the data to organize the information according to thematic categories (Hinchey, 2008). Transcribing the interviews helped to identify if there are any experiences or behaviors that were reoccurring. After collecting all of the raw data, I used a process of inductive analysis to reduce the information collected to highlight the key findings. One way to accomplish that is by creating a coding scheme. A

coding scheme essentially involves reading through the different sources of data and grouping it according to similar types of information (Mertler, 2012; Parsons & Brown, 2002). Although there are many ways to organize the data by grouping, I used different color markers to group events and observations. Each color represents a different theme or category. The coding process is very complex and often requires rereading the data to capture all of the themes that may be present. The second stage of coding involves connecting the themes back to the research questions (Mertler, 2012). The final step involves interpret the data and answer the research questions for my study.

### **Limitations**

First, it is noteworthy to acknowledges that this study is an action research study and designed to address a concern at one institution. Therefore, this study is limited in its generalizability to other institutions that have a different population, size, culture, and overall context. Although other institutions may have a similar concern to address, the nuances and uniqueness of every institution will impact the results of this study if replicated. Second, this qualitative study only involved three participants. Therefore, this study, again, is limited in its scope in addressing the concerns of faculty in general. Certainly, the few participants in this study cannot represent the experiences of all faculty and therefore should only be interpreted as a study that lends itself to more inquiry. Finally, my role as a researcher who is also employed at this institution may, in some way, impact the responses gained from the participants. As a fellow faculty member, it is possible that the participants answered questions and implemented strategies in a way that they perceived was desired by the researcher rather than being authentic.



## **Role of Researcher**

I am particularly interested in this topic because of my affiliation with the institution and my passion for working to improve the student success of Black males in college. In stating my interest in this particular topic, it has become increasingly apparent that I must acknowledge my biases as I conduct this study. I am aware that my affiliation with the institution may impact the way I collect and even interpret data. To control for this, I worked closely with colleagues who are affiliated and those who are not affiliated with this institution to ensure that I capture the true experiences of the participants without unconsciously inserting my own.

There will be minimal risks. The participants are all consenting adults who are familiar with institutional research. Additionally, proper approval was obtained from the institution where the study will take place as well as IRB approval from the institution I am enrolled in as a student. Each institution has an institutional review board that reviewed and approved my research interest before any data was be collected. Consent forms were developed and given to the participants. Additionally, the participants who were selected were given the opportunity to ask questions and gain clarity prior to participating. To protect the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms are used rather than actual names when recording and reporting data.

## **Confidentiality**

In keeping confidentiality, the data collected from this study remain confidential and kept in a locked box in my office. The contents kept in the locked box consist of transcripts, observations, and tape recordings from the interviews. No one had access to the locked box other than myself. I acquired approval from the institutional review board

where I am pursuing my degree as well as from the institution where I conducted the research.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore the utility of strategies, based on validation theory, that enhance faculty-student interaction with Black males in the classroom. Divergent from traditional studies on faculty-student interaction, this study focuses on the experiences from the perspective of the faculty rather than the student. Specifically, this study sought to identify strategies that the faculty participants found to be helpful in enhancing their interactions with the Black males in their classroom. In addition to identifying strategies that faculty found useful, I also highlighted the experiences of the faculty while participating in the study.

There is an abundance of literature on faculty-student interaction from the perspective of students, however this study gives detailed accounts of faculty experiences in attempting to initiate interactions with their Black male students. In order to gain a comprehensive view of the faculty-student interaction experience, this study attempts to balance the literature on this topic by providing the faculty perspective. In this chapter, I discuss the cycles of action research in detail. There is a total of three cycles in this study and within each cycle there is a planning, action, evaluation, and reflection stage. In the first cycle the participants were required to attend a training session on the topic of faculty-student interaction and validation theory. In addition, the participants were given validating strategies they could use in the classroom with their students. I then reflected on the training session and journaled about the adjustments that had to be made as a result of the training. In the second cycle, I took field notes while observing the participants in the classroom setting. After observing the participants as they implemented the strategies

in class, I met with the participants in a focus group to discuss how things were going and to determine what further adjustments would need to be made. I also was able to journal my reflections from the in-class observations and the focus group. In the third and final cycle I observed the participants once again in class while they implemented the strategies. Lastly, I conducted a semi-structured interview with each participant to gain insight into their experiences as they implemented the strategies and the perceived impact they felt the strategies had on their interactions with the Black males in their classroom. After collecting all of this data, I reviewed the responses from the participants and my field notes and journal entries to identify broad themes that emerged.

### **Cycle I**

In this cycle, I completed a review of the literature on faculty-student interaction was able to extract some validating strategies that were cited in the literature as effective ways to enhance faculty interaction with students of color in general and Black males in particular. In my review of the literature, I was able to identify some of the barriers to interacting with faculty for Black males such as stereotype threat, which is the fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one's own group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). For many Black students, males in particular, the media portrays them as unintelligent, which causes them to be self-conscious and can reduce the likelihood of them initiating interaction with faculty (Wood, 2014). In order to reduce the pressure some Black male students may feel about engaging faculty in discussion about their academics, faculty can shift the onus from the student to themselves. Specifically, by faculty taking the responsibility of fostering interaction with their students and not the other way around, faculty can alleviate some of the fear students may have about interacting with a faculty

member by initiating the interaction themselves. In order to foster interaction with students in the classroom, it helps to create an environment that is inviting and welcoming to students (Harrison & Palacios, 2014). There are a few ways faculty can create a welcoming environment in the classroom; the first, and potentially most important way to create a welcoming environment for students in the classroom, is by explicitly verbalizing to the students that they belong in the class. Faculty must be cognizant of the reality that some students, particularly those of color, may have been made to feel that they are not smart enough to succeed in college through messages in the media or a discouraging k-12 experience. Despite the negative messages they may have received about themselves as students prior to enrolling in college, faculty can counter that narrative by verbalizing to students that they belong. Another way faculty can create a welcoming environment in the classroom is by inquiring about the progress of their students, not just in their class but in college in general (Harrison & Palacios, 2014). Inquiring about progress is a way for the faculty to demonstrate that they care about the student and their success. In accordance with VT, when someone takes an active interest in a student and their college experience, it increases the likelihood of their success (Rendon, 1994). Lastly, another way for faculty to create a welcoming environment is by encouraging interactions with students and taking the time to remember their students' names. Establishing a personal connection with students was found to be one of the most important factors that contributed to the success of minority men in community college (CCSSE, 2014). Utilizing their names when interacting with students is an indication to the student that the faculty is aware of who they are. Rather than being just an obscure student in the class, addressing students by name personalizes the interaction.

Utilizing the literature review, I was able to prepare a training session that the participants had to attend before implementing the strategies in the classroom. Five participants attended the training session: four were present for the entire 75-minute presentation and one participant arrived late and was only present for the last fifteen minutes of the presentation. The participants were all engaged in the training material as evidenced by my observation of them taking notes, asking questions, and body language. Specifically, the participants were making eye contact with me throughout the presentation, smiling and nodding their heads in approval of something displayed or said. Some of the validating strategies discussed involved initiating contact with students, providing affirming feedback on assignments, and giving assignments that allow students to tie in their personal experiences. Another validating strategy presented was the concept of othermothering, which involves faculty going above and beyond what is required of them as faculty by doing things such as taking an interest in the personal and academic development of students, holding students accountable by monitoring progress, offering to meet individually after class, and giving support and advocacy (Guiffrida, 2005). Another strategy discussed in the training involved the faculty using accessibility cues, which are cues that indicate to students that the faculty member is accessible. Some accessibility cues involve smiling, waving, being personable, and being friendly (Cole, 2007). Additionally, I explained validating behaviors such as checking on academic progress, actively listening to concerns, proactively addressing performance issues, and consistently encouraging students to succeed (Wood & Turner, 2011). Lastly, some validating practices that are consistent with the literature were provided, including

providing academic support even when it is not requested, collaborating with students on research projects (when possible), and providing mentorship.

### **Reflections From Cycle I**

The participants appeared to be engaged and genuinely interested in increasing their interaction with the Black males in their classes. I observed that two out of the four participants were actively taking notes during the training session. The other two participants did not take notes but listened attentively. Each participant offered suggestions for other strategies that could be used in the classroom. Some of the strategies suggested were informing students of conferences that may coincide with their career interests, soliciting the input of the students to inform teaching techniques, collaborating with students on projects, and sending personalized emails to students who are struggling with course material encouraging them to speak with faculty for extra help. Some concerns were expressed about this research project and we discussed them in the training session, some of those concerns involved the presence of researcher during in-class observations impacting the class dynamics and the prospect of male students dropping the class during the academic term thus not meeting the requirement to have two Black males in class. One participant in particular, did not have two Black males in one class but taught two separate classes with one Black male in each class. As a result, I was required to make some decisions about participation in the study.

In response to the concern about my presence impacting the dynamics of the class during observations, we agreed that it was a limitation that would have to be acknowledged but not changed. The observation was an important component of the study and needed to remain. One participant asked about experiencing attrition during the

study and falling below the required two Black males in one class to participate in the study. This was also another limitation that we agreed would have to be acknowledged but would not disqualify a participant once the study had begun. Rather that participant could still speak to his or her experiences before the attrition and could offer thoughts about the perceived impact of the validating strategies. However, I decided that the participant who did not have the required two Black males in one class would not be able to participate in the study. Furthermore, I also decided that the participant who was late and only received the last fifteen minutes of the training session, and thus did not have the benefit of participating in the entire training session, would not be able to participate in the study as well.

After the initial training session, there were three participants who were selected to participate in the study. Given the amount of data that would need to be collected from each participant, I decided that a minimum of three participants would be sufficient to complete the study. Upon leaving the training, I wondered if the participants really understood the importance of faculty-student interaction. I felt rushed. The session lasted 75 minutes and each of the participants had to run to teach a class immediately after the session ended. Although the participants asked questions and were attentive during the training, I left the session uncertain about whether or not they had a good understanding of the material. Moreover, I was concerned about whether the participants would feel comfortable enough utilizing the strategies we discussed in the training. Specifically, I was concerned that the participants might need more than one training to effectively implement some of the validating strategies discussed.



## Cycle II

After completing the training session, the participants were instructed to begin utilizing the identified strategies discussed in the training to enhance their degree of interaction with their students. Each participant received the same set of strategies to utilize. Additionally, with a better understanding of validation theory and validation approach, the participants were encouraged to create strategies as well. The participants were given approximately five weeks to begin implementing the strategies before my in-class observations. I scheduled an in-class observation with each participant in order to evaluate their usage of the strategies. I wanted to schedule the in-class observations during a content class and not when a test was scheduled in order to maximize the observation. As a result, scheduling observations proved to be a more difficult challenge than anticipated. Nevertheless, an observation was scheduled for each participant and executed. I observed the participants and took notes using an observation protocol that focused on particular areas of interest as it pertains to the study (Appendix B). Specifically, the observation protocol focused on frequency of interaction, strategies used, level of comfort utilizing strategies, obstacles, and new strategies. Lastly, each observation looked at a series of time periods: the beginning or first third of the class, the middle or middle third of the class, the end or last third of the class, and after class. Each class lasted approximately 165 minutes. Pseudonyms were used to differentiate one participant from the next and I only knew the identifiers.

**Professor A.** I observed professor A as he interacted with his Black male students frequently, particularly during the beginning and midpoint of the class. Other strategies I observed professor A using during this observation included strategies such as: initiating

contact with his students before the class officially started, inquiring about the progress of his students during the class, and remembering the names of his students. When students gave an incorrect answer, he validated the student given by the student by stating that it was a “good try” but not the correct answer to avoid singling out one student. I also observed his usage of accessibility cues such as: smiling, waving, and being friendly as students walked in the class. At one point I heard him chime in on a video game discussion some students were having in the class saying, “that sounds like a really cool game.” The students preceded to give him more details about how the game is played. I interpreted this intrusion on the conversation the students were having as his attempt to relate to the students and take interest in the things his students cared about. Based upon my observation, there were three Black male students in the class. Two of the Black male students in the class were friends, extremely talkative, and not afraid to initiate interaction with him. The other Black male student was more reserved and less talkative but felt comfortable enough to approach him about his academic performance in the classroom.

The student approached him, seemingly to talk about making up an assignment after missing a prior class. I heard professor A respond by saying, “that is not a problem just give me the assignment next week.” I also overheard Professor A say to the same student, “how does your mouth feel after the surgery?” To which the student replied, “I am feeling a lot better.” The classroom environment seemed to be non-threatening. The students were vocal and did not appear to shy away from discussion in class, with each other, or the professor. The environment felt laid back and the conversations were free-flowing. One major challenge I observed in his class was trying to actively listen to the

two Black males students who were comfortable initiating interaction with him while making sure the more reserved student got a chance to include his voice in the classroom discussions. In an attempt to get his more reserved students involved in the class discussion he gave an in-class assignment that required everyone to contribute to the discussion. Specifically, he had the students observe a video clip and then write down what they saw. Each student had to verbalize what he or she saw. Although all of the students viewed the same clip, they all took note of something unique and different than their classmates. Consequently, everyone in the room had an opportunity to share what they observed, even the more reserved Black male.

After observing every student participate at some point during the class I wrote in my journal, “the participant was able to create a welcoming environment by initiating one-on-one interaction with students and using class assignments that required everyone’s participation.” As an observer I got the feeling that my presence did impact the classroom dynamic. I observed the professor speak with each Black male student individually at some point during the class and I wrote in my journal the question, “does he do this every class or did he do it simply because I was present?” I also wondered if he intentionally interacted with the students because that is what he thought I was looking for in my observation. During the observation I felt he could have done a better job of holding his students accountable. During the class one Black male student frequently utilized his cell phone during the lecture and he did not address the student right away. The student played with his phone for approximately 20 minutes before he finally addressed the student. Additionally, there was one Black male student who was very talkative during the lecture, speaking with a student next to him, loud enough that I could

hear him sitting in the back of the class. Similarly to the case with the cell phone, 20 minutes elapsed before he addressed the student.

**Professor B.** The first observation I made in his class was that the students were very talkative. There were three Black males in the class and the professor had very little interaction with them at the beginning of the class. The majority of the interaction with students took place after class. Out of the three Black male students, only one student stayed after class to discuss his academic performance. In this class the students were making presentations and received feedback during class immediately following their presentation. The feedback students received was very encouraging. One presentation in particular done by a Black male student did not meet all of the requirements of the presentation. The presentation was supposed to be typed up and the student did not have a typed copy of the presentation to hand in. Furthermore, the student did not present for three minutes as instructed but finished much earlier. Rather than refuse the presentation, the student was allowed to present and asked to email the typed version by the end of the day. Although this student was obviously not prepared to present the professor had encouraging feedback for the student making comments such as, “I can see you are passionate about the topic,” and “if you had more time to prepare, this presentation would have received a much higher grade.” The student appeared visibly relieved that he was able to present and that the professor had positive things to say about his presentation. By giving positive feedback in addition to identifying what could have been done better the student’s efforts were validated. The student appeared to be satisfied with the feedback he received as evidenced by the smile when receiving the feedback.

I observed the friendly demeanor the professor displayed in the classroom from the onset of the class. The instructor greeted the students by name and smiled at them as they came up to present. The class felt very welcoming and light-hearted rather than rigid and cold. Towards the end of the class the professor spoke with one of the students saying, "I want to see you do well in this course." The class received messages of encouragement such as, "if you have any issues or concerns with the course please come speak with me." One Black male student stayed after class to speak with the professor about his grade and to gain clarity on an assignment that he had missed. Although the student only inquired about pulling his grade up, in an attempt to get student motivated to strive to get the highest grade possible, the student was told what he needed to do to get an A in the course. The student was encouraged to do extra credit and was told, "you can do this, you are going to be fine in this course." The students in this class were also talkative and at times the professor had to redirect everyone's attention back to the class.

Holding the students accountable, the Black students in particular, was an issue in this course as well. The student that was not prepared to present received positive feedback following his presentation but the parts of the presentation that did not meet the requirements were not addressed. Again, I felt my presence in the class impacted the dynamic of the class. The student that did not type out his presentation or present for three minutes as instructed. Furthermore, that student did not stay after class to discuss the parts of the presentation that did not meet the standards of the course. In my observation of this particular incident I said, "professor missed an opportunity have more interaction with student." The student could have been notified during class to speak with him after class to discuss how the student can better prepare for the next presentation.

One of the validating practices discussed in the training was offering academic support to students even when they do not necessarily request it. As I reflected on the class I was concerned that perhaps too many allowances were made for the students because the study was taking place and I was present in the classroom.

**Professor C.** I did not observe frequent interaction with the Black male students before, during, or after class while observing Professor C. However, I did observe frequent use of accessibility cues, specifically: smiling, waving, and being friendly towards students. The professor knew the names of all of the students and would even use the names of students in examples during her lecture. The students would respond by listening to what she was talking about because she used their names in the examples. I thought it was an effective strategy to keep students engaged in the discussion. This strategy was particularly useful for one Black male student who spent a considerable amount of time on his phone, however when she used his name in an example, he put the phone down to hear what she was saying. Questions were used during lecture to keep students from disengaging in the classroom discussion. When students gave an incorrect answer, she would offer a supportive comment such as, “that was an interesting way of looking at that,” rather than merely state that the response was incorrect. During the first thirty minutes of class only one Black male student was present however three out of the four Black male students in the class arrived excessively late: thirty-three minutes, fifty minutes, and one hour late respectively. Class time was not used to address the student’s tardiness. I assumed that she did not want to embarrass the students by making a spectacle of the time they arrived, however, she did not use break time or after class to hold students accountable. The one Black male that was present from the beginning of

class left during break, which was five to ten minutes, and did not return for thirty minutes.

Another validating strategy Professor C introduced in her class was incorporating culturally relevant topics in her lecture which provided an opportunity for her students of color to provide their perspectives in the class discussion. Some of the topics discussed were negative encounters with the police and discriminatory practices used in experiments that targeted the disenfranchised. Nevertheless, the Black males in this particular class appeared less engaged in the lecture than I had observed in other classes. Quite possibly my presence in the class impacted the dynamics of the class. The Black male students did not volunteer to participate, but were willing to contribute to the discussion if called upon. Participation from her Black male students appeared to be a problem in the class. In my observation I wrote, “how can the professor get the Black males to participate more in the class?” There were other students in the course who participated so much they made it hard for others to participate. Although I observed the usage of accessibility cues and culturally relevant pedagogy, the amount of interaction with the Black male students was minimal. The professor appeared to be very accommodating of students who were late and potentially may have lost an opportunity to hold students accountable. I wrote in my observation, “when will the excessive tardiness be addressed?” After conducting the observations with each participant, a focus group was scheduled within days of the last observation.

## **Focus Group**

The focus group was scheduled to be a 75-minute session similar to the length of time of the initial training session. All three of the participants were scheduled to attend the focus group however only two of the participants actually made it to the focus group. Professor A forgot to add the focus group to his schedule and missed the meeting.

Professor B and Professor C were present for the focus group. The focus group protocol was used to guide the discussion with the participants (Appendix C). Professor B found simple strategies such as: “going out of one’s way to be friendly,” and “acknowledging the student’s presence,” to be very useful in enhancing interaction with his Black males. Professor C reported that “providing positive feedback to students, via email and during class discussion,” to be useful in enhancing interaction with her Black students. The participants both felt that going out of one’s way to be friendly contributed to creating a welcoming environment. The more welcomed the student felt by faculty, the easier it became for students to communicate with them. Acknowledging the student’s presence was a shared sentiment with regards to its impact on students according to the participants. The participants found that knowing the students’ names and using them to interact with the students was extremely helpful in establishing a personal connection with them. Professor C said “although I remembered the names of students of mine in the past, doing so with the intention of using that name to enhance my interaction with my Black male students was a different experience.” Specifically, using their names in examples to illustrate a point was a strategy that she believed enhanced her interaction. Also, I observed that providing positive feedback was another strategy that Professor C really focused on when addressing students. Professor C noted that, “it was hard finding



ways to say something positive about an assignment that was done incorrectly.” The primary mode of interaction for Professor C was email. According to Professor C, “if a student missed an assignment or was late to class I would send them a personal email to inform them I am expecting them to be present or for the assignment to be turned in.” Professor B reported enhanced interaction with his students when he gave them positive feedback on assignments. In my observation of Professor B’s class, it was apparent to me that he has adopted the philosophy of providing positive feedback to students. Every student that presented during my observation received affirming messages such as: “I can tell you are passionate about the topic,” “good job,” “way to go,” and “you are going to do fine in this class.” Professor B said, “the students are forming stronger bonds with each other and providing positive feedback to one another after presentations.”

The participants felt like the strategies were directly related to their lack of attrition in the courses that they taught. Professor C said, “I honestly believe some of my students would have dropped out already if I did not utilize these strategies.” The participants saw their interaction with students as a good way to retain students by establishing a relationship with a student which will increase students’ sense of responsibility. To support this experience, in my observations with the participants I was able to see how the faculty were able to leverage the relationship with the students to get them to participate or volunteer in class. Professor A reported, “I saw one student in the hallway and he was going to walk right pass me until I stopped and began to stare at him, the student immediately began to apologize for missing the assignment and told me that he would give it to me at the next class.” An area of growth for the participants would be

in building a stronger relationship with their Black male students so that they encourage them to do more academically.

There were also some concerns that arose during the discussion that both participants agreed on and that has to do with trying to avoid preferential treatment. Both the participants agreed that if they had not been participating in this study, they would not have been so accommodating of their Black male students. The participants expressed the concern of compromising the integrity of the course by allowing something for one group of students but not for all students. In response to this concern, I informed the participants that holding students accountable is a major component of faculty-student interaction. Another concern the participants had was the lack of follow up by students they extended the invitation to meet with about their academics. Professor C believes that emailing invitations to meet with student may be too impersonal and the invitation may need to be in-person.

Professor A did not attend the focus group due to a scheduling error. In a subsequent meeting, we were able to discuss items on the focus group protocol and I was able to get his input on his experiences up to that point. Professor A agreed that acknowledging the existence of the students had a major impact on the level of interaction he had with his students. Professor A noted “taking the time get to know their names made them visible.” Professor A would even address students by name outside of the class, in passing in the hallway, or anywhere on campus. Professor A believes that utilizing validating strategies is great way to connect with those students who feel disconnected. Professor A talked about the challenge of the pressure to treat every student the same. Professor A shares similar concerns about displaying preferential treatment.

Professor A stated, “I had a hard time knowing where to draw the line between being casual and authoritative in the classroom.”

Professor A reported seeing a difference in his level of interaction with students. Furthermore, Professor A stated, “interacting with students inside the classroom does not provide enough time for dialogue.” Professor A reported using breaks time outside of the class as well to interact with students. Interacting with students outside of the class, meaning before or after, provides an opportunity faculty to interact with students more.

### **Reflections From Cycle II**

After speaking with the participants in the focus group session and in a one-on-one session with Professor A, who missed the focus group, I began to think that the participants could have benefitted from another training, or at least they could have benefitted from being sent the power point from the training so that they have been able to identify more strategies that were discussed in the training. In the second set of observations each participant was observed again. Given how late in the semester the observations took place, the participants did not have much time to implement the adjustments discussed in the focus group. In the classes observed, a review for the final and final presentations were done. In my reflections, I wrote “what about strategies outside of the class?” I felt like the participants were not able to generate much interactions outside of the class. In part, that may be due to the community college context and the student population having more responsibilities (Deil-Amen, 2011). However, I noticed that majority of the interaction with students were formal and only Professor A was able to establish some interaction with his students outside of the classroom.

### **Cycle III**

In cycle III I completed a second round of classroom observations of each participant and took notes. I also complete semi-structured interviews with each participant at the end of the semester to allow the participants to reflect on the semester and discuss their experiences with utilizing strategies based on validation theory.

**Professor A.** I observed Professor A initiating contact with his students as they entered the class. Prior to the start of the class, he interacted with his Black male students: two of the three students he spoke with regarding class-related concerns and the third student he had a brief conversation with regarding an assignment. In an attempt to get every student involved in class discussion, he went around the room and asked each student a question that would be on the test. Every time he called on a student he referenced them by name. To encourage participation in class discussion he highlighted the bravery of the student to attempt to answer the question, even if it was wrong. I also observed him during the break, which takes place during the midpoint of the class, using that time to check in with students to see how they are doing in their classes. During the break in the class I heard Professor A jokingly ask one of his Black male students “what would you call the color of that sweater?” Professor A used humor often to establish a casual relationship with his students. The student seemed happy to engage in the discussion and replied “it’s called fashion.” I also observed Professor A using accessibility cues like smiling and being friendly with students were to create a welcoming environment. The Black male students appeared to be comfortable interacting with Professor A. After class, I observed him meeting with a student to inform him of an assignment that needed to be made up due to absence. Professor A had frequent formal

and informal contact with his Black male students, initiating interaction with them at the beginning, midpoint, and the end of class. Rather than waiting for students to initiate interaction with him, he went to them and began engaging them in discussion at multiple times during the class.

**Professor B.** I did not observe a lot of interaction taking place with the Black males in his class. The students were not afraid to ask questions or get clarity on assignments, however he never moved from behind his desk. The students had to take the initiative. The students were invited to speak with professor after class if they had questions or concerns. I wrote in my observation, “despite his lack of mobility, he used accessibility cues to let students know that he was available and open to meeting with them.” One student took him up on the invitation and waited for him after class to discuss an assignment, however the Black males left right after class. I wrote in my observation, “is inviting students to meet with you after class a sufficient strategy for a community college?” Students were given a lot of positive feedback. The positive feedback and the usage of accessibility cues helped to create a welcoming environment for the students. The class engaged in a lot of chatter during class; I attributed that to his caring approach to teaching. The students were never rushed or embarrassed during their presentations. I observed Professor B as he gave feedback to one student after he presented saying “great job, you seem to be very knowledgeable about the topic and I like how you kept the audience’s attention.” Professor B gave all of his feedback with a smile and spoke about the positives of the presentation before pointing out things that could have done better.

By making himself available after class to meet with students and discuss their performance with them he found another way to encourage interaction. However, the

students had to initiate the discussion regarding performance and none of the Black male students remained after class to speak with Professor B. The Black male students in the class appeared to appreciate the validating feedback from Professor B, as evidence by smiling upon hearing feedback. The students in the class appeared to feel comfortable approaching Professor B. There were no new strategies used by Professor B from the first round of observation.

**Professor C.** Black male students, among other students were greeted by name upon entering the class, however I did not observe the professor interact with any other Black male students face-to-face after that. Only one student was late in the class and he arrived ten minutes late. I wrote in my observation “why are the students on time today as opposed to the last observation?” Although the professor did not address the students directly during my last visit, she did inform me that she sent an email inquiring of their whereabouts. This is what Guffrida (2014) would refer to as going above and beyond what is required to help a student become successful. Rather than allow the students to continue to disengage from the class, Professor C reached out to the students.

I observed Professor C again using accessibility cues: smiling, waiving, and being personable. The Black males were not always engaged in the class discussion. I observed Professor C occasionally calling on the Black male students by name to get their attention. It appeared to be an effective strategy to get students to re-focus. Professor C continued to use culturally relevant topics in the lesson, today she used a movie clip on the mass incarceration of Black people. Although the Black males in the class did not volunteer their thoughts on the different topics during the discussion, they did appear to be interested in the discussion that ensued after the movie clip. I observed the Black

Males looking up at the professor rather than down on the phone or to the left or to the right talking to peers while discussing the culturally relevant topics. After class, Professor C made herself available to meet with students, however none of the Black male students stayed after to discuss their academic performance.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

After observing the participants in class, I conducted 60-minute interviews with each participant. The participants were given the opportunity to respond to questions from an interview protocol that was used to gain insight into their experiences as participants in the study (Appendix D). Each interview was recorded and transcribed for the purposes of identifying themes among the experiences of the participants.

**Professor A.** Professor A referred to two main challenges he had while attempting to implement validating strategies in the classroom. One challenge involved the tension of trying to “treat everyone the same,” while acknowledging the unique challenges that some of the Black male students in his class face. Professor A said, “faculty are trained to treat every student the same...” and that he, “wrestled with knowing when he was making special accommodations that would compromise the integrity of the course.” Professor A also saw his desire to use race and the negative stereotypes that exist about Black males to motivate his students as a conversation that might to much pressure on his students to succeed. Specifically, Professor A said, “I don’t want to make their success about race.....I don’t want them to have the pressure of carrying their race on their backs.” Furthermore, Professor A stated, “I feel compelled to say, I’m rooting for you, you know, prove the statistics wrong” he also states, “I don’t want them to have to bear the burden of having to be responsible for succeeding on

behalf of an entire race.” Professor A struggled with supporting and encouraging his Black male students without putting too much pressure on them. One strategy that Professor A found to be particularly useful was acknowledging the Black male students by referring to them by name. Specifically, Professor A reports making it a point to become acquainted with each of the Black males in his class by interacting with them. Professor A reports going up to their desk, introducing himself, and getting to know a little about the student. Furthermore, Professor A would address them by name outside of class just in passing on campus. Professor A found that this strategy was particularly effective for those student who were quiet and disconnected in class. The difference in his approach to interaction while participating in this study, as opposed to previous classes, was the intention and awareness he had of how and when he interacted with his Black male students.

According to Professor A, “one student missed class because he had a wisdom tooth removed. When the student returned to class I made it a point to ask the student about his recovery so that it was clear to the student that I noticed him, not just as a student in the class but a human being.” Professor A wanted students to see that he was concerned about them as people, not just students. Professor A stated, “I saw a noticeable increase in class discussion from all of my students.” Professor A also stated, “validating students in the class frees the students to get more involved and to respond more in class.” The experiences Professor A had with using validating strategies linked the strategies with engagement and participation.

“As a White male in my forties, there were some cultural differences that I could not overcome when trying to relate to my Black male students,” according to Professor



A. Professor A used the example of students in his class talking a musical artist that his student assumed he was not aware of. As he inquired about the music the student listens to, he felt the student's refusal to tell him began to become defensive, so he backed off. Professor A said, "if he were Black and younger the students would have told him." In this statement, Professor A acknowledges that there are limits to his ability to establish a relationship with Black students because of his race and age.

Professor A also mentioned that in his attempt to establish a relationship with his students he sometimes became too casual with them and would have to work a little harder to re-establish his role as the authority in the room. Even though establishing a relationship with the students is critical to validation, there is a line that if crossed will make it difficult to get the students to stay on task. Professor A stated, "I don't want to come across as an authoritarian but if learning stops taking place and students get lost in non-academic discussions I have to get the students to settle down."

Professor A states, "using breaks during class and even time before or after class to interact with students is the only way to establish a strong connection with students." According to Professor A, "there is not enough time during class to effectively interact with students." Talking with students outside of class time creates an opportunity for students to discuss more than a concept that was covered in class. Professor A felt like speaking with students outside of class was a different experience than speaking with them during class. Professor A reported "one student wanted to play an audio he recorded but the class was over so I stayed and listened, because he really wanted me to hear it..." Although the class was over and nothing contractually required him as a professor to remain after class and listen, nevertheless he made time. Professor A stated that staying

late was an opportunity for him to connect with a student by going beyond what was required of him as a faculty. Overall, Professor A reported that the validating strategies contributed toward the retention of students in his class. Repeating a story he told me before Professor A stated “I saw one student in the hall on campus, who saw me but tried to walk by me without saying anything so I stopped and stared at him and the student came and apologized and promised to make up an assignment.” Professor A told me his interaction with students compelled them to be more accountable for their academic performance.

**Professor B.** Professor B said that implementing the strategies came easily to him. He talked about the students in his particular class being a very outspoken group and easy to interact with. Professor B told me that participating in this study helped him to become more aware of his students and to take more of an interest in their success. Specifically, Professor B stated, “I made it a point to go out of my way to encourage and support my Black male students, as a result of participating in the study.” Professor B also said, “I made it a point to be validating and supportive even when assignments were not done properly, as away to encourage students to try harder.” Professor B saw the responsiveness from students as an advantage for using validation in the classroom. Professor B mentioned that the students in his class appreciated and were motivated by his attempts to demonstrate to them that he cared and was supportive of their success. One way Professor B accomplished this is by seeking out his Black male students to clarify assignments and offer supportive advice.

However ,Professor B stated, “I feel like I am showing special privilege or giving advantage to the Black males in my class.” Specifically, Professor B had some

reservations about going above and beyond what is required of him as an instructor for some students but not all students. Professor B also stated that, “differentiation of treatment concerned me in theory but not in practice.” As a result, Professor B reported being conscious of his actions and treatment towards his students, which enabled him to maintain the integrity of the course. Rather than utilize the one-size fits all approach, Professor B acknowledged that his students did not all have the same support network and so he took the responsibility of making sure his students of color, in particular, felt welcomed in the course by finding encouraging ways to give feedback to student. Professor B would gave encouraging feedback by telling students that although they may need to improve in some areas, they belonged in the course.

Professor B reported finding all of the strategies to be useful. In fact, when comparing the level of interaction he has had with the Black males in his class this year compared to previous years, he said, “I am more sensitive and responsive to the needs of my students this year.” Professor B told me, “I think I did a better job of reaching out to his students and listening to their concerns regarding the class.” Nevertheless, Professor B told me he was not satisfied with the level of performance of his Black male students. Professor B stated, “the validation did increase the level of interaction but did not result in the same level of increased academic performance.” Professor B reported, “I gave one student multiple opportunities to bring up his grade by completing a missing assignment, however the student did not do it.” Additionally, Professor B stated, after “I asked the student to stay after class to discuss his performance in the class, the student still left as soon as class was over.” Professor B asked, “what could I have done differently to get the student to be more invested in raising his grade in the class?” One of the obstacles

Professor B acknowledged in trying to increase his interaction with his students was the limited opportunities he has during class and after class teaching at a Branch campus.

Professor B felt like students at a Branch campus were less likely to wait around to speak with him because he did not have an office to take them to.

Another major obstacle Professor B found while trying to increase his interaction with the Black males in the classroom was the age and cultural difference. Professor B said, “I was not able to relate to my Black males students on a cultural level as an older white male.” Professor B said, “I am not aware of the latest rapper or who the most recent starlet is.” Rather than attempting to change his interest to align them with that of his students, he uses humor to highlight how uninformed he is about the most recent artist. Professor B did not report creating any new strategies, but did acknowledge that he went more out of his way to connect and interact with his Black male students than he has done in the past. Furthermore, his intentionally remembering the names of his students and referring to them by name helped to create a welcoming culture in the classroom. Professor B believes that using validation in the classroom has helped to create a stronger bond between the students in the classroom and himself. Consequently, he told me had an increase in participation in the classroom discussions and observing a culture within the class that was more liberating and outspoken.

**Professor C.** Professor C told me she felt comfortable utilizing the validating strategies in the classroom. Professor C mentioned that using technology to interact with Black male students was very helpful. “I would send personalized emails to my Black male students to address performance issues in a validating way... I would also use email to address issues of absenteeism.” Professor C would frequently use email to clarify

assignments and encourage her students. Professor C took note of the quick responses and gratitude that she received from her students for reaching out and offering words of encouragement to them. “I made it a point, to intentionally remember the names of the students in my class and to use the names of students to illustrate a point in class.” In my observations I observed the shock on some of her students’ faces when she would greet them by name. Professor C took the time to find culturally relevant material to imbed in the curriculum so that her Black students were able to see familiar topics that may be more inviting for them to participate in. Professor C used articles and videos that addressed social issues like discrimination and prejudice to reinforce theories taught in class. “I observed my Black male students’ faces when teaching the lessons that were infused with diversity and she reports that they appeared interested.”

Professor C mentioned making eye contact with her Black male students was not helpful. In fact, she reported that making eye contact appeared to have more of an opposite effect on her students. “I noticed students looking away rather than leaning in to hear more of the lecture.” Also Professor C did not get students to come visit her during office hours like she had hoped. She said, “I should have made more of a direct invite to meet with students rather than giving them an open-ended one... next time, rather stating that I am available to meet before and after class, I think I should have set a specific time to meet with students rather than giving them the opportunity to not show up for the meeting.” Professor C did not take the next step of being more direct with her invitations to meet with students because she had already gone above and beyond what she would normally do by inviting the students to meet with her.

Professor C told me utilizing the names of students was very impactful. “I believe utilizing the names of students when speaking with them face-to-face, as well as interacting with my students via email, opened the door for me to hold the students accountable for their actions.” Professor C reported monitoring the progress of her students and confronting students when they were not meeting the academic standards of the course. Professor C stated, “after sending emails to students when they were absent from class, I received emails from students apologizing for their absence.” Professor C reported that this was significant because she told me she does not typically get responses like that. Professor C attributed that to the validating tone in her emails. However she told me, “although the interaction with my Black male students did increase, it did not result in a dramatic change in their academic performance, like I had hoped.” Nevertheless, Professor C reported that although the Black males in her class did not receive high grades in her class, what was remarkable about this experience was the fact that not one of them dropped her course. “I believe that if I did not have such frequent interaction with my Black male students, they would have dropped the course.”

### **Reflections From Cycle III**

I thought that the participants all had good intentions and tried very hard to give their students the support they needed to be successful. I was concerned however about the challenges some of the Black males students in their classes had in performing well academically. I reflected on the question, “what could they have done differently to increase the academic performance of the students?” Professor A was the only participant that did not report the underperformance of his Black male students. Professor A also taught a career-oriented course rather than a general education course, as did the other

participants. In reflection, I mentioned “I wish the participants would have established more of a personal connection with the students.” The participants reported in-class interaction with students offering encouragement and support however they did not report being able to have much informal or social interaction with the students. Perhaps a combination of informal and formal interaction really is needed to increase the academic performance of students. I felt that the participants were excited about the increased level of interaction but wanted to see more success in academic performance. Professor B asked, “what could I have done differently to get the student to be more invested in raising his grade in the class?” In reflection, I wrote “the participants have to set high expectations for the students and communicate that to them.” The participants were heavy on encouraging and supporting the students but hesitant to demand more effort from the students. Professor A stated, “I don’t want them to have the pressure of carrying their race on their backs.” This comment from Professor A made me think the participants may have wanted their Black male students to succeed so badly that instead of setting higher expectations for them, they set low expectations by making concessions for them.

### **Emergent Themes**

In order to identify broad themes, I used multiple sources to collect data on the participants’ experiences. I used sources such as journaling, focus groups, observations, and semi-structured interviews to collect data for this research project. Once the data was collected, I had the semi-structured interviews transcribed so that the transcriptions along with the journal entries, observations, and focus groups could be used to identify broad themes that emerge as an analysis of the data. There were four broad themes that

emerged from the data: making a connection, accountability, affirmation messages, and student effort.

### **Making a Connection**

On the part of every participant was the desire and intent to initiate contact with their Black male students and not the other way around. In every case, the participants made a conscious and intentional effort to remember and use the names of their Black male students to establish a connection. Professor A reported that knowing the name of the student made them visible and reduced their chances of being able to hide.

Additionally, all of the participants were committed to using accessibility cues as a means to create a welcoming environment for the students. I observed the participants on many occasions smiling, waving, and being friendly with their Black male students. Professor A told me that remembering the names of the students helped with interacting with students outside of class. Another popular strategy shared amongst the participants was the usage of providing positive feedback. The participants used validating feedback on assignments and class discussions making comments like “I want you to do well in this course,” “you can do this, you are going to do fine in this course,” and “that is an as a way of looking at that,” to encourage students even when their assignment or response to an in-class question was incorrect. The participants often seized opportunities to encourage their students.

Professor C used email as a way to encourage and support the Black males in her class. Additionally, Professor C reports having a good response rate to the emails she sent out to students. Professor A and Professor C even made adjustments to the curriculum to teach about culturally relevant and relatable topics that allowed the Black male students



to use their own experiences to participate in class. In an attempt to establish a connection with students the participants mentioned moments when they went above and beyond what is required of them as faculty members to demonstrate care and concern for their Black male students. For example, Professor A reported “one student wanted to play an audio he recorded but the class was over so I stayed and listened, because he really wanted me to hear it.” Professor A demonstrated his willingness to go above and beyond what is required to establish a connection with his student by staying after class to listen to some recording that one of his students wanted him to hear. The recording had nothing to do with the class but clearly the student valued Professor A’s opinion enough to ask for his critique of his work. Professor A was willing to leave class late in order to establish a connection with that student and felt it strengthened his relationship with that student as a result. This approach to teaching is known in the literature as othermothering, where the faculty member is willing to accept the responsibility of taking an interest in the success and development of his or her students (Giuffrida, 2005). Although some of the participants admitted that practices such as remembering names of their students and being friendly with students from the onset were not new practices for them, it was the awareness and intentional usage of the practices that impacted how often they used them and how the students responded to the practices. The participants all agreed that the strategies enhanced their interaction with their Black male students.

### **Accountability**

Holding students accountable was made easier due to the frequent interaction that the participants had with their Black male students. Professor C reports addressing issues of performance and attendance through constant email contact. Professor C reported that

her encouraging emails and offering to assist her students by clarifying assignments opened the door for her to hold students accountable. Professor C reported “if a student missed an assignment or was late to class I would send them a personal email to inform them I am expecting them to be present or for the assignment to be turned in.” Professor C added that the students were responsive to her emails and even offered apologies for missed classes and late assignments which had not happen before in past experiences.

Professor A reported that initiating interaction with his students and not allowing them to be “invisible” contributed to his ability to hold students accountable without receiving any backlash. Professor A stated “I saw one student in the hall on campus, who saw me but tried to walk by me without saying anything so I stopped and stared at him and the student came and apologized and promised to make up an assignment.” Referring to students by name and having conversations with them outside the class helped Professor A strengthen his interaction with students.

Professor B had some challenges with holding students accountable because of his desire to see the Black males in his class succeed. All of the participants expressed apprehension about treating their Black male students differently than their other students making comments like “faculty are trained to treat everyone the same” and “I feel like I am showing special privilege or giving an advantage to the Black males in my class.” Each participant expressed their concern about not showing favoritism and giving allowances to some students and not all students. The participants did not want to compromise the integrity of the course by making special concessions for their Black male students only. For instance, Professor B allowed one of his students make a presentation when he was not prepared. Professor C talked about allowing a student the

opportunity to complete assignment late when that was not her past practice. Each participant had some philosophical concerns with where to draw the line with accommodations, but were able to reconcile their philosophies with practices they were comfortable with. However, those concerns may have impacted their level of involvement in holding students accountable.

### **Affirming Messages**

The participants frequently reported using affirming messages to validate the students as having potential and being valued at the institution and in the class. I observed each of the participants as they responded to answers that students gave during class discussions and regardless if the answer was correct or incorrect, the students were always encouraged to continue to participate. Participants were able to give affirming messages by responding to assignments, in class discussions, and via email. Professor C in particular used personal emails to her Black male students to encourage them to participate and work hard in the course. Professor A was challenged in this area because of his desire to see his students defy the negative stereotypes about Black men in America, he had to be careful not to put too much pressure on his students to succeed. The participants made comments to students like “I’m fighting for you to succeed,” “you may need to improve in some areas but you are right where you need to be,” “I’d love to see you back in class next week,” “great answer,” “you are going to do fine in this class,” and other affirming messages. The participants even observed some of their students smiling in response to the affirmation. I observed students reacting positively to the affirmation as well. Specifically, students were smiling, getting engaged in class discussions, raising their hands in class and offering answers to questions. The

affirmations seemed to have made the students feel more relaxed and comfortable in the course. There was always lively discussion in each of the classes I observed.

### **Student Effort**

Another major theme that I observed and that the participants commented on in the focus group and semi-structured interviews was the effort on the part of the students. Although the level of interaction increased for all of the participants, they still had concerns about the student effort. Professor C reported that the validating strategies contributed to the students being retained in her class. However, Professor C still reported attendance issues and academic performance issues of the Black males in her class. Despite the retention, Professor C reported wondering what could have been done differently to get the students to try harder in her class. Professor C reported that the final grades for the Black males in her course were low, however no one dropped the class and she attributes part of that to her validating practices. Professor B expressed concern about the academic performance of the Black male students in his course as well. Professor B reported, "I gave one student multiple opportunities to bring up his grade by completing a missing assignment however the student did not do it." Professor B also stated "I asked the student to stay after class to discuss his performance in the class, the student still left as soon as class was over." Professor B expressed frustration about not knowing what he could do to motivate his students to perform better academically. Professor A taught a course that is more career oriented in nature in comparison to the other two participants who teach general education courses. Perhaps the students in the career oriented course were naturally interested in the course because it was the career they had chosen, whereas

the students in the general education courses may have to work harder to find interest in the course.

## Chapter 5

### Summary and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to explore the utility of validating strategies that have been identified in the literature to enhance faculty-student interaction, particularly with Black males. Validation theory was used as a theoretical framework because it involves a person, in this case a faculty member, taking an active and intentional interest in the academic and personal interest of a student (Rendon, 1994). Having faculty as participants in the study was essential to implementing these strategies because of the influential role they play in affecting the development of college students (Bensimon, 2007; Fountaine, 2012). In this study the participants received training on validating strategies that could be used to enhance the faculty-student interaction with the Black males in their classroom. The participants were then observed in class as they implemented the strategies. After spending weeks implementing these strategies, the participants were able to discuss their progress in a focus group, and then make adjustments in their classrooms during the semester, with a second set of observations. Finally, at the end of the semester the participants were interviewed individually, which gave them the opportunity to reflect on their experiences.

In comparing the data collected from this study with the literature on validating practices and faculty-student interaction, I found some similarities and differences in the experiences of the participants. The participants in this study all made a conscious effort to initiate interaction with the Black male students in their classes. Wood (2014) talks about the apprehension some Black males feel about initiating interaction with faculty as a barrier. However, the participants were able to relieve that fear by being proactive in

their attempt to form relationships with their students. As a result of this proactive approach to interaction, the participants reported having stronger relationships with their students both inside and outside of the classroom. In the literature, creating a welcoming environment for the students by initiating interaction with students and showing signs of accessibility by being friendly, smiling, and waving increases the likelihood of interaction with students (Harrison & Palacios, 2014). The participants in this study all reported not only having stronger relationships, but more frequent interaction with their students. One participant commented on his in-class interaction leading to more interaction with students outside of class as well. One of the challenges of trying to interact with students on a community college campus is the lack of time that they have to devote to meeting with faculty outside of class time (Lester, Leonard & Mathis, 2013; Tinto, 1997). One participant expressed that although he desired to meet with some students after class, some would not wait around even though meeting with him would have helped the student improve upon an assignment. Cole (2010) talks about the importance of advice and criticism given to Black students and the potential impact it can have in FSI. Criticism of assignments is a critical component of how students evaluate their ability to perform well in college. In order for a faculty member to use criticism and feedback as a validating tool, it is important for them to avoid equating performance with ability. For example, one participant identified what was right with the presentation along with what was wrong so that the student did not walk away feeling like they were not smart enough to perform well in the class. Another participant leveraged his relationship with the students inside the classroom to interact with them outside of the classroom when he saw them walking around on campus. Formal interaction which typically

involves course-related discussion can lead to out-of-classroom or informal interaction (Cotton & Wilson, 2006), however only one participant was able to successfully increase his interaction with students outside of the classroom.

In the literature on FSI, interaction can lead to engagement, which is essential to student success (Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Wood, 2014). The participants in this study reported seeing an increase in the engagement of their Black male students compared to previous years, particularly in the areas of classroom discussion and collaborating with peers on class projects. The primary type of interaction that took place in this study was formal, which also consistent with the literature (Change, 2005; Deil-Amen, 2011; Kim & Sax, 2009). More studies are needed on how to increase the amount of informal interaction with students despite the constraints many community college students have such as working full-time, family demands, and dependents to care for (Berkner & Choy, 2008; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Horn & Neville, 2006). Another area where more studies are needed is in the area of learning and achievement as it relates to faculty-student interaction. The literature supports the assertion that persistence, learning, retention, and academic achievement are outcomes that are directly impacted by FSI (Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2008; 2001; Cole, 2010; Endo & Harpel, 1982; Lampton, 1993; McClenney, Marti & Adkins, 2001; Pasacarella & Terenzini, 2001). However, this study only supports the impact FSI has on retention and possibly persistence. This study was only for one semester, and therefore persistence, which involves enrollment all the way through to graduation, was not assessed. However, the retention of students can ultimately lead to persistence. The participants reported retaining all of their Black male students during the study. One participant in particular noted that this had never occurred



before and is convinced that her validating approach contributed to the retention of her students. Despite the retention of their Black male students, the participants were concerned about the lack of achievement. The participants reported that many of their students did not perform well academically in the class.

Utilizing formal interaction as the primary mode of interaction limits the kind of validation faculty can give students because the interaction has an academic focus, primarily. One participant reported sending emails encouraging her Black male students, giving validating feedback on assignments, and using culturally relevant topics to invite the experiences of their students in class discussion. One participant was able to experience a measure of informal interaction and was able to engage students in discussion about personal interests and career interests. It is important to note that the participant who was able to experience some informal interaction with students teaches career-oriented courses rather than general education. The career focus may have opened a door for more discussion about careers compared to the participants in the other courses who teach general education courses. Nevertheless, the participant with the career-oriented courses was able to validate the students in a more personal way, which led to more discussion outside of the class. Furthermore, comparatively speaking, the Black males in the career-oriented courses performed better academically than those students in the general education courses as reported by the participants.

The type of interaction that the participants used primarily was formal in nature. The participants discussed interacting with their students mainly about course-material and assignments. The type of interaction that takes place at a two-year institution is typically formal, given the demands that many community college students have with

work and familial responsibilities (Chang, 2005; Kim & Sax, 2009). One participant reported having some informal interaction with students, discussing personal interests and goals with students. However, the majority of the interaction with the students in this study took place in class and was formal. The time constraints of students can impede interaction occurring outside of the classroom. Furthermore, Professor B and Professor C, specifically, reported on the underperformance of the students in their classes. Formal interaction can have a negative impact on Black students in particular when the nature of the interaction has to do with feedback and criticism that is overwhelmingly negative (Kim & Sax, 2009). However the participants in this study report encouraging the students and validating their efforts when giving feedback and criticism. The participants wanted to know more about the types of interactions that produce success in the academic outcomes in particular.

### **Research Questions**

Guiding this study were four research questions:

1. Which strategies used to enhance interaction with Black males in the classroom emerged as useful to faculty?
2. According to faculty, how did utilizing these strategies affect the interactions with Black male students?
3. According to faculty, what are the advantages and disadvantages to utilizing these strategies?
4. How does validation theory inform this study?

**Which strategies used to enhance interaction with Black males in the classroom emerged as useful to faculty?** In this study there were several strategies that the participants used and felt were useful in enhancing interaction with the Black males in their class. Initiating interaction with the students was a strategy that all of the participants found to enhance their interaction with students. Rather than waiting on the students to interact with them, the participants all demonstrated that they care by approaching the students first (Wood, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2011). The participants were committed to creating an environment in which the students felt welcome and they accomplished this by remembering the names of their Black male students and referring to them by name. Professor A described the experience as sending a message to the student that they are not “invisible.” This strategy of validating students by affirming their existence increases the willingness on the part of the students to interact and engage in the classroom (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Participant C talked about the initial shock some students had when she referred to them in class discussion by name. Although referencing students by name seems insignificant, the participants noticed that difference it made in the way students responded to them.

Another strategy the participants found to be useful was accessibility cues: smiling, waving, and being friendly towards the students sends the message to the students that they were approachable and accessible (Cole, 2007; Kezar & Maxey, 2014). When students perceive that faculty are not approachable or friendly, Black male students are more likely to disengage (Wood, 2014). In my observations, I witnessed students seeming comfortable participating in class and asking questions to get clarification on assignments. The participants also used a great deal of validation in the feedback they

gave to students on assignments as well as in classroom discussions. By identifying the things that the student has done right, the participants were able to counter the negative stereotypes that they may have heard about their demographic (Steele, 1992; & Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Another strategy used by Participant C was the usage of culturally relevant material in her lesson planning. By finding articles, videos, and developing assignments that addressed some topics that incorporated race and culture, she invited the input of her Black male students. Historically, the literature on integration called for students of color to abandon their culture in order to integrate into the culture of the institution (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Tierney, 1992). However, Participant C created lessons in her class that helped her Black students to develop an understanding and appreciation for their own culture while learning to integrate into the culture of institution as well. Validation theory supports the idea of integrating into the dominant culture while maintaining one's own culture in the process (Lundberg, 2010).

**According to faculty, how did utilizing these strategies affect the interactions with Black male students?** The participants were in agreement that there was more discussion with their students than they have had in the past. The participants worked hard to create a welcoming environment where all could feel comfortable participating in class without fear of being embarrassed or of confirming a negative stereotype about one's self (Harrison & Palacios, 2014). According to the participants, the students were more talkative and comfortable voicing their opinions in class. In fact, Participant A had difficulty getting the students to refocus because the level of comfort in the class was so high, that the discussions began to take up too much class time. Even the responses to

emails, according to Participant C, was more frequent and sincere. The students were more responsive to the outreach of the participants and demonstrated more care for missing class and/or assignments. Participant B talked about the increased level of comradery and collaboration that existed in his classes amongst the students. The students began to be supportive and validating of one another as students delivered presentations in class.

For participants B and C, the majority of their interaction with students took place inside of the class or via email. This was consistent with the literature on interaction and community college students (Chang, 2005; Cole, 2010; Kim & Sax, 2009), given their vast time constraints they report and prefer interaction inside of the classroom (Berkner & Choy, 2008; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Lester, Brown-Leonard & Mathis, 2013). Despite these challenges, Participant A was able to establish a connection that resulted in his desire to speak with students informally outside of class time as well. When faculty are able to foster interaction inside of the classroom it can often lead to interaction outside of the classroom (Cotton & Wilson, 2006). Partnering with students on research projects and taking on more of a mentorship role is another strategy for faculty to establish more interaction with their students (Fuentes, 2014). By demonstrating care and interest in one of his students beyond academic performance in the classroom, Participant A managed to learn more about his students' personal interests in music and video games. Another way in which the strategies affected the students is in the level of comfort in discussing their performance on assignments, quizzes, and tests. I observed students approaching the Participants A and B to discuss an assignment or upcoming test rather than leaving immediately after the class was over. The majority of the students I observed did not

appear apprehensive at all about speaking with the instructor about their academic performance.

**According to faculty, what are the advantages and disadvantages to utilizing these strategies?** The participants were able to identify several advantages to utilizing the validating strategies and had few concerns or disadvantages they associated with the strategies. One of the major advantages of utilizing the strategies is the connection faculty members were able to establish with their students. By using these strategies, the participants found that they were able to develop stronger relationships with their students. Another advantage to using these strategies was the increased engagement in the classroom. The participants found that the students were more comfortable inquiring about their academic progress and participating in class discussions. Faculty-student interaction is positively linked to engagement and as the interaction increases so does the engagement of the students while in the classroom (Harrison & Palacios, 2014; Wood, 2014). The participants believed students developed stronger relationships with one another, validating and supporting one another in classroom presentations. The participants found that their outreach to students and students' response time was improved as a result of using validating strategies as well. The participants were able to use the relationships they had with the students to hold them accountable. Students who are known by the faculty sometimes feel compelled to be accountable because they are no longer able to hide (Cotton & Wilson, 2006). The participants in this study found that their Black male students would apologize and give account for being absent or missing assignments, in a way that was different from their experiences in the past. Participant C in particular talked about the sincerity and sense of accountability of her Black male

students being in her class being unlike the responses she would get from students previously.

However, one major concern or disadvantage to using validating strategies according to the participants was the difficulty they had with knowing where to draw the line when working with their Black male students. Specifically, the participants expressed the concern of showing favoritism or being partial. Taking an interest in the success of an underperforming population does not require differential treatment. In fact, the literature is clear that although there may be conditional effects across student outcomes when looking at race or gender (Cole, 2007; Cole, 2010; Seymour, 1995; Thompson, 2001), faculty-student interaction as well as validation theory is beneficial for all students (Kim, 2010; Rendon-Linares & Munoz, 2011). Furthermore, as it relates to this study, the strategies that were used could have been applied to all of the students if the participant thought it would contribute to their success. It is important to note that the purpose of utilizing these strategies for this project was not to provide advantage to Black male students but bridge a gap in interaction between faculty and students that could help to increase student success.

Participant A mentioned wanting his Black male students to succeed so badly that he felt he may be putting too much pressure on his students by expecting too much of them. This perspective, albeit well-intentioned, could compromise the expectations faculty have for their Black male students, resulting in the faculty having low or no expectations of them at all. According to a report put by out in 2014 by (CCSSE, 2014) titled “Aspirations to achievement: Men of color and community colleges,” one of the key findings was that students being held to high standards was a major contributor to the

success of men of color. It is possible to have high expectations for students without putting too much pressure on them. Every student is different and should be expected to do their very best, whatever that means for each student.

Another concern had to do with not seeing the improved academic performance from their Black male students that they were hoping for. Although none of the students dropped the courses they were in, many of them barely passed the class. The participants were concerned that even though the interaction with students was enhanced and the students were retained, the academic performance of their students had not improved much. A partial explanation for this could be the type of interaction that commonly takes place at two-year institutions, which is formal interaction (Deil-Amen, 2011; Tinto, 1997). Formal interaction involves course-related discussion and is pre-dominantly academic in nature (Kim, 2010). In this study, the interaction with students was disproportionately formal although many of the studies done on learning outcomes and interaction focus on informal interaction (Frankel & Swanson, 2002; Lampion, 1993; Lundberg, 2010; West, 1999). Informal interaction is more social in nature and involves faculty showing a concern for the personal and emotional growth of the student (Endo & Harpel, 1982). Informal interaction, which traditionally takes place outside the class has been linked to intellectual outcomes such as: math skills, problem solving, learning, and perceived school-community college students in general, and Black students in particular, are more likely to interact with faculty over course-related matters, they do not report higher GPA's and enhanced critical thinking skills like other racial groups (Kim & Sax, 2009). Participant A reported the most informal interaction with his students and also reported the best academic performance from his Black male students out of all the



participants. This may be due to the fact that Participant A taught a career-oriented course while the other participants taught more general education courses and perhaps the students were more interested in the career courses. Lastly, despite the efforts of the participants to help their students to perform well academically, there is a part that the student has to play in putting forth the effort to be successful.

**How does validation theory inform this study?** At the center of all these strategies is the theory introduced by Rendon (1994), that by taking an active interest in students, their chances of succeeding in college are increased. The participants who were ultimately selected for this study had already expressed an interest and desire to see more of their Black male students succeed in college. Therefore, the participants did not have to be convinced of the importance of validation. In light of the fact that validation undergirds the strategies used in this study, the faculty who use them have to possess the basic desire to see their students succeed. One of the main components of validation theory is that faculty must be intentional about their interaction with students (Rendon, 1994). Specifically, the participants in this study began their classes with the intention of connecting with their Black male students. The participants were keenly aware of whether or not their students were engaged in class discussions, late or absent from class, current on homework assignments, and received validating messages in class. Validation has to be intentional in order to be effective. The more faculty were aware of those students who may not have been engaged in the class and the learning experience, the easier it became for faculty to incorporate validating strategies to address the potential needs of the students. Basic strategies such as using accessibility cues or remembering the names of students are basic behaviors that could be taken for granted unless the

faculty member is intentionally using them to make students feel welcome in the classroom. According to a study done by Barnett (2011), being known and valued by one's instructor was the highest predictor of intent to persist for students of color. In this study, the participants all intentionally remembered the names of their Black male students and used them frequently to demonstrate care by taking the time to remember their names. Without establishing causality, the participants also commented on the fact that none of their Black male students dropped their class. Participant C explicitly stated that she is certain that her usage of validation contributed to the retention of all of her Black male students. Rendon's (1994) theory of validation suggests and Barnett's (2011) study supports the notion that validation may be the main contributor to student persistence. This study is consistent with the aforementioned works in that the participants felt their usage of validation was a key factor in their students' persistence.

The participants in this study made it a point to constantly encourage their students: whether through encouraging messages through email, in responding to answers in group discussion, or in feedback on an assignment. When faculty take the time to intentionally encourage their students it is a subtle, yet effective, form of validation (Rendon, 1994).

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

The discussion on student success has to be expanded to include research on FSI, particularly as it relates to the pivotal role faculty play in the success of students (Bensimon, 2007; Fountaine, 2012). In this study, the perspective of faculty was explored regarding the impact validating strategies of FSI can have on their student success. One of the main takeaways from this study was the retention of every Black male student in

the different courses. The participants in this study reported that they believe the usage of the strategies was a major contributing factor to the retention of their Black male students. With that said, Black males have the highest college dropout rate among every racial/ethnic and gender subgroup (Wood, 2012). Validation is a strong predictor of persistence (Barnett, 2011). Consequently, the more Black male students feel validated it increases their likelihood of integration and engagement which leads to persistence (Barnett, 2011 & Bauer, 2014).

Consequently, validating strategies that help to enhance FSI could assist institutions in their attempt to retain more Black males. The retention rates of Black males at the institution where this study took place are the lowest among racial/ethnic and gender subgroups. This study supports the assertion made by Cole (2010) and Harrison and Palacios (2014), that more training for faculty is needed to improve the quality of faculty-student interaction. Currently, the faculty are not required to attend any training on FSI nor is it offered. Therefore, one of the recommendations for this study is that the faculty be given more training on validating strategies that can be used with their students. When conducting this study, I thought that the faculty were not fully confident in which strategies to use, how often to use them, and why one strategy may be more applicable than the other. Faculty in general could benefit from receiving more training on student success (Cole, 2010; Harrison & Palacios, 2014). Faculty training in working with students is necessary because faculty are required to be content experts. Furthermore, money that is earmarked for professional development is typically used to attend conferences that are relevant to the faculty members' disciplines, rather than

conferences on teaching strategies. Therefore community colleges have the responsibility on providing training for their faculty in the area of student success, particularly FSI.

This study attempted to fill a gap in the literature by providing the perspectives of the faculty on the matter of FSI. Traditionally, studies on FSI have focused on the perspective of students and few have incorporated the perspective of faculty (Anderson & Carta-Falsa, 2002; Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Frankel & Swanson, 2002). More studies are needed on FSI incorporating the perspectives of faculty. Reflecting on this study, I thought that the faculty participants could have benefitted from more training. One training session does not give the faculty enough time to really grasp the different strategies and understand validation theory to the point where they are confident developing their own strategies. Beyond more training for faculty I believe that one semester was not enough time for the faculty get comfortable with the strategies. If the study took place over one year, faculty would have more time to reflect on what is working and what is not working and would be able to make more adjustments. The participants in this study were not as reflective as they could have been had they had a full year to assess the impact the strategies have on their students. I would have liked to have the faculty participants be more reflective about their experiences over a longer period of time so that I could have gained a more in depth understanding of how they perceived the strategies. Additionally, I would have liked to conduct a larger study with more faculty members giving their experiences on the strategies. The pool of participants were all White and I would of liked to compare the experiences of Black faculty participants with that of White faculty participants. Some of the participants in the study

made reference to being limited by their race and age when attempting to connect with the students.

Given the limits of this study, questions still remain after analyzing the data from this study. Future research should explore what differences in experiences, if any, Black faculty members had in attempting to enhance their interaction with Black male students. Additionally, future research can address what kind of adjustments the participants would make for the second semester if the study was stretched out over one year. What can be done through the usage of validating strategies to assist students in increasing their academic performance? Additionally, there needs to be a better understanding of how faculty can leverage their relationships with their students to improve academic achievement. Furthermore, what aspect of the interaction motivates students to not only remain in the class but excel in the class? Is there a difference in how formal and informal interaction impact academic achievement?

### **Implications for Leadership**

My leadership approach in this study was one of social justice leadership. Social justice leadership essentially involves making marginalized populations the focus of one's advocacy and leadership practice (Theoharis, 2007). In this study, the challenges and obstacles that Black males face as college students was central to my desire to advocate and effectively change the negative outcomes associated with Black male college students. As a Black male, I can relate to some of the challenges that exist in trying to initiate interaction with faculty. I can remember, vividly, wanting to speak with my Professors in college but being apprehensive out of fear of not making sense. I also remember the frustration of needing help, guidance, and clarification on assignments but

not having the courage to ask for it. Gewirtz (1998) viewed social justice leadership as a vehicle to put an end to the systems, or in this case practices, that promote the marginalization of a particular group. Practices that promote the marginalization of Black males students involve faculty relying on the students to initiate interaction with them and prove their interest in the class.

The primary negative stereotype that exists about Black males that serve as a barrier and contributes to the apprehension they may feel about interacting with a faculty member is the belief that Black males are not regarded as smart. Using validating FSI practices provides a way for faculty to play a pivotal role in tearing down the barriers that separate Black males from the benefits of interacting with faculty. Furthermore, the participants who were selected for this study had to first possess some desire to bring about change in the negative outcomes of Black males in college. The participants in this study felt an obligation as faculty to take action and saw this research project as an opportunity to do so. However, the participants of this study may not be an accurate representation of how the faculty-at-large feel about the challenges Black male students face. Consequently, although social justice leadership worked for me and helped to motivate the participants in this study, another approach to leadership might be needed to get campus-wide buy-in.

Another leadership approach that would be effective for this type of study and ultimately this type of change is transformational leadership. Transformational leadership informs others of the importance of a goal that is higher than one's self-interest (McClesky, 2014). This type of approach requires a leader who is influential and is able to convince others to put down personal agendas and to work toward a common goal.

Even though the participants were already poised to participate in the study, I believe through a series of trainings I could convince others of the importance of using validating strategies to increase FSI. Faculty who are set in their ways and not interested in trying any new approaches to teaching might be opposed to the idea of participating in a training, however if the college established the retention and persistence of Black males as a priority, it may incentivize faculty to get involved in the training. Transformational leadership has to come from the highest levels of the college in order to be successful. Borrowing from Kotter (2008) I would create a sense of urgency by providing the President's cabinet with charts and statistics that highlight what the college stands to gain financially by retaining more students. Currently, community colleges across the state of New Jersey are seeing a reduced amount of financial support from the state as well as the county, which results in these institutions having to rely more on enrollment and tuition to pay for the cost of daily operation. Recently however, enrollment has gone down, making retention essential to the fiscal health of community colleges. One way to increase retention and persistence, particularly for students of color, is faculty-student interaction.

At my institution, I have taken the lead on working with faculty to understand the challenges that many Black males face, but more importantly educating them on the strategies they can use to foster their success. This institution is predominantly White amongst the faculty, as well as the students, and after working at the institution, I believe that more should be done to address the needs of the Black students, males in particular, to assist the students in being successful. As a counselor at the college, I noticed that many of the Black male students that I worked with had little to no interaction with their

professors at all. Often times the students had questions that they were afraid or unwilling to ask their professors, but would come to me for answers. I also noticed the improvement many of the Black male students I worked with were having academically and I decided to begin some initiatives that targeted Black males. I taught a first-year seminar that targeted Black male students. The desire to initiate interaction with my students was organic for me. As a Black male, I understand the apprehension some students have about interacting with faculty. Many of the strategies I gleaned from the literature (Barnett, 2011; Guiffrida, 2005; Harrison & Palacios, 2014; Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Rendon, 1994; Wood & Turner, 2011) and trained my participants on were strategies that I commonly used as an instructor, not because I learned them, but because I understood the impact they could have on students, Black males in particular. Class participation for many faculty is an indication that the student is engaged in the topic, however I understood that some students wrestled with stereotype threat, specifically, the belief that Black students are unintelligent. In addition to teaching the class focusing on Black male students, I also began to speak up in faculty meetings and college-wide meetings about my desire to see more Black men succeed at the college. I have done presentations for different academic departments on working with Black male students and ultimately coordinated initiative for Black males on campus that introduces them to professionals in different careers of interest to help them to make an informed decisions when choosing a career. Academic departments and deans have begun to seek me out to train faculty on how to increase interaction and engagement with their students of color. I have presented at campus-wide meetings on the topic of interaction and engagement with male students of color. The college is beginning to see the urgency of becoming more



knowledgeable in working with diverse populations. Specifically, the leadership at the college sees the value in gaining a better understanding of how to foster the success of underperforming populations who might otherwise drop out.

My leadership in the area of working with Black male students is birthed out of an obligation to help a population who I identify with. Not merely because of the color of my skin, but because I have personal experience in working through some of the challenges they face. Also, I understand the transformative power in demonstrating care and concern for an otherwise overlooked population. I understand the power in validating the ability of a person who has become accustomed to being told that they lack ability. I believe that we all have an inherent ability to improve and become better in whatever we do and that belief helps me to have patience with those students who are severely underprepared for college.

## **Conclusion**

The overall purpose of this study was to enhance faculty-student interaction with Black males inside the classroom. Utilizing validating strategies (Rendon, 1994), the participants in this study were trained, observed, and given the opportunity to share their experiences after having spent a semester implementing these strategies. The faculty participants agreed that the strategies made a difference in the level of interaction they had with their Black male students. Specifically, I learned that in a validating environment, students are more likely to engage in class discussions, collaborate with each other on group projects, and inquire about their academic requirements. I agree with Barnett (2011), validation can serve as a precondition to interaction and engagement. Furthermore, faculty report having more interaction with their students. Faculty

highlighted the importance of remembering students and calling them by name when referring to them. This study was consistent with the literature as it relates to interaction being a pre-condition for engagement.

A major concern that the participants all shared was the low academic performance of their Black male students. Although the participants reported that all of their Black male students were retained, what has yet to be understood are the factors faculty believe contribute to increasing the academic performance of their Black male students. The underperformance of Black males in higher education is a problem that has many factors (Brown, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Haycock, 2001). Although the lack of interaction contributes to the disengagement of students, addressing this issue will require more than just increasing interaction. Nevertheless, I would like to see more studies on FSI from the vantage point of faculty over a longer period of time, specifically, an academic year. One semester is not enough time to become comfortable initiating interaction if the faculty member does not have much experience working with Black male students. The participants in this study needed more time in order to become comfortable and proficient in utilizing validating strategies (Rendon, 1994).

The participants' concern about the ethical dilemma of going the extra mile to help their Black students without feeling like they were being partial to the Black males in their classroom was an unexpected result. I did not expect the participants to view validation as an act of favoritism or preferential treatment. Particularly because the strategies that were introduced to the participants were strategies that could and should be used with all their students. I felt that there was such a strong desire on the part of the participants, to see their Black male students succeed and to see this study have positive

results that they devoted a lot of their efforts to ensuring the individual success of their Black male students rather than the entire class. Although the two are not mutually exclusive, it seemed to be hard for the participants to find a balance between individual strategies and collective strategies. There is no one size fits all approach to student success; even within one class the needs of the students can vary. The challenge for faculty is understanding what strategies are effective when teaching a diverse population of students. Strategies such as remembering the names of the students and intentionally utilizing the names to increase interaction with students, to me, seemed to be common knowledge. However, understanding the impact of remembering the name of a student who has a history of being marginalized can have on fostering interaction is not common.

Furthermore, I would like to see a more diverse pool of faculty participants. Particularly, I would like to see if the experiences of Black professors would be similar to that of their White counterparts. The faculty in this study were all White and were very aware of their race and how it may have played a part in their ability to connect with the students, particularly as it relates to their ability to relate to the Black male students in their classes. Another study can examine whether Black faculty experience the same challenges that White faculty experience when attempting to interact with Black male students. If Black faculty experience fewer challenges when initiating interaction with Black male students, then institutions could benefit from hiring more Black faculty. The Achievement Gap is a problem that has existed in education in America for many years and it will take time to ultimately close it. The idea of finding a miracle strategy that will erase years of systemic issues that have contributed to underperformance of Black male students is disingenuous. However, in working with faculty who are identified by Black

male students as a primary contributor to their success in higher education is a step in the right direction.

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## Appendix A

### Consent to Take Part in a Research Study



**TITLE OF STUDY:** Enhancing Faculty-Student Interaction with Black Males in the Classroom

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. MaryBeth Walpole

**Co-Investigator:** Fidel Wilson

This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you to decide whether you wish to volunteer for this research study. It will help you to understand what the study is about and what will happen in the course of the study.

If you have questions at any time during the research study, you should feel free to ask them and should expect to be given answers that you completely understand.

After all of your questions have been answered, if you still wish to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this informed consent form.

**Dr. MaryBeth Walpole, Fidel Wilson** or another member of the study team will also be asked to sign this informed consent. You will be given a copy of the signed consent form to keep.

You are not giving up any of your legal rights by volunteering for this research study or by signing this consent form. By signing this consent form and agreeing to participate in this study you are also consenting to keep what is discussed amongst the participant group confidential. The goal in keeping what is discussed confidential is to promote open and honest dialogue from the participants.

**FINANCIAL INTERESTS:**

None

**A. Why is this study being done?**

This study is being done as part of my school requirements for my dissertation. The purpose of this study is to identify strategies to enhance faculty-student interaction with Black males in the classroom. Participants will accomplish this by learning validating strategies to enhance their interaction with their Black male students in an overall effort to increase their student success.

**B. Why have you been asked to take part in this study?**

You have been asked to participate in this study because you meet the criteria of being an instructor at a community college with 5 years or more teaching experience. You have also expressed an interest in participating in this research study.

**C. Who may take part in this study? And who may not?**

In order to participate in this study, you must be an instructor at a community college with five or more years of teaching experience. Additionally, you must have at least 2 Black males in your classroom.

**D. How many subjects will be enrolled in the study?**

There will be 3 participants in this study. Given that this is a qualitative study the emphasis will be on getting detailed descriptions from the participants on their experiences with utilizing and creating strategies to enhance their interaction with students in the classroom.

**E. How long will my participation in this study take?**

This study will take place over a period of approximately 15 weeks during Fall 2017 term. As a participant, we ask that you are available during this time to participate in an initial training for the duration of 75 minutes. The initial training will consist of learning strategies consistent with the literature on how to enhance faculty-student interaction with Black males in the classroom. Some of those strategies will involve activities like being friendly from the onset, regularly checking on academic progress and encouraging students to succeed. Participants will also be encouraged to innovate and create their own strategies. After receiving training on how to use validating approaches to foster interaction the participants will be encouraged to utilize those strategies in the classroom. Participants will also be asked to participate in a focus group for the duration of 75 minutes. In the focus group, we will discuss what strategies are working and share what new strategies may have been developed. We will also discuss adjustments that can be made to improve strategies. Additionally, there will be two in-class observations for the duration of your class time. The purpose of the observations is to observe the strategies in-use. One observation will occur within the first 7 weeks of the Fall term and another observation will occur after the focus group in the last 7 weeks of the term. Lastly, in the during the final 2 weeks of the term the participants will be asked to take part in one 30 – 60 minute semi-structured interview. The purpose of the interview is to understand the experiences and concluding thoughts you have of the strategies and their level of effectiveness. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed to identify themes that may emerge from the experiences of the different participants.

**F. Where will the study take place?**

You will be asked to attend an initial training that will take place in a meeting room on the main campus. Additionally, you will be asked to participate in a focus group in a meeting room on the main campus (exact room number to be determined). The observations will take place in your classroom during your regularly scheduled class time. The first observation will take place within the first 7 weeks of the term and the second observation will take place within the last seven weeks of the term after the focus group. The interview will take place in an office on campus at some point during the last 2 weeks of the term.

**G. What will you be asked to do if you take part in this research study?**

You will be asked to participate in a training during the first week of the term. In this training, you will learn about strategies you can use to improve your interaction with the Black males students in the classroom. This training will take approximately 75 minutes. You will be asked to allow your class to be observed twice: once in the first 7 weeks of the term and then again during the last 7 weeks of the term. You will be asked to implement strategies that are identified as effective ways of enhancing faculty-student interaction with Black males in the classroom. In addition to the in-class observations, you will be asked to participate in a focus group with the other participants. This focus group will take place in week 7 or 8 of the Fall 2017 term. In this focus group, you will be asked to discuss the strategies you find to be successful in the classroom, any new strategies you may have found helpful, and possible changes that may improve the interaction. Lastly, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview in which we will ask you questions about your experience and what strategies you found to be the most effective in improving your interaction with students.

**H. What are the risks and/or discomforts you might experience if you take part in this study?**

Although no identifiers will be used to reveal the identity of the participants or the institution participants may experience some discomfort being transparent about their interactions with students. Additionally, participants may feel discomfort having me observe them in the classroom. There may be a fear of judgment. Another risk is of one of the participants repeating what is discussed in the focus group outside of the group setting. However, the goal is for participants to be able to speak openly about their experiences and therefore the informed consent form explicitly states that the information shared in this study remain confidential.



**I. Are there any benefits for you if you choose to take part in this research study?**

The benefits of for you in participating:

- address an area that is important to their everyday work
- develop practice that is data-driven and classroom specific
- identify strategies that can help enhance interaction with Black males in the classroom on a community college campus.

**J. What are your alternatives if you don't want to take part in this study?**

There are no alternative treatments available. Your alternative is not to take part in this study.

**K. How will you know if new information is learned that may affect whether you are willing to stay in this research study?**

During the course of the study, you will be updated about any new information that may affect whether you are willing to continue taking part in the study. If new information is learned that may affect you, you will be contacted.

**L. Will there be any cost to you to take part in this study?**

No cost.

**M. Will you be paid to take part in this study?**

You will not be paid for your participation in this research study.

**N. How will information about you be kept private or confidential?**

All efforts will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential, but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Your personal information may be given out, if required by law. Presentations and publications to the public and at scientific conferences and meetings **will not** use your name and other personal information. When recording data, I will use pseudonyms rather than actual names to refer to the different participants. Furthermore, the data collected from this study will remain confidential and kept in a locked box in an office. The contents kept in the locked box will consist of transcripts, observations, and audiotape recordings from the interviews. No one will have access to the locked box other than the Primary and co-investigators of this study. We will acquire approval from the institutional review board from Rowan University as well as from the institution where the research will take place.

**O. What will happen if you are injured during this study?**

Your participation in this study is considered no greater than minimal risk. If however, you are injured in this study and need treatment, contact CPC Behavioral Healthcare at (732) 842-2000 and seek treatment.

We will offer the care needed to treat injuries directly resulting from taking part in this study. Rowan University may bill your insurance company or other third parties, if appropriate, for the costs of the care you get for the injury. However, you may be responsible for some of those costs. Rowan University does not plan to pay you or provide compensation for the injury. You do not give up your legal rights by signing this form.

If at any time during your participation and conduct in the study you have been or are injured, you should communicate those injuries to the research staff present at the time of injury and to the Principal Investigator, whose name and contact information is on this consent form.

**P. What will happen if you do not wish to take part in the study or if you later decide not to stay in the study?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may change your mind at any time.

If you do not want to enter the study or decide to stop participating, your relationship with the study staff will not change, and you may do so without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also withdraw your consent for the use of data already collected about you, but you must do this in writing to **Dr. MaryBeth Walpole, Rowan University, Educational Leadership Dept, 201 Mullica Hill Road - Glassboro, New Jersey 08028 OR Fidel Wilson, Brookdale Community College, Educational Opportunity Fund Dept, 765 Newman Springs Road, Lincroft NJ, 07738.**

If you decide to withdraw from the study for any reason, you may be asked to participate in one meeting with the Principal Investigator.

**Q. Who can you call if you have any questions?**

If you have any questions about taking part in this study or if you feel you may have suffered a research related injury, you can call the Principal Investigator:

Dr. MaryBeth Walpole  
Educational Leadership Dept  
856- 256-4706

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can call:

Office of Research Compliance

(856) 256-4078– Glassboro/CMSRU

**What are your rights if you decide to take part in this research study?**

You have the right to ask questions about any part of the study at any time. You should not sign this form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have been given answers to all of your questions.

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**AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE**

I have read this entire form, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed. All of my questions about this form or this study have been answered.

Subject Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:**

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the full contents of the study including all of the information contained in this consent form. All questions of the research subject and those of his/her parent or legal guardian have been accurately answered.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Observation Protocol



<b><u>Time period</u></b>	<b><u>Frequency of interaction</u></b>	<b><u>Which Strategy</u></b>	<b><u>Comfort (Body Language)</u></b>	<b><u>Obstacles</u></b>	<b><u>New Strategies</u></b>
<b><u>Beginning</u></b> (first third of class)					
<b><u>Midpoint</u></b> (middle third of class)					
<b><u>End</u></b> (last third of class)					
<b><u>After Class</u></b>					

## Appendix C

### Focus Group Protocol



1. Let's talk about strategies that derived from training emerged as useful in enhancing your interaction with Black males and why?
2. Let's talk about strategies that derived from training were not useful in enhancing your interaction with Black males and why?
3. Tell me about any obstacles served as barriers to interaction and why?
4. Tell me about any new validating strategies you were able to create?
5. Let's talk about the impact you think the strategies had on your interaction the Black males in your classroom?
6. Tell me about adjustments would you like to make to the strategies you use to enhance your interaction with the Black males in your classroom?
7. Let's talk about different time periods in the class when you thought the strategies were more useful?
8. Tell me how you would describe/ define validation?

## Appendix D

### Interview Protocol



1. Tell me about your level of comfort adopting validating strategies to enhance your interaction with Black males.
2. Which strategies emerged as useful in enhancing your interaction with Black males in the classroom?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of utilizing validating strategies to enhance your interaction with Black males?
4. Which strategies did you find to be less useful in enhancing your interaction with Black males in the classroom?
5. What obstacles served as barriers to interaction and why?
6. What strategies did you create?
7. What impact do you feel implementing these strategies had on enhancing your interaction with Black males in the classroom?