

## **ABSTRACT**

Jennifer Wilson Gonyea, **LEARNING A TRADE: INCREASING SUCCESS RATES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN GATEWAY ENGLISH AND MATH COURSES IN TRADE PROGRAMS AT WILSON COMMUNITY COLLEGE** (Under the direction of Dr. Crystal Chambers). Department of Educational Leadership, May 2022.

This participatory action research (PAR) study examines the challenges and barriers experienced by African American male students enrolled in select trade programs at Wilson Community College, how those challenges and barriers impact the success rates of these students in gateway English and math courses required for their program, and what type of intervention strategy would be most effective in alleviating the impact of identified challenges and barriers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with faculty advisors for the trade programs, English and math faculty, and African-American male students currently enrolled in the selected trade programs when the study was conducted to obtain data on real and perceived challenges and barriers from both a faculty and student perspective.

This study concludes that African American males enrolled in trade programs feel that English and math courses are unnecessary for success in their trade courses and the field. In addition, student participants believed that if assignments in their English and math courses were related to the content taught in the trade programs, they would be engaged and more likely to succeed in these courses. The data obtained during this inquiry was used to develop a tutoring program that addresses the challenges and barriers identified by the student participants that can be proposed for possible implementation at Wilson Community College.



LEARNING A TRADE: INCREASING SUCCESS RATES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN  
MALES IN GATEWAY ENGLISH AND MATH COURSES IN TRADE PROGRAMS  
AT WILSON COMMUNITY COLLEGE

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership  
East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

Jennifer Wilson Gonyea

May, 2022

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my late grandmother, Brenda Joyce Johnson Owens, whom I love with all my heart. She was the reason I began my journey into higher education, and her encouragement and words of wisdom have allowed me to make it to the end of this journey. I wish she were still here with me, but I am blessed to be able to carry with me her words and pearls of wisdom that she bestowed upon me over the years through my beautiful memories of her. I know she is watching over me now, and when my journey ends and the doctoral degree is conferred, she will have a smile so wide, and I can hear her saying, "I am so proud of you Jenn! Thank you for keeping your promise to me that you made so long ago." She wanted me to go to college because she knew it would open up opportunities for me that would allow me to have a stable career that I loved and give me the means to make my way through this life. I hope that, to some extent, in pursuing this journey, I have set an example for all of my children in some manner. I am not referring to just the importance of furthering your education, but the importance of persistence, motivation, sacrifice, and hard work.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First and foremost, I want to praise God for the strength He provided that allowed me to reach my goal. My family has been my support system from the start of this journey with their encouraging words, help with the household chores and dinners, and giving me a break when they knew I needed it. I could not have done this without them by my side. I want to thank all of my professors who have supported and encouraged me throughout my time in the EdD program. My sincerest gratitude is extended to my Wilson Community College colleagues. There are too many to mention, but the help and support they provided me will never be forgotten. Through this program, I have met some extraordinary people I refer to as my “Cohort Family.” We have such a unique bond that we will carry with us for the rest of our lives. We have helped one another through failures and disappointments, but more importantly, we have praised each other during our accomplishments. I could not have asked for a better group of people than God blessed me with for this journey. A special thanks to my accountability partner, Bruce Panneton, who has put up with me for the last three years and gave the best pep talks. This has been a wonderful experience for me, and I could not have come this far alone!

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Background of FoP**

Wilson Community College (WCC) has a long-standing history of offering technical education programs to serve the needs of the citizens and businesses within its service area. While WCC provides many other programs outside of technical education, also referred to as trade programs, there is a continuous need in the community for graduates from these programs. Trade programs thrive at WCC, but in the last couple of years, low success rates of African American male students in gateway English/math courses required to complete these programs were notable. In the 2017-18 academic year, 37.5% were unsuccessful in completing the gateway English course required for their program, and 50% were unsuccessful in completing the gateway math course required. In the 2018-19 academic year, 66.67% were unsuccessful in the gateway English course, and 33.33% were unsuccessful in the gateway math course. This FoP addresses the low success rates of African American males in the gateway English/math courses required for their trade program through the lens of educational equity and social justice to develop an intervention strategy that will be accessible to this population and will promote an increase in their success rates.

Wilson Community College (WCC) is located in Wilson, North Carolina (NC). In July 2019, the population of Wilson, NC, was estimated to be 81,807 (United States Census Bureau, 2020). The median household income in Wilson, NC, from 2014 to 2018 was \$42,850, and the poverty rate in 2018 was 21.1% (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Given this level of economic distress, the North Carolina Department of Commerce ranks Wilson as a Tier 1 county.

WCC was established in 1958 as Wilson Industrial Education Center to serve as a dedicated space to provide educational opportunities (Swain, 1990) and a pathway to improved employment prospects in the region. Program offerings, such as welding and automotive, were added to provide technical education for the citizens of Wilson County and surrounding areas (History of Wilson Community College [WCC], 2020). With program expansion, the institution changed its name several times until its current name – Wilson Community College (History of WCC, 2020). Even though “technical” is no longer part of the college’s name, technical education is still provided through the various trade programs available at WCC.

Technical education is significant in rural counties such as Wilson, NC, where the disparities between rich and poor are vast and often exacerbated by race. As observed by Beale (1980), endemic poverty is “the effect of long-established factors such as the legacy of race discrimination, or low-wage regional and rural economies in which even full-time workers may receive only poverty-level incomes” (p. 26). Technical programs focusing on trades and services in demand in rural communities can help provide skills students can use to sustain themselves and their families. Yearly income increases by 5-10% with just one year of post-secondary education (Blomquist et al., 2014). For this study, the programs focused upon fall under the Industrial Technology department and include air conditioning, heating, and refrigeration technology; automotive systems technology; electrical systems technology, and welding technology (Industrial Technologies, 2019). The air conditioning, heating, and refrigeration technology and the automotive systems technology programs offer associate, diploma, and certificate credential options. In contrast, electrical systems technology and welding technology offer diploma and certificate credential options.

## **Context of Study**

The unduplicated headcount in the Curriculum Division at WCC for the 2017-18 academic year totaled 2,345 students, 9.5% of which were African American males. In the 2018-19 academic year, the unduplicated headcount in the Curriculum Division was 2,349 students, 8.4% of which were African American males. In academic years 2017-18 and 2018-19, of the African American males enrolled at WCC, 12% and 10.10% respectively declared one of the associate or diploma level trade programs as their major. In addition to courses specifically related to their field of study, the associate and diploma credentials for the trade programs require students to complete gateway English and math courses to graduate. Of the African American males enrolled in these programs in the 2017-18 academic year, 37.5% were unsuccessful in completing the gateway English course required for their program, and 50% were unsuccessful in completing the gateway math course required. In the 2018-19 academic year, 66.67% were unsuccessful in the gateway English course, and 33.33% were unsuccessful in the gateway math course. These statistics represent the need to increase the success rates of African American male students in the gateway English and math courses to ensure graduation from their program.

Through the inquiry, I examined the contributing factors that result in the low success rates of African American male students in the gateway English and math courses required to complete the trade programs included in this study. As a result of the information gathered, an intervention strategy was designed to promote program completion of African American male students in their respective trade programs.



## **Statement of FoP**

To complete the associate or diploma credential for the selected trade programs at WCC, students must take and pass the necessary gateway English and math courses. The low success rates of African American male students in these courses are notable and of concern to senior administration. It is critical to understand this discrepancy to assist these students in their academic journey and successful completion of their program. For many of these men, program completion is a pathway out of poverty for themselves and their families. Thus, program completion here is a matter of social justice and educational equity. Based on the literature about African American male student success in post-secondary education, factors suspected to contribute to low completion rates within this population include prior educational experience, poverty and the ability to finance higher education, and first generational status as it relates to the social and cultural capital needed to access higher education.

### **Prior Educational Experience**

#### **High School Grade Point Average (GPA) and Coursework**

High school GPA and coursework are two of several factors that impact college attendance and performance. In 2013, the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) implemented a multiple measures design to determine if placement testing and developmental education would be required for students who graduated from high school within five years of entering a community college in North Carolina. In addition to meeting minimum scores on standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT, high school performance was added to the criteria that could be used to waive placement testing for admissions (Barbitta & Munn, 2018). Students who had an unweighted GPA of 2.6 or higher and had completed four math courses, with at least one math course higher than Algebra II, were considered college-ready and exempt from

placement testing and developmental coursework (Barbitta & Munn, 2018). As a result, students who performed well in their coursework during their high school career had one less barrier to overcome in the admissions process by being exempt from placement testing. Also, by being exempt from developmental courses, they were eligible to immediately enroll in the gateway English and math courses required for their program, shortening the amount of coursework needed to graduate from college. Often, it is not the case that African American males in the WCC service area are exempt from developmental coursework. African American males tend not to qualify for this exemption, which elongates the number of courses needed to take and the length of time to graduate.

### **Developmental Coursework**

Many African American males must take developmental education courses to prepare them for college-level work. In fall 2017, 52% of African American males were placed into some level of developmental coursework upon admission into the North Carolina Community College System (North Carolina Community College System [NCCCS] Equity Report, 2019). Developmental education, also referred to as remedial education, is designed to assist students who cannot demonstrate college readiness in English and math upon college admission. Students can demonstrate college readiness in high school GPA/coursework, standardized test scores, and college placement testing. If students cannot demonstrate college readiness, they are placed into developmental education courses that provide instruction to advance their skills to the acceptable level (Bailey et al., 2010). The amount of developmental coursework that a student must complete before being eligible for gateway English and math courses may impact persistence. Often, the more developmental pathways a student is required to complete to gain eligibility for gateway courses, the less likely the student is to persist toward gateway course eligibility.

In July of 2019, WCC implemented the Reinforced Instruction for Student Excellence (RISE) initiative with the guidance of the NCCCS. RISE aims to provide additional validated measures by which to place students regarding developmental coursework. It accomplishes this by extending the time frame in which standards are acceptable for college admission placement, such as test scores; implementation of a new placement test platform that more accurately places students; allowing additional criteria to be eligible for college admission placement use, and replacement of pre-requisite remediation with co-requisite remediation. However, due to the short time since implementation, there is no data available to determine whether or not students are benefiting from RISE.

### **Dual Enrollment**

The last few decades have given rise to an increased interest for high school students to earn college credits to accelerate their path to college (Taylor, 2015). Dual enrollment programs are commonly known for providing high school students with the opportunity to earn college credits while still enrolled in high school. Such programs have been credited for giving underserved high school students the motivation to attend college, the decrease in educational inequities through the college-level learning opportunities it affords, and an increased likelihood of enrollment and success in college (Taylor, 2015). Public high school students in Wilson, NC, are afforded the opportunity of taking WCC courses tuition-free, which is made possible through the Career and College Promise (CCP) initiative. Students who meet the eligibility requirements for CCP are dually enrolled in college and high school courses. The purpose of the CCP program is to allow eligible students to earn college credit while still enrolled in high school. The CCP initiative offers two pathways for students to pursue during their tenure in high school. Those two pathways are Career-Technical Education (CTE) and College Transfer (CT). In fall 2017,

only 6% of the total dual enrollment population at WCC consisted of African American males (NCCCS Equity Report, 2019).

According to the NC Department of Public Instruction, the CTE pathway aims to empower high school students to participate effectively in various economies as outstanding workers and citizens (Department of Public Instruction CTE local application system, 2019). There are several CTE pathway programs offered through WCC, including, but not limited to, welding technology, electrical systems technology, criminal justice technology, and information technology. College preparation is not encompassed in the purpose of the CTE pathway. Students in the CTE pathway are earning college credits that will apply to the trade programs and other programs offered at WCC while still in high school. However, there is debate over whether or not this pathway adequately prepares them for non-trades courses, specifically the gateway English and math courses required for completion of college trade programs. A research study conducted by Kreisman and Stange (2017) indicated that high school students participating in vocational coursework were marginally less likely to complete a college degree and more likely to be deterred from enrolling in college upon high school graduation.

In contrast, the CT pathway is designed to position high school students in the direction of post-secondary education upon high school graduation (“Programs [of] Study,” 2019). There are two CT pathway programs offered through WCC: Associate in Science and Associate in Arts. Both CT pathways allow students the opportunity to take English and math courses in both CT pathways while still attending high school. This is not the case for students pursuing one of the CTE pathways. Therefore, whether or not the students in the CT pathways complete the gateway English or math courses, they have still been exposed to these courses before college enrollment. Since none of the CTE pathways require students to take gateway English and math

courses, students participating in one of the CTE pathways receive less college exposure than those in the CT pathway.

### **First-Generation College Students**

Being a first-generation college student is also a contributing factor to the low success rates of African American male students in gateway English and math courses. According to Dennis et al. (2005), many first-generation college students often lack assets, such as the personal skills and support systems to assist with college degree completion. A lack of knowledge regarding higher education terminology can also create barriers for students during admissions and financial aid processes (McCoy, 2014). Those who belong to racially and ethnically minoritized populations may face even more challenges (Dennis et al., 2005). During a study conducted at New England College in fall 2012, when first-generation college students of color were asked to describe their experience with the college admissions process, the words “exceptionally challenging” were included in their response (McCoy, 2014, p. 161). In addition to encountering challenges during the admissions and enrollment processes, first-generation college students of color also experience challenges in the college environment in the form of behavior that is stereotypical and sometimes racist (McCoy, 2014).

A particular subset of first-generation college students is adult students returning to the community college after years of being away from any schooling. A student over 25 years of age looking to change careers or enhance their skills is considered a non-traditional college student (Jesnek, 2012). Many of these adult students are first-generation college students.

### **Financial Aid**

Funding a college education is a challenge for many potential students, especially in a rural community such as Wilson, NC. Family income has a unique link to post-secondary

attendance patterns, or in other words, the lower one's family income, the lower the probability of college matriculation (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The Higher Education Act of 1965 resulted in federal legislation and addressed financial aid issues by creating what is known today as the Pell Grant (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). One of the factors used in determining Pell Grant eligibility is the individual's family income.

Fortunately, Pell Grant is available for financial assistance to students meeting the eligibility requirements, and within the NCCCS, Pell covers total tuition costs (Hall & Poock, 2014). In fall 2017, 76% of the African American male student population received the Pell Grant at WCC (NCCCS Equity Report, 2019). Students receiving the Pell Grant must maintain a minimum grade point average (GPA) of 2.0, and their satisfactory academic progress percentage must be 67% or higher. If a student is not completing courses, they are likely to fall below the minimum 2.0 GPA. If the student's GPA remains below 2.0 for two consecutive semesters, they lose eligibility to receive the Pell Grant. Unsuccessful completion of gateway English and math courses will negatively impact a student's GPA, resulting in Pell Grant eligibility loss. The aggregate GPA of all African American male students at WCC at the end of fall 2017 was 1.91 (NCCCS Equity Report, 2019). Regarding satisfactory academic progress, only 34% of first-time curriculum African-American male students enrolled at WCC in fall 2017 completed the required 67% or higher of their coursework during their first year (NCCCS Equity Report, 2019). These two factors position African American males toward loss of Pell Grant eligibility which likely means they will not continue college enrollment. The percentage of this population who met both the GPA and satisfactory academic progress requirements in fall 2017 was only 34% (NCCCS Equity Report, 2019). These startling statistics are another reason why completing gateway English and math courses is vital.

## **Student Retention**

Community colleges are not exempt from the student retention issues currently plaguing higher education. While a perfect solution has not been found for increasing retention, community colleges have received support from government and private organizations. In 2009, the Obama Administration's American Graduation Initiative aimed to help community colleges strengthen and increase reform efforts (Clotfelter et al., 2013). The Administration also views student retention in community colleges as the cornerstone to ensure America's economy is vital in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Heiman, 2010). The American Graduation Initiative intends to support efforts to increase student retention rates to double the number of community college graduates by 2020 (Heiman, 2010). The non-profit organization, Achieving the Dream, has also funded reform efforts to demonstrate their dedication to helping community colleges succeed (Clotfelter et al., 2013).

While state and federal initiatives can assist community colleges in improving student retention rates, this issue must also be addressed using institutional initiatives. Identifying problems in an institution's local context that can have a detrimental impact on student retention can solve these issues. The FoP identified for this inquiry impacts student retention negatively due to the low success rates of African American male students in the gateway English/math courses required for their trade program. If they cannot complete these courses, it will result in unsatisfactory academic progress, resulting in financial aid eligibility loss. Many depend on financial aid to attend, so the institution risks losing the student before completing the desired credential. It is essential to address the issue central to this FoP to keep these students enrolled until they graduate.

## **FoP Guiding Questions**

The questions that guided this FoP inquiry were used to determine the challenges and barriers encountered by African American male students enrolled in trade programs from a faculty and student perspective. In addition, the questions allowed both groups to identify institutional support(s) that could be provided to alleviate the identified challenges and barriers for the population central to this inquiry. The questions that guided the FoP inquiry are:

1. What challenges and barriers do select faculty perceive are encountered by African American males, and what types of institutional support do faculty recommend to increase the success rates of this population in gateway English/math courses?
2. What challenges and barriers do African American males enrolled in trade programs feel inhibit their success in gateway English/math courses, and what types of inst; African support do they think would minimize the impact of these challenges and barriers?
3. What type of institutional support is best suited to address the identified challenges and barriers that will lead to increased success rates of African American males enrolled in trade programs in their gateway English/math courses?

## **Overview of the Inquiry**

Participatory action research (PAR) used an iterative design to conduct the inquiry. PAR is a research method that can effectively create change using inquiry-in-action to solve a problem identified in the participants' local context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the overarching goal of the inquiry was to design an intervention strategy to propose for implementation that would increase the success rates of African American male students enrolled in trade programs in their gateway English and math courses, PAR using iterative design was ideal for the inquiry.



The sampling strategy used to select participants for the inquiry was within-culture sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within-culture sampling is used once the researcher has chosen a site and determined the cultural group to be analyzed can be found within the selected area (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This sampling strategy was ideal for the inquiry given the location, WCC, and the cultural group to be analyzed; African American male students enrolled in trade programs at WCC, were already identified in the overarching goal of the inquiry. The number of participants involved in the study depended on how many students were actively enrolled in the specified trade programs when the inquiry took place. Participation was limited to a maximum of ten students.

Once participants for the study were confirmed, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview questions were designed to collect qualitative data on perceived challenges and barriers encountered by African American males, how they feel these perceived challenges and barriers impact their success in the gateway English and math courses required for their trade program, and what institutional support they felt would minimize these challenges and barriers and increase their likelihood of success.

English and math faculty, and the faculty for the specified trade programs, were included in the study to gain insight into what they perceived as challenges and barriers that contribute to the low success rates of African American male students in the gateway courses. Also, insight was gained regarding what institutional supports they felt would increase success rates for African American male students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected faculty to obtain this data.

Research results were analyzed based on the tenets of Strayhorn et al.'s (2015) Sense of Belonging and Schlossberg's (1989) Marginality and Mattering theoretical frameworks. The

hope was that analyzing the qualitative data concerning the tenets contained within the chosen theoretical frameworks would be beneficial in developing an intervention strategy that African American male students can utilize during their enrollment at WCC. This inquiry aims to improve support to African American male students enrolled in trade programs and increase their success rates in the gateway English and math courses required for program completion.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The guiding questions for the inquiry are based on the tenets encompassed in Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging Theory. According to Strayhorn et al. (2015), a connection exists between a sense of belonging and educational experiences for underrepresented students. The tenets included in this framework addressed during the three phases of the inquiry are as follows: faculty-student engagement, degree of connectedness, and campus support (Strayhorn et al., 2015). Each of these tenets can be utilized to assess one's sense of belonging in a post-secondary educational environment.

Schlossberg's (1989) Marginality and Mattering Theory was used to interpret the research results to assist in designing an institutional support that can be presented to senior administration for possible implementation at WCC. According to Schlossberg et al. (1989), transitions to new roles can lead to marginality, resulting in a person feeling like they do not matter to others. This theory speaks to mattering and marginality's impact on an individual's college experience (Patton et al., 2016). The marginality portion of this theory applies to minoritized groups. The mattering tenet of this theory encompasses the following aspects: attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation (Patton et al., 2016). The inquiry aims to provide adequate support to African American males enrolled in trade programs

to increase their success rates in the gateway English and math courses to progress to graduation. Both theoretical frameworks are discussed in greater length in Chapter 2.

### **Inquiry Partners**

To effectively and efficiently conduct the research for this FoP, make well-informed decisions from the data analysis, and develop an intervention strategy that is most beneficial for the population central to this inquiry, multiple individuals were involved throughout the research process. The African American male students actively enrolled in trade programs played an integral role in the research process when the inquiry was conducted. It was essential to understand the challenges and barriers these students perceive inhibit their success in gateway English/math courses. The feedback obtained from the semi-structured interviews provided me with practical knowledge about developing an intervention strategy that would create the most positive change for the target population.

In addition to the target population, faculty members teaching the transition, co-requisite, and gateway English and math courses and the faculty for the selected trade programs were also involved in the research process. Feedback from the selected faculty was obtained using semi-structured interviews. The interview questions allowed faculty to identify the challenges and barriers they perceive African American males encounter that are detrimental to success in gateway English/math courses. Also, the interview allowed for suggestions regarding what type of institutional support could be provided to minimize the impacts of the challenges and barriers identified for the target population.

In preparation for commencing this inquiry, I communicated with the Vice President for Academic Affairs (VPAA) and the President at WCC. There was consensus that addressing the issue identified for this inquiry would benefit both the target population and the institution. The

semi-structured interview questions were presented to the VPAA for review before use to ensure he knew what was addressed in the instruments. I developed an intervention strategy that would be most accessible and beneficial to the target population using the data collected. The intervention strategy will be presented to the VPAA and President for possible implementation.

### **Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions**

Although the overall goal of this inquiry is to improve support for African American male students at WCC in the gateway English and math courses required for their trade program, the findings of this study may not be readily generalizable to other institutions. The student body population varies across community colleges and universities. This study is not meant to imply that the challenges and barriers identified by the participants would match that of students at other institutions if studied using the same instruments.

In addition, I assume that, to some extent, the student participants were wary of divulging some of their feelings or that feedback was limited, given my position as Director of Enrollment Services/Registrar at WCC but more importantly due to my race and gender. During the recruitment process, it was essential that I conveyed to them that the purpose of the inquiry was to develop an intervention strategy that would be accessible and most beneficial for them to succeed in the gateway English/math courses required for their program. Also, it was of significance that I shared with them my passion for education and how important it is to me for all students to be successful in their educational endeavors. In doing so, I hoped to create an environment where they could be honest when responding to the interview questions. It was also important that I was mindful not to let my past challenges and barriers encountered in my post-secondary education experiences shape how I interpreted their perceived challenges and barriers, given that everyone's educational journey takes a different path.

Regarding the feedback received from the selected faculty, I was knowledgeable that their responses to the interview questions may not have fully reflected their true feelings to the greatest extent possible due to loyalty to their department dean. I assume there was some information or opinion that they were not comfortable divulging in this inquiry due to concern that they may be frowned upon by their colleagues, department dean, or senior administration. During the pilot project, I addressed this by informing faculty to feel free to be as honest and open as they like because senior administration had approved of the study and the end goal for all involved was for there to be an intervention strategy designed to promote change for our African American male students enrolled in trade programs that would increase their success rates in the required gateway English/math courses. In addition, faculty were informed that their responses would remain anonymous.

### **Significance of Inquiry**

This population's low success rates are significant because of the time and effort spent by African American male students to complete their trade program and the opportunities they will forgo if they do not progress to graduation. Non-completers negatively influence retention and graduation rates at WCC, which, in turn, impacts funding. Therefore, in addition to this issue having an individual impact on African American males enrolled in trade programs, there is also an institutional impact. The stakeholders who will benefit from a resolution to this issue include, but are not limited to: faculty teaching the gateway English and math courses required for the trade programs; faculty advisors for the trade programs; the Student Development staff members who are responsible for ensuring persistence from admission through graduation; and the African American male students actively enrolled in trade programs.

This issue is of personal significance because one of my duties as Director of Enrollment Services/Registrar is to verify that all required coursework has been completed for graduation. Often, African American males submit graduation applications, and following a review of their academic record, they are not eligible for graduation. The cause for this graduation ineligibility is typically due to the unsuccessful completion of the gateway English and/or math requirement for their trade program. The situation is a hurtful one for both the student and me. Therefore, I am vested in seeing improvements to this community college practice challenge.

### **Summary**

The low success rates of African American male students in the gateway English and math courses required for the selected trade programs at WCC were identified as a significant issue that needed to be addressed. The trade programs taught at WCC provide an avenue for African American male students to escape poverty in a rural community such as Wilson County. A brief overview of the factors suspected to contribute to these low success rates, the inquiry, its components, and the significance of the study has been provided. The next chapter offers a more in-depth look into the theoretical frameworks chosen for this inquiry and their relation to gaining a better understanding of the issue central to this FoP. History of community colleges at the national and state level, as well as for WCC, will be presented. An overview of the purpose and importance of trade programs will be provided. In addition, the literature review on the factors suspected of contributing to the low success rates of African American male students in gateway English and math courses required for the trade programs is discussed. In Chapter 3, I delineate the inquiry method more fully and provide results in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, I discuss my findings within the context of the research literature and conclude with recommendations for future inquiries and practice.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

To complete the associate or diploma credential for trade programs at Wilson Community College (WCC), students must take and pass the necessary gateway English and math courses. African American male students' low success rates in these courses are notable. It is essential to understand this discrepancy to better assist this population in their academic journey and progression to program completion.

This study examines the factors suspected to contribute to the low success rate of African American male students in the gateway English and math courses required to complete one of the previously mentioned trade programs. As a result of the information gathered from this inquiry, an intervention strategy was developed to increase the success rates of African American males in their respective trade programs. This chapter will detail the history of community colleges in general and the history specific to the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) and WCC. A brief overview of trade programs and access and affordability factors, both institutional and individual, will be outlined. This chapter will close with a detailed discussion of the theoretical frameworks that guided the research questions for this inquiry.

### **History**

Community colleges date back to the early 1900s in the form of post-secondary vocational schools whose mission was to teach trades otherwise disregarded at other institutions (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). During their early years, community colleges were typically referred to as junior colleges and were praised for contributing to community improvements and providing a local study option for students (Grubbs, 2019). United States leaders recognized the lack of skilled workers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Jurgens, 2010). Numerous factors led to the need for a workforce that consisted of more skilled workers, such as urbanization, diversity, technology,

and economic forces (Jurgens, 2010). Community colleges provided job training programs in the 1930s during the Great Depression (Jurgens, 2010). The programs were considered vocational education and encompassed shop trades, skills in agriculture, salesmanship, and bookkeeping/secretarial skills (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). The continued value of community colleges in providing students with a vocational and technical education was expressed in the Truman Commission Report dated 1947 (Jurgens, 2010). The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was enacted in July 2014 to provide employment and training programs for adults and dislocated workers via federal grants (Employment and Training Administration, 2020). Vocational and technical education has always been an integral part of the community college's mission and purpose.

### **North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS)**

Following World War II, economic shifts in North Carolina from agriculture to industry resulted in the need for a tax-supported community college system (Mission & History, 2019). As a result, industrial education centers were created in the 1950s to offer vocational and technical education to assist adults in transitioning from agricultural occupations to industry-based occupations (Brooks et al., 1997). The vast opportunities for workforce development that stemmed from the industrial education centers subsequently resulted in the need for an increase in facilities and program offerings (Brooks et al., 1997). To further improve higher education in North Carolina, the Carlyle Commission published a report in 1962 that outlined several recommendations (Wiggs, 1989). One of the recommendations was for two-year institutions to offer college transfer and special interest programs, in addition to vocational and technical programs (Wiggs, 1989). As a result, the established industrial education centers evolved into 58 comprehensive community colleges by 1978 (Mission & History, 2019).



The rich history of the NCCCS is full of transitions that have resulted from North Carolina's ever-changing labor market. While the community colleges expanded their program offerings outside of vocational and technical education, the labor market continued to drive enrollment and program offerings. Given this fact, community colleges will continue to be positioned at the forefront of improving workforce development (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2015). As industry needs changed, community colleges were charged with adapting quickly and were well suited to bridge the gap between people and jobs (Brooks et al., 1997). Therefore, education and training for the workforce and economic development remain crucial components of the NCCCS's mission statement (Mission & History, 2019).

### **Wilson Community College (WCC)**

Wilson Community College began as the Wilson Industrial Education Center in 1958 (Swain, 1990). Based on local industry needs, five technology programs were selected for implementation in the fall of 1960: Electronics, mechanical drafting and design, air conditioning and refrigeration, mechanical, and transportation maintenance (Swain, 1990). The State Board of Education granted technical institute status in 1964, and thus, the institution's name changed to Wilson County Technical Institute (Swain, 1990). Automotive and welding were eventually added to the list of program options (History of WCC, 2020).

In 1989, the institution became Wilson Technical Community College and, in 1993, added a college transfer program to its list of offerings (History of WCC, 2020). The institution established and maintained existing relationships with local business and industry representatives. As a result, program offerings continued to expand in the curriculum and continuing education departments. In 2007, the institution became Wilson Community College,

and even though “technical” was removed from the name, its reputation for educating and training the workforce remains (History of WCC, 2020).

### **Trade Programs Overview**

Trade programs, also known as vocational or technical education programs, offered by community colleges, are designed to run parallel to the needs of the labor force in working-class occupations (Gauthier, 2018; Wyner, 2014). This aligns with society’s expectation that higher education should result in gainful employment for its graduates that will lead to a working-class career (Gauthier, 2018; Rojewski & Hill, 2014). Since trade programs are intended to produce skilled occupational workers upon graduation, program offerings vary based on local industry needs across the community college system. Often, students attending four-year universities decide to matriculate back into community college trade programs to gain skills in technical careers (Bragg, 2002). This is called reverse transfer (Liu, 2021) and speaks to the importance of vocational education provided by community college trade programs.

Since its inception in 1958, WCC has been dedicated to technical education programs (History of WCC, 2020). The trade programs at WCC focused upon in this inquiry include air conditioning, heating and refrigeration technology, automotive systems technology, electrical systems technology, and welding technology. These programs fall under the Industrial Technology classification at WCC, and their specific intent is to prepare students to be skilled workers in their field of study (Industrial Technologies, 2019). The air conditioning, heating, and refrigeration technology, and automotive systems technology programs offer associate, diploma, and certificate credential options. In contrast, electrical systems and welding technology offer diploma and certificate credential options. These various credentialing options are necessary to meet the differing needs of the students. Some students have worked in their field for quite some

time and may just need to enhance their skills. Therefore, the certificate option may be ideal for them rather than pursuing the diploma or associate credential. On the opposite end of the spectrum, some students desire to enter a trade occupation but do not possess any skills in the trade. This would require exposure to more coursework than what the certificate offers to be considered qualified in the field upon graduation.

### **Access and Affordability**

Enrollment in trade programs at community colleges is influenced by several factors, such as employability, family educational background, and socioeconomics (Gauthier, 2018). Often, individuals are not seeking an undergraduate degree but want to complete a short-term program to increase employability skills in a particular trade. They need a program that will quickly progress them toward earning a working-class salary (Rojewski & Hill, 2014). Students enter trade programs with an understanding that upon graduation, they will be qualified in an occupation that will allow for immediate employment (Gauthier, 2018). During his study, Gauthier (2018) found that the families of students currently enrolled in these programs also coveted career-technical education as an avenue in higher education that would promote immediate employment. Post-secondary program choice is influenced by an individual's socioeconomic background and geographic location (Barbatis, 2010). Thus, socioeconomic status typically plays an integral role in an individual's decision-making process.

Community colleges are well-known for providing a much more affordable education when compared to four-year institutions. Affordability and the increased likelihood of being employed upon graduation from a community college trade program entice students who otherwise cannot meet the expense of university tuition (Gauthier, 2018; Murray, 2009; Strauss, 2012).

## **Institutional Factors**

### **Prior Educational Experience**

Prior educational experiences influence whether and how African American males enter higher education (Anderson, 2018; Carey, 2019). While community colleges boast open door, open enrollment policies (Cohen & Brawer, 2008), how individuals enter a community college is determined by prior academic performance. Given under preparation in K-12, many African American males are not college-ready and must engage in additional programming to qualify to enroll in the college-level work community colleges provide (Attewell et al., 2006).

### ***High School Grade Point Average (GPA) and Coursework***

Experiences encountered in high school can influence an individual's decision as to whether or not they matriculate into post-secondary education and what type of post-secondary education they choose to pursue. These same experiences can have an impact on college performance once enrolled. Often a student's cumulative high school performance in terms of their grade point average (GPA) is used to assess college readiness. Adebayo (2008) identified high school GPA as one of the three best variables to predict college GPA. However, single college readiness measures can negatively impact minoritized populations subject to inadequate elementary and secondary school preparation (Bahr et al., 2019).

In 2013, the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) implemented a multiple measures design to determine if placement testing and developmental education would be required for students who graduated from high school within five years of entering a community college in North Carolina. In addition to meeting minimum scores on standardized tests, such as the SAT and ACT, high school performance was added to the criteria that could be used to waive placement testing for admissions (Barbitta & Munn, 2018). Students who had an

unweighted GPA of 2.6 or higher and had completed four math courses, with at least one math course higher than Algebra II, were considered college-ready and exempt from placement testing and developmental coursework (Barbitta & Munn, 2018). As a result, students who performed well in their coursework during their high school career had one less barrier to overcome in the admissions process by being exempt from placement testing. Also, by being exempt from developmental courses, they were eligible to immediately enroll in the gateway English and math courses required for their program, shortening the amount of coursework needed to graduate from college. High school GPA and coursework are two of several factors that impact college attendance and performance.

### ***Dual Enrollment***

Lack of college exposure while enrolled in high school can also be detrimental to college attendance and performance. Entering college after high school graduation can create a tremendous amount of stress for students. This stress is multiplied for first-generation college students and students who are not subjected to college expectations during high school. In addition to high school GPA and coursework, college exposure during high school allows students to gain knowledge about the college experience and influence college completion (Taylor, 2015).

The last few decades have given rise to an increased interest for high school students to earn college credits to accelerate their path to college (Taylor, 2015). Dual enrollment programs are commonly known for providing high school students with the opportunity to earn college credits while still enrolled in high school. Such programs are credited for providing underserved high school students with the motivation to attend college, the decrease in educational inequities through the college-level learning opportunities it affords, and an increased likelihood of

enrollment and success in college (Boswell, 2001; Hoffman, 2005; Hugo, 2001; Taylor, 2015). A study of Illinois high school students who graduated in 2003 found that 91% of the students who participated in dual enrollment matriculated to college, and 52% of them earned their degree (Taylor, 2015). This can be compared with non-dually enrolled students, of which 63% enrolled in college, and only 29% completed their degree (Taylor, 2015). Fink et al. (2017) utilized enrollment and degree records from National Student Clearinghouse to examine students dually enrolled in community college courses and the path they pursued after high school graduation. This resulted in 200,000+ high school students being tracked from fall 2010 to summer 2016. The key findings of the study were: (1) 15% of community college entrants in fall 2010, nationally, were former participants of dual enrollment programs, (2) almost 50% of dual enrollment high school students enrolled in a community college immediately after graduation, and (3) of those dually enrolled students who immediately matriculated to a community college upon high school graduation, 46% were awarded a college credential within five years (Fink et al., 2017). The statistical gap in college attendance and completion for dual enrollment versus non-dual enrollment students is significant. It emphasizes the positive impact of dual enrollment on high school students.

**Dual Enrollment in NC.** North Carolina statutes authorizing dual enrollment of high school students have been in existence for the last thirty years under several different programs (Public Schools of North Carolina, State Board of Education, Department of Public Instruction, North Carolina Community College System, University of North Carolina System, & North Carolina, UNC System, & NC Independent Colleges & Universities, 2019). In 2011, the decision was made to amalgamate all dual enrollment programs under the Career and College Promise (CCP) Program (Public Schools of North Carolina, State Board of Education, Department of

Public Instruction, North Carolina Community College System, University of North Carolina System, & North Carolina, UNC System, & NC Independent Colleges & Universities, 2019). Public, private, and home-schooled high school students in their junior or senior year who meet the eligibility criteria are provided the opportunity to be dually enrolled through the CCP program offered by the NCCCS.

This program, which requires collaboration between the community colleges and their local high school administrators, offers two pathways for traditional high school students; (1) college transfer (CT) pathway and (2) career-technical education (CTE) pathway (State Board Community College Code. 1D SBCCC 400.11 Education Services through Career and College Promise (Curriculum), (2019). Of the North Carolina high school students that graduated in 2017-18, 59.5% earned college credit through the CCP program before graduation (Public Schools of North Carolina, State Board of Education, Department of Public Instruction, North Carolina Community College System, University of North Carolina System, & North Carolina, UNC System, & NC Independent Colleges & Universities, 2019). Both pathways are structured to earn a certificate once all courses in the program of study are completed (State Board Community College Code. 1D SBCCC 400.11 Education Services through Career and College Promise (Curriculum), 2019). Also, should the student decide to enroll in the same program at the community college upon high school graduation, the credits they earned will apply and reduce the time to complete the degree and/or diploma (State Board Community College Code. 1D SBCCC 400.11 Education Services through Career and College Promise (Curriculum), 2019). In fall 2017, the number of students enrolled in either the CT or CTE pathways totaled 27,453 (Public Schools of North Carolina, State Board of Education, Department of Public Instruction, North Carolina Community College System, University of North Carolina System, &

North Carolina, UNC System, & NC Independent Colleges & Universities, 2019). Of these same students, 6% or 1,709, had graduated with at least one degree by the summer of 2018 (Public Schools of North Carolina, State Board of Education, Department of Public Instruction, North Carolina Community College System, University of North Carolina System, & North Carolina, UNC System, & NC Independent Colleges & Universities, 2019).

Both pathways have eligibility requirements that must be met for a student to participate. Students must have an unweighted high school GPA of 2.8 or higher and meet college-ready benchmarks for English and math on any number of the approved diagnostic assessments (State Board Community College Code. 1D SBCCC 400.11 Education Services through Career and College Promise (Curriculum), 2019) To remain in the CCP pathway, the student must maintain progression toward high school graduation. If the student's GPA drops below 2.0, the college's satisfactory academic progress policy will be enforced (State Board Community College Code. 1D SBCCC 400.11 Education Services through Career and College Promise (Curriculum), 2019). This points back to the high school GPA's significance, even before graduation.

**Dual Enrollment at WCC.** Wilson Community College (WCC) currently offers two CT pathway choices and 13 CTE pathway choices (Career and College Promise, 2019). In fall 2017, WCC had 335 high school students enrolled in one of the CT or CTE pathways offered. African American males accounted for 3.9% of the CCP enrollment during this same term. While the pathway enrollment dropped in fall 2018 to 304 students, the percentage of African American males remained at 3.9%. These statistics make it evident that the number of African American males participating in the CCP program at WCC is extremely low. Thus, this pathway that could be of more significant benefit to African American males interested in trade programs, may be underutilized.



## **Developmental Education**

Developmental education, also referred to as remedial education, is designed to assist students who are unable to demonstrate college readiness in English and math upon being admitted to college. Students can demonstrate college readiness in the form of high school GPA/coursework, standardized test scores, and/or college placement testing. If students cannot display college readiness, they are placed into developmental education courses that provide instruction to advance their skills to the acceptable level (Bailey et al., 2010). Typically, developmental education is structured in the form of sequenced courses. Any student, dual enrollment or otherwise, who does not place out of developmental coursework using one of the aforementioned demonstrations of college readiness, must complete all courses in the sequence before being eligible to enroll in gateway English and math courses required for their program of study. The number of courses required in the sequence varies based on the measure used for initial placement upon admission to the college. Placing into development coursework prolongs access to gateway English and math courses which extends the time to graduation and employment. Research indicates that success in college and the probability of successful completion of a gateway English or math course is significantly reduced when a student places into developmental courses (Clotfelter et al., 2015).

Early on in the history of higher education, it was expected that a student's high school education would prepare them for matriculation to college. However, during the Mass Higher Education Era (1945-1975), it was discovered that high school graduates were grossly underprepared for college, and remedial education was forced upon post-secondary institutions (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Community colleges took on a majority of the task to provide remedial education during this time (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). This still rings true today as a startling

number of high school graduates remain underprepared in the academic skills necessary for success in college-level courses (Cohen & Kisker, 2010).

While developmental education imposes yet another cost for post-secondary institutions, students who place into these courses suffer a significant impact in the form of financial, psychological, and opportunity costs (Bailey et al., 2010). Many students who place into a developmental course sequence tend not to enroll in the first course in the series, which deters college attendance (Bailey et al., 2010; Rosenbaum, 2001). A study conducted by Hodara and Jagers (2014) concluded that students starting in a shorter sequence of remediation courses were 9.7% more likely to enroll in a gateway English course and 6% more likely to complete the course. Also, the study found the shorter sequence for students in math remediation resulted in them being 3.5% more likely to enroll in a gateway math course and 3% more likely to complete the course (Hodara & Jagers, 2014). Given the negative impact that participation in developmental education can have on enrollment and persistence, many states have commenced looking for ways to shorten the sequence of, or eliminate, these courses. North Carolina is among the states striving to streamline developmental education efforts in the community college system by reducing the amount of remediation and allowing more criteria to serve as measures for awarding developmental course waivers.

### ***NCCCS Developmental Education***

Clotfelter et al. (2015) conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of developmental education in North Carolina community colleges. This study determined no evidence to substantiate claims that developmental education provided the students with the necessary academic skills (Clotfelter et al., 2015). The findings of this study also reiterated the results of

previous research that correlated developmental education with a lower probability of college success and gateway English and/or math course completion (Clotfelter et al., 2015).

In 2011, the NCCCS was awarded a Completion by Design grant funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Bowling et al., 2014). During the planning phase for this initiative, five cadre colleges in the system developed a core working team that analyzed several years of data to cultivate a Loss and Momentum Framework (Bowling et al., 2014). As a result of this analysis it was determined that 65% of students enrolled at the five cadre colleges were placed into at least one developmental course, thus defining developmental education as a significant loss point in the framework (Bowling et al., 2014). These findings prompted the necessity to determine alternative placement approaches for developmental education.

While the developmental education structure has been overhauled several times since the establishment of the NCCCS, in 2017 the system's commitment to continuous improvement resulted in the planning phase for Reinforced Instruction for Student Excellence (RISE). By spring 2019, several community colleges began piloting RISE, and by fall 2020, all colleges in the NCCCS will have launched this initiative. The single objective of RISE is to increase student momentum toward gateway courses (RISE Program Overview, 2019). Several changes to developmental course placement result from RISE: (1) shift from pre-requisite to co-requisite remediation, (2) more criteria that can be used to determine gateway course eligibility, (3) elimination of placement testing for students graduating high school in the last ten years, (4) tiered high school GPA placement and (5) elimination of the fourth math previously required in the multiple measures format (RISE Program Overview, 2019).

### ***WCC Developmental Education***

WCC implemented RISE in fall 2019 after one and a half years of planning, training, and professional development. While it is too early to determine if the RISE initiative has impacted success in gateway English and math courses, it has already significantly reduced the number of students required to take the placement test during the admissions process. Data should be available in fall 2020 to derive RISE's impact on enrollment and success in gateway English and math courses.

In fall 2017, 14.8% of African American males enrolled at WCC were taking at least one developmental English or math course. This is more than double the number of their white counterparts, who accounted for only 6.7% of enrollment in at least one developmental English or math course. This statistic aligns with Bailey et al.'s (2010) research findings that African American students were more likely to require developmental education.

### **Individual Factors**

#### **African American Male Students**

Several landmark Supreme Court cases, such as *Sipuel v. Oklahoma Board of Regents* in 1948, *Sweatt v. Painter* and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma Board of Regents* in 1950, and *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, paved a pathway towards ending racial segregation in higher education (Chambers, 2016). However, it took a couple of decades after these landmark decisions before African American enrollments in higher education witnessed a steady increase (Newman et al., 2012). However, this increase was plagued with unfavorable outcomes, such as significantly lower persistence and graduation rates for African American males than white males and African American females (Newman et al., 2012). After *de jure* segregation in higher education ended, many African Americans, particularly males, who attended predominantly

white institutions were accosted with adverse campus climates, often filled with racism and isolation from White peers and faculty members, which resulted in psychosocial challenges that contributed to the significantly lower persistence and graduation rates of African American males (Chambers, 2016; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Feagin et al., 1996).

Contemporarily, African American male students utilize community colleges as their primary means to access post-secondary education, with 46.6% enrolling in two-year institutions (Staklis, 2010). Furthermore, community colleges have been named a gateway for African American males when pursuing post-secondary education and career preparation (Bennett, 2020). These statistics demonstrate the critical need for community colleges to increase faculty and administrative diversity; create an academic environment conducive to addressing the needs specific to African American males; provide opportunities for this population to demonstrate their unique abilities; and foster support networks that provide equitable outcomes for African American males (Newman et al., 2012).

In the 2017-18 academic year of the approximately 222 African American males enrolled at WCC, 12% declared one of the previously mentioned associate or diploma trade programs as their major. In the 2018-19 academic year, these figures were 197 and 10.10%, respectively. In addition to courses specifically related to their field of study, the associate and diploma credentials for the trade programs require students to complete gateway math and English courses to graduate. Of the African American males enrolled in these programs in the 2017-18 academic year, 37.5% were unsuccessful in completing the gateway English course required for their program, and 50% were unsuccessful in completing the required gateway math course. In the 2018-19 academic year, 66.67% were unsuccessful in the gateway English course, and 33.33% were unsuccessful in the gateway math course. These statistics represent the need to

increase the success rates of African American males in the gateway English and math courses to ensure graduation from their trade program.

### **First-Generation College Students**

Navigating the college admissions process can be quite a daunting task for an individual, but the intimidation factor is multiplied for first-generation college students who often lack support. One definition of the term first-generation college student provided by Peralta and Klonowski (2017) is “an individual who is pursuing a higher education degree and whose parents or guardians do not have a post-secondary degree” (p. 635). Matriculating into post-secondary education involves several steps, and the fact that admissions requirements vary across institutions makes it even more complex. The admissions process requires more than simply completing and submitting an application at most institutions. Other entrance requirements, such as submitting standardized test scores or taking a placement test to demonstrate college readiness in English and math, must also be met. The college admissions and enrollment processes can become quite overwhelming for first-generation college students.

While financial aid is not technically part of the admissions requirements, applying for financial aid is a step that must be taken for those who otherwise would not be able to afford the cost of college attendance (Davidson et al., 2020). The need for financial aid increases as socioeconomic status decreases. More first-generation college students report they are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than do traditional students (Aspelmeier et al., 2012). So the financial aid process is yet another task that may be added to a first-generation college student’s admissions checklist.

The pressure is not over once the admissions process is complete. Students are then faced with advising, course scheduling, performing well in coursework, and adhering to college

expectations. Again, for first-generation college students, these tasks can be laborious. A first-generation college student's academic outcomes and college experiences are perceived to differ from traditional college students (Aspelmeier et al., 2012). Lack of academic preparation oftentimes makes remedial education necessary for first-generation college students delaying their attainment of credits that count toward a degree (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). This, in turn, can decrease the likelihood that they will persist to graduation. A study conducted by Atherton (2014) found that first-generation students were significantly less likely to be academically prepared when compared to students whose parents had attended college. First-generation college students are also afflicted with frustration and lack of success that creates another barrier to college transition and may lead to adverse outcomes regarding retention and attainment (Atherton, 2014).

First-generation college students with a racial or ethnic minority background are also identified as an underrepresented group in terms of academic success in college (Dennis et al., 2005). Although higher education has become more accessible over the last several decades, first-generation students of color transition into higher education at disproportionately lower rates than their White peers (McCoy, 2014). First-generation college students encounter several obstacles during the college admissions and enrollment processes. However, first-generation college students of color face obstacles in addition to those previously mentioned (McCoy, 2014; Ortiz & Heavy-Runner, 2003). In many cases, students from ethnic minorities are typically the first in their family to attend college and with that comes high familial expectations that they succeed (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; McCoy, 2014). These high expectations can sometimes positively impact success because they can contribute to the student's aspiration to attend college and do well (Bui, 2002; McCoy, 2014). However, these exact expectations can leave some

students feeling as if the goals resulting from these expectations are unrealistic (McCoy, 2014). The negative feelings associated with high familial expectations can result in students experiencing internal conflicts regarding college enrollment.

During a research study conducted at New England College in fall 2012, when first-generation college students of color were asked to describe their experience with the college admissions process, the words “exceptionally challenging” were included in their responses (McCoy, 2014). A lack of knowledge of higher education terminology can also create barriers for students, which one first-generation college student of color noted, made applying for financial aid difficult (McCoy, 2014). In addition to encountering challenges during the admissions and enrollment processes, first-generation college students of color also experience challenges in the college environment in the form of behavior that is stereotypical and sometimes racist (McCoy, 2014). While many institutions have support programs or systems to assist first-generation college students with overcoming barriers, they should be mindful that first-generation college students of color encounter additional challenges, not only with admissions but throughout college life.

### **Adult College Students**

While first-generation college students encounter barriers in higher education, they are not alone. Adult college students, a subset of first-generation college students, also face challenges in college. A student over 25 years of age, often a first-generation student, looking to change careers or enhance their skills is considered a non-traditional college student (Jesnek, 2012). This population of students has been matriculating back into post-secondary education rapidly (Forbus et al., 2011). Non-traditional student enrollment in community colleges has grown drastically in the last ten years due to unemployment and economic trends (Jesnek, 2012).



Older students were drawn to community colleges to learn or enhance a career skill that would make them more employable (Cohen & Kisker, 2010).

One of the obstacles that non-traditional college students face is time shortages. In a study conducted by Steinhauer and Lovell (2019), time available to meet personal and college responsibilities was identified as the most significant obstacle (p. 2). While traditional students have more time to focus on college, non-traditional college students have work and family demands that can result in overload once they begin school (Forbus et al., 2011). Non-traditional college students typically commute, which also takes away from their time (Forbus et al., 2011).

Technology use in higher education can also be an obstacle for non-traditional college students. You will not find many classrooms today that still utilize chalkboards or overhead projectors. Most classrooms and laboratories are equipped with up-to-date technologies, such as laptops, smart televisions, and other digital devices, which are constantly changing. Technological expectations vary across degree programs, and unfortunately, many non-traditional college students suffer from technical ineptitude, which can deter success (Jesnek, 2012).

### **Financial Aid and Progression to Degree**

While higher education is more accessible now than in past decades, the cost of college tuition, fees, and books can be astronomical. The high costs associated with college attendance can close the door for many people who do not have the discretionary income to cover such costs. Minority and first-generation college students are more likely to lack the financial capital required for college attendance (McCabe & Jackson, 2016). As a result, financial aid plays an integral role in an individual's ability to participate in post-secondary education. Financial aid

comes in several forms; Federal Pell Grant, scholarships, student loans, employee sponsorships, and the GI Bill. For this study, the Federal Pell Grant will be discussed.

Family income has a unique link to post-secondary attendance patterns, or in other words, the lower one's family income, the lower the probability of college matriculation (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The Higher Education Act of 1965 resulted from federal legislation, and it addressed financial aid issues by creating what is known today as the Pell Grant (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). One of the factors used in determining Pell Grant eligibility is the individual's family income.

In the NCCCS, there is a contrast between African American males and white males who receive Federal Pell Grant to attend a community college. The NCCCS Equity Report (2019) showed that in fall 2017, African American males accounted for 69% of first-time curriculum students receiving Federal Pell Grant funding. In contrast, only 35% of white males in the same cohort were Federal Pell Grant recipients (NCCCS Equity Report, 2019). This gap between African American and white male recipients is evident across all community colleges in North Carolina.

Once approved for the Federal Pell Grant, two criteria that recipients must meet to remain eligible relate to satisfactory academic progress (SAP) in the form of course completion and GPA. Every post-secondary institution has the autonomy to establish its SAP policy (Federal Student Aid, 2019). The standard SAP requirements across the NCCCS require a course completion rate of 66.7% and a GPA of 2.0 or higher to demonstrate satisfactory progress. In fall 2017, of the African American males who were first-time curriculum students in the NCCCS, only 40% earned an aggregate GPA of 2.0 or higher during their first academic year compared to 64% for white males (NCCCS Equity Report, 2019). During this same term, of the African

American males who were first-time curriculum students in the NCCCS, only 33% successfully completed 66.7% of their courses during their first academic year compared to 56% for white males (NCCCS Equity Report, 2019). When the two factors were combined, only 31% of African American males met both SAP standards during their first academic year compared to 55% for white males (NCCCS Equity Report, 2019).

The SAP policy at WCC follows the same standards used in the NCCCS Equity Report to measure satisfactory progress (Wilson Community College 2019-2020 Catalog, 2019). The percentage gaps among African American males and white males enrolled at WCC during the fall 2017 term shadow that of the state totals reported in the NCCCS Equity report. Seventy-six percent of African American males and 8% of white males attended WCC as first-time curriculum students were Pell Grant recipients (NCCCS Equity Report, 2019). Using the same criteria previously mentioned for the NCCCS statistics, the percentages for African American and white males at WCC during fall 2017 are 45% of African American males and 64% of white males with regards to aggregate GPA of 2.0 or higher (NCCCS Equity Report, 2019); 34% of African American males and 56% of white males with regards to the successful completion of 66.7% of coursework (NCCCS Equity Report, 2019); and 28% of African-American males and 56% of white males who met both standards for SAP (NCCCS Equity Report, 2019). Given these startling statistics among African American and white males and the correlation between income and Pell Grant eligibility, successful completion of remedial and gateway English and math courses should be a point of concern.

## **Student Retention**

Retention, the ability of higher education institutions to keep students enrolled progressing towards degree completion, is of paramount concern for higher education institutions since most institutions are funded based on enrollment, with many state funding formulas considering degree completion rates (Barr & McClellan, 2018). Retention is designated as a significant problem in higher education (Heiman, 2010). Performance-based funding as implemented in the NCCCS with its emphasis on graduation rates may have a negative influence on African American male enrollments (McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017; Rosinger et al., 2020) as institutions more actively engage potential students and programming more likely to result in graduations (Li & Kennedy, 2018).

While a perfect solution has not been found for increasing retention, community colleges have received support from government and private organizations. In 2009, the Obama Administration's American Graduation Initiative aimed to help community colleges strengthen and increase reform efforts (Clotfelter et al., 2013). The Obama Administration viewed student retention in community colleges as the cornerstone to ensure America's economy is strong in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Heiman, 2010). The American Graduation Initiative intends to support an array of efforts designed to increase student retention rates to double the number of community college graduates by 2020 (Heiman, 2010). The non-profit organization, Achieving the Dream, has also funded reform efforts to demonstrate their dedication to helping community colleges succeed (Clotfelter et al., 2013). The NCCCS participated in the Achieving the Dream program through its Completion by Design program in 2011 (Bowling et al., 2014).

The guided pathway model in the form of structured program requirements is also suggested as a way to increase retention rates (Van Noy et al., 2016). This structure eliminates

students having various course options to fulfill specific requirements. The NCCCS is currently piloting its North Carolina Guided Pathways to Success (NC GPS) initiative to reform program mapping and alignment to increase completion rates (NC Guided Pathways to Success Plan 2018-2019, 2019). Program alignment also comes in the form of stackable credentials, which refers to connecting credentials in a structured sequence (Van Noy et al., 2016).

Wilson Community College is also dedicated to increasing enrollment and retention rates, which is demonstrated by its participation in the Completion by Design program. Currently, WCC is involved in the planning stage to prepare for implementing the NC GPS initiative. Many programs at WCC, especially the trade programs, offer stackable credentials. This allows students to earn certificates and diplomas while working toward their associate degree program. Other efforts to increase student retention at WCC include the Early Alert Referral System (EARS) and the minority male program entitled Influential Men Achieving Greatness through Education (IMAGE). EARS was developed to provide faculty with an avenue to report students at risk of failing their courses. Once reported, a Student Development staff member follows up with the student to determine the challenges being faced and what measures can be taken to assist the student with course completion (Early Alert Referral System, 2019). The IMAGE program is a subset of the Minority Male Success Initiative developed by the NCCCS. This program strives to improve the success and well-being of minority male students (IMAGE: Influential Men Achieving Greatness through Education, 2019).

While higher education faces many challenges, student retention impacts not only the institution but also students, citizens, the American workforce, and the economy. Efforts to increase student retention should be at the forefront of institutional initiatives given the far-reaching effect it has in so many areas. Retention and degree completion are social justice issues

for those seeking a pathway out of poverty. Poverty is common in rural communities such as Wilson County. In 2018 there were 21.1% of individuals living below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau, 2020). African Americans made up 40.5% of Wilson County's total population in 2018 (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Based on these statistics, one could deduce that many African Americans in Wilson County live in poverty and need the means to obtain employability skills to provide a better life for themselves and their families. According to Kane and Rouse (1999), community college attendance and persistence to graduation can boost an individual's potential for increased earnings. Often, those living in poverty lack transportation to get back and forth to classes and certainly do not have enough, if any, disposable income to afford tuition and fees to enroll in post-secondary education. Such circumstances lead to community college enrollment growth due to the low cost of attendance and convenient locale (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Thus, community colleges have a responsibility to address the social injustice and educational inequity issues that impact student retention, not only for the institution but for the sake of those hindered by these injustices and inequities.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging Theory emphasizes the connection between the sense of belonging and educational experiences for underrepresented students (Strayhorn et al., 2015). This theoretical framework encompasses the following tenets: the degree of connectedness, academic identification/disidentification, campus support, and faculty-student engagement (Strayhorn et al., 2015). A sense of belonging is necessary for African American males transitioning to post-secondary education. In an exploratory study conducted by Strayhorn et al. (2015), the goal was to determine the relationship that existed between a sense of belonging and confidence during this transition. The results indicated African American males who identified

as feeling a sense of belonging were also confident that their transition was successful (Strayhorn et al., 2015).

The questions guiding the inquiry for this FoP are attached to these tenets previously mentioned to gain insight into the perceptions African American males have regarding the challenges and barriers they encounter during enrollment and the level of sense of belonging they feel with regards to the tenets of this theory. The questions also gain this same insight from a faculty perspective as well.

In addition to Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging Theory, Schlossberg's Marginality and Mattering Theory was used in collaboration with the data obtained from the inquiry to develop the intervention strategy. The previously identified factors that contribute to the issue central to my FoP result from social injustice and educational inequities often experienced by marginalized populations. This theory is ideal when analyzing marginalized populations while addressing the injustices and inequities experienced by the African American males enrolled in the selected trade programs at WCC.

According to Schlossberg et al. (1989), marginality occurs during transitions to new roles, and feelings of marginality can result in an individual feeling as if they do not matter to anyone. This theory addresses the influential impact that mattering and marginality have on a student's college experience (Patton et al., 2016). The marginality factor encompassed in this theory can be applied to minoritized groups and first-generation college students. Schlossberg indicates that marginality can be temporary or permanent, and the student's sense of not belonging results in feelings of depression, increased self-consciousness, and petulance (Patton et al., 2016). These feelings, separately or combined, can inhibit the college experience's development and completion. Typically, marginality, and the detrimental feelings that result

from it, arise when individuals enter new roles, such as becoming a student in a higher education setting (Patton et al., 2016). Schlossberg further explains that minoritized groups often experience marginality permanently, whereas others may only experience it temporarily (Patton et al., 2016).

Schlossberg indicated that individuals who experience marginality, permanent or temporary, also have concerns about whether they matter to others (Patton et al., 2016). Also, she identified the five aspects encompassed in the mattering tenet of her theory which include attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation (Patton et al., 2016).

According to Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), attention is defined by the necessity to be noticed by another person and for others to be interested in them. Individuals also have a desire to be important to someone and cared for by others. Feeling that someone is proud of an accomplishment or disappointed in failure is the concept of ego-extension. The need to feel depended on and that you have someone to rely on describes dependence. Appreciation is the need to feel appreciated for one's efforts (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Collectively, these five aspects address one's need to be cared for, paid attention to, validated for accomplishments, supported in failures, and appreciated for their efforts.

In practice, Schlossberg's Mattering and Marginality theory has found that creating conditions of mattering consistently has shown to increase student persistence at historically black colleges and universities (Berger & Milem, 2000; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Campus environments that create a sense of mattering for students will encourage them to become involved, leading to goal accomplishment (Schlossberg et al., 1989). According to Schlossberg et al. (1989), institutions that foster an environment for mattering and increased student involvement are more likely to be successful in terms of student motivation and retention.



Analyzing my target population from this perspective provided significant guidance for developing an intervention strategy that addresses students' sense of belonging, mattering, and marginality among African American male students enrolled in trade programs. This analysis helped gain insight into the type of intervention strategy that would most likely be beneficial to increase the success rates of African American males in their required gateway English and math courses. It is expected that an intervention strategy providing students with a sense of belonging, or mattering, will alleviate some or all feelings of marginality experienced by African American males in trade programs at WCC.

### **Summary**

Each of the factors suspected to contribute to the low success rates of African American male students in gateway English and math courses discussed within this chapter could be viewed as a result of social injustice and educational inequity for the African American male student population at WCC. Community colleges play a significant role in providing quality technical and vocational education. All individuals who desire to pursue a trade program must have equal access to said program. Also, a support strategy that will help them minimize barriers to program completion is essential for them to become more employable. Increased employability will provide these students with opportunities to succeed financially and break the vicious cycle of poverty. Thus, it was essential to use the data obtained from this inquiry to design an intervention strategy that would most benefit the target population. The next chapter describes the inquiry method used to obtain the data necessary to make an informed decision regarding the intervention strategy that would increase the success rates of African American males in the gateway English and math courses required for the selected trade programs.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY**

To complete the associate or diploma credential for the aforementioned trade programs at WCC, students must complete the required gateway English and math courses. Senior administration noted the low success rates of African American male students in these courses. To develop an intervention strategy that would increase success rates in gateway English/math courses required for their trade program, it was essential to determine and understand the factors that inhibit success for this population. Being unsuccessful in the gateway English/math courses delays program completion. Given program completion is a pathway out of poverty for many of these students, program completion here becomes a matter of social justice and educational equity.

This inquiry aimed to examine the factors suspected to contribute to the low success rates of African American male students in the gateway English and math courses required to complete the selected trade programs. As a result of the information gathered during this inquiry, an intervention strategy was designed that can be presented to senior administration in the form of a proposal for implementation. The ideal outcome is for the intervention strategy to increase the gateway English and math course success rates of African American males in their respective trade programs. This chapter discusses the research questions and methods used to obtain the data necessary to make an informed decision as to which type of intervention strategy would create change and be most beneficial for the target population.

### **FoP Guiding Questions**

The following questions guide this study:

1. What challenges and barriers do selected faculty perceive are encountered by African American males and what types of institutional support do faculty recommend to increase the success rates of this population in gateway English/math courses?
2. What challenges and barriers do African American males enrolled in trade programs feel inhibit their success in gateway English/math courses and what types of institutional support do they feel would minimize the impact of these challenges and barriers?
3. What type of institutional support is best suited to address the identified challenges and barriers that will lead to increased success rates of African American males enrolled in trade programs in their gateway English/math courses?

### **Inquiry Design and Rationale**

The question central to this study is: what institutional support can be provided to African American male students enrolled in trade programs at WCC to increase their success rates in required gateway English and math courses? It is essential that the institutional support designed for possible implementation addresses the needs of African American male students and is facilitated in a most beneficial and accessible way. To ensure this occurs, they must be afforded an opportunity to provide feedback regarding the challenges and barriers they encounter and what they feel would minimize the impact of said challenges and barriers. Participatory action research (PAR) using iterative design was utilized to conduct this inquiry as it afforded this opportunity to the participants. PAR is a research method that can effectively create change using inquiry-in-action to solve a problem identified in the participants' local context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the overarching goal of this inquiry was to design an intervention strategy for possible implementation that would increase the success rates of African American males

enrolled in trade programs in their gateway English and math courses, PAR using iterative design was ideal for this inquiry.

The iterative design consisted of three phases. Phase I addressed the faculty-student engagement tenet of Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging theoretical framework (Strayhorn et al., 2015) by allowing faculty an opportunity to identify the challenges and barriers that African American males encounter that are detrimental to their success in gateway English/math courses while also providing suggestions on what type of institutional support they feel would be most beneficial in increasing the success rates of African American male students in trade programs. The research question associated with this phase was as follows: What challenges and barriers do selected faculty perceive are encountered by African American male students and what types of institutional support do faculty recommend to increase the success rates of this population in gateway English/math courses?

Phase II involved obtaining feedback from African American male students enrolled in the selected trade programs when the inquiry was conducted. This phase addressed the degree of connectedness tenet of Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging theoretical framework (Strayhorn et al., 2015) by allowing these students to convey the challenges and barriers they perceive as inhibiting their success in gateway English/math courses required for their program, as well as, what types of institutional support they feel would be accessible and most beneficial to increase their chances of success in said courses. The research question associated with this tenet was as follows: What challenges and barriers do African American males feel inhibit their success in gateway English/math courses and what types of institutional support do they feel would minimize the impacts of these challenges and barriers?

Phase III utilized the qualitative data obtained, analyzed, and coded from phases I and II to design an intervention strategy that can be presented to the VPAA and the President in the form of a proposal for possible implementation. This phase addressed the campus support tenet of Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging theoretical framework (Strayhorn et al., 2015). The research question associated with this tenet was as follows: What type of institutional support is best suited to address the identified challenges and barriers that will lead to increased success rates of African American males enrolled in trade programs at WCC in their gateway English/math courses? Table 1 summarizes each phase of the design, the theoretical framework tenet the phase addressed, and the research question answered for each phase.

### **Context of the Study**

Technical education is of significance in rural counties such as Wilson, NC, where WCC is situated in disparities between rich and poor, often exacerbated by race. As observed by Beale (1980), endemic poverty is "the effect of long-established factors such as the legacy of race discrimination, or low-wage regional and rural economies in which even full-time workers may receive only poverty-level incomes" (p. 26). Technical programs focusing on trade services in demand in rural communities can help provide skills students can use to sustain themselves and their families, given that yearly income increases by 5-10% with just one year of post-secondary education (Blomquist et al., 2014).

The unduplicated headcount in the Curriculum Division at WCC for the 2017-18 academic year totaled 2,345 students; 9.5% were African American males. In the 2018-19 academic year, the unduplicated headcount in the Curriculum Division was 2,349 students, 8.4% of which were African American males. In the academic years 2017-18 and 2018-19, of the African American males enrolled at WCC, 12% and 10.10% respectively declared one of the

Table 1

*Summary of Inquiry Design Phases*

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Phase	Theoretical Framework Tenet	Research Question
Phase I	Faculty-Student Engagement	What challenges and barriers do selected faculty perceive are encountered by African American males and what types of institutional support do faculty recommend to increase the success rates of this population in gateway English/math courses?
Phase II	Degree of Connectedness	What challenges and barriers do African American males enrolled in trade programs feel inhibit their success in gateway English/math courses and what types of institutional support do they think would minimize the impact of these challenges and barriers?
Phase III	Campus Support	What type of institutional support is best suited to address the identified challenges and barriers that will lead to increased success rates of African American males enrolled in trade programs in their gateway English/math courses?

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aforementioned associate or diploma level trade programs as their major. In addition to courses specifically related to their field of study, the associate and diploma credentials for the trade programs require students to successfully complete gateway math and/or English courses to graduate. Of the African American males enrolled in these programs in the 2017-18 academic year, 37.5% were unsuccessful in completing the gateway English course required for their program, and 50% were unsuccessful in completing the gateway math course required. In the 2018-19 academic year, 66.67% were unsuccessful in the gateway English course, and 33.33% were unsuccessful in the gateway math course. These statistics represent the need to increase the success rates of African American males in the gateway English and math courses to ensure graduation from their major.

This inquiry examined factors contributing to the low success rates of African American male students in the gateway English and math courses required to complete the trade programs selected for this study. As a result of the information gathered, an intervention strategy was developed that can be proposed for implementation to support the program completion of African American males in their respective trade programs.

### **Inquiry Partners**

Multiple individuals were involved throughout the research process to effectively research this FoP and make well-informed decisions when developing an intervention strategy for possible implementation. When the inquiry was conducted, the African American male students actively enrolled in trade programs played an integral role in the research process. The feedback obtained from the semi-structured interviews afforded me practical knowledge that was used in the development process in hopes that the intervention strategy would create the most positive change for the target population.

In addition to the target population, faculty members teaching the transition, co-requisite, and gateway English and math courses and the faculty for the selected trade programs were involved in the research process. Feedback from the selected faculty was obtained using semi-structured interviews. The interview questions provided faculty the opportunity to identify the challenges and barriers they perceive are encountered by African American males that are detrimental to success in gateway English/math courses. Also, the interview allowed for suggestions regarding what types of institutional support faculty recommend they feel would minimize the identified challenges and barriers. Faculty were an essential component in this inquiry as they could encourage student participation and possibly, the intervention strategy if approved for implementation.

In preparation for commencing this inquiry, I communicated with the VPAA and the President at WCC. There was a consensus that addressing the issue identified for this inquiry would benefit both the target population and the institution as a whole. The semi-structured interview questions were presented to the VPAA for review and approval before the interviews were conducted. Using the data collected, an intervention strategy was developed that will be most accessible and beneficial to the target population. The design plan for the intervention strategy will be submitted to the VPAA and President in the form of a proposal for implementation.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In preparation for conducting research, I completed CITI training in February 2020. The purpose of this training was to develop ethical research practices. Approval to request faculty and student participation in this inquiry was sought and received from the VPAA in early March 2020, before the pilot project was conducted. In addition, approval was also sought from the



Institutional Review Board (IBR) at East Carolina University (ECU). My study was submitted to IRB in March 2021 and was approved as an exempt certification study (see Appendix A). Each student participant was asked to sign a consent form before participation. The purpose of the consent form was to ensure each participant clearly understood the research study was voluntary and they could revoke their participation at any time during the research study without consequence. Participant information is stored securely in a digital format, ECU's Piratedrive, and names were changed to maintain anonymity.

### **Inquiry Procedures**

The sampling strategy used to select participants for this inquiry was within-culture sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within-culture sampling is typically used after the researcher has determined a site, and the cultural group to be analyzed can be found at the chosen site (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given that the population and site were already identified in the central research question, African American males enrolled in trade programs at WCC; the within-cultures sampling strategy was ideal for this inquiry. The number of participants involved in the study depended on how many students were actively enrolled in the specified programs when the actual inquiry occurred. Ten students was the pre-determined limit going into the study. The maximum of ten students was to ensure that all data obtained could be transcribed and coded for use in the time frame allowed for this inquiry. Student participants were recruited via an invite sent to their student and personal email accounts on record. Prior to the invite being sent to eligible participants, the faculty advisor for each trade program was contacted via email to make them aware of the students in their program being invited to participate in the study. In addition, each faculty advisor was asked to mention the invite in class and ask students to check their

email. The reason for this step is that I have found that students often do not check emails very frequently, even those enrolled in online classes.

The invite began with an introduction of myself, the current program I am enrolled in at ECU, and the study's title. In addition, the invite explained the extreme importance of the study and the desired outcome. The significant value that student feedback would add to the study and expectations of the participant were noted. In closing, the invite explained that participation was voluntary, participants would remain anonymous, and feedback obtained during the interview would not be shared with WCC faculty or staff. Students were given a deadline of one week from the date the invite email was sent to respond if they would like to participate in the study. Upon receiving their response, I set up a date, time, and location for the semi-structured interview and responded to the student with that information. This response included the order of events for the semi-structured interview. Once the deadline to respond to the email invite passed, I contacted the faculty advisors again via email. They were asked to obtain reliable cell phone numbers from all students indicated on the list in my previous email and send them to me. Once the reliable cell numbers were received from the faculty advisors, all students who did not respond to the email invite by the deadline were sent a text message invite. My institution has found text messaging alerts and notifications to student cell phone numbers is a highly effective method in communicating with students.

Once participants for the study were confirmed, a semi-structured interview was held with each student that agreed to participate in the study. These questions were designed to collect qualitative data on perceived challenges and barriers encountered by African American males, how they feel these perceived challenges and barriers impact their success in the gateway

English and math courses required for their trades program, and what institutional support(s) they feel would minimize these challenges and barriers and increase their likelihood of success.

Faculty teaching the transition, co-requisite, and gateway English and math courses, as well as the faculty for the specified trade programs, were included in the study to gain knowledge on what they perceive are challenges and barriers that contribute to the low success rates of African American male students in the gateway courses. Also, insight was gained on what institutional support(s) they felt would increase success rates. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected faculty who agreed to participate to obtain this data.

Research results were analyzed based on the tenets of Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging and Schlossberg's Marginality and Mattering theoretical frameworks. The hope was that this information could be used to develop an intervention strategy that African American males could utilize during their enrollment at WCC. The overall goal of this inquiry was to provide adequate support to African American males enrolled in trade programs to increase their success rates in the gateway English and math courses to progress to graduation.

### **Phase I**

A preliminary pilot project was conducted with selected faculty. The purpose of the pilot project was to address the faculty-student engagement tenet of Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging theoretical framework (Strayhorn et al., 2015) by allowing faculty an opportunity to identify the challenges and barriers they perceive are detrimental to the success of African American males in gateway English/math courses as well as to provide suggestions as to what type of institutional support(s) would be most beneficial in increasing the success rates of the target population in said courses. The research question associated with this tenet was as follows: What challenges and barriers do selected faculty perceive are encountered by African American males and what

types of institutional support do faculty recommend to increase the success rates of this population in gateway English/math courses?

### **Description of Participants and Recruitment Strategies**

To answer the above question, faculty for the selected trade programs and faculty teaching transition, co-requisite, and gateway English and math courses were interviewed. These faculty were chosen because they have a direct connection with the students who were the focus of the overall inquiry.

An email was sent to all selected faculty members requesting their participation in the interview. When a faculty member agreed to participate, the face-to-face interview was scheduled with an allotted time of one hour and 30 minutes. An audio recorder would be used during the interviews, and then the results would be coded into apparent themes. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 safety precautions, faculty and staff at WCC were required to work remotely from home through May 1, 2020, which resulted in the interviews being conducted via email.

### **Instrumentation**

The interview questions varied between the faculty advisors and the English/math faculty. To answer the question associated with this phase, faculty advisors for the trade programs and faculty teaching transition, co-requisite, and gateway English and math courses were interviewed. These questions were arrived at by determining what was necessary to learn from faculty regarding their perceptions of the challenge/barriers African American male students encounter regarding gateway English/math courses and completion of their trade program overall. Appendices A and B contain the interview questions asked in the pilot project.

## **Phase I Data Collection**

It was essential to obtain feedback from the faculty mentioned in the previous section to better understand their perceptions as they related to my FoP. This feedback was then compared to the feedback received when interviews were conducted with the African American males central to the overall inquiry. Comparison of the two interview results allowed for the identification of misperceptions between the two groups, illumination of the challenges and barriers experienced by African American males, and discovery of an intervention strategy that would be best suited to aid in the success of African American males in gateway English and math courses.

## **Summary of Phase I**

After reviewing, analyzing, and coding all of the responses received, it was determined that some consensus existed among faculty regarding factors contributing to low success rates in gateway English and math courses and completion of the trade programs. The requirement to successfully complete gateway English and math courses to graduate from the trade programs is a hurdle for students. The interview responses indicated several factors contributing to the lack of success in English transition, co-requisite, and gateway courses. One theme that both faculty advisors and English faculty had in common was the need for some type(s) of support to alleviate the impact of the challenges and barriers students encounter. Peer coaches, mentors who are not able to influence student grades, and support that could be integrated into the trade courses were some of the suggestions mentioned by faculty.

While these responses were constructive and informative, the feedback received was more directed at students overall than African American male students specifically. This could be a result of not being able to conduct interviews face-to-face. Having to conduct the interviews

via email contributed to a loss of rich conversation and follow-up questions that would have taken place had the interviews been held face-to-face.

When conducting the entire research project, African American male students actively enrolled in the selected trade programs were asked to participate in this study to gain insight into their perceptions of the challenges and barriers they encounter. This was not only for English and math courses but their trades courses as well. In conjunction with faculty feedback, this information was vital in determining an intervention strategy that would be accessible and most beneficial to African American male students enrolled in trade programs to increase their success rates in gateway English/math courses.

## **Phase II**

The second phase of this inquiry involved obtaining feedback from African American male students enrolled in the selected trade programs when the inquiry was conducted. The purpose of this phase was to address the degree of connectedness tenet of Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging theoretical framework (Strayhorn et al., 2015) by allowing African American males to convey the challenges and barriers they perceive as inhibiting their success in gateway English/math courses required for their program, as well as, what type of institutional support(s) they feel would be accessible and most beneficial to increase their chances of success in said courses. The research question associated with this tenet was as follows: What challenges and barriers do African American males feel inhibit their success in gateway English/math courses and what types of institutional support do they feel would minimize the impacts of these challenges and barriers?

## **Description of Participants and Recruitment Strategies**

To answer this question, African American male students enrolled in the selected trade programs at the time of inquiry were asked to participate. The starting point for recruiting student participants was to determine who met the target population for this study. To obtain this information, I asked the Director of Institutional Effectiveness at my institution to run a report that would query all African American male students currently enrolled in one of the trade programs selected for this study. Upon receiving this information, I found that nine students met the target population criteria and were currently enrolled in the fall 2021 semester. The first stage of recruitment consisted of sending the email invite, which was discussed in more detail in the previous section, to each student's college-issued and personal email account. This stage resulted in three students agreeing to participate in the study. Dates and times for each interview were scheduled based on each student's availability and what was most convenient for them. Those who did not respond to the email invite by the deadline were sent a text message to their cell phone inviting them to participate. This recruitment strategy did not result in any more eligible students agreeing to participate in the study.

## **Instrumentation**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the three students who agreed to participate in the inquiry. These questions were constructed in a way that allowed African American male students to convey their challenges and barriers to success. Appendix D contains the semi-structured questions that were asked during the interview. Each interview began with a re-introduction of myself, a more detailed explanation of my study and its importance, and an opportunity for the student participant to ask any questions about the study and their participation. Once this was completed, each participant was asked to sign a consent form before

starting the interview. In addition, I informed the student that the interview would be recorded for transcription purposes at a later date. A sample consent form is included in Appendix E. The semi-structured interviews were recorded to provide for more accurate analysis and coding upon completion.

## **Summary of Phase II**

Feelings that English/math courses required are unnecessary for, and unrelated to, their trade program was the overarching consensus among the student participants. Another commonality that existed regarding the gateway English/math courses was that the assignments were more difficult and required more time than trade courses. All student participants agreed that a tutoring program and/or having assignments related to the trade program would help increase student engagement and thwart the loss of focus/interest in the course content.

Once all data from the semi-structured student interviews were analyzed and coded, the themes identified in this phase were compared to those from the semi-structured faculty interviews. The purpose of comparing the results from both phases was to determine commonalities that existed amongst the faculty and student responses regarding challenges/barriers experienced by African American male students enrolled in the selected trade programs and the suggestions for institutional support. The commonalities identified were used to design an intervention strategy in the form of an institutional support that would be best suited for the target population central to this FoP. Therefore, the data from both phases I and II assisted with answering the question that will be presented in phase III.

## **Phase III**

The purpose of phase III was to utilize the qualitative data that was analyzed and coded from phases I and II to design an intervention strategy that can be presented to the VPAA and the



President in the form of a proposal for possible implementation. This phase addressed the campus support tenet of Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging theoretical framework (Strayhorn et al., 2015). The research question associated with this tenet was as follows: What type of institutional support is best suited to address the identified challenges and barriers that will lead to increased success rates of African American males enrolled in trade programs at WCC in their gateway English/math courses?

Rather than conducting research for this phase, the data collected from phases I and II were used to answer the question associated with phase III. While all of the qualitative data were used to develop the proposed intervention strategy presented in this phase, the student feedback collected carried more weight than faculty feedback during the design process to ensure that the support would be accessible and most beneficial to promote increased success rates in the required gateway English/math courses for the target population. Due to time constraints, this study aimed to develop and propose an intervention strategy for implementation based on the data collected in phases I and II, rather than to implement the strategy and evaluate it. The proposed intervention strategy developed as a result of the data from phases I and II is discussed in detail in the following chapter.

The purpose of the pilot project conducted in phase I was to gather information from select faculty regarding their perceived challenges and barriers encountered by African American males enrolled in the trade programs chosen for this inquiry. Also, feedback was obtained regarding the type of institutional support the target population would benefit from the most to increase their success rates in their program's gateway English/math courses.

Phase II addressed African American male students' challenges and barriers as they perceive them with regards to post-secondary education as a whole. In addition, and more

specifically, how the identified challenges and barriers impact their ability to be successful in the required gateway English/math courses required for their program. This phase allowed these same students to provide suggestions regarding what type of institutional support they felt would be most accessible and beneficial to their success in said courses.

Phase III utilized the data gathered in phases I and II to design the intervention strategy discussed in the next chapter that can be presented to the VPAA and President in the form of a proposal for implementation. A tutoring program was selected as the proposed intervention strategy since it was suggested as an institutional support by both faculty and students that participated in the study. The proposed tutoring program was designed to address three concerns that were a consensus amongst all students who participated in the research conducted in phase II. These concerns were accessibility of support due to the time constraints that result from the numerous contact hours required for trade courses, more assistance from English and math faculty, and the desire that assignments in English/math courses be related/applicable to their trade.

### **Inquiry Design Rigor**

An essential aspect of the research process was that the data reported be trustworthy and dependable. To meet the standards of rigor crucial to this inquiry, semi-structured interviews with participating students were recorded so they could later be transcribed verbatim. The initial transcriptions were a result of utilizing Otter.ai transcript software. To increase the dependability and trustworthiness of the data, the initial transcription for each student interview was compared to the actual audio recording of the interview and necessary edits were made throughout this step. This process was repeated multiple times until the transcription for each interview accurately reflected what was said in each recording verbatim.

Faculty semi-structured interviews conducted in phase I during the spring 2020 term were performed via email due to COVID-19 implications. Math faculty that were selected but did not participate in the phase I semi-structured interview were contacted again in the summer 2021 term and resulted in the participation of one math instructor. Due to faculty still working remotely because of COVID-19 implications, the interview was conducted via email just as it was in phase I. Faculty responses from the semi-structured interview were transcribed verbatim from each email. Each transcript was compared to the email responses to ensure accuracy.

### **Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions**

While the intention for the intervention strategy that was designed as a result of this inquiry was to increase the success rates of African American male students in gateway English/math courses, the findings of this study may not be readily generalizable for other institutions. The student body population varies across community colleges and universities. This study was not meant to imply that the challenges and barriers identified by the participants would match that of students at other institutions if studied using the same instruments.

Also, I assumed that, to some extent, the student participants would be wary of divulging some of their feelings or that feedback would be limited, given my position as Director of Enrollment Services/Registrar at WCC, but more importantly due to my race and gender. To thwart this, the invite to participate in the study conveyed to the students the purpose of the inquiry was to develop an intervention strategy that would be accessible and most beneficial for them to succeed in the gateway English/math courses required for their program. Also, it was of significance that I shared with them my passion for education and how important it was to me for all students to be successful in their educational endeavors. The invitation to participate also clearly informed them that their responses to the interview questions would not be shared with

faculty or staff. In addition, their names would be excluded to provide anonymity. It was also vital that I was mindful not to let my past challenges and barriers encountered in my post-secondary education experiences shape how I interpreted their perceived challenges and barriers because everyone's educational journey takes a different path.

Regarding the feedback received from the faculty who participated in this study, I was knowledgeable that their responses to the semi-structured interview questions might not entirely reflect their true feelings to the greatest extent possible due to loyalty to their department dean. I assumed there would be some pieces of information or opinion that they would not be comfortable divulging in this inquiry due to concern that they may be frowned upon by their students, colleagues, department dean, or senior administration. During the pilot project, I addressed this by informing faculty to feel free to be as honest and open as their responses would not be disclosed to students, staff, or other faculty members and that their names would be changed to preserve anonymity. In addition, I informed them that senior administration had approved the study and the end goal for all involved was for there to be an intervention strategy designed to promote change for our African American male students enrolled in trade programs that would increase their success rates in the gateway English/math courses required for their program.

### **Role of the Scholarly Practitioner**

My role within the inquiry for this FoP was to conduct research with selected faculty members; African American males students enrolled in the trade programs at WCC during the time the inquiry was conducted; use the qualitative data collected and analyzed to design an intervention strategy that would promote increased success rates of said African American male

students in the gateway English/math courses required for their trade program; and that could be presented to the VPAA and President in the form of a proposal for implementation.

The issue central to my FoP came to fruition after discussions with the VPAA and the President regarding what issues they felt needed to be addressed at WCC. The low success rates of African American male students enrolled in the gateway English/math courses required for their trade program were mentioned during the discussion. After much consideration about the suggestions for issues to be addressed that were presented during these discussions, it was decided that addressing the low success rates of African American male students enrolled in trade programs in the required gateway English/math courses was a feasible opportunity to try to promote change with regards to educational inequity and social injustice.

I took great pride in the responsibilities of being a researcher afforded to me by this FoP inquiry. I exerted great effort to exclude my biases, beliefs, and assumptions throughout the study so that the perceptions and beliefs of faculty and student participants would prevail in the research findings. This was an essential component of making informed decisions during the design process of the intervention strategy outlined previously to ensure accessibility and maximum benefit to the student population central to this FoP inquiry.

### **Summary**

The overarching goal of this FoP inquiry was to address the low success rates of African American male students enrolled in trade programs in the required gateway English/math courses. Using the qualitative data from this inquiry, I designed an intervention strategy that can be presented to senior administration in the form of a proposal for implementation. The hope is that if the intervention strategy is implemented and is successful, it can be expanded to serve students who need assistance with other subjects besides English and math. The following

chapter will present the research findings from phases I and II, a detailed outline of the proposed intervention strategy developed as a result of the research data, and, more specifically, how the proposed intervention strategy will address key research findings.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS**

The purpose of this study was to determine the challenges and barriers experienced by African American males enrolled in select trade programs at Wilson Community College (WCC) that inhibit their success in the gateway English and math courses required for their program and to utilize the data to design an intervention strategy that would address the identified challenges and barriers in an effort to increase the success rates for this population in said courses. The research questions that guided this FoP were addressed in three different phases to ascertain this information. The research question for phase I was as follows: What challenges and barriers do select faculty perceive are encountered by African American males, and what types of institutional support do faculty recommend to increase the success rates of this population in gateway English/math courses? The research question for phase II was as follows: What challenges and barriers do African American males feel inhibit their success in gateway English/math courses, and what types of institutional support do they think would minimize the impacts of these challenges and barriers? Lastly, the research question for phase III was as follows: What type of institutional support is best suited to address the identified challenges and barriers that will lead to increased success rates of African American males enrolled in trade programs at WCC in their gateway English/math courses?

Eight faculty members participated in phase I of the study. Two were faculty advisors for the selected trade programs and six that teach the transition, co-requisite, and gateway English/math courses required for said trade programs. The pilot study for phase I was conducted in the spring 2020 and summer 2021 terms. Phase II participation included three African American male students who were currently enrolled in one of the selected trade programs during the fall 2021 term.

## **Phase I Data Analysis**

Responses to the interview questions were received from two of the four selected faculty advisors and three of the seven selected English/math faculty. It is important to mention that even though the interview questions were sent to English and math faculty, the only responses received were from English faculty. In the summer 2021 semester, faculty were still working remotely due to COVID-19 safety precautions implemented at WCC. Therefore, the English/math faculty who did not participate in the initial phase of the pilot project were sent a second email inviting them to participate with the interview questions attached. This attempt resulted in two additional English faculty participants and one math faculty participant. The data were analyzed over the course of five different coding cycles, which ultimately resulted in the identification of themes.

The first coding cycle employed an exploratory method called holistic coding. Exploratory methods encompass coding processes that seek to preliminarily assign codes to the data until a refined coding process is developed and applied (Saldaña, 2016). Holistic coding involves the application of single codes to large units to understand the overall data and which themes may develop as a result of said data (Saldaña, 2016). The first coding cycle consisted of creating a table for the English/math faculty interview questions and responses. A column was created for each question, and all six responses for that question were grouped together by row. This process was duplicated for the faculty advisor interview questions and responses.

The second cycle of the data analysis utilized the In Vivo coding process. According to Saldaña (2016), this process is used early on in the data analysis to divide the data into segments that are individually coded. A two-column table was created for the faculty advisor interviews in this cycle. The left-hand column of the table contained the interview question, and the right-hand



column contained key words/phrases, eliminating duplicate responses that were prevalent throughout the grouped responses for each question in the previous cycle. This process was duplicated for the English/math faculty interview questions and responses.

Cycle three of the data analysis used code mapping to combine both faculty groups' interview questions and responses. Code mapping is intended to provide the researcher an opportunity to enhance the integrity and reliability of the data analysis process (Saldana, 2016). Given that several of the questions from both sets of faculty interviews overlapped or were fairly similar. Because the primary goal of phase I was to obtain a faculty perspective on why African American male students struggle and what the institution can do to support them, I decided to combine the responses from both sets of interview questions. Each question was listed and labeled as English/math faculty, advisors, or both. Then the key words/phrases identified in the second cycle for each question, excluding duplicates, were listed as bullet points under the corresponding question.

The pattern coding process was employed for the fourth and fifth coding cycles of the data analysis. This process organizes the data by identifying and grouping similarities and then assigning a meaningful label for each category (Saldaña, 2016). In the fourth cycle, the groups of key words/phrases that resulted from the third cycle were subjected to a detailed examination to identify repetitive key words/phrases. Commonalities were combined, and duplicates were removed from the list. During this cycle, it was determined that some questions could have been eliminated from the interview because they did not directly provide feedback on the guiding question the interview was intended to address. These responses were taken out of the list and excluded from this cycle's data analysis. However, the key words/phrases derived from these questions provide context applicable to my study and will be included in the narrative for the

following chapter. Lastly, the remaining key words/phrases were grouped, and the following themes were identified: (1) general education course/program completion challenges, (2) current support for students, and (3) suggestions for institutional support.

The same process was repeated for the fifth cycle. During this cycle, I performed a line-by-line review to determine if the data needed to be broken down further or if some of the subcategories could be combined. After this thorough review was conducted, it was determined that the first theme identified in the previous cycle needed to be broken down into two themes. In addition, several key words/phrases and subcategories could be combined for brevity. The final themes that resulted from this cycle were: (1) student characteristics that deter success in gateway English/math courses, (2) extraneous factors that deter student success in gateway English/math courses, (3) current support faculty provide for students, and (4) suggestions for institutional support that will increase student success rates in gateway English/math courses. Table 2 reflects the result of the final coding cycle in the data analysis.

### **Phase I Summary**

The goal of the pilot study conducted in phase I was to determine, from a faculty perspective, the challenges and barriers encountered by African American male students and what type of support WCC could implement to increase their success rates in gateway English and math courses. The semi-structured questions utilized to obtain feedback from faculty can be found in Appendices B and C. The coding processes that were employed to analyze the data for this phase resulted in the identification of the following themes: (1) student characteristics that deter success in gateway English/math courses, (2) extraneous factors that deter student success in gateway English/math courses, (3) current support faculty provide for students, and (4) suggestions for institutional support to increase success rates in gateway English/math courses.

Table 2

*Final Coding Cycle Results for Faculty Interviews*

Theme	Key Words/Phrases in Responses
<p>Student Characteristics that Deter Success in Gateway English/Math Courses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Lack of skills               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Communication</li> <li>▪ Technology</li> <li>▪ Time Management</li> <li>▪ Comprehension (English/math/online courses and materials)</li> <li>▪ Writing/grammar/punctuation rules</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Lack of confidence, motivation, participation</li> <li>○ Maturity</li> <li>○ Lack of exposure to trades or mechanical experience which increases the student’s learning curve</li> <li>○ Feelings that general education courses are unnecessary and delay graduation/employment</li> <li>○ Lack of resources               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Computer access</li> <li>▪ Reliable transportation</li> <li>▪ Childcare</li> <li>▪ Time off work</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>Extraneous Factors that Deter Student Success in Gateway English/Math Courses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Distractions (friends/phones)</li> <li>○ Lack of support and/or role model at home</li> <li>○ Seated general education course sections interfere with seated trade courses</li> <li>○ Stigmas associated with being an educated black male that impacts persistence               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Teasing/ridicule from peers</li> <li>▪ Negative stereotypes/profiling</li> <li>▪ “Selling out”/being a nerd</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Table 2 (continued)

Theme	Key Words/Phrases in Responses
Current Support Faculty Provide for Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Deadline extensions/assignment flexibility</li> <li>○ Relevant/engaging instructional methods               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Teach/review skills for success</li> <li>▪ Small group/one-on-one instruction</li> <li>▪ Breaking large assignments into “chunks”</li> <li>▪ Time management/technology skills integrated into assignments</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Assistance outside of class               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ On-campus “tutoring”/support</li> <li>▪ During times that fit student schedules (evenings/weekends)</li> <li>▪ Technology issues</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Suggestions for an Institutional Support to Increase Student Success Rates in Gateway English/Math Courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Encourage computer course to be taken in the first semester</li> <li>○ Open tutoring lab</li> <li>○ Peer coaches</li> <li>○ Mentor program</li> <li>○ Writing lab for evening students</li> <li>○ Some type of support for unmotivated students</li> <li>○ Seated general education courses that fit seated trade course schedule</li> <li>○ Tutoring more specific to trades</li> </ul>

The level of faculty-student engagement, which was the tenet this phase addressed, is reflected in the key words/phrases identified during the final coding cycle for this phase which are listed under the current student support theme in Table 2.

The list of challenges and barriers that faculty perceive are encountered by African American male students was lengthy, which is why the deterrents of success in gateway English/math courses were grouped by student characteristics and extraneous factors. When the faculty advisors for the trade programs were asked what challenges and barriers they thought students experienced when it came to being successful in their program, “completion of students general education courses” and “online classes and materials; general education classes, especially English and math” were some of the responses. One faculty advisor stated, “many students have voiced over the years that they felt they should only have to take the trade core classes.” Feedback regarding the gateway English and math courses required for the trade programs that faculty noted they had received from students included “concerns arise about their ability to complete the courses” and “interferes with program course sequence...slows down their graduation and/or employment.” When asked what they felt inhibited student success in their courses, the English and math faculty indicated different reasons. Their responses made up a majority of the student characteristics factors that were identified as deterring success in gateway English/math courses. One of the English faculty participants stated, “...the two biggest hurdles I’ve seen are lack of resources and lack of confidence/motivation.” Other responses included “students often don’t know how to organize themselves, follow directions as written, or manage their limited time.” When asked about factors that impact success for African American male students, specifically, lack of resources such as computer access, technology skills, communication skills, and lack of motivation was among the responses from several

English/math faculty. One faculty participant stated, “From my personal experience, the students I have seen have the least motivation tend to be African American males.” When asked if they felt African American males struggled more in their courses than other students, the following example was given:

Being educated, especially as a black male, isn’t always looked at favorable, so they have to overcome the teasing and possible ridicule they may be getting from the community and then fight the negative stereotypes and profiling...many hoops to get through for them, and it can be discouraging real quick if someone says just the right thing to them that would make them want to give up. Being smart or well educated is sometimes thought of as selling out or associated with being a nerd in the African American community, and for those growing up where education isn’t valued, they would choose to rather fit in with their surroundings than being the odd ball out. (Table 2)

The suggestions for institutional support mentioned most amongst the faculty participants included having an open tutoring/writing lab, offering seated general education courses that would fit in students’ schedule of trade courses, and tutoring more specific to trades. One faculty advisor stated, “The biggest struggle I hear is online courses for their general ed are a problem for them.” One English faculty member stated, “I would like to see an open tutoring lab like we used to have...dozens of students took advantage of the services the open lab provided. The positives of the lab were that students did not have to qualify to use the open tutoring lab.”

It is worth noting that COVID-19 directly impacted the research for phase I. Initially, the selected faculty were invited to participate in face-to-face interviews. Those who had agreed to participate had interviews scheduled for the week of March 16, 2020. However, on March 17, 2020, in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19, all faculty, staff, and students were sent

home. As a result, WCC's spring break had to be extended to allow faculty time to transition traditional courses to an online format. Faculty and students remained off campus for the remainder of the semester. Due to the time constraints that resulted from the implementation of COVID-19 safety measures and to maintain the study's momentum, a decision on how to move forward with faculty interviews had to be made quickly. At the time a decision had to be made, the College had not begun utilizing online meeting platforms. As a result, and in the interest of time, the semi-structured interview questions were sent via email to the faculty who had agreed to participate. Using this method to conduct the interviews eliminated the possibility for rich conversational exchanges that may have prompted follow-up questions. In addition, I believe that the method alone may have deterred some faculty who would have otherwise participated in the study because it takes more effort to type rather than talk. I worried that the feedback received via the email responses would not be as thorough as that which would have been received in face-to-face interviews. However, the email responses from faculty participants were lengthy and very detailed. I feel this compensates significantly for the opportunities that were lost when the interviews were not able to be held in person.

### **Phase II Data Analysis**

The recordings from the three semi-structured student interviews were initially transcribed using Otter.ai software. Once the initial transcription was completed for each student interview, the transcripts were printed so they could be reviewed for accuracy. After listening to each audio recording multiple times and updating the transcript each time, the final transcripts were printed so the analysis and coding process could begin. This phase's analysis and coding process mimic the processes used in phase I, except for the number of coding cycles used.

As with phase I, the first coding cycle employed the exploratory method called holistic coding. The first coding cycle consisted of creating a one-column table for the student interview questions. Each row contained an interview question, and three additional rows, one for each participant, were added under each question. Each student participant row had the response for the initial question(s) and any follow-up questions and those responses.

The second cycle of the data analysis utilized the In Vivo coding process. In this cycle, a two-column table was created for the student interviews. The table's left-hand column contained the interview question. The right-hand column contained key words/phrases prevalent throughout the grouped responses for each question in the previous cycle.

Cycle three of the data analysis consisted of using code mapping of the key words/phrases identified in the previous coding cycle. Each interview question was listed and the key words/phrases identified in the second cycle for each question were listed as bullet points under the corresponding question. Duplicate responses were removed during this cycle.

The pattern coding process was employed for the fourth, and final, coding cycle of the data analysis. In the fourth cycle, the groups of key words/phrases that resulted from the third cycle were subjected to a detailed examination to identify repetitive key words/phrases. Commonalities were combined, and duplicates were removed from the list. During this cycle, it was determined that some questions could have been eliminated from the interview because they did not directly provide feedback on the guiding question the interview was intended to address. These responses were taken out of the list and excluded from this cycle's data analysis. However, the key words/phrases derived from these questions provide context applicable to my study and will be included in the narrative for the following chapter. A line-by-line review was conducted during this cycle to determine if the remaining data needed to be broken down further



or if other duplications could be eliminated. Lastly, the remaining key words/phrases were grouped. The following themes were identified: (1) student-identified factors impacting success in gateway English/math courses and (2) suggestions for institutional support to increase student success rates in gateway English/math courses. Table 3 reflects the result of the final coding cycle in the data analysis.

### **Phase II Summary**

The goal of the second phase of this research study was to obtain the same information that was sought in phase I, but from the perspective of the African American male students currently enrolled in the trade programs selected for this study. The results from both phases will be compared to determine if any commonalities, or striking differences, exist between the two groups. The semi-structured interview questions used in this phase to determine the challenges and barriers that African American males feel inhibit their success, especially in the gateway English and math courses required for their trade program, as well as their suggestions for what type of institutional support that WCC could provide that would minimize the impact of those challenges and barriers, can be found in Appendix D. The coding processes that were utilized to analyze the data for phase II described above resulted in the identification of the following themes: student-identified factors that deter success in gateway English/math courses and suggestions for institutional support that will increase success rates in gateway English/math courses. The degree of connectedness, the tenet this phase addressed, was demonstrated in the responses received during the semi-structured student interviews. All participants agreed that their experience at the College had been a positive one thus far. When asked if they felt a sense of belonging with the faculty, staff, and students at WCC, the responses included “feel like I fit in pretty good,” “everybody [students] pretty much works together.” One participant mentioned a

Table 3

*Final Coding Cycle Results for Student Interviews*

Theme	Key Words/Phrases in Responses
Student-Identified Factors that Deter Success in Gateway English/Math Courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balancing school/work/family</li> <li>• Difficult assignments</li> <li>• Multiple attempts to pass the course</li> <li>• Feelings that courses are not necessary for /related to trade program</li> <li>• Courses overwhelming/require more time</li> <li>• Lack of comprehension</li> <li>• Lack of interest in course content</li> <li>• Being prideful rather than reaching out for help/support</li> <li>• Finding time to utilize help/support</li> </ul>
Suggestions for Institutional Support to Increase Student Success in Gateway English/Math Courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tutoring program</li> <li>• More assistance from instructors in gateway English/math courses</li> <li>• Have trade-related essay topics/other assignments to               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increase student engagement</li> <li>▪ Thwart loss of student focus/interest in courses</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

time he sought help from staff with the Financial Aid process, and he said, “I got what I needed.” In addition, all student participants agreed the faculty were always willing to assist, and one participant stated the instructors “made me feel very welcomed.” Besides balancing school with work and family responsibilities, the other challenges and barriers that the student participants identified were related to the English and/or math courses required for their trade program. One student even mentioned the challenge of balancing school with work and family as being a result of the extra time it took to complete the assignments required for the English courses. One student identified the English and math courses as their biggest challenge and stated, “I had to take both of them like twice, maybe three times, then I passed it.” The consensus amongst the student participants was that these courses were unnecessary and not related to their trade, especially with regards to English courses. Also, when asked if they felt the English and math courses were more difficult than their trade courses, all of the student participants felt they were. The reasons given for this were “lost interest in it (English) because it felt overwhelming,” “it doesn’t relate to my trade honestly,” and “I wasn’t really here to take an English class...needed that in order to take the rest of what I needed.”

When the African American male students were asked what type of support they felt WCC could provide to increase their success rates in the English and math courses, a tutoring program was the one suggestion that all of them agreed would be beneficial. In addition, they all felt that relating the English and math courses to their trade would help minimize the challenges and barriers they had identified as inhibiting their success in these courses. While some participants felt the math skills were somewhat applicable to the trade program, they all thought that the English skills being taught were not useful for success in their trade courses. Overall, they felt that if the English and math assignments were related to their trade, it would increase

student engagement and thwart the loss of focus and interest in these courses. Currently, WCC does not have a tutoring program that is open to all students or that specially offers assistance in English and math courses by relating assignments to the content taught in trade courses. Therefore, the student suggestions mentioned above are viable options to explore. Initially, the student research portion of this study was scheduled to be conducted in the fall 2020 term. However, due to COVID-19, few classes were being held on campus. The only time faculty and students were allowed to be on campus was during a scheduled class time. The trade courses were only on campus for the lab hours required for the course. The lecture portion was conducted via our learning management system. Therefore, students were not on campus very often, and when they were, it was only for the scheduled class time. In addition, staff was only allowed to be on campus when a task that could not be completed remotely had to be accomplished. Given these circumstances, it was not feasible to try and conduct the semi-structured student interviews during the fall 2020 term.

Since I felt that participation and feedback were adversely impacted when the semi-structured faculty interviews had to be transitioned from in-person to an electronic method, I felt strongly about delaying the student interviews as long as possible to conduct them face-to-face. In spring 2021, faculty and staff were informed that WCC would resume normal operations beginning fall 2021, so the student interviews were not conducted until this time. However, even though students were back on campus as much as they were pre-pandemic, I found it extremely difficult to recruit students to participate in this study.

Initially, ten students fit the criteria of the target population central to this study. I started the recruitment process by contacting the faculty advisors for the trade programs selected for the study and provided them with a list of students in their program, informed them I would be

sending a participation invite via their WCC student email address, and asked them to make them aware and encourage the students to check their email. We have had issues with students checking their WCC email accounts, so contacting the faculty advisors beforehand was an effort to eliminate this occurrence. The email invite was sent on September 28, 2021, and asked if they would like to participate to respond no later than October 5, 2021. Three students responded agreeing to participate, and interviews were scheduled. The interviews were conducted on October 5, 2021, October 6, 2021, and October 13, 2021.

I reached back out to the faculty advisors after the October 5 deadline had passed and asked whether they had mentioned the participation invite email to the students they were previously informed of in my initial contact with them. All faculty advisors confirmed they had mentioned it to the students on their list. One faculty advisor informed me that when he mentioned it, one student came to him and declined to participate but did explain why. Given that the trade courses have numerous contact hours, faculty advisors spend most of their day with these students. For this reason, my next step in the recruitment process was to reach out to the faculty advisors again and ask them to obtain a reliable cell phone number for the remaining six students. Since most people do not answer calls from unknown numbers and because sending alerts via text message has proven to be an effective communication method for the College, I decided to send a text to the remaining students inviting them to participate. The text were sent on October 16, 2021 and included a condensed version of the information provided in the email invitation.

As of October 18, 2021, I had only received one response, and that was from a student's mother who had his phone because he was out of town, but said she would relay the message. I heard nothing more. At this point, I was not hopeful that I would receive any additional

responses to the text invite. I considered the following options that could be utilized for recruiting additional student participants: send the participation invite to their personal email account on file (if there was one), call their cell phone and leave a voicemail if they did not answer (if there was an option to leave a voicemail), or make a classroom visit and approach them directly. After much thought, I felt strongly that I had performed due diligence on my part and that any further attempts to recruit participants would result in the students feeling aggravated. In addition, I believed that if the other recruiting options previously mentioned were utilized and resulted in additional participants, the return of feedback would be diminished. On October 22, 2021, one week after the text invite was sent, none of the students had responded to the text. At this time, the decision was made to move forward with the feedback I had from the three student interviews that were conducted.

### **Phase III**

The purpose of phase III was not to conduct research, but to instead use the data that were collected, analyzed, and coded from the first two phases to determine: (1) what challenges and barriers inhibit African American male students from being successful in gateway English and math courses and (2) what type of intervention strategy might be the most effective in minimizing the impact of the identified challenges/barriers. In preparation for developing the intervention strategy, the faculty and student data were compared to see which commonalities existed between the two groups. Given that students were very specific regarding what type of institutional support they felt would be most beneficial for them and because support of this kind was not currently in place at WCC, the data from the student interviews was the primary driver during the development of the intervention strategy.

Several conclusions resulted from the comparison of faculty and student data. One, a tutoring program as a possible intervention strategy prevailed in both phases. In addition, accessibility, more assistance from English/math instructors, and relating English/math assignments to the trade programs were commonalities as well. The intervention strategy, a tutoring program, presented below, was developed taking all of these factors into consideration.

### **Proposed Intervention Strategy**

The only suggestion for an institutional support provided in both the faculty and student interviews was a tutoring program. The faculty interviews yielded several other recommendations for institutional support that may assist with the increase of African American males' success rates in the gateway English and math courses required for their trade program. However, a tutoring program was selected because it was the only faculty recommendation that was also suggested by all of the student participants as well. From the beginning of this research study, the intention was for the data collected from the semi-structured student interviews to weigh more heavily on developing an intervention strategy to be proposed for implementation. Therefore, the other suggestions provided from the student participants with regards to institutional support (1) more one-on-one assistance from English/math instructors when completing assignments, (2) relating assignments for these courses to their trade, and (3) having support that would be accessible outside of the heavy contact hours required by the trade courses, were examined in the development process. Doing so ensured that the intervention strategy addressed the students' concerns.

It is important to note that WCC's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) in 2005 called for implementing the Academically Challenging Tutorial (ACT) Lab. Implementation of the lab took place during the spring 2005 semester and initially only offered tutoring for math with the

addition of English and reading the following semester. The lab was staffed by peer tutors and was equipped with the latest office software and supplemental reading/math software. Students were able to self-refer to the lab, and it was open most of each day and a couple of early evening hours, excluding weekends and holidays. The purpose of the lab was to provide a tutoring option to students who did not qualify for tutoring services via the federally funded TRiO program Student Support Services (SSS) (Wilson Community College, 2005). The reason for this notation is because the ACT Lab, while successful in meeting several of the expected outcomes based on increasing success rates of participants (Wilson Community College, 2009), did not maintain student participation at a level sufficient enough for WCC to recoup the costs generated by the facilitation of the lab via full-time equivalent (FTE) reimbursement for total contact hours accumulated by student participation in the lab. The fact that the ACT Lab did not earn enough in FTE to cover costs, coupled with facilitation issues and reporting errors, eventually caused its demise when it came time for a new QEP to be developed for the Southern Association of College and Schools (SACS) reaffirmation (Wilson Community College, 2014). In addition, circumventing these previous issues will increase the chances of the tutoring program remaining sustainable and achieving the goal of increasing the success rates of African American male students in the gateway English/math courses required for their trade program.

Though African American males enrolled in the selected trade programs were the target population central to this study, limiting access to a public program on the basis of race is prohibited (*Podberesky v. Kirwan*, 1993). Therefore, the tutoring program proposed for implementation will not be restricted to African American male students enrolled in the selected trade programs. While the tutoring program cannot be reserved for a specific population, the data obtained from the African American male student participants was the primary source used



during the tutoring program development process. This ensured that the needs identified by the student participants were addressed by the tutoring program, which will help acquire and retain student participants. Due to the time constraints imposed on this research study, the resulting tutoring program was developed using strictly the data obtained as time did not allow for cross-collaboration across departments. The tutoring program that resulted from the data analysis is discussed in detail below. A forecasted budget of expenditures for the tutoring program is outlined in Appendix F. It is important to note that this budget is strictly an estimate. Once the location and operating hours for the tutoring program are finalized, the associated expenditures will need to be revised. The next step is to propose this tutoring program as an intervention strategy that, while available to all students, has been designed using feedback from African American male students and will address their needs specifically. This proposal for implementation will be made to the VPAA and the President at WCC when time allows.

English and math faculty, full-time and adjunct, would facilitate the tutoring services rather than peer tutors. Their participation would be voluntary, and full-time faculty would provide their services outside of their teaching/office hours. Having faculty serve as tutors will address the suggestion of having more assistance from English and math faculty that was provided during the student interviews. While it will cost more to compensate faculty for their tutoring hours than it would peer tutors, students may be more likely to participate knowing they would be receiving tutoring from actual instructors rather than their fellow students. Therefore, while the compensation cost will be higher, it is possible that the rate of return yielded from this investment would exceed the additional cost incurred in the form of increased student participation and sustainability. To avoid facilitation and coordination issues previously experienced with the ACT Lab, a full-time coordinator for the tutoring lab would need to be

hired to oversee the operation of the lab. While the coordinator would not facilitate the tutoring services provided to the students, they would handle scheduling appointments, addressing any issues that may arise, maintain up-to-date supplemental resources for English and math, complete any required reporting and record-keeping, and perform any other duties necessary to keep the program running smoothly. An on-campus space would need to be secured for, and dedicated to, the tutoring program. The designated area would need to be outfitted with workstations with computers and desk space. However, if the designated space is already equipped with workstations and laptops, such as the Library, this would reduce the start-up costs for the tutoring program. In addition, supplemental resources for English and math would need to be purchased for student participants to utilize while in the lab.

Expenditures would need to be set aside to develop a marketing strategy and materials to make students aware the program exists and promote the tutoring program's utilization. Faculty and staff encouraging students in need of tutoring in English and math to participate in the program will help, but should not be the sole form of marketing the tutoring program if it is expected to succeed and remain sustainable. In addition, an electronic means, such as Microsoft Excel, should be used to record attendance and calculate total participation hours. This will allow for more accurate and readily-available information instead of using hand-written logs and other documents like those used in the ACT Lab. These electronic resources will also save valuable time for the tutoring program coordinator, allowing for increased productivity. Again, regarding marketing and technology resources, the hope is that the reward will exceed the cost in the form of student participation and increased success rates in English and math courses.

Relating assignments in English and math courses to content taught in trade courses was another recommendation suggested by all student participants. To accomplish this, the tutoring

program would incorporate student learning objectives from English and math courses into the content being taught in the trade programs. Several techniques can be employed to allow for relating assignments to trade program content and content taught in all programs offered at WCC. One example would be teaching a student participating in the tutoring program how to construct and format an essay on a topic specifically related to the trade, such as what skills they feel automotive technicians need to succeed in the field. Using this topic, the tutor can assist the student with framing their ideas into an essay so that the student acquires the skills necessary to construct an essay on a pre-selected topic provided by their English instructor. This same technique could also be applied to teaching students the skills necessary to succeed in math. Given that the time constraints this research study were bound by did not allow for faculty collaboration during the development process, discussions will need to be had with faculty before implementation. In addition, faculty will need to encourage their students who need assistance in English and math to take advantage of this resource.

Several aspects of the tutoring program will allow for its increased accessibility. First, students will be able to self-refer at any time they need assistance. The College's current appointment booking application, Bookings, can be utilized to assist with preventing conflicts in tutoring sessions/double-bookings, allow students to easily schedule an appointment that is convenient for them during the program's operating hours established by the coordinator, and provide students the opportunity to indicate what type of assistance they need so tutors can prepare in advance. In addition, walk-ins will be allowed and assisted if a tutor is available. Should a tutor not be readily available at that time, the coordinator will work with the student to determine the next available appointment that is convenient for the student. Secondly, students will have the option to make appointments for virtual tutoring sessions. These sessions can be

conducted using virtual meeting platforms that the institution already has access to and would therefore not result in an additional cost. The coordinator will use the course schedules for the trade programs to determine operating hours for the tutoring program. This will ensure, to the best of the coordinator's ability, that the tutoring program is available to students outside of scheduled class times for the trade programs.

The overall goal of the tutoring program is to help students enhance their math and English skills to increase the success rates in these courses. Initially, the tutoring program would need to be piloted to determine whether or not the intended outcomes are met. Piloting the program would also provide an opportunity to make any necessary changes, address issues that were not considered in the initial proposal, and ensure the College will have funding available in the budget to sustain/expand the program in the future should it prove to be successful in attaining the goal set forth for the program. A program evaluation plan would need to be developed and conducted after the pre-determined time period. Results of the evaluation would need to be shared with senior administration so an informed decision can be made regarding the future of the tutoring program.

### **Summary**

The overarching goal of my FoP inquiry was to address the low success rates of African American male students enrolled in trade programs in the required gateway English/math courses and to use the data obtained throughout the research to develop an intervention strategy that WCC could provide that would help minimize the inhibitors to success. Phase I afforded selected faculty an opportunity to provide their perspective on challenges/barriers experienced by African American males and suggestions on what they felt the institution could do to increase success rates in gateway English/math courses for this population. Phase II afforded the same

opportunity, but for African American male students enrolled in the selected trade programs when the research was conducted. Phase III utilized the data from previous phases to develop an intervention strategy, a tutoring program, that addressed identified challenges/barriers and would be most beneficial for the target population in hopes that success rates in gateway English/math courses would increase if senior administration decided to implement the said strategy. The next and final chapter for this research study will summarize the research findings, offer an interpretation of data related to the literature review conducted for this study, suggest limitations, and end with conclusions.

## **CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, OUTCOMES, AND CONCLUSION**

The overarching goal of this study was to determine what institutional support could be provided to African American male students enrolled in trade programs at Wilson Community College (WCC) to increase their success rates in required gateway English and math courses. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with select faculty and the African American male students enrolled in the trade programs selected for this study. The purpose of these interviews was two-fold: (1) to identify challenges and barriers encountered by African American males that impact their success rates in gateway English and math courses from both a faculty and student perspective and (2) to learn what type(s) of institutional support the faculty and students felt would result in the utmost amount of positive change in the success rates of African American male students in required gateway English and math courses.

Data obtained during the faculty and student interviews were analyzed and coded into themes. The final results from both sets of interviews were then compared to one another. Using this information a tutoring program was developed as a possible intervention strategy that could be implemented at WCC to address the low success rates of the population central to this study. It is important to note that student feedback weighed more heavily than faculty feedback when it came to developing the intervention strategy. Since time did not allow for cross-collaboration with stakeholders during the design process, it will be vital that they are involved during the implementation process should the intervention strategy be approved. The intervention strategy that was outlined in detail in chapter four, along with the results of this study, and will be presented to the Vice President for Academic Affairs (VPAA) and the President for possible implementation.

## Summary of Research Findings

The findings from the semi-structured faculty interviews resulted in a long list of factors they perceived as contributing to low success rates in gateway English and math courses. In addition, faculty were forthcoming with current supports provided by them to students and suggestions for support that could be provided by the institution to increase success rates in the gateway English/math courses required for the trade programs selected for this study. When comparing the data obtained from the faculty interviews to that obtained from the student interviews, I discovered an interesting connection between the themes identified for both data sets.

The connection can be found when comparing the factors that faculty and students identified as impacting student success. Most of the factors identified by faculty were deficit-oriented: Connected to faculty sense of students' lack of skills, confidence, motivation, and resources. Student participants identified several factors impacting their success, all directly related to their success in the gateway English and math courses required for the trade programs. It is important to note that while most of the faculty perceived lack of resources such as transportation and access to technology as impacting student success, none of these factors were identified as challenges or barriers by the student participants. When reflecting on these factors that were identified as impacting success across both groups, I surmised that the factors identified by faculty were more than likely the drivers of student experiences as identified during the faculty interviews. The students' perception that English and math courses are unnecessary for, and unrelated to, the trade programs was a sentiment expressed by all student participants. This sentiment was also prevalent in the faculty interviews when faculty indicated that students expressed discontent with completing these courses. Given this feeling was a consensus among

students that may further explain the lack of motivation, confidence, and the like witnessed by faculty teaching English and math courses.

While both faculty and staff provided several suggestions for institutional support, two prevailed from the data obtained during this study's first and second phases. A tutoring program was the one suggestion for institutional support that both faculty and students mentioned. Another suggestion, relating assignments in the English/math courses to the trade programs, was the consensus among all student participants. These two factors carried the most weight while developing the proposed intervention strategy previously outlined in chapter four, which, in conjunction with the research findings, can be presented to the VPAA and the President in the form of a proposal for implementation.

### **Interpretation of Research Findings**

A review of the literature indicates that African American male students utilize community colleges as their primary means to access post-secondary education, demonstrated by 43.6% enrolling in two-year institutions (Staklis, 2010). Furthermore, community colleges have been named as a gateway for African American males when it comes to pursuing post-secondary education and career preparation (Bennett, 2020). Given these statistics, Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging Theory was the theoretical framework used to guide this study. This theory emphasizes the connection between the sense of belonging and educational experiences for underrepresented students (Strayhorn et al., 2015). Each phase of the research study addressed a different tenet encompassed by this framework. Phase I of the study addressed faculty-student engagement; phase II addressed the degree of connectedness; and phase III addressed campus support. A thorough review of the research findings resulted in the following determinations: (1) both faculty and students feel that several factors impact student success in gateway English and



math courses required for the selected trade programs, (2) a tutoring program that assists with the transition, co-requisite, and gateway English/math courses would be beneficial to African American male students and may create a positive change in their success rates in these courses, (3) relating assignments for the English and math courses to the content covered in the trade courses for their program would increase student engagement and thwart students loss of focus/interest in these courses, and (4) the institutional support would need to be one that was accessible outside of the heavy contact hours required by the trade programs. The need for community colleges to create an academic environment conducive to addressing the needs specific to African American males, provide opportunities for this population to demonstrate their unique abilities, and foster support networks that provide equitable outcomes for African American males is critical (Newman et al., 2012). This speaks to why it is so vital that specialized support be provided to this underrepresented student population if the gap experienced by educational inequities and social injustices is to be lessened.

Using these findings, a tutoring program to address identified needs was developed. To increase the tutoring program's probability of increasing the success rates of African American male students in these courses, the tutoring program was designed to mimic assignments given by English and math faculty to content taught in the student's trade program. In addition, the operating hours of the tutoring program would allow for student participants to schedule appointments for assistance outside of the contact hours required for the trade courses. Presently, the tutoring program is only in the form of a proposal that can be presented to the senior administration for possible implementation. As such, evaluation of the impact of the tutoring program, while a function of continuous improvement within the College, is beyond the scope of the present study. Overall, the design of the tutoring program addresses all of the findings

previously mentioned in this chapter and should increase the success rates of African American male students in the gateway English and math courses required for their trade program.

### **Limitations of the Research Study**

My position at Wilson Community College as the Director of Enrollment Services/Registrar was of primary concern regarding my ability to engage the target population from the moment the FoP for this study was determined. One responsibility required by my position is to verify graduation. I feared that once students realized this, it may have had a detrimental impact on the amount of participation and feedback I received during the student portion of this research study. Another limitation that pertained to student participants was my gender and race. To combat these limitations, I took a few minutes before the interviews were started to provide an in-depth explanation of the study's purpose and the importance of their feedback in developing an intervention strategy that, if implemented, would be accessible and most beneficial for them to be successful in the gateway English and math courses required for their trade program. In addition, my extensive passion for helping others achieve their educational endeavors was shared, and the students were informed their feedback would remain anonymous. During the interviews, the students seemed comfortable and provided thorough feedback to the questions that were asked.

The same fear of lack of participation and/or feedback also existed in the faculty portion of this research study. This time, it was in the form of the assumption that faculty may not be comfortable divulging feedback that others could view negatively as students, colleagues, dean, and /or senior administration. To thwart this, it was made very clear in the participation invite sent via email that senior administration were aware, and in favor, of this research study, and their feedback would remain anonymous. Based on the feedback received from the faculty

interviews, I feel confident that they provided thorough and honest feedback when responding to the questions presented.

Initially, the previously mentioned limitations were all that were forecasted for this study, but in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic quickly became a major limitation to this study. Faculty semi-structured interviews conducted in the spring 2020 term had to be transitioned from face-to-face to electronic due to faculty, staff, and students being sent home to work remotely. Traditional classes were converted to online classes. This transition for the faculty interview inquiry method impacted the first phase of the study in that rich conversation that could have been produced from follow-up questions was lost with the electronic method. Also, given that faculty had to type, rather than speak, their responses, I feel this resulted in some faculty deciding not to participate. While the semi-structured interviews with students were able to be conducted face-to-face on campus, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the interviews having to be pushed back for an entire year due to students and faculty not fully returning to campus until August 2021. Initially, a focus group was planned to be conducted with student participants in addition to the semi-structured interviews. However, given time restraints caused by the disruption to operations and due to social distancing restrictions still being in effect during phase II of the study, it was decided to eliminate the focus group portion.

### **Implications of Research Findings**

The research findings indicate a consensus among the faculty and students selected for this study that African American male students need specialized support to increase their success rates in the gateway English and math courses required for their trade program. The tutoring program developed in phase III of this study, which resulted from the research findings, provides WCC with a possible intervention strategy to address the low success rates in the gateway

English and math courses experienced by African American male students enrolled in trade programs. The results of this study and the tutoring program will be presented to the VPAA and President in the form of a proposal for implementation. Suppose the decision is made to implement this tutoring program, and it is found to be successful. In that case, there is a possibility of expanding it to other subjects, besides English and math, in the future.

During the thorough review of data performed in phase III, it was determined that a striking difference exists between the factors faculty identified as impacting success when compared to those identified by the student participants. Faculty responses were centered around students having a lack of various resources, such as transportation and access to technology. However, factors indicated by students centered solely around English and math course completion. Further discussions should be had with faculty to determine why they feel African American male students lack the resources to be successful and also to inform them of the factors these students identified as inhibitors to their success. This will allow faculty to better understand the real, rather than perceived, challenges and barriers that African American male students experience. In addition, if faculty are better informed, it may eliminate the deficit mindset exhibited in the data obtained during this study.

For the tutoring program to provide assistance in the form of relating English and math assignments to content taught in the trade programs, cross-curricular discussions will need to be had to fully develop the most effective technique for the program to utilize. Faculty from both the college transfer and industrial technologies departments will also have to collaborate to provide students assistance using this technique during tutoring sessions.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

The faculty participants for this study exhibited a deficit mindset with regards to factors that they felt impacted student success. However, only half of the program departments have faculty representation in this study. Further research will need to be conducted that provides faculty from all program departments an opportunity to provide feedback regarding their perceived challenges and barriers experienced by students that impact success. This data will help determine what percentage of faculty share this deficit mindset, what caused it, and how it can be redirected to a more positive mindset. Faculty having a better understanding of the fundamental factors that impact success for African American male students challenges and barriers that students experience that impact success will allow them to better address student needs and concerns.

Time constraints for this study did not allow for faculty collaboration during the development of the tutoring program. Should this topic be researched in the future, faculty collaboration should be sought before, or at least during, the development process before implementing a tutoring program. Doing such will engage faculty in the initiative and allow them to provide valuable feedback when designing techniques and strategies to be utilized in the tutoring program.

During the faculty and student interviews, concerns centered around English and math courses were prevalent. Faculty indicated students had expressed discontent with having to take these courses because there were more complex than the trade courses. All student participants indicated they felt English and math courses were unnecessary for, and unrelated to, their trade program. However, faculty participants did not indicate how they responded to students who approached them with this concern, and student participants did not indicate that faculty had

tried to explain the importance or relevance of these courses. It is recommended that further research be conducted with faculty and students to determine: (1) how faculty respond to students with this concern, (2) are there any faculty that agree with these student concerns, and (3) if students have ever been educated by faculty of the importance and relevance of these courses.

The scope of this research study was restricted to select trade programs and African American male students in these programs. Therefore, the percentage of participants in this study as it relates to the total number of faculty and students at WCC is minimal. Future research should be conducted on a broader scale by including faculty from all programs and expanding the student population central to the study. In addition, this study was conducted during one semester. Future research could be completed over several semesters to increase the number of participants. The researcher(s) is encouraged to work with senior administration to develop strategies to promote and recruit student participation in a study designed to improve their experience at WCC.

Lastly, implementation and evaluation of the intervention strategy were not feasible for the time constraints by which this research study was bound. Therefore, future research should include implementing and evaluating the intervention strategy. This information will help determine if the intervention strategy should continue to be funded and, if so, what changes should be made to improve it.

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that African American males enrolled in trade programs feel that English and math courses are unnecessary to succeed in their trade courses and/or in the field. Due to this, student participants expressed feeling overwhelmed and uninterested in these

courses. The overall consensus among the African American male students interviewed was that if assignments for their English and math courses were related to the content taught in their trade program, they would be more engaged and focused. A tutoring program was decided for the intervention strategy because both faculty and students who participated in the study indicated that as being an institutional support they felt would help increase the success rates of African American males enrolled in trade programs in the required gateway English and math courses. In addition, the design of the tutoring program addresses accessibility outside of the numerous contact hours required for trade courses and provides support by relating English and math assignments to their trade when receiving assistance from a tutor. While much more research could be conducted, the time constraints this study was bound by did not allow for implementing and evaluating an intervention strategy. However, the results obtained and intervention strategy developed during this study provide a solid starting point for WCC to address the low success rates of African American males enrolled in trade programs in required gateway English and math courses.

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# APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



**EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY**  
**University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board**  
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682  
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834  
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-  
2284 · [rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/](https://rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/)

## Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB

To: [Jennifer Gonyea](#)

CC: [Crystal Chambers](#)

Date: 3/12/2021

Re: [UMCIRB 21-000393](#)

Success Rates of African American Males in Gateway English and Math Courses

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 3/12/2021. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 1 & 2a.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
Faculty Interview Questions(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Faculty Interview Questions(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Focus Group Prompts/Questions(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Informed Consent(0.02)	Consent Forms
Interview Questions(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Jennifer Gonyea- Dissertation Proposal(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FACULTY ADVISORS**

- How long have you been teaching at a collegiate level?
- How long have you been the faculty advisor at Wilson Community College?
- What program do you advise/teach at Wilson Community College?
- What, if any, struggles/challenges do you think students have when it comes to being successful in your program?
- Have you ever received feedback from students relating to their success or lack of success in your program? What was that feedback?
- If yes, what form of feedback did you receive? Verbal, course evaluation, email, etc?
- Given the high number of contact hours required for your program you get to spend a lot of time with your students. Have any of your students expressed concern regarding the transition, co-requisite, or gateway English and math courses required for your program?
- What, if any, barriers/challenges do you think African American male students specifically have when it comes to being successful in your program?
- Have any of your students ever expressed discontent in having to take courses outside of the core trades courses required for the program? Ex: English and math
- Do you think that African American males struggle more with your program than the other students?
- If so, why? Specific examples?
- Are you aware of any students in your program utilizing the tutoring services offered in Student Support Services?
- If so, are any African American males?
- What types of support, if any, could Wilson Community College offer students who struggle with your program?
- Do you think that any of the suggestions for support you just named would benefit the African American male students in your program? If so, which?
- Do you think that if a support of some kind was offered to African American male students with regards to their English and math courses, they would utilize it?
- If not, why? If so, why?
- Do you think the support would be utilized more if it were something that was integrated into the trades courses? Or something offered in between classes in the same classroom?

## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR MATH AND ENGLISH FACULTY**

- How long have you been teaching at a collegiate level?
- How long have you been teaching at Wilson Community College?
- Which course(s) are you teaching at Wilson Community College this semester?
- What, if any, struggles/challenges do think students have when it comes to being successful in your course?
- Have you ever received any feedback from students relating to their success or lack of success in your course?
- If yes, what form of feedback did you receive? Verbal, course evaluation, email, etc?
- Has any of the feedback you have received resulted in you making any changes to the course? The way it is taught, the type of assignments, etc?
- What, if any, barriers/challenges do you think African American male students specifically have when it comes to being successful in your course?
- Do you think that African American males struggle more with your course than the other students?
- If so, what makes you think that way? Specific examples?
- What types of support, if any, could Wilson Community College offer students who struggle with your course?
- Do you think that any of the suggestions for support you just named would benefit African American male students in your courses? If so, which?

**APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE  
STUDENTS CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN SELECTED TRADE PROGRAMS**

1. What do you hope to achieve by completing this program?
2. Do you have any other obligations outside of college? Employment? Family responsibilities?
  - a. Do you find it difficult to balance college with your other obligations?
  - b. What changes have you made, if any, to minimize difficulty in balancing college and outside obligations?
3. Have the faculty and staff you have engaged with at WCC made you feel welcomed? Why or why not?
4. Do you feel a sense of belonging with faculty, staff, and students at WCC? Why or why not?
5. What challenges/barriers, if any, have you encountered while enrolled at WCC?
6. Do you feel these challenges/barriers have impacted your ability to be successful in your program? Why or why not?
7. Do you feel these challenges/barriers have impacted/will impact your ability to be successful in the gateway English and math courses required for your program?
8. Did you find the gateway English and math course required for your program to be more difficult than your trade courses? Why or why not?

**OR**

- Do you have any concerns about successfully completing the required gateway English and math course for your program? Why or why not?
9. What type of support do you feel WCC could implement that would be/would have been, accessible to you and would/would have, help/helped minimize the challenges/barriers you have encountered to increase your chances of success in the gateway English/math courses required for your trade program?
  10. Would you/would you have, utilized this support to increase your chances of success in the gateway English/math courses required for your trade program? Why or why not?

## APPENDIX E: SAMPLE CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENT INTERVIEWS



### Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Title of Research Study: LEARNING A TRADE: INCREASING THE SUCCESS RATES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN GATEWAY ENGLISH AND MATH COURSES IN TRADE PROGRAMS AT WILSON COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Principal Investigator: Jennifer W. Gonyea (Person in Charge of this Study)

Institution, Department or Division: ECU College of Education, Department of Education Leadership

Telephone #: 252-246-1228

Study Coordinator: Crystal Chambers, JD, PhD. Professor, Department of Educational Leadership

Telephone #: 252-328-4649

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Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

You are being invited to participate in a **research** study titled “**Learning A Trade: Increasing Success Rates of African American Males in Gateway English and Math Courses at Wilson Community College**” being conducted by Jennifer W. Gonyea, a student at East Carolina University in the Higher Education Leadership department. The goal is to survey a maximum of ten individuals, ages 18 or older, at Wilson Community College using a semi-structured interview. The interview will take approximately 15-45 minutes to complete. The interview will be recorded to be transcribed at a later time. It is hoped that this information will assist us to understand better what type of institutional support could possibly be provided to help increase the success rates of African American males in the gateway English and math courses required for selected trade programs at Wilson Community College. Your responses will be kept confidential, and no data will be released or used with your identification attached. Your participation in the research is **voluntary**. You may choose not to answer any or all questions, and you may stop at any time. We **will not** be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study. There is **no penalty for not taking part** in this research study. Please call Jennifer W. Gonyea at 252-246-1228 for any research related questions or the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at 252-744-2914 for questions about your rights as a research participant.

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**Participant's Name (PRINT)**

**Signature**

**Date**

**Person Obtaining Informed Consent:** I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above, and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

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**Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)**

**Signature**

**Date**

## APPENDIX F: FORECASTED BUDGET FOR TUTORING PROGRAM

<b>Expenditure</b>	<b>Cost</b>
Laptops	\$5,000 (\$500 x 10 units)*
Workstation	\$1,750 (\$175 x 10 units)*
Supplemental Resources	\$1,500 (annually)
Supplies	\$500 (annually)
Marketing	\$500 (annually)
Salary- Tutors	\$39,000 (annually)**
Salary- Full-time Coordinator	\$42,000 (annually)

*\*These would be one-time expenditures to start the program. Should a space on campus be secured that already has laptops and/or workstations, these costs would need to be revised accordingly.*

*\*\*This figure is based on faculty being paid \$30/hour for 25 hours per week. Once the operating hours for the tutoring program are finalized, this cost will need to be revised accordingly.*



