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Perception of educational experiences by at-risk African-American students in an undergraduate teacher education program

Sharman Pride-McRae

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Perception of Educational Experiences by At-Risk African-American Students in an Undergraduate Teacher Education Program

by

Sharman Pride-McRae

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education Department of Adult, Career and Higher Education College of Education University of South Florida

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work in loving memory of my parents: Dr. Richard F. Pride, Sr. and Eva L. Pride; and my brother Richard F. Pride, Jr.; and my late husband Robert McRae.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks to Dr. Waynne James, as my major professor and advisor whom I extend sincere gratitude for all your support and guidance in getting me through the doctoral program. I thank my committee members, Drs. Rosemary Closson, Jeffrey Kromrey, and William Young for their guidance, support and encouragements through the course of my studies. A special thank you to Dr. Robert Dedrick for chairing my final defense under adverse circumstances. In addition, to Dr. Susan Zucker, thank you for your invaluable input, coaching, and encouragement.

Special thanks to my daughters, Shaylia and Ashley, for your support, love, strength, and understanding over the years. Also, I would like to thank all my family and friends who have supported me through the whole process.

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A special thank you goes out to all the participants in this study. You freely volunteered your time and shared personal experiences in the interest of the greater good. Finally, to my newly devoted friend and companion, Michael, my sincere gratitude for understanding and always being there, especially during a difficult time in my life.
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The purpose of this study was to explore individual perceptions of African-American at-risk students in an undergraduate teacher education program, specifically continuing students or community college transfer students in a four-year urban university College of Education (COE) program. Specific areas of interest included: (a) demographic characteristics profiling the study participants; (b) emotional and motivational factors as they affected the students; and (c) the personal thoughts and effect of institutional and environmental variables and administrative factors. Ten females volunteered to participate in a semi-structured interview. The 22 semi-structured interview questions were developed by the researcher. The questions captured the individual personal background, academic information, college environment, and reasons for leaving college. A triangulated set of research methods for data collection was used, including a demographic profile, the semi-structured interview, coding, and salient points and theme validation. Member checks and independent reviewers were used for verification and validation purposes.

Conclusions drawn from this study include the findings that the majority of students were motivated to complete their degree, but a variety of barriers including personal problems, financial needs, faculty communication difficulties, lack of
administrative support services, and isolation in classes existed. Some positive perceptions of the teacher education program included appreciation for most of the faculty in the college, technology services and the new facilities for the COE, and the existence of on-line advising capabilities.

The following implications emerged from this study: (a) the COE needs a clear policy for recruiting at-risk African-American students; (b) flexible course selections and offerings conducive to non-traditional students are desirable; (c) a full-time recruiter to organize and facilitate student organization support is needed; (d) more African-American faculty are crucial as role models; and (e) it is essential to continue to focus on cultural awareness within the curriculum, and (f) creating a climate of support and togetherness in which students feel comfortable is necessary. Future research is recommended addressing the perceptions of at-risk African-American male students, other ethnic and racial minorities and other colleges within the university or across universities.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the past, teaching has been a traditional career choice for African-Americans. However, percentages of African-American professionals pursuing teaching careers have been steadily declining, evidenced by fewer African-American students pursuing educational degree program tracts (Blacks Issues in Higher Education, 2002; King, 1993). This is particularly notable not only because the numbers are declining but also because of the fact that selective admission policies and competence testing has been used recently.

Examining the experiences of African Americans in undergraduate teaching education programs who struggle to complete their degrees may reveal that there are patterns which largely contribute to student difficulties. These patterns could be useful to uncover and establish effective interventions which could result in raising the number of African-American professionals who succeed in becoming teachers.

Research reveals that one reason for this decline was the desegregation of public schools during the 1960s and 1970s (Jones, 1999). This resulted in large numbers of African-American teachers losing their jobs when African-American schools closed. Additionally, desegregation resulted in openings of previously closed jobs or professions to college-degreed African Americans. Therefore, more African Americans opted for lucrative or extrinsically attractive professions other than teaching (Jones, 1999).
In the early 1970s, before Civil Rights legislation was enacted and the affirmative action law was passed, African-American students were attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) (Cross & Slater, 1999). Yet by 1997, approximately 85% of all African-American college students were enrolled in predominantly white institutions (Harvey, 2001). Affirmative action admission programs resulted in these enrollment increases.

Twenty-eight years later, *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2001) reported that initiations of race-based admissions policy for undergraduate programs at select universities (e.g., the universities of Michigan and Duke) occurred in 1998. Staddon (2002) states that race-based admissions apparently eroded the traditional and unique mission of all universities—places devoted to the rational and objective discussion of ideas. Thus, the educational effects of race-based admissions reveal more undesirable effects than desirable ones. There has been no research indicating that race-based admission has been effective.

In other words, the race-based admission policy does not guarantee African-American students’ acceptance into college, based on educational and intellectual diversity. Staddon (2002) implies that America’s elite universities shifted from intellectual (cognitive) and impersonal (objective) to the moral (multicultural sensitivity) and personal (more qualified) characteristics in their admissions policies. Staddon (2002) claimed that the selective admission process affected all African-American students nationwide and resulted in the immediate decline of African-American students attending colleges and universities.
The following questions have been posed by Brooks-Harris, Higa, and Mori (1999):

- Why are there fewer African-American students graduating from college?
- Why is there a decrease in the percentage of African-American teachers in the work force?
- Why is there a decline in the number of African-American students pursuing careers in the field of education?

African-American representation has been low in teacher education programs, resulting in an urgent need to recruit African Americans into teaching (Educational Testing Services, 2003). Approximately 40% of all public schools in the United States currently have no minority teachers (National Education Association, 2002). The lack of minority teachers arose from the retirement of experienced teaching professionals combined with the inability to attract and hold candidates in teacher preparation programs. In the next decade, researchers predict an approximate two million teacher shortage (Southworth, 2000).

Therefore, higher education institutions need more research pertaining to factors affecting the retention and dropout rates of African-American students. Some of the factors cited that affect retention rates include: a) colleges and universities becoming increasingly tuition driven; b) state legislators and administrators’ concerns with students not demonstrating adequate academic preparation; c) lack of financial support; and d) increased social and group pressures from non-minority students impacting African-American student enrollments, particularly those who attend predominantly white colleges and universities (McRae, 2003).
Florida’s Educational Initiative

The 1999 legislative decision entitled, “One Florida Initiative,” introduced new admissions’ policies, hoping to increase the overall student population. Furthermore, this allowed the top 20% of graduating classes at high schools, including numerous all-black high schools, to automatically qualify for admission to any state university system. Phillips (2002) believes retention remains as equally important as access, and that higher education should strongly focus on this issue.

The nation’s five-year college graduation rate at four-year institutions is 32.5%, up from previous percentages for African-American students and 51.4% for Caucasian students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001, 2003b). Although the numbers increased for African-American students during 2000-2001, enrollment remained low compared to white student numbers.

1. As of 2004-2005, enrollments at predominately white institutions in Florida continue to increase while African-American enrollments remain 20% lower. The National Center for Education Statistics (2003a) reports that the number of African-American students enrolled both part-time and full-time, the number of African-American students in two- and four-year institutions, and the number of male and female undergraduates is projected to reach a new high from 2003 through 2013. Since the implementation of the 1999 initiative, Kiernan (2002) implies that Florida universities created methods to increase African-American student enrollment by implementing various techniques (Kiernan, 2002), and they increased the admission’s internal operational budget to supplement new operations such as the following:
• Offered scholarships to top high school graduates;
• Provided student-recruitment conferences;
• Supplied scholarships to students not in the top 20 percentile.

*Black Issues in Higher Education* (2002) states that more African-American students leave college before graduating, only half earn a baccalaureate degree within the normal four to six years. Some students who stay in college experience several academic and personal problems.

Several publications such as *First-Generation College Students* (Hsiao, 1992), *Community College Review* (Iman & Mayes, 1999) and *Blacks in Higher Education* (Hodge, 2004), and the *Journal of College Students Development* (Sedlacek, 1990) indicate that the first two years of college tend to be the most stressful. Stressors may include: (a) adjusting to a new environment, (b) learning various forms of classroom instruction, (c) dealing with interpersonal relationships, (d) having a level of independent experiences, and (e) reaching academic goals such as maintaining good grades and graduating. Colleges and universities spend billions of dollars providing remedial courses for students who are unprepared to enter higher educational institutions. Historically, higher education mentoring programs present a valuable and effective tool to promote interaction between faculty and students. Mentoring programs represent a process of intervention, enhancing retention and success. These programs continue to be a viable alternative in working with under-represented African-American students. Townsend (1994) believed that college and university faculty, mainly at predominately white universities with few African-American professors, have a major impact on whether African-American students “stick it out” or decide to drop out. Studies in higher

The University of South Florida’s (USF) College of Education (COE) has been providing retention programs to help improve and ensure the success rate of African-American community college transfer and continuing students. These programs assist students before and after matriculating into the university programs. For example, four programs in the Project Thrust Program and the College of Education were created to increase the number of minorities and under-represented student’s seeking bachelor’s degrees. The programs are titled Project Thrust, Freshman Summer Institute, Project Thrust/College of Education Mentoring Program, and Project Thrust/College of Education Secondary Education Mentoring Partnership. These programs help students before and after entering the university. The programs focus on the recruitment, retention, and graduation rates of all minorities.

**Statement of the Problem**

African-American student enrollments and graduates in the teacher education program at USF’s College of Education decrease every year (*USF InforMart*, 2006). Table 1 presents the numbers and percentages of African-American and Caucasian education students enrolled and graduated by year. This table also notes the number of students enrolled by race, year attended, total number of students, percentage of total
number, total number of students graduated, and percentages of these totals. In the 2000-
2001 academic year, 151 (8.8%) African-Americans students enrolled in a teacher
preparation program with only 56 (10.3%) graduating. This compares to 1568 (91.2%)
Caucasian students enrolled in a teacher preparation program with 486 (89.7%)
graduating. In the 2001-2002 academic year, 145 (8.2%) African-American students
enrolled and 57 (8.1%) graduated, compared to 1629 (91.8%) Caucasian enrolled
students with 651 (91.9%) graduating.

In the 2002-2003 academic year, 126 (7.6%) African-American students enrolled
in a teacher education program at USF with 55 (9.4%) graduating, compared to 1539
(92.4%) Caucasian students with 532 (90.6%) graduating. In the 2003-2004 academic
year, 116 (7.5%) African-American students were enrolled with 36 (6.7%) graduating,
compared to 1430 (92.5%) Caucasian students with 498 (93.3%) graduating. In the
2004-2005 academic year, 141 (8.8%) African-American students were enrolled with 38
(7.5%) graduating, compared to 1458 (91.2%) Caucasian students with 470 (92.5%)
graduating. Although the African-American student enrollment decreased from 2001-
2004, and the numbers of African-American students enrollment increased during 2004-
2005, the numbers were still comparatively low compared to the Caucasian students. The
number of African-American students who graduated decreased from 2001-2005
compared to Caucasian students who graduated during that same period or stayed the
same.

Historically, the demographic, enrollment, and employment characteristics for
undergraduate African-American students attending colleges and universities were
associated with dropout risks. Once students received acceptance into the education
program, universities typically made every effort to retain and graduate the students. However, Gordon (1994) reported negative experiences in K-12 schools, including lack of adequate preparation, as a typical reason African-American students overlook teaching as a career. Negligible amounts of research focus directly on the declining numbers of African-American students in teacher education programs. Nor was there any recent research about the obstacles and possible incentives experienced by or offered to African-American students choosing teaching as a profession.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study was to explore individual perceptions of African-American at-risk students in an undergraduate teacher education program, specifically continuing students or community college transfer students in a four-year urban university College of Education program. This study mainly identified at-risk African-American students from fall 1997 through fall 2005 and identified personal thoughts, psychodynamic characteristics (emotional and motivational factors), the effects of institutional and environmental variables, and administrative factors perceived by African-American students at an urban university. It also addressed a teacher education program at an urban university. This study was based on Tinto’s longitudinal model of departure (1975, 1993, 2000). His model discusses the process of departure as it occurs within institutions of higher education and explains why and how individuals leave their institutions prior to the completion of their degree programs.
Table 1

Numbers and Percentages of Education Students Enrolled and Graduated by African-American and Caucasian Students by Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year/Race of Student</th>
<th>Students Enrolled</th>
<th>% of Total*</th>
<th>Total Enrolled</th>
<th>Students Graduated</th>
<th>% of Total*</th>
<th>Total Graduated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000-2001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American Students</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>1719</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian Students</td>
<td>1568</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>486</td>
<td>89.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American Students</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>1774</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian Students</td>
<td>1629</td>
<td>91.8</td>
<td></td>
<td>651</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2003</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American Students</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>1665</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>587</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian Students</td>
<td>1539</td>
<td>92.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>532</td>
<td>90.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American Students</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>1546</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian Students</td>
<td>1430</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>498</td>
<td>93.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American Students</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>1599</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian Students</td>
<td>1458</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>470</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: USF InforMart (2006)*
*Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.*
Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions regarding at-risk African-American students:

1. What characteristics and factors are associated with at-risk African-American students in terms of motivation to complete the degree, perception of faculty, and participation in retention programs?

2. What were the expectations such as degree process and goal attainment of at-risk African-American students when they entered the program?

3. What is the relation between at-risk African-American student expectations and actual experiences in the program?

4. What role does support or lack of support play in the decision to discontinue the program?

Significance of the Study

Existing research in the area of at-risk African-Americans who do not succeed in graduating from undergraduate teaching programs recognizes the difficulties that African-Americans face. Additional research could help educators understand why at-risk students experience difficulties when transitioning from community colleges to upper-level division educational programs. To improve the African-American student retention rate in undergraduate teaching programs, it is apparent that institutions need better and more programs to retain African-American at-risk students. Having an insight into at-risk African-American students’ personal thoughts, psychodynamic characteristics, and effects of the institutional and environmental factors could
inform and provide administrators, chairs/directors and other personnel of four-year urban universities with information about the specific needs and/or expectations of African-American students.

Limitations of Study

For the qualitative component of the study, the primary threat to internal credibility is often researcher bias at the data analysis stage and confirmation bias at the data interpretation stage. Although the qualitative data in this study were collected from participants through personal interviews, the researcher was the person who coded the data, and thus “when the researcher has personal biases or a priori assumptions” (Onwuegbuzie, 2003, p. 19), that person tends to look for themes that are predetermined. The consequence of researcher bias threat is more likely found the confirmation bias where “interpretations and conclusions based on new data to be overly congruent with a priori hypotheses” (Greenwald, Pratkanis, Leippe, & Baumgardner, 1986, p.217). Also, similar to the quantitative study, the confirmation bias poses a real threat when there is one or more “plausible rival explanation to the underlying findings that might be demonstrated to be superior if given the opportunity” (Onwuegbuzie, 2003, p. 20). One potential threat to external credibility is population generalizability (Onwuegbuzie, 2003), which in this study was the ability to generalize the findings beyond the sample from which the data were collected; however, qualitative this generalization is not crucial because characteristics of research relating to collection of rich and thick descriptions rather than large amounts of data.
There were several strategies employed in this study to minimize the threats to both internal and external validity. These strategies included creating an audit trail, rich and thick descriptions, and member checks. Leaving an audit trail means the researcher is willing to open all the documentation of data of the study for public auditing (Onwuegbuzie, 2003); rich and thick description refers to the collection of a sufficient amount of data that are “detailed and complete enough to maximize the ability to find meaning” (Onwuegbuzie, 2003, p. 37). Conversely, member checks allow the researcher to clarify any misinterpretations of the “voice” so that the researcher is more certain of her findings (Maxwell, 1996).

The following include limitations of this study:

1. Participants for this study were limited to African-American continuing and community college transfer students who enrolled at the University of South Florida, College of Education, and Teacher’s Education Program and did not complete this program during the years 1997-2005.

2. The study relied on personal interviews to gather data related to emotional and motivational factors, perceptions, expectations, and specific needs of the African-American student. The possibility of not revealing as much information as the researcher may hope for is a possibility due to the factor of social desirability, or wanting to look good to the researcher.

3. The population sample was restricted to students from 1997-2005 enrolled in a large, urban university.

4. The participants were familiar with the researcher as their advisor.
Definition of Terms

The following definitions clarify terms and concepts used in this study:

*Academic Support.* Programs designed to provide emotional and moral support for minority students.

*African American.* Refers to origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa, and includes people indicating their race or races as “Black, African American, or Negro.”

*Associate of Arts (A.A.) Degree.* A two-year degree designed for transfer from the Community College System of Florida to the State University System of Florida.

*At-risk Student.* African-American students admitted in an undergraduate teacher education program who failed to meet all requirements to complete the program, who dropped out of college for personal/financial reasons and who did not return to the COE for a period of at least one year.

*Bachelor’s Degree.* A degree granted for the successful completion of a baccalaureate program of studies, usually requiring at least four years (or equivalent) of college level study.

*Community College Transfer Students.* Students who gained initial postsecondary experience at a Florida community college; they obtained an A.A. degree or 60 or more hours and transferred to the university for their junior and/or senior years.

*Continuing Students.* Students who began their academic experiences at USF and continued enrollment through their junior and/or senior years.
Expectations. Anticipated help and support from faculty and staff to progress through and complete the undergraduate education degree program.

Institutional Factors. Organizational factors that may affect student services, comfort level, admissions, and perceptions of the teaching education programs.

Non-traditional Student. Students aged 25 years or older.

Perceptions. Student personal, emotional experiences and opinions of faculty, staff, and college teaching education programs.

Project Thrust’s Personal Excellence Program. A retention program providing academic counseling, personal support, and social/cultural enrichment activities to first-time-in-college USF students enrolling during the summer bridge program. Although students do not meet all of the university’s criteria, they demonstrate potential to succeed in college. The program helps ease the transition from high school to college, establishes a strong academic foundation during the summer semester, and exposes students to the full range of university resources and facilities.

Retention Programs. Mentoring programs designed to recruit and retain African-American students to assist them in attaining their education and career objectives.

Student Support Services Program. Activities that describe a federally funded grant program that provides academic support for at-risk students having the potential to succeed in college. The Student Support Services program provides an opportunity for students to get involved in programs and activities
that broaden career perspectives, build self confidence, and provide individual and group counseling for academic and social adjustment at USF.

*Student Variables.* Demographic and experiential independent variables identified such as age, gender, entrance GPA, last attended GPA, number of dependents, marital status, and academic preparation.

*Traditional Student.* College students between the ages of 18 and 24 years of age in a college or university system.

**Organization of Study**

Chapter 1 discusses the declining numbers of African-American students entering the teaching profession, the statement of the problem, purpose of the research, the specific research questions, the educational significance, the limitations of the study, and the definitions of terms.

Chapter 2 provides relevant literature review on Tinto’s Longitudinal Model, African-American issues in higher education, and USF studies related to higher education, graduation rates of African-American students in higher education, high-risk college students, mentoring initiatives, and African-American teachers in higher education and their influences on at-risk African-American students.

Chapter 3 describes the research design, a description of the population and the sample selection, development of the interview instrument, the university setting, the data collection procedures, the data analysis process, and a summary.

Chapter 4 presents five sections of the study findings and also the interpretation of the results. It includes descriptions of participants’
demographics, personal connections, individual participant interviews and profiles, strands of inquiry with sample quotes, and observations from the interview process.

Chapter 5 presents a summary of the study. It also includes the conclusions, implications, and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to explore individual perceptions of African-American at-risk students in an undergraduate teacher education program, specifically continuing students or community college transfer students in a four-year urban university College of Education program. The review of related literature consists of (a) Tinto’s longitudinal model (1975, 1993, 2000) of departure, (b) African-American issues in higher education, (c) USF studies related to higher education, (d) graduation rates of African-American students in higher education, (e) high-risk college students, (f) mentoring initiatives, and (g) African-American teachers in higher education and their influences at-risk African-American students.

Limitations existed in the body of research that addressed the at-risk African-American continuing and community college transfer students attending upper division junior/senior postsecondary-level urban institutions. There was no recent research that addressed the obstacles and incentives experienced by those who chose teacher education or the factors relating to research on high-risk, first-time-in-college students; first-generation college students; or economically disadvantaged students, including those who did not meet all the criteria for admission to the college or university.
Tinto’s Longitudinal Model

Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2000) longitudinal model of departure has been widely used and researched in higher education for over 25 years. His model stems from earlier works of Spady, Durkheim, and Van Gennep. Tinto’s sociological theory continues as the foundation for understanding how students navigate through the postsecondary system. First, his model discusses the longitudinal process of departure as it occurs within institution of higher educations. It explains why and how individuals depart their institutions prior to the completion of their degree programs. Secondly, the model closely addresses the longitudinal process in which individuals come to voluntarily withdraw from higher education institutions. Third, the model represents a longitudinal process of interactional character. It emphasizes the process of interactions that arises among individuals within the institution, and which is viewed over time to determine the processes of withdrawal or disassociation, which marks individual departure. Tinto (1993) claims that this is an explanatory model of departure in which the primary goal investigates how interactions among different individuals—within the academic and social systems of the institution and the communities—lead persons of varied characteristics to withdraw from that institution prior to degree completion. Tinto (1993) reports that 40% of students who enroll at four-year institutions fail to earn bachelor’s degrees, and nearly 75% of this group leaves prior to the start of the second year. He identifies six major causes for attrition as:

1. unclear or new goals,
2. difficulty in making the transition from high school to college.

3. low commitment to earning a 4-year degree,

4. external commitments that interfere with school,

5. financial difficulties, and

6. feelings of isolation.

Between individual goals and internal and external commitments, Tinto argues that interactions influences not only whether a person leaves, but also the form in which the leaving occurs. He further states that institutional goals or commitments can lead to institutional departure; additionally, educational goals and commitments relate to shape the individuals staying or leaving the institution.

Within the past decade, Masursky (2000) and Tierney (1992) criticized Tinto’s theory because of the lack of minority experiences and other non-middle class students. Masursky (2000) concludes that Tinto’s theory “has maintained its credibility over two decades, but the experiences of marginalized students are an essential part of the college attrition puzzle, and their voices have been largely absent from the research to date” (p. 4). Tierney (1992) suggested a more multicultural framework for investigating college attrition. Visot (2000) implies that “literature on race/ethnicity in relation to nontraditional students persistence is limited; there is substantial literature on traditional students, which links race ethnicity as a factor related to retention” (p. 38).

In addition to Tinto’s research, another study was conducted that revealed alternate factors and populations to consider, related to student persistence in higher education. Metzner and Bean (1987) developed a model to predict the
attrition of non-traditional students who are over the age of 24 years, not living in a campus residence, attending college part-time, or a combination of these three factors. The research indicates that persistence was independent of campus integration as it related to non-traditional students. These students typically had a closer relationship with faculty and access to counseling, shared similar values with faculty, and shared experiences with other students displaying specific career goals. Metzner and Bean (1987) stated academic and psychological outcomes influenced students’ intentions to drop out or persist in their academic goals. Their model revealed that non-traditional students do not attend universities to socialize, but instead commit to the study program and achieve good grades and perspectives on future employment.

African-American Issues in Higher Education

Recently, colleges and universities have been developing and focusing on innovative research addressing minority students’ enrollments in higher education institutions (American Council on Education, 2001). Johnson (2005) states that in the twenty-first century, African-American students will continue to enroll in predominantly White institutions at higher rates than African-American students enrolling at historically Black colleges and universities. However, Hodge (2004) states the graduation rates of African-American students in colleges and universities are dismal due to the dramatic increase of minority dropout rates between 2001-2004. Due to low graduation rates, African-American students will have limited personal and professional choices and will unlikely forego career positions requiring a college education (Gloria, Robinson-Kurpius,
Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999). *Black Issues in Higher Education* (2002) reports that too many African-American college students drop out of college before finishing; approximately half earn a baccalaureate degree within six years, and some who stay in school do not learn as much as they could. Major economic success exists beyond dispute when African-American students do stay in college and earn a degree (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2001). However, once a degree is achieved, African Americans must face the challenge of racial influences regarding economic standards.

Swail, Redd, and Perna (2003) assert that educational opportunity and success are uneven in the United States based on income and race/ethnicity. African-American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American students continue to earn degrees at substantially lower rates than Whites and Asians.

**USF Studies Related to Higher Education**

Two studies by Wright (1999) and Visot (2000) were similar in design to each other and this study. They were conducted at USF utilizing non-traditional and traditional undergraduate students. These studies informed the researcher of the present study by offering a basis for comparison from which to draw suppositions and conclusions. Additionally, Stripling’s study (2004) influenced this study by identifying factors related to students’ failure to complete their doctorate degrees.

Wright (1999) studied three areas to: a) determine the extent to which perceived self-efficacy in college tasks predicts the GPA of *at-risk* African-American, first-time-in-college (FTIC) students after their first two semesters
(Summer and Fall), b) investigate the relationship between academic self-efficacy, those with other selected and demographic characteristics, to college academic achievement measured by college GPA’s for overall sample and both subgroups, and c) further clarify what academic self-efficacy means to FTIC students. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are selected demographic and academic characteristics of FTIC students enrolled in two University of South Florida retention programs: Student Support Services and Project Thrust’s Personal Excellence Program?
2. Are there differences between academic self-efficacy for students enrolled in Student Support Services and those in Project Thrust’s Personal Excellence Program?
3. What are the relationships among the predictor variables of high school American College Test/Scholastic Test (ACT/SAT1) score, college GPA, gender, program, and academic self-efficacy for FTIC students in the Student Support Services and Project Thrust’s Personal Excellence Program?
4. What are the relationships between academic characteristics explored in research question #1 and college GPA of at-risk college students after two semesters?
5. To what degree does academic self-efficacy change from the time an FTIC student enrolls at USF in Student Support Services and the Project Thrust’s Personal Excellence Program and the end of the second semester? Is the change the same for both subgroups?
6. How do students perceive the nature and source of academic self-efficacy? (Wright, p. 9)

Sixty-one African-American freshman students participated in the study during the Summer and Fall semesters. Two groups were identified as students in the Student Support Services (SSS) and Personal Excellence Program (PEP) at the University of South Florida. SSS students were primarily low income and FTIC; and PEP students requiring no eligibility requirements, beyond alternative-admit status, were from college-educated families. Both programs exist for at-risk university students.
Wright utilized a variety of data sources to complete the study: Student Demographic Data Survey, the Office of the Registrar, College Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (CASES), and audio-taped personal interviews. In compiling the data, a quasi-experimental, non-randomized design was employed to investigate the six research questions.

Three steps were performed in the research:

1. A 33-item Likert-type College Academic Self-Efficacy scale (CASES) questionnaire was completed. The questionnaire was given to 89 FTIC students the first three weeks into the summer semester and again in the fall semester to 61 of the same students who completed the survey in the summer.

2. A Student Demographic Data form was used and designed to ascertain pertinent information about the students.

3. Analyzing students’ results on the CASES were analyzed.
   Students were also interviewed with two-questions and audio-taped to gain a clearer understanding of the academic self-efficacy. The first question was designed to obtain information about techniques employed by students that may impact their overall academic self-efficacy or academic self-confidence. The second semi-structured question was designed to learn more about their loci control and their self-confidence about being a student at USF.

Wright explored the resilience in at-risk students and how it can be maintained and improved. Sixty-one students completed questionnaires that
included both administrations. Findings revealed that academic self-efficacy represented a significant variable for student success, and the college GPA strongly predicted academic success. The study revealed no major differences in at-risk populations enrolled in SSS or PEP. However, PEP students were above the overall mean in areas of leadership, high school GPA, ACT/SAT I scores, and college GPA; SSS students were above the overall mean in semester hours earned. PEP students typically were from college-educated families and SSS students were primarily first-generation students. The study only revealed significant differences in first generation status and parental education. According to Wright’s study of African-American students, self-efficacy supported the findings of Bandura, Owen, and Foreman on the validity of self-efficacy as a stable construct of all college-level students.

Wright’s study contained several similarities to this research which included non-traditional undergraduate African-American students and students’ participation in retention programs. Methods of data collection for both studies included face-to-face interviews.

The second study, Visot (2000), identified and analyzed selected variables associated with persistence of non-traditional and traditional undergraduate students attending a metropolitan university to complete their degree programs. Five research questions were asked to explore persistence of non-traditional and traditional undergraduate students at the University of South Florida:

1. Do traditional and non-traditional students differ in terms of selected students, institutional and environmental variables; and do native and transfer students differ in terms of the same set of selected student, institutional and environmental variables?
2. Do individual student characteristics—age, gender, race/ethnicity, prior institutional GPA, current overall GPA, number of dependents, marital status, management skills, goal commitment, institutional commitment, high school preparation, academic integration, and social integration—associate with persistence of undergraduate students at a metropolitan university; and are the associations consistent for (a) traditional and nontraditional students and (b) native and transfer students?

3. Do institutional factors—support services, course scheduling options, and course delivery options—associate with persistence of undergraduate students at a metropolitan university; and are the associations consistent for (a) traditional and non-traditional students and (b) native and transfer students?

4. Do environmental factors (those outside the institutional environment)—family issues, work-related issues, employment status, influence of friends, external social integration, or financial issues—associate with persistence of undergraduate students at a metropolitan university and are the associations consistent for (a) traditional and non-traditional students and (b) native and transfer students?

5. Do student, institutional, and environmental factors as a group associate with persistence of undergraduate students at a metropolitan university and are the associations consistent for (a) traditional students and (b) native and transfer students? (Visot, p. 9)

The study sample consisted of 1,492 non-traditional and traditional students who were currently enrolled, graduated, or not currently enrolled at USF. Of that number, 346 participating students were community college transfer students with an A.A. degree or with 60 or more hours or as FTIC students at the junior level.

Visot developed a questionnaire utilizing Metzner’s Student Attrition Instrument for the study. The research study used descriptive statistics, analysis of variance, chi-square, and discriminant analysis. Student, institutional, and environmental variables were grouped and tested according to non-traditional and traditional status, and included a discriminate analysis by total group that revealed
a small non-persister return rate (13%). The effect size was calculated utilizing Mahalanobis Distance.

Visot’s findings suggested that 8 out of 12 individual student variables and two individual institutional variables were associated with student persistence. Participants in the study were typically single with no dependents. They were employed 20 hours or less per week, entered the university with a higher high school or community college grade point average, attended college full-time, and were financially dependent. Non-traditional students married with one or more dependents were employed off-campus for at least 20 hours per week. They entered the university with lower high school or community college grade point average, attended college part-time majority of the time, and were financially independent. A discriminant analysis showed 10 out of 23 variables were associated with student persistence and a new independent variable—management skills—was associated with persistence of non-traditional students. Persistence theory was not applicable to non-traditional students. Statistically significant differences existed between traditional and non-traditional students, variables across student groups, and management skills as a contributor to persistence of non-traditional students.

Visot’s study examined how persistence and motivation affected the rate of graduation across all populations at USF, whether they were traditional or non-traditional students. Notable similarities between Visot’s study and this study include: (a) undergraduates students at USF comprised the studied populations; (b) the influence of institutional factors such as support services, campus and
college comfort level, admissions criteria, and perceptions of experiences in the
college; and (c) environmental variables that included employment status—
whether they were employed during class attendance—and family and financial
issues.

The third study provided additional information for this study was the
research conduct by Stripling (2004). He identified a variety of reasons for
students’ failure to complete a doctorate degree. His study investigated the
perceived emotional and institutional variables of All-But-Dissertation (ABD)
non-completers of Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)
degrees in education. The focus of his study was doctoral candidates who did not
complete the degree, were in jeopardy of not completing degree, or self-disclosed
an inability or unwillingness to complete the degree.

His specific areas of interest included: a) basic demographic
characteristics, b) psychodynamic characteristics (emotional and motivational
factors), and c) the presence of and effect of institutional and/or administrative
factors. Four research questions addressed in the study to determine decisions
made by doctoral students included the following:

1. Are there observable trends and/or patterns regarding non-completion
   of ABD doctoral candidates?
2. What strands, if any, emerge as influential in contributing to
candidates remaining ABD?
3. In the absence of any observable strands, trends, or patterns, what
   factors or characteristics emerge as potential contributors to ABD non-
   completion?
4. Are there differences between the strands, trends or patterns of ABD
   students in the Ph.D. and Ed.D. programs? (Stripling, p. 8)
There were 13 respondents who participated in a semi-structure interview session. Of the 13 respondents, 9 were female, 4 were male; 11 were Caucasian, and 2 were African-American.

The data collection for the study included 66 participants from Fall 1989 through Fall 1995. The Dean of Graduate School supplied basic information such as demographics, academic data, whether graduate or not graduated, considered inactive/active, and readmission into the program. Lengthy interviews with the 13 selected individuals provided the data for the study.

Selected variables were used to gather specific information about the participants and focused on the experiences and perceptions of the ABD while attending USF. The variables were ABD awareness, societal/familial concerns, ego issues, motivation, self-awareness, perception of the doctoral process, program requirements, peer student/cohort group, major professor role/mentorship, doctoral committee, assistantships, institutional issues, and two post hoc questions. The questions were designed to provide a sense of closure to the conversation, and also provided an opportunity for the participants to disclose any additional thoughts not purposively sought by the interview.

The findings of his study revealed that participants were personally challenged by the adversities that led to the inability to successfully perform in or complete the dissertation phase. All the variables used in the study were contributing factors in varying degrees; no one strand was a major contributor as the cause for attrition from candidacy. The most prevalent motivating factors
were obtaining the degree, learning at the highest possible achievement, learning for its own sake, and becoming a better practitioner in one’s professional area.

The similarities to this study indicated that non-traditional graduate students are no different then undergraduate students as they relate to basic demographic characteristics, psychodynamic characteristics (emotional and motivational factors), and the presence of and effect of institutional and/or administrative factors.

Graduation Rates of African-American Students in Higher Education

Jones (2001) believes the most critical issues addressing performance, persistence, and graduation rates of African-American students attending postsecondary institutions depends on the level of social and academic integration into college life that includes cognitive and non-cognitive factors. Five common institutional climate factors are suggested:

1. The need to adjust to a new environment, a different value system, and an intensified awareness of one’s own ethnic minority status.
2. The need to receive adequate financial aid.
3. The need to perceive the social and academic climate as inclusive and affirming.
4. The need to establish long term goals, short term objectives, and a commitment to both.
5. Students’ personal characteristics. (p. 8)

Jones (2001) also implies attrition is neither solely a student problem nor solely caused by students. He believes that organizational policies and institutional or campus climate have an impact on student attrition. In addition, studies indicate exposure to a climate of predominately white institutions of prejudice and discrimination campus-wide are also considered a contributing factor of withdrawal behavior between minorities and non minorities (Cabrera,
Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999). An article in the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2002) states that the nationwide college graduation rate for black students “stood at an appalling rate of 38%” (p. 90), which was 21% below the rate of white students.

**High-Risk College Students**

Jones and Watson (1990) believe attrition exists as a major problem for American colleges and universities; efforts to retain students are stymied and complex because an increasing number of enrollees fit the socioeconomic and demographic profile of “high-risk” students. “High-risk” students are “minorities, the academically disadvantaged, the disabled, and those of low socioeconomic status” (p. 1). Jones and Watson (1990) described “high-risk” as a theoretical concept contingent upon the degree of negative risk concerning an educational experience. High-risk students in university or college settings produce a major impact on both institutions of higher education and society in general. Educational groups should recognize the characteristics of African-American students who attend colleges and universities; thus, they will determine their commonalities when discussing recruiting and retaining this population. Most institutions lack the precise number of high-risk students or first-generation students enrolled, yet retain a general sense of the African-American students attending their institution. Wright (1999) claims that high-risk students vary and that the term “high-risk” can be quite vague; for example, one popular misconception is that high-risk students exist only at inner-city schools in impoverished neighborhoods. However, McCormick (1989) states that more than
three-fifths of high-risk students exist nationwide in rural areas as well as suburban areas.

According to McCormick, despite a confusing range of definitions and challenges associated with a concise categorization, researchers have reached a consensus opinion. Researchers state that problems associated with school failure are often inherent among students who are destitute and members of a minority group. The title of “high-risk” has been used throughout minority students’ lives since elementary and secondary schools. Jones and Watson (1990) believe that labeling inevitably hinders the students when continuing their education, based on the terminology and how it is perceived. McCormick (1989) describes at-risk students as “economically disadvantaged.” He determines that they lack the home and community resources to benefit from conventional schooling practices. Because of poverty, cultural obstacles, or linguistic differences, these children tend to have low academic achievement and high dropout rates. Such students are heavily concentrated among minority groups, immigrants, non English-speaking families, and economically disadvantaged population. (p. 6)

First-Generation Students

Hsiao (1992) indicated that a growing number of first generation college students are currently enrolling in American colleges and universities. Hsiao (1992) also stated that several first generation students are academically unprepared for college and lack the experiences of survival: time-management, the economic realities of college life, and understanding the bureaucratic nature of institutions in obtaining a degree. He mentioned two categories of generations: first-generation students and first-generation adults who often come with unique
challenges in their endeavor to obtain a degree. First-generation students, or “new students” to higher education, often face challenges: conflicting obligations, false expectations, and lack of preparation or support either from family or institution. First generation adults are less intimidated by the culture shock of entering a college community, but they struggle with conflicting responsibilities and require a different type of support mechanism to succeed in an academic setting. Iman and Mayes (1999) indicate that it is crucial for colleges and universities to comprehend their first-generation populations to effectively enhance their recruitment, admission and retention policies.

Academic Problems

Johnson (2005) states that two major academic factors are associated with the African-American student attending predominantly white universities: academic deterioration and stereotyping. African-American students, who are admitted according to academic standards equal to those of white students, feel and experience academic deterioration due to stressors in college environment. Johnson (2005) believes academic deterioration occurs for African-American students when their GPA’s and academic performances decline. Inevitably, the African-American students begin to doubt their own academic abilities; they often succumb to faculty and peers questioning their authenticity as a college student. African-American students’ acceptance remains critical when participating in a classroom of all white peers. Several scholars have attempted to understand the basic underlying causes of the attrition rates of African-American students’ academic performance relative to their white and Asian-American peers (Fries-
Britt & Turner, 2001). Johnson (2005) believes African-American students’ performance is affected when they internalize the stereotypes of their white peers. When stereotyped by their white peers, African-American students become extremely stressed, believing that additional preparation is warranted for them to maintain the status quo. Thus, several African-American students contemplate quitting from the pressure and stress attempting to maintain these academic standards.

Sedlacek (1993) asserts that several African-American students are limited in their exposure to and knowledge of teaching and learning modes, several commonly existing in traditional academic settings. Educators of African-American students should become sensitive to these supposed varied comprehensive levels from a cultural perspective, as this could greatly enhance their effectiveness as teachers (Davis, 2001). African-American students experience a sense of confusion about what they know versus what their professors expect them to know about the dominant culture.

**Social Factors**

Social factors are overwhelming to an African-American student who attends and wants to complete a degree at a predominantly white institution (Johnson, 2005). The number of African-American faculty at a predominantly white institution was extremely limited or non-existent for decades; thus, several African-American students are intimidated and/or have a difficult time relating with white professors. African-American students also believe that white professors show favoritism to white peers. Recent studies (Bennett & Okinaka,
1990; Johnson, 2005) indicate that 92% of African-American students experience emotional alienation and loneliness as reasons for dropping out. Although some students may graduate, Bennett and Okinaka (1990) believe the alienation and isolation these students experience from peers and faculty leave them dissatisfied with their college experience. For decades, predominantly white colleges and university environments were considered intimidating and isolating for African-American students. Recent studies show that predominantly white institutions are attempting to produce environments more welcoming for African American students.

Financial Assistance

Although the numbers of African-American students attending colleges and universities are increasing, financial aid, grants, and loans are decreasing in today’s economy. African-American students attending educational institutions rely heavily on some type of financial assistance to gain access to and persist economically in higher education programs. African-American students often come from affluent families; hence, when financial assistance does not materialize or the grant monies do not cover the tuition, parents are unable to help these struggling students. Over the past few years, tuition rates have increased and federal and state financial aid subsidies have decreased.

Educational institution monies are becoming increasingly competitive among the brightest and gifted students and less available to economically disadvantaged students. In current society, the middle-class and lower class-families’ incomes are not equaling economic growth to assist in meeting student
academic and career needs. McRae (2003) indicates that 83.50% of African-American students attending the University of South Florida College of Education programs are on financial aid, 53.39% are on scholarships, 45.62% are on personal loans, and 18.75% are supported by parents/spouse. Despite the presence of several assistance opportunities, studies reveal that more economically disadvantaged students accept educational loans, work full-time or part-time, receive partial grants, federal work-study and minimal scholarships, and graduate with an average debt of 30% greater than those receiving other types of financial assistance (American Council on Education, 2001). McRae (2003) states that economically disadvantaged students have no alternatives and must make decisions to place other priorities first over receiving a quality education.

Mentoring Initiatives

Universities and colleges nationwide have initiated a variety of retention programs in efforts to recruit and retain African-American students. Researchers have seen students’ academic success rates increase through mentoring programs. According to Jacobi (1991), mentoring programs illustrate a valuable and effective tool relating to student attrition rates. Most mentoring programs have been promoted by utilizing interaction between faculty and students. Jacobi (1991) states, “whereas mentoring has been long associated with an apprentice model of graduate education, it is increasingly looked upon as a retention and enrichment strategy for undergraduate education” (p. 505). Mentoring appears in several other research articles and produces an effective educational tool.
Anderson, LaVant and Tiggs (1997) agree that there are two types of mentoring in post-secondary education: formal and informal. Formal mentoring programs are designed to increase enrollment and retention of minority and other students, and to increase student satisfaction with the academic experience. Informal mentoring is an ad hoc, spontaneous relationship, established by two or more individuals for the benefit of those involved. African-American students benefit from having a formal and structured mentoring program in predominantly white institutions nationwide. A major concern exists to develop enough African-American faculty and/or staff as role models at predominantly white institutions, especially amid a shortage of representatives. Unfortunately, the African-American faculty and staff are so overwhelmed that they cannot mentor every African-American student who needs assistance. Most African-American students are paired with white faculty or staff and sometimes have difficulty relating personal issues. However, most institutions are not able to afford a African-American mentoring program exclusively for the African-American students.

African-American Teachers in Higher Education and Their Influences on At-Risk African-American Teachers in Higher Education

The shortage of African-American faculty has often been a topic of discussion across the country, from the largest universities to the smallest colleges asking, “where are the minority teachers?” Currently, an increasing number of researchers reveal that minorities fare better in classes despite high expectations when taught by teachers mirroring their ethnic background, according to *Blacks*
Sedlacek (1990) states that the absence of African-American faculty serving as role models may strongly affect feelings of alienation among African-American students. He also determines that the lack of similar viewpoints or cultural perspectives remain pertinent to African-American students, and can affect the learning, development, and identification with the institution. When African-American faculty and staff are visible, students often seek assistance in establishing a connection with the university, college, and program of study. Austin (1993), in the Theory of Involvement, postulates that relationships established between a student and faculty and between a student and other students highly influence whether the student persists. The relationship between faculty and students and the student achievement level depends on the psychological and physical energy expected by both the teacher and the student (Braxton, Bray, & Berger, 2000).

Summary

The research reviewed identifies studies focused on the perceptions of at-risk students among undergraduate African-American continuing and community college transfer students in higher education. Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2000) example of a longitudinal model on student retention and persistence was used as the theoretical model for the studies conducted on student attrition and persistence. Studies focus on graduation rates of African-American students in higher education, high-risk college students, and mentoring initiatives.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to explore individual perceptions of African-American at-risk students in an undergraduate teacher education program, specifically continuing students or community college transfer students in a four-year urban university College of Education program. African-American students were interviewed about their personal thoughts and emotional and motivational feelings about continuing the Teachers Education Program, and the influence of institutional and environmental factors on their decisions. To obtain the necessary information, a qualitative approach was used that allowed the researcher to gather information by listening to the feelings and experiences of African-American students. Specific areas of interest included:

1. Demographic characteristics profiling the undergraduate African-American at-risk students in an undergraduate teacher education program.

2. Psychodynamic characteristics (emotional and motivational factors) as they affected the African-American students not completing their teaching degree.

3. The personal thoughts and effect of institutional and environmental variables and administrative factors as perceived by the participants.
This chapter discusses the Research Design, Population and Sample, the instrument, Data Collection, Data Analysis, and Summary. A discussion of credibility and dependability is also presented.

Research Design

A qualitative design provided the in-depth structured interviews of at-risk African-American undergraduate students for this study. Interviews allowed the researcher to gain the knowledge and understanding of why students were having difficulties in completing the program. “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). The in-depth interview of semi-structured questions was designed and planned out very carefully to address the research questions. The researcher made every attempt to follow the semi-structured questions to assure an in-depth discussion of experiences. Consequently, each participant’s interview responses varied, some needing more or less structure for depth beyond the first responses to promote an atmosphere of trust and disclosure (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Some probing was necessary for the researcher to gather additional information from the interviewees because of the initial responses and/or lack of responses. A review of the researcher’s notes and interview protocol helped guide the interview and provide assurance that all questions and answers were obtained (Seidman, 2006).

This method allowed the African-American students the opportunity to express their concerns, providing experiences and frustrations that have been often overlooked. Understanding the African-American students’ issues and
concerns can provide information to utilize their experiences to enhance their college knowledge. Several qualitative studies (Felder, 1993, Ford, 2002; Taylor, 2004) provided information regarding the influences and frustrations of African–American students at predominately white institutions. The majority of studies have been quantitative (Flowers, 2003; Kelsey-Brown, 2002) have quantified experiences and perceptions that provide data that are generalized. However, these studies did not take into account the voices of African-American students. Understanding the students’ perceptions and feelings is imperative in today’s higher education because the enrollment of African-American students in higher education continues to drop due to the lack of interest or understanding of the issues (McRae, 2003). The researcher was interested in finding meaning in the experiences of African-American students attending the College of Education, University of South Florida.

The research questions were derived from the problem statement and related to the individual perceptions of African-American at-risk students in an undergraduate teacher education program. These questions were designed to guide the inquiry and data collection (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). The following research questions were addressed through analysis of the collected data and discussed regarding at-risk students:

1. What characteristics and factors are associated with at-risk African-American students in terms of motivation to complete the degree, perception of faculty, and participation in retention programs?
2. What were the expectations such as degree process and goal attainment of at-risk African-American students when they entered the program?
3. What is the relation between at-risk African-American student expectations and actual experiences in the program?
4. What role does support or lack of support play in the decision to discontinue the program?

Population and Sample

The research population investigated in this study was African-American at-risk students in an undergraduate continuing or community college transfer students at the University of South Florida/College of Education teaching program. The most recent and available access to students’ demographic and academic information was provided through the Office of Student Academic Service’s enrollment data from 1997 through 2005. The African-American population was a logical and convenient group to study and had been previously researched. The study was approved by the administration to support future improvements and initiatives for African-American students. Researchers of educational inquiry acknowledge that a convenience sampling is an acceptable strategy of selecting cases simply because they are available and easy to study (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005). However, in this study, the fact is that the COE is one of the largest producers of teachers in the nation (D. Briscoe, personal communication, September 15, 2006).

Sample Selection

The selection of participants was undertaken using convenience sampling. The participants were chosen because of the low representation and declining enrollment of at-risk African-American students in the college. The investigator was interested in the personal thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of students who did not complete the teaching program. The average age for African-American students in the teacher education program was 25 years and older. The
College of Education Office of Student Academic Services provided the demographic and academic information for the African-American students from 1997 through 2005. The enrollment data included the names, addresses, emails, and telephone numbers for this research. The target population consisted of 92 African-American students admitted into a teacher education program who had dropped out of the University of South Florida (USF) College of Education (COE) within the time frame of this research study.

The investigator sent the initial introductory letters through mail, fax, and emails to the 92 African-American students explaining the research and how the students’ experiences would help the administration, professors, and staff. Also, that it was important to understand their personal thoughts, emotions, and motivation and, the effects of institutional and environmental perspectives as an African-American student. See Appendix A for a copy of introductory letter. Within three weeks, 62 letters were returned due to wrong addresses and emails. Immediately, a search was undertaken on Google to ascertain current addresses, email addresses, and telephone numbers. Of the 62 wrong addresses, 20 new addresses, emails, and telephone numbers were obtained. In addition, telephone calls were made in hopes of talking with students to encourage them to participate. After correcting the addresses, a second letter was mailed to the 30 students who did not respond to the introductory letter to encourage them to respond to this study. See Appendix B for a copy of the second introductory letter. A third letter was emailed to 20 new email addresses hoping for a response. See Appendix C for a copy of the third emailed letter. Of the three
letters mailed and emailed, 10 African-American students responded agreeing to participate in the study. There were no responses to email addresses. From the introductory letter and emails, students were informed that they would receive a lottery ticket for their participation in the study.

The Instrument

The interview questions were developed by the researcher based on concerns about the low enrollment and the non-completion of African-American students in the Teachers Education program. The researcher’s 24 years of experience as an advisor provided insight in developing the questions. The 22 semi-structured interview questions were designed to capture the individual personal background, academic information, college environment, and reasons for leaving the college. Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) define semi-structured interviews as a series of structured questions that probe more deeply than open-form questions to obtain additional information. Three face-to-face pilot interviews were conducted with African-American College of Education students volunteering to pilot test the interview questions and to determine the effectiveness of the instrument. The pilot interviews helped contribute to the researcher’s understanding of the process and to practice and fine tune the questions and interview skills. Minor adjustments were made to the questionnaire. The first six interview questions in the personal background provided the demographic information on each participant and any other personal background that would have impacted their education. Questions 7 through 15 in the academic information section addressed reasons why the participants did not
complete the program, who gave them moral support in the college, what were their expectations of the college as a whole, whether they felt emotionally comfortable in the college, and how they described their relationship with their professors. Related to the college environment, questions 16 through 19 included likes and dislikes about the college, and kinds of experiences in the classroom. Questions 20 through 22, concerning leaving the college or motivation to return, provided an in-depth conclusion to the study. If additional questioning was needed for the interviews, the questions were adjusted accordingly. Each scheduled interview with each participant lasted 1 to 2 hours.

Strands of Inquiry and Interview Questions

The semi-structured interview questions were designed to capture the participants’ personal background, academic information, college environment, and reasons for leaving the college. These questions also attempted to uncover the understanding of personal thoughts and emotional and motivational feelings of why they did not complete the teaching program.

Personal Background

1. What was your marital status or did you have a significant other or partner at the time you were enrolled in the college?
2. How did you finance your education?
3. Were you employed at the time you were enrolled in the college and did your job hinder your learning experiences? If so, explain.
4. Where did you reside while attending the college?
5. Tell me something about your personal background?
6. Anything in your personal background that would have impacted your education?
Academic Information

7. Can you identify any other reasons why you did not complete your degree other than financial reasons? Explain.

8. Where did you get, or who gave you, the most moral support in the college while you were in attendance? Explain.

9. What services did you receive from Student Academic Services Office? Were you satisfied or dissatisfied with the services? Explain.

10. What were your expectations of the College of Education as a whole?

11. Did you feel emotionally comfortable in the College of Education? If yes or no, explain?

12. How would you describe your relationship, personally and professionally, with your professor(s)?

13. How would you describe your relationship today with your professor(s)?

14. Anytime during your college experiences have you had anyone who served as a role model or mentor? If so, what ways, did the person(s) influence or impact you?

15. What support programs did you participate in the College of Education? How did they help?

College Environment

16. What did you like about the College of Education?

17. What did you dislike about the College of Education?

18. What kinds of experiences did you have in the classroom? Give me some examples of pleasant or unpleasant experiences?

19. Did you participate in any College of Education activities outside of classroom such as SCATT, M.O.S.E. and Children’s Festival? If yes, explain?

Leaving the College

20. What were your main reasons for leaving the college? Do those reasons still apply?
21. What would it take for you to return to the College of Education?
22. Are you using your skills and knowledge in your job now? If so, how?

Setting

The researcher provided general information about all programs and services that were offered through the USF COE to all African-American students. The retention programs provided guidance and assistance to the African-American students to help them reach their goal to become teachers.

*University of South Florida*

The University of South Florida (USF) whose benchmark profile in 2005-2006 indicated that it was a public, multi-campus, urban, top-tier research university in a metropolitan area on the Florida gulf coast. USF is located in the Tampa Bay area, with 20% Hispanic and 19.7% African-American students compared to 64.9% white students. This demographic data made USF an ideal study target institution involving minority students. This university is the third largest public university in the state and is among the top 20 largest in the nation. It serves over 42,238 students. The university offers 87 baccalaureates, 90 masters, and 223 doctoral degrees as well as the Doctorate of Medicine. These degrees are offered in 10 colleges on four campuses (University of South Florida InforMart, 2006).

*The College of Education*

Data from the fall 2005 preliminary benchmark showed the College of Education (COE) offering teaching and non-teaching degrees including 27 undergraduate programs and 125 graduate program degrees. There were 4,355
students, of whom 1,894 were undergraduates and 2,461 were graduates. Of those in the undergraduate program, 126 were African American students, and of those in the graduate program, 245 were African-American students. There were 139 faculty members within the Teacher Education Program. Of the 90 tenured and 49 tenure-earning faculties in this program, nine were African-American faculty: five tenured and four tenure-earning. The COE added a new building six years ago and renovated the old building, which made the environment and atmosphere conducive for a more inviting learning experience (University of South Florida InforMart, 2006).

**Teacher Education Program**

The Teacher Education Program is fully accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). The State’s Teacher Certification Board also accredits the program. The Education Program has undergraduate degree offerings in the following areas: elementary education, early childhood education, special education, secondary education, athletic training education, physical education, and wellness leadership education. USF COE is one of the largest producers of teachers in the nation (University of South Florida InforMart, 2006).

**Admission and Retention in the Teacher Education Program**

The admission requirements into the College of Education have changed several times in the past five years, which has affected many African-American students in pursuing a degree in education. The College of Education admission policy previously provided minority students with the possibility of a 10%
exception acceptance for admission into the college (10% of the students did not have to meet the strict admission requirements of COE). The individual student had to meet the necessary requirements to be fully admitted and graduate within five years. Students who were not fully admitted were considered as at-risk students. The regular admission requirements for entry into the program during 1997-2000 required students to meet the following qualifications: complete 60 hours of general requirements with a grade of ‘C’ or higher from a community college or four-year college or university, take three prerequisite courses completed prior to admission along with an American College Test (ACT) or a Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and College Level Aptitude Scholastic Test (CLAST), earn an overall grade point average (GPA) of 2.50 on a 4.0 scale, and a grade point average (GPA) of 2.50 in the major prior to enrolling in the internship experience. ACT or SAT score was no longer required for admission. During 2001-2005, admission requirements were changed. The three prerequisite courses, passing the College Level Aptitude Scholastic Test (CLAST) test, and an overall GPA of 2.50 were required. As of Fall 2006, students had to pass all sections of the CLAST or the Praxis I, or the General Knowledge Test (GKT) before being admitted into the college. In addition, students who previously passed the CLAST test had to take all parts of the GKT test before graduating with an overall GPA of 2.50. The policy changes within the six-year period for admission and graduation requirements caused confusion and concern among African-American students about what was required for the Teaching Education Program. COE enrollment data for fall 1997 through fall 2005 indicated 20% of
the African-American students did not pass the CLAST test for admission and graduation. The enrollment data also indicates that African-American students were performing better on the GKT test. The SAS department has been encouraging African-American students to take the GKT as early as possible to prevent not being admitted on schedule. Recent studies (Brooks-Harris, Mori, & Higa 1999; Wright, 1999) have indicated that African-American students are not academically prepared to take standardized tests that are administered at many colleges and universities.

Four mentoring programs were developed and implemented in the College of Education Program at the University of South Florida. The programs were designed to recruit disadvantaged and underrepresented minorities so that they could attain their educational and career objectives. Each of these programs is described in the following sections:

*Project Thrust Program*

Since 1978, 1000 minority students have academically benefited from the services of the Project Thrust Program. The major goal of the program is to provide advising and counseling in the area of course selection, financial assistance, petition, personal, and academic support to undergraduates. The program features a holistic approach, emphasizing student development with the end goal of students graduating.

*Project Thrust Elementary and Secondary Education for Adults Learning about Education and Its Real Applications (Project ESCALERA).* In 2001, the Project ESCALERA Program was established and partnered with Hillsborough
County School District Foundation. The program assists paraprofessionals in obtaining teaching experiences benefiting from mentoring, and getting a paid internship. The program had 21 participants: 13 in Hillsborough County, 5 in Pasco County, and 3 in Pinellas County during the time frame of the study. Since 2002, the Project Thrust Mentoring Program and the Project ESCALERA Program have been in partnership with the English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) department of USF COE and Pasco County Schools.

The participants are paired with mentors and/or teachers from Pasco County Schools as well as faculty, staff, and graduate students from the College of Education. The partnership and the paraprofessionals gain experience as well as receive teaching certificates upon completion of the program.

*Project Thrust /College of Education Mentoring Program.* In fall of 2002, the Project Thrust Program recruited “Mentors” (administrators, faculty, staff, and graduate students) to work with “Mentees” (African-American pre-education and continuing students) to create a positive, multi-cultural environment in the COE that supports its educational mission. Fifteen African-American student “Mentees” were matched with five professional educator “Mentors” to receive the personal one-on-one assistance and guidance needed to be successful in the program. Most mentors/mentees usually continue the partnership throughout and beyond the college years.

*Freshmen Summer Institute*

The Freshmen Summer Institute, a 6-week summer program which focuses on acquainting students to university services and resources before the
academic year begins, selects a number of disadvantaged low income students
who desire to succeed in their higher education programs. Pre-education students
are assigned to a College of Education Project Thrust Advisor to receive academic
advising and personal counseling during the summer. The students continue to
receive academic assistance until graduation.

Data Collection

Triangulation of research methods through multiple sources was used in
this study to enhance validity and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall &
Rossman, 2006). In addition, triangulation reduces the possibility of chance
associations, as well as of systematic biases prevailing due to a specific method
being utilized, thereby allowing greater confidence in any interpretations made
(Maxwell, 1996). The three data collection sources included: (a) enrollment data
that were provided by the Student Academic Services Office and the Registrar’s
Office, (b) semi-structured interviews, and (c) field and observation notes. Each
interview was conducted exclusively by the researcher.

The research relied on an in-depth semi-structured interview as the
primary means of data collection. Seidman (2006) considered in-depth
interviewing to be important in understanding the experience of other people and
the meaning they make of that experience. He also contends that in-depth
interviews can support the terms of validity and reliability. Eisner (1998)
proposed that other than direct observation of a phenomenon or behavior, use of
the interview is important as a source of information in qualitative data collection.

Contact and Informed Consent
From the initial contact with the 10 African-American students agreeing to participate in the study, a fourth letter was sent with instructions and enclosures. See Appendix D for a copy of the participant’s Contact Form, providing possible dates, times, and location for the interview. See Appendix E for a copy of the Informed Consent Form approved by the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB). See Appendix F for the interview questions provided in advance to help participants gather their thoughts and perceptions of their experiences in the college before the actual interview. Appendices D, E, and F were mailed to all the individuals who agreed to participate; a stamped self-addressed return envelope was also included. Providing a copy of the interview in advance gave each participant the opportunity to cancel the interview if any concerns or issues relating to the interview developed. No student cancelled after receiving the interview questions. The interviews begin in August 2006 and were completed by October 2006.

Interview Arrangements

Face-to-face in-depth interviews were the primary means of interview communication with participants. The participants were offered any location of their choice and were requested to return the letter to the researcher with their preferred choices. The dates and times were agreed upon and the researcher met with each participant individually. The researcher confirmed that all the locations were appropriate and would be devoid of interruptions while taping the interviews. All participants were interviewed in different locations including their
place of employment, home; educational settings, and public facilities. All interviews were conducted in the afternoon during work and/or after work. The time frame for interviewing all of the participants took three months to complete. After each interview was conducted, transcriptions were prepared immediately. The completion time for all transcripts was four weeks.

To facilitate the interview process, the researcher introduced herself and asked for the participant’s cooperation in the research. The research project was explained to the participants in detail before the interview. The interview questions were approved through the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) as a mean of protecting the participant and assuring that the interview would be confidential. Permission was obtained from participants to record the interviews. If the researcher needed clarity in the response, the questions were repeated. Each of the taped interviews lasted 1 to 2 hours.

Note Taking

The researcher recorded the participants’ reactions and feelings during the taping of the session to account for non-verbal communication and to develop subsequent probing questions. Verbal responses were supplemented by note-taking; non-verbal behaviors or reactions that may have provided additional insight as they occurred during the session were captured. After the interview session, the researcher utilized a blank copy of the interview protocol to re-write notes for comparison, clarity, and understanding of the taped interview. In addition, field and observation notes were taken and compiled to be added to as a reference to the interview questions in order to assure the informal, conversational
tone of the interview (Seidman, 2006). This procedure promoted and enhanced the engagement of the participants and helped focus the stories (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Transcriptions

Three steps were performed for all taped interviews. First, all taped interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber in written format. Once the transcriptions were completed the final transcribed interview was provided to the researcher for review and to make any revisions, if necessary. If any of the responses to the questions did not address the questions specifically, the statements were excluded (e.g., repetitions “hum,” “errs” and so on were removed) (Seidman, 1989). Secondly, after the researcher reviewed the final copy of the transcriptions, copies were returned to the participants for their final review if they needed to add or delete anything in the transcript. A third step was undertaken to clarify the salient points and to compile field and observation notes on the margins of the transcriptions. All participants returned their transcribed interviews with minor revisions. The time frame for each individual transcription was two weeks for completion. These procedures promoted and enhanced the engagement of the participants and helped focus the stories (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data Analysis

The data analysis used in this research is best described as content analysis method. The data analysis process brought order, structure, and meaning to the data collected (Patton, 2002). Content analysis identifies patterns of meaningful
experiences and identification of specific characteristics (Merriam, 1998). Predetermined categories helped analyze the interview data as well as allowing other factors or characteristics that might emerge.

To carefully examine the obtained information, each interview was analyzed. All materials were previously assigned an identification number/code for confidentiality, so anonymity could be assured for each participant. Merriam (1998) supported the use of coding or the assignment of numbers, abbreviations, or other designations to identify certain common aspects of the data. In analyzing qualitative data, categories are identified to create sharp distinctions between categories and also to designate those areas which are theoretically significant (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). To analyze the personal interviews, the researcher created the categories (Constas, 1992). A rating scale (see Appendix G—Rating Scale Instructions) was developed to validate each step of the evaluation process. The transcribed interviews as well as the identified salient points and themes were selected, evaluated, categorized, and compiled in a chart. Confirmation of themes was accomplished through three levels of verification that included identifying salient points and themes, rating strength of agreement with salient points/themes, and selecting appropriate quotes.

Five independent reviewers in three different procedures participated in the validation process. The reviewers, listed in Appendix H, were asked for their participation in this study because of their expertise in the area of Adult Education, research and measurement, and higher education. Reviewer A assisted in reviewing the participants’ responses independently of the researcher’s
responses and helped create a category of salient points and themes to compare for validity. Comparisons of findings were discussed for clarity and verification. Verification was used to justify the existence of each category so that those which were created adequately represented the range of responses (Constas, 1992). All other categories were developed after the responses were gathered, or *a posteriori* (Constas, 1992). It was decided that the categories could be expanded, creating multiple sub-categories. The process was iterative, evolving through two rounds of review.

Five of the 10 participants’ edited transcripts were randomly selected for the three triangulation procedures for creditability. As a beginning five interviewers were randomly chosen to determine the validity of the transcripts as identified themes. Interview numbers one, two, three, five, and eight were selected. For creditability, each reviewer was provided three of these interviews. In all the steps, one of the interviews was examined twice as a check on accuracy across the reviewer. Since there appeared to be no problems with the transcriptions and/or analysis, the additional verification of the other interviews was not deemed to be necessary.

To improve the reliability, three steps of data sources were used to perform the triangulation. Four doctoral students (coded B, C, D, and E) were recruited from the Adult Education program. These students were experienced in qualitative research as raters to validate the transcription of interviews and select salient points for comparison for reliability on the identifying salient points form. See Appendix I for a copy of the Instructions for Identifying Salient Points Form.
See Appendix J for a copy of the Identifying Salient Points Form and Samples of Identifying Salient Points by Raters. The examples of the salient points were identified by the raters. In the first step, the raters B and D reviewed, evaluated, and identified the salient points on interviews 2, 5, and 8. Both the researcher and the advanced graduate students discussed and compared the findings and coded the salient points and themes for verification. The second step consisted of raters C and E, also advanced graduate students from the Adult Education program, who confirmed and validated the quotes originally extracted from the transcripts on the placement of salient and identified themes sheet. A letter with instructions and the form were sent to each reviewer. See Appendix K for a copy of Instructions for Placement of Salient Points and Themes Letter. Each theme was coded by number in relation to each research question. From the themes, responses were grouped under each research question. Once this was completed, quotes were extracted from each interview transcription to illustrate wording that was indicative of the concerns being investigated. Each quote was categorized under the appropriate research question. In the third step, C and E advanced graduate students also validated the identified themes from interviews 1, 3, and 8, and rated their agreement or disagreement with the form with the rating scale found on the placement of salient points and identified themes sheet. See Appendix L for a copy of the Placement of Salient Points and Identified Themes Rating Sheet. Each interview question, theme, and pattern were identified by a code number, and utilized in the results and findings. Should any problems or disagreements have been identified on any of the steps, all 10 interviews would have been
reviewed. However, this was not necessary because the reviews provided similar responses. Data analysis was both exploratory and confirmatory, seeking to expand on existing knowledge about the perceptions of African-American students not completing a teacher’s education program.

*Credibility*

According to Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), the concept of interpretive validity within qualitative research refers to credibility of the researcher’s interpretive knowledge. In this study, criteria for interpretive validity referred to usefulness, contextual completeness, researcher positioning, and reporting style as discussed by Gall, Borg, and Gall.

The researchers’ 24 years of educational experience as an advisor in the USF COE contributed to the validity of the study and its usefulness. The participants’ inability to determine how to help themselves and/or their lack of awareness concerning the cause of their struggles in the academic environment, such as their motivations, emotional setbacks and lack of administrative support at the USF COE, were explained in the interviews. These are referred to as unseen or hidden variables. During the interviews, the participants commented on variables that were categorized as hidden/unseen.

This study is also considered useful because it sheds light on why participants were unable to complete their degrees and/or why they had troubles completing their degree. The implications of this study can set the stage for future students to be more successful and to get the help they need so that they realize maximum academic success by supplying valuable information to the USF
COE administration that can then provide the services/support needed to help at-risk students.

Contextual completeness of the study provided the necessary descriptions of the investigative processes. Detailed descriptions were given about the individual interviews, transcribing the ensuing discussions, analyzing the responses, and identifying participants’ educational and personal experiences that affected their performance in the USF COE teaching program. Multiple sources were used to conduct the study. Using many resources to verify and confirm information is known as triangulation of data sources (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Researcher positioning refers to the bias of the researcher and is a potential concern with regard to the validity of the research. It is crucial for the researcher to maintain unbiased interpretation of information and situations involving the participants in the study. As the researcher, I consider myself to be an ethical and a moral person who strives to help students solve their problems and report information in an unbiased manner. I became a champion of African-American students’ rights in higher education because of my dedication to the students and strong feelings about their desire to become professional educators. The empathy I felt for the participants made it difficult to see them struggle within the USF COE system. I also felt a major source of frustration in not being able to provide the necessary assistance to help them solve their problems. However, I believe aware that I reported the information in its totality and without bias or misinterpretation.
The reporting style of the study followed a conventional qualitative research format which was comprised of: an introduction, a review of literature, procedures for collecting data, results and findings, summary, conclusion, implications, and recommendations. The researcher devised a research design with its own set of procedures and devised a category system to analyze and interpret the data.

Merriam (1998) contended that issues of conceptualization, research design, data collection, and interpretation must be given careful attention, and are the building blocks necessary for any study to alleviate distress over validity and reliability. Reliability and validity in the traditional sense are not considered practical or appropriate for qualitative studies (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative research involves using the same samples, duplicating and producing the same results, as well as using the results to make generalizations about the larger population. Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) suggest checking for dependability and consistency in all research, regardless of type of research.

**Dependability**

To show consistency and dependability, the research must state the problem as it relates to the group being studied, use multiple data collection methods when possible, and describe in detail how data collected and analyzed. Dependability is achieved by providing rich, thick descriptions so that “readers will be able to determine how closely their situations match the research situation, whether findings can be transferred” (Merriam, 1998, p. 211).
External validity refers to the extent to which research findings can be applied to other situations. Generalizability of qualitative research findings may not always be possible, since some research studies emphasize understanding of a specific situation rather than a universal one. The reader may or may not identify with or relate to the phenomena being studied. Merriam (1998) suggested that qualitative findings are useful in transferring knowledge of a particular to new situations with similar conditions. In this study, triangulation techniques provided authentic evidence contained in an audit trial which included interpreting and transcribing interviews, field and observation notes, outside evaluators confirming the evidence collected, and the demographic and collateral information collected throughout the study.

Summary

A qualitative study was used for this research. Ten at-risk African-American students were interviewed to gain insight on their personal thoughts and emotional and motivational feelings about continuing in the teacher education program, as well as the influence of institutional and environmental factors on their decisions. Triangulation was achieved through data collection on demographic profiles, structured interviews, transcribed texts, and field and observation notes. Member checks were used for validation and verification of data. Data analysis was accomplished utilizing line-by-line microanalysis. The results of the study and descriptions of each participant are reported in the fourth chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore individual perceptions of at-risk African-American students in an undergraduate teacher education program, specially continuing students or community college transfer students in a four-year urban university College of Education program. Participants provided their personal thoughts, emotional and motivational feelings, and reflections about how the collegiate environment affected their decision not to complete their program in response to the interview questions presented to them by the researcher.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section, an overview of the participants and demographic characteristics, is followed by reflections on the personal connections made between the researcher and the participants during the interviews. The second section provides individual profiles of participants’ personal backgrounds and academic experiences that affected their emotional and motivational feelings while they were in the college program. The third section describes themes that emerged from the interviews and includes sample quotes spoken by the participants and the interviewer. The fourth section presents a narrative interaction between the researcher and quotes from the participants. Finally, issues of subjectivity, validity, and limitations of the study are discussed.
Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed through collected data and interpretation as follows:

1. What characteristics and factors are associated with at-risk students in terms of motivation to complete the degree, perception of faculty, and participation in retention programs?

2. What were the expectations, such as degree process and goal attainment of at-risk African-American students when they entered the program?

3. What is the relation between at-risk African-American student expectations and actual experiences in the program?

4. What role does support play or lack of support play in the decision to discontinue the program?

Overview of Participants

Participants interviewed for this study were comprised of African-American female students who a) were admitted into the teacher education program between the years of 1997 through 2005, b) dropped out of the teacher education program, or c) returned to USF’s College of Education undergraduate program during that timeframe. Students were recruited from the Office of Student Academic Services, the Alumni Office, and the Registrar’s Office enrollment data system. The participants were identified as at-risk because they had dropped out of the COE teacher education program during the time frame established for this study.
Ten African-American women volunteered to participate in this study. There was a paucity of African-American men who enroll in the undergraduate teaching program at USF’s College of Education, so no names of men who agreed to participate in the study existed. This phenomenon is consistent across the country (American Council on Education, 2004) and applies to males of all ethnic backgrounds in all teaching program. USF data from the Fall 2005-2006 preliminary benchmark show that 90% of the African-American population in the College of Education teaching programs are women (USF InforMart, 2006).

The 10 participants in this study included 7 community college transfers and 3 continuing students from the State of Florida. Each participant was admitted into the USF’s College of Education program at various years: 1 in Summer 1997, 1 in Fall 1998, 2 in the Fall 1999, 1 in the Spring 2000, 2 in the Fall 2001, 2 in the Spring 2003, and 1 in the Fall 2004. Five participants majored in Elementary Education, 4 participants majored in Special Education, and 1 participant majored in English Education. Of the 10 women, 3 were re-admitted and graduated from the teacher education program, 3 did not graduate because they could not pass one portion of the CLAST and/or did not satisfactorily complete the internship, 2 changed their majors but did not graduate, and 2 changed their majors and graduated in other colleges. Their overall grade point average ranged from 2.48-3.50. Three of the participants, who did not complete the teacher education program, were working while attending college; 2 were working in the private sector; and 1 was a teaching assistant.
Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics and percentages of African-American students in USF’s College of Education undergraduate teaching program from the years 1997 through 2005. In relation to entry status 7 (70%) were community college transfer students and 3 (30%) were continuing students. The majority 7 (70%) of the participants were single, 2 (20%) were married, and 1 (10%) was separated. The living arrangements for participants included 2 (20%) who lived in the dormitory, 7 (70%) who lived in apartments, and 1 (10%) who lived with her parents. All of the participants, except 2, worked during their enrollment in COE. Four (40%) worked full-time and 4 (40%) worked part-time. All participants were working during the time of their interviews; 4 (40%) were teaching and 6 (60%) were working in the private sector. Two (20%) participants entered the college with a 3.25-4.00 GPA, 3 (30%) participants had a 2.75-3.24 GPA, 3 (30%) participants had a 2.50-2.74 GPA, and 2 (20%) participants had a 2.00–2.49 GPA. Eight (80%) participants had a GPA between 2.50-3.24 and 2 (20%) had a GPA between 2.00-2.49 when they last attended. All participants had some type of financial assistance while attending school: 4 (40%) had loans, 3 (30%) received scholarships, 1 (10%) received a grant, and 2 (20%) received assistance from financial aid. All participants were nontraditional (i.e., 25 years of age and older), undergraduate students.

Personal Connections

The researcher had been the Project Thrust advisor for 24 years in the College of Education Student Academic Services Office. The researcher’s
responsibilities included helping students select their academic courses, referring students for tutoring, assisting students with career choices, placing into internship, and performing graduation checks. The researcher had a personal connection with all 10 participants as their minority advisor in the College of Education. The researcher was confronted with students’ many frustrations and stresses while working with African-American students on a daily basis. In reassuring the students and advising them on what alternatives there might be, the researcher could understand and sympathize with some of the issues the African-American were experiencing. The researcher felt one participant in particular was note worth in the study because the situation could have been handled differently by the administration. Other participants’ situations were handled appropriately. The researcher’s responsibilities were very limited about how much could be undertaken to assist the participants.

I consider myself to have good ethics and am an honest person who strives to help students solve their problems. Interviewing the participants as their former advisor was not difficult or stressful. Because I had a previous connection with the participants and knew them on a personal level, inviting them to participate in this study was not difficult. In analyzing and evaluating the transcribed interviews, I felt it was not necessary to change or interpret the transcribed interviews of any of the participants, except for taking out unnecessary wording.

Requests to students to participate in this study were sent by mail, email, and telephone. The enrollment data from fall 1997 through fall 2005 was
supposed to include the most recent addresses, emails, and telephone numbers. The researcher made four attempts to reach all students by email and telephone calls if they were not available via mail. Despite these efforts, only 10 participants were identified and volunteered to participate in the study.

Participant Interviews and Profiles

Data collection began in August 2006 with scheduled face-to-face interviews for all participants. All interviews were completed by October 2006. Participants were coded as participants 1-10 in this analysis.

The researcher scheduled a meeting with participant 1 at her parents’ home on a Saturday afternoon. The researcher was enthusiastic about this interview because she had personally known participant 1 and had not seen her for a couple of years. Before beginning the interview with participant 1, the researcher ensured that the location was conducive to a non-interrupted interview once greetings were completed.

Participant 1 seemed very relaxed and comfortable after the first five background questions were asked. During the interview, the researcher was able to control the tempo of the interview and provided a break between questions. The participant had been admitted during spring 2000 as a continuing student majoring in Elementary Education with a grade point average (GPA) of 2.80. While attending the university, she preferred to live on campus for the convenience of attending classes. The participant worked part-time to help supplement the financial assistance she had received from her parents, the student loans, and financial aid. She felt that working part-time, going to school full-
time, and taking care of her ill mother was more than what she could handle. Consequently, her grades suffered and she was put on academic probation. She praised the advising office for their assistance and support during the time of frustration and stress, but felt she should not continue so that she could get a better handle on her situation. She, however, later returned after two semesters and repeated course work to increase her GPA to a 2.66. Ultimately, she graduated in spring 2004. At the time of the interview, she was teaching in the public school system.

A scheduled interview for participant 2 was conducted at her job after work where she was employed as an elementary school teacher. The atmosphere was conducive for the interview and the participant expressed her feelings about being a teacher in great detail. She taught in a pod (two rooms that were joined together) with another teacher. She explained how difficult it was to teach with another teacher in the same room. At one point during the interview, it was necessary to stop and ask the co-teacher to turn down her music so that we could continue the interview.

Participant 2 was admitted during spring 2003 as a continuing student majoring in Special Education with a GPA of 2.41. She explained that while attending school she had to work two and sometimes three jobs to help supplement loans, despite the fact that she was receiving grants and scholarships. She spent the first three years living in the dormitory and had to move back home due to financial pressures and lack of motivation to study. Although her grades suffered because of her lack of motivation, she felt that she had been misadvised,
Table 2

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

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<th>Category</th>
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*Note. N=10*
because of the changes in admission and graduation requirements for taking the CLAST test. She had to take the CLAST several times before she finally passed it. She explained there was no difficulty in passing the Teacher Certification Test and could not understand why she did not pass the CLAST. Throughout the interview, she continued to praise her mother for her inspiration and support, without which she would not have continued her education. She returned to the program at USF after two semesters of repeating courses to raise her GPA, and graduated spring 2005 with a GPA of 3.33.

Participant 3 was interviewed at the elementary school where she worked as a teaching assistant. The researcher and the participant agreed her school would be a good location to conduct the interview. Sitting in her classroom and observing all of the materials that were being used were very enlightening and moving. She explained her responsibilities as a teaching assistant with excitement and enthusiasm.

Participant 3 was admitted during Fall 2001 as a transfer student majoring in Special Education with a GPA of 3.50. She worked full-time and lived in an apartment while attending school. As a first-year student at USF, she continually believed she was not prepared for college upon graduating from the public school system. While attending USF, she was told that she had a learning disability and was advised to attend a community college. She attended the community college and graduated with an Associate of Arts degree. When she returned to USF three semesters later, she was confronted by a professor who stated in a private advising session that she could not read. Her classmates understood her disappointment
and frustration with that particular professor and began to help her continue the program. The COE would not let her complete her internship so she could graduate merely on the recommendation of that professor. She was advised to change her major to one outside of the COE to another degree program. She was extremely frustrated by not being allowed to continue, especially after completing all the course work with a 3.04 GPA and taking two practica. Once again, she experienced events that hindered her completion; administration forced her to transfer to another state institution where she was completing her degree in an elementary program.

Participant 4’s interview was scheduled at a private office where she worked as a full-time receptionist. The location and atmosphere were quiet with few people around to disturb the interview. After the first five background questions were asked, the participant seemed very relaxed and comfortable and gave a little smile afterward. She was admitted during fall 1998 as a transfer student majoring in English Education with a 2.66 GPA. It was necessary for her to work full-time to help supplement student loans. This was particularly essential as she lived in the college dormitory for the first two years, enabling her to experience college life more fully. Due to the rising cost of the dormitory and tuition, financial responsibilities increased and ultimately she had to move off campus. She identified financial obligations as having a great impact on her education, and she had to decrease her course load and finally stopped attending school. After an hour had passed, the building was closing, and the interview had to be continued at an alternate location. The second location was at a Sonic
hamburger restaurant where the interview was finished outside at a table. The evening was very pleasant and the interview was finished with no interruptions. The participant continued with ease in answering the questions. Academically, she felt a lot of frustration and stress from various professors. Lack of communication with professors who did not understand cultural issues affected her greatly, and she decided to move to another college and major in English. While completing her English degree during Spring 2005, she took an additional course, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), gaining access to teach at any grade level. She graduated as an ESOL teacher with an English degree. Her plans were to become an English teacher. She was working full-time in the private sector during the time of this research study.

Several participants scheduled their interviews within days of each other, allowing the researcher to make progress toward completing all the interviews in a timely fashion. Participant 5 scheduled her appointment at the Day Care Center, where she was employed as a daycare instructor. Considering that her day job was at the Center, and she also worked part-time in the evening, the Day Care Center was the best place to meet after school was closed. She made prior arrangements with other instructors so that the interview could be conducted in a private room. The researcher had a close relationship with the participant because the researcher was the advisor of an organization to which the participant had belonged while in college.

Participant 5 was admitted during fall 2001 as a transfer student majoring in Elementary Education with a grade point average of 2.48. For the first two
semesters, the participant was enrolled full-time and received student loans, grants, and scholarships. She also worked part-time and received financial help from her parents, which she used towards living expenses and tuition. Although she completed all course work, she had not passed the math portion of CLAST in order to meet the program requirements for graduation. Despite the fact that she took the CLAST several times, her scores were not high enough to pass. She decided to work full-time, because she had not passed the test; she planned to obtain tutoring assistance before re-taking the test again. During her extremely stressful time concerning the CLAST, a close family member passed away. This caused additional stress and confusion, causing doubt about her ever being able to continue the program. She still desired to become a permanent teacher in a public school system, since working at a daycare kept her inspired and desirous of wanting to help young children to learn.

Participant 6 was a single mother taking care of her daughter. Her goal was to attend school full-time. The participant scheduled her interview at home, assuring the researcher that there would be no interruptions during the interview. Meeting with her the afternoon of the interview was pleasant and comfortable. Conversation began by talking about mutual friends, none of which we had seen in a few years. Then she began to express her feelings about the educational system needing good teachers. She decided to quit work to pursue her dream to become a teacher. It was a sacrifice to quit her job, but she was prepared to accept student loans, financial aid, scholarships, and grants to help with tuition and living expenses. She was admitted during fall 1999 as a transfer student.
majoring in special education with a 3.44 GPA. After completing all course work during spring 2002 with a GPA of 3.18, she could not pass the math portion of the CLAST test. Passing this test was necessary for her to complete the final internship and to graduate. She made several attempts to pass the math section of CLAST, missing four to five points each time. Her frustration over not passing the test, yet not needing any additional courses, made her decide to drop out of school until she passed the test. She had not returned to retake the math portion of the CLAST test since spring 2002. At the time of the interview, she had no desire to complete her degree in education. This stemmed from the state test requirement that hindered her from completing the degree that would allow her to become a teacher.

Participant 7 scheduled her interview at the elementary school where she worked after the children left for the day. The initial conversation began with how she enjoyed teaching children. The room was decorated with several cartoon characters showing different alphabets, numbers, and various countries, which made the atmosphere very relaxing and comfortable. She began the interview with a brief background of herself and her college experiences. The participant was admitted during Fall 1999 as a transfer student majoring in Elementary Education with a GPA of 3.16. As a single mother caring for her daughter, working full-time and completing her education was a challenge. She had always wanted to become a teacher in the public school system and to help the younger generation. However, due to her work schedule and taking care of her mother, attending school had been quite difficult. Family responsibilities forced her to
limit her course load to one or two courses a term. She realized that taking only a few courses at a time would take her longer to complete the degree. Therefore, she decided to change her work schedule to attend full-time and cut back work hours to part-time. She began receiving help from family members. Taking demanding courses and having a distinct lack of communication with a particular professor concerning cultural issues caused her to stop taking courses. She decided to re-think what was more important in her life. Eventually she returned to the program, repeating courses, and completing all requirements for the degree in Elementary. She graduated during the summer 2005 with a 2.75 GPA.

The first time the researcher met participant 8 was at a presentation regarding Careers in Education. Over a particular period during her semesters, the participant experienced family issues that caused her concern about being admitted and completing the program. The researcher and participant 8 had met several times to help the participant decide whether teaching was her best career choice. The researcher scheduled the interview for this research office at the participant’s convenience and made certain they would not be interrupted during the interview. The initial interview began with the background interview questions.

She was admitted during fall 1999 as a transfer student majoring in Special Education with a GPA of 2.75. The participant was married yet separated, hoping to obtain custody of her four children. The participant explained that the difficulty in attending school and trying to work had caused doubts about whether she would be able to complete the program.
For the first two years, she lived in the dormitory receiving financial aid in the form of student loans. She worked 30 to 35 hours a week to help pay tuition, room, and board. The stress of finances exhausted her ability to learn and she was forced to stop attending classes; consequently, she moved off the campus. Working full-time and trying to get custody of her children became a priority. When the participant returned and was re-admitted during spring 2000, she majored in Special Education and was offered an opportunity to participate in a minority program that provided tuition reimbursement. She was also awarded the Florida Fund for Minority Teachers Scholarship. Both scholarships required her to be a full-time student. Ultimately, family problems and not doing well academically caused great frustration and decreased her desire to complete the education program. With her low GPA, she was advised during spring 2001 to seek another major that would give her the opportunity and time she needed to graduate.

The researcher scheduled the interview with participant 9 in the researcher’s office because the participant had limited time and the researcher’s office was a more convenient location. The participant was a wife and full-time student majoring in Elementary Education; she had a 2.66 GPA. She was admitted during fall 2004 and offered the Florida Fund for Minority Teachers Scholarship, which provided full tuition. While attending college, she experienced three personal tragedies: the death of her grandfather and two pregnancies, which both ended in miscarriages. Her personal losses, a lack of communication with professors in understanding her personal situation, and the
fact that she was misadvised in the program on doing her final internship brought the participant too much stress and diminished her desire to continue. Her husband, her greatest motivator to continue her education, supported her decision to take a semester off while she was pregnant. She returned to the program and graduated during fall 2005 with a 3.09 GPA.

Participant 10 scheduled her interview at her home for the convenience of taking care of her newborn child. The researcher made sure that interference would be at a minimum; her husband agreed to help with the baby so the interview could be conducted privately.

She was admitted during fall 1999 as a transfer student majoring in Elementary Education with a GPA of 3.07. Both she and her husband were attending the university aspiring to earn bachelor degrees. Her first year in college was very difficult because she suffered a personal loss. This gave her great concerns and doubts about wanting to continue her education. Being a foreign student and not yet a citizen of the United States posed several financial obligations. Both she and her husband had to work full-time and stopped taking classes; however, encouragement from family and friends helped them return to the university. The participant completed all program course work, but could not pass the math section of the CLAST test. She worked with a temporary teaching certificate for two years because she had major financial obligations. Additionally, she sought outside tutoring to help her pass the test. She ultimately passed the CLAST after several attempts and graduated during fall 2006, and currently has a permanent teaching certificate.
The participant’s emotional and motivational experiences, attitudes and perceptions throughout the study are discussed. Emerging themes are established for more thorough analysis in the next section.

Strands of Inquiry

The first five questions were written to capture the personal background of each participant and allow an openness of communication expressed through meaningful conversation. The set of questions was intended to obtain a general sense of the participants’ motivation, feelings, and learning experiences as well as their expectations on what to expect throughout the interview. This included why they did not complete the Teaching Education Program. The responses to the questions were quite specific and were arranged in order for grouping purposes. Questions one through five discussed the basic demographics and financial obligations of the participants.

Initial Questions

After confirming and validating original quotes extracted from the interviews, the researcher utilized 46 of the original quotes the participants used to express their feelings about the interview questions. After each quote, the participant code number is presented. The first five questions pertained to financial obligations and whether the participants worked while attending school.

The majority of the participants had to work more then one job to supplement their tuition expenses and helped to fray the cost of financial obligations. Most participants agreed that their jobs hindered their learning experiences. Two participants felt fortunate not to have to work, and all
participants agreed that working while attending college was quite difficult and stressful.

I was working part-time the entire time I was in college and, yes, it did affect my education, as far as the hours were concerned. In the COE, it is really hard to have a job while taking courses, because of the way the courses are scheduled. Working affected the quality of my homework and my ability to meet deadlines. (Participant #1)

I had three jobs during my three internships to support myself. That prevented me from getting as much experience as possible in schools and prevented me from focusing on my assignments. (#2)

It was indicated to me that the education program was full-time program and I decided to quit my permanent job and go full-time receiving financial aid, loans, grants, and scholarships. (#6)

Most of my courses were very demanding and having to work full-time definitely had an impact on my education. (#7)

On the other hand, two of the participants did not have to work. One commented,

“I received several scholarships that paid for me to attend full-time.” (#9)

Most students discussed several issues and challenges they experienced while attending school that forced them to forego the teacher education program. Instead of financial problems, some participants were having family crises such as the death of a loved one, getting custody of their children, or having to take care of a parent.

My mother had multiple sclerosis and there were times she had to be put in the hospital. There were times when she would fall and I would have to rush home to help her. There were a lot of different situations where I had to tend to her while I was thinking about the future and what was going on with my life. (#1)

I didn’t complete my degree because I had a professor who felt like I had a learning disability and his thing was I couldn’t read and if I couldn’t read, I couldn’t be an effective teacher. There were many road blocks put in my
way, so he wouldn’t sign off on my paper work and just kept going through a lot of problems. (#3)

Finances were a big problem and had a great impact on me. I did not really have enough money to do the basic things I needed to do. By the grace of God he really brought me through a lot and I think through the ups and downs of going through school it took me longer, but I knew that I was going to leave USF with a degree. (#4)

Critical life changes that can not be controlled can change one’s feelings and life has no particular barriers. (#5)

I was transitioning from moving to Tampa and getting custody of my children. Before I had two jobs and could not take care of them at that time. (#8)

Several of the participants had one major reason in particular for not completing the program in a timely fashion: not being prepared for the entrance test and graduation requirements. Most had to take the test several times before passing and graduating.

I was told to take the CLAST test in order to be admitted into the program. I took the test several times missing by 1 to 2 points. Later I was told I needed the General Knowledge Test (GKT) before I graduated. (#2)

I don’t think I was mentally prepared for college and I did not see the guidelines as to how to and what to do. (#3)

I was not allowed to do my final internship until I passed portions of the CLAST Test. I passed all sections of the teachers’ certificate test. I just could not pass the math section of the CLAST test and I was just idling in the college. I could not continue taking classes because of finances. I had to get out and find a job and if that required me to put my education on hold, than so be it. (#6)

The main reason I could not complete the program in a timely fashion is that I had trouble passing the math portion of the CLAST. I took the test several times over three years. (#10)

There is a prevailing thought that most African-American students are looking for a mentor to guide them through the process of college life, providing
all the answers to their questions. The African-American students admitted into the College of Education were assigned to a minority advisor for all their academic and personal needs. All participants agreed that the Project Thrust Advisor (PTA) served as a motivator and mentor.

The PTA provided the most moral support. I can remember asking for help several times. I did not want anybody to know that I was having problems besides my PTA. (#1)

The PTA and the Mentoring Program gave me the inspiration to continue on and try to do whatever I could do to succeed. (#2)

The PTA with all the pep talks kept me going and encouraged me not to give up regardless of what it looked like financially, and academically or otherwise. I was still going to fulfill my goal, which was to become a teacher. I would not be here today as an English teacher without her help and inspiration. (#4)

At the beginning of the year after speaking to PTA on several occasions, she encouraged me and gave me the desire to continue and not quit. I consider PTA as my role model, somebody I could look up to. (#5)

Well, I remember when I first came here to USF, I met the PTA and she offered me a scholarship. I was feeling very positive because it was the beginning, it wasn’t like something I had planned on or thought was going to happen. She also helped me in getting a job in the Anchin Center which basically was a full-time job. So after work I could go right upstairs to my classes and that was a really good arrangement, even though it took a lot of time. This was my first semester and I don’t really think I could have had a better way of being in the COE. (#7)

Some students expressed that the Student Academic Services Office (SAS) provided academic advising to all students when needed, but also provided an online self-help report to serve as a program guide. The increase of students in the COE these past five years has made it more difficult for individual advising. The SAS department has created a guide for self-help advising online. Most
students agreed the advising reports were very helpful when they were unable to see an advisor.

They were great. They helped me figure out what it was that I wanted to take because when I first came to the college of education I was not an education major. [The SAS advisors] helped me make the final decision to become a teacher. (#2)

I think the SAS Report is a good system. I made sure I basically studied the catalog and found out what I needed to have before I graduated, but I think SAS is good as a check-up. I really did not know what I really needed. SAS has a system that makes sure you are doing what you need to be doing online which is really good. (#4)

I was grateful for the SAS department and how they assisted me in advising. If it was not for student services, I would not be in college. They helped me get with a study group to prepare for the entrance level exam. (#5)

Some participants felt comfortable in some aspect, but not comfortable in the college as a whole. The feelings, attitudes, and emotions were expressed by participants about how they felt in the College of Education—the students felt no togetherness of the college as a whole. They did not sense a feeling of family or congeniality that they characterized as togetherness. Another concern emerged if one of the participants were the only African-American student in class; thus, this caused most of the participants to experience a sense of isolation in the classroom.

I didn’t feel emotionally comfortable in the college. I never felt like I belonged at USF and with the college, I just never felt welcome. I think this is my personal feelings as an African-American student. (#3)

I felt silenced in the department and sometimes in the classroom. I felt like there were things I just could not say because other students would have issues with it, even when I went and said it anyway. I felt the distance and I personally think that it had to do with cultural issues. I wanted to do ESOL, basically—“when you get your job you deal with it in your own way” but it wasn’t something that was really addressed in my program. It was kind of like the majority was being dealt with; you deal with your population when you get your job—in other words. (#4)
Professors that are like robots in the classroom--that’s when I would do badly in those classes. There is no connection and I didn’t feel like I could talk in class or to them about what’s going on or if I did not understand an assignment. I felt like it was a waste of my time to speak to them. (#6)

Several students expressed their feelings that the faculty and administration did not understand some of their cultural issues. Several of the participants’ comments are provided below:

When you get your job, you deal with it in your own way. It was kind of we’re dealing with the majority; you deal with your population when you get a job. (#3)

I felt silenced in the department and sometimes in the classroom. I felt like there were things I just could not say because other students would have issues with it, even when I went and said it anyway. I felt the distance and I personally think that it had to do with cultural issues. (#4)

I was always talked down to a lot. . . . it came out that it had a lot racial stuff going on. I have never felt comfortable in the classroom or college as a whole. They never welcomed me in their office only to downgrade to me--why did you do this? or why did you say that? or should you do this. (#5)

My relationships with professors in communicating . . . problems became culture barrier of not understanding certain issues. (#7)

The feelings, attitudes, and emotions were expressed by participants about how they felt about their professors. Most felt very uncomfortable to approach professors or to meet with them individually to discuss concerns.

Giving an answer to a question or say something, the students would basically drown out my answer or suppress the issues. Our input based on our life experience was not encouraged. They didn’t encourage your input based on your life experiences. I felt suppressed when I would speak or it was just blown off or they didn’t say anything or--“here we go again,” she has another black issue. I couldn’t say anything, so most of my emotions came out when I would write my papers for the class. (#3)
I have no relationship with the professor and you know that’s not just something you can make happen. It has to be there, but I don’t have one. I don’t quite understand the distance. (#4)

My relationship with my professors was always very tense. I was talked down to a lot. I felt like I was degraded. I always felt like it was based on my learning disability, but in talking to other peers it came out that [may emotions] had a lot of racial stuff going on. I have never felt comfortable talking around them. They never welcomed me into their office, other then to basically ask me “why did you do this?” or “why did you say this?” or “you should do this.” (#5)

My relationship with professors in communicating academic and personal life problems became a culture barrier of not understanding certain issues. Students having difficulty with professors continue to be an issue if not addressed through the administration. Some teachers were approachable and some teachers were not approachable. (#7)

I dislike the COE as it related to the faculty attitudes, do whatever you have to do, I don’t care what you have to do. This is my class and you know if you can’t handle it, whatever. It’s like my personal life doesn’t matter. What you’re going through outside of class, doesn’t matter, I mean I understand that to a point. It was like, it was all about the class work and whatever is going on outside didn’t really matter. (#8)

All participants agreed that having classes in a new building that offered new technology services, appropriate classroom size, and an improved atmosphere in and around the building, all provided an adequate learning experience.

I like the people I have met, my peers, and the courses. Some of the courses I have enjoyed and learned from them. I like the way the building is set up. The class size had no more then 15-20 people in the classroom. I got to know everyone in my class because of the set up. (#1)

I think the college was set up very nice. The classrooms were nice and neat small enough to get a good learning experience. You always had access to computer labs. (#3)

One of the positive things about the COE that really stood out was the new building itself, because when I came in, I was part of the first group that got to use the building. I saw how important it was to have a professional
image and to project a professional view of education. The building itself gives an image that teaching is really worth pursuing. (#4)

Most participants felt the classroom experience was pleasant and rewarding working with the various hands on experiences. Some experiences were not as pleasant in some situations.

The experiences I liked in the classroom were hands-on experiences where we got to actually pretend we were in a teacher environment. I loved when the professors were more personal and interacted more than just during their lecturing. (#1)

My class was really good and they saw what was going on so they basically embraced me. I can honestly say that all my classmates embraced me and it got to the point where I did get comfortable with them and they would come to me and ask questions. (#3)

Very distant, I felt very uncomfortable. The feelings were that you could cut it with a knife. It was like this in every class and outside of the class a different world. (#4)

Most participants expected of the COE to embrace the non-traditional students. The college has not addressed the issues and concerns of the non-traditional students particularly taking classes in the evening and/or weekends.

I dislike how the courses were scheduled. Besides us having jobs, it was really hard to have a job with attending school because of the way the courses were scheduled for 9-5 pm during the day, even going through internship. That was one of my biggest problems was the conflict between school and work. (#1)

I really expected more of a diversified faculty and better program integration. I know in some programs, they are able to attract more students, especially in Elementary Education and Special Education. I think they approach things individualistic. (#4)

All the participants described a feeling of frustration when giving their reasons for leaving the college. Having reasons for leaving and not completing
the program was very disappointing, not to mention very stressful to the
participants.

I did not complete my degree because I had a professor who felt I had a
learning disability and that I could not read and be an effective teacher. (#3)

My reason for leaving was financial. I got into the heart of my major but
the lack of cohesiveness and understanding just within the classroom
environment made me feel that the problem is largely cultural. (#4)

The main reason I left the college was because of the administration and
the way I was treated. I have a goal to complete my degree so I can’t
allow other people to stop me from achieving my goal. (#9)

Almost all of the participants voiced approval of returning to the college
for a higher degree. Others described feeling unhappy at not returning, lack of
support, stress, and frustration in not completing the degree.

I would be motivated and inspired to return to graduate school and major
in ESOL with the hopes of seeing more of a diversified program. (#4)

At this point I don’t know . . . I just don’t even have a desire to attend the
College of Education anymore. I just can’t because for one, money,
resources, and time. I don’t want to do it at this point. When I had the will
power and motivation and the desire to do it, I was there. Now that I am
outside and I am working, I have no reason to return to the college. (#6)

I would come back to earn a masters degree. I feel the USF graduate
program is a very good program and I would return. (#10)

All participants agreed the experiences and academic skills learned in the
college were very beneficial and would be utilized while teaching or in their
everyday activities.

I use a lot of the academic work. I think it prepared me fairly well.
Children should know a little more about the role as a teacher as a
professional other than the way we dress. (#1)

I am so grateful that I went to a great school like USF. I am presently
teaching at a private school. A lot of my skills that I am using today are from the curriculum and the practicum/experiences. (#10)

Internal Validity

Following the data analysis section of this study, salient points were analyzed and themes found—“never felt connected to USF COE faculty” and “felt degraded and talked down too” were examples of results and findings that were compiled and measured. Three validations of internal validity were analyzed in the study. The first measure analyzed consisted of two triangulation tests. The first test was through the triangulation of the actual salient points for comparison of reliability, while the second test was for the appropriateness of the responses. The third validation was to perform member checks of the quotes and the placement of salient points and themes used in the results and findings.

Triangulation

The results of the salient point’s verification were confirmed by two outside raters, stating the participants’ perceptions of their experiences were correctly identified. Both raters agreed that the salient points used in the findings were from the specific interview transcripts obtained from the study. All salient points were located in the original transcribed interviews and the second-level edited transcripts. See Appendix L for a copy of the themes verification letter to participants. Two additional outside raters also performed the check of the appropriateness of quotes placement extracted from the transcripts and rated them on a scale of 1 to 3, with 1 meaning “I disagree that the corresponding identified themes relate to the salient points”, 2 means “I somewhat agree there is a corresponding identified theme but there may be better option(s),” and 3 means “I
strongly agree that the corresponding to identified themes relate to the salient points.” Secondly, the raters identified matches corresponding to salient points, and assigned a rating score using 1 through 3 scales. Table 3 presents the number of times each rater used the rating scales scores for each of the selected participant transcripts. See Appendix K for a copy of the placement of salient points and themes letter to participants. Both raters agreed that the rating scale score of 2 related to the quotes and salient points sections could have alternate themes. For quotes identified as having more than one meaning, the researcher provided additional themes to the raters to use as alternatives. If alternate themes were used based on the raters’ suggestions, the researcher utilized the corrected themes for the quotes of the participants.

**Member Checks**

All 10 participants reviewed their individual transcripts for accuracy and returned them with minor editing. Some editing was corrected to remove repetitions; “you know” “hums,” and simpler vocalizations were removed from the transcripts.

Triangulation of data collection, utilizing the interviews, transcriptions, and reporting of the responses from the independent interviews provided the reliability and validity that was protected throughout the process of the study.

**Observations**

The researcher’s observations in conducting the semi-structured interview with 10 African-American students provided rich and thick descriptions of their personal experiences while attending college. Their personal feelings and
emotions about their experiences were quite informative and heartfelt. The participants volunteered their time to express their opinions, truthfully and genuinely, to the researcher in hopes of

Table 3

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</table>

improving conditions for future African-American students. The researcher was their advisor and was quite familiar with the participants and their personal experiences in the USF COE. Interviewing the participants individually at their selected place made the experience comfortable and relaxing. They were candid in explaining their individual situations about their particular professor(s) or the frustration of not being able to pass a section of a test. In asking questions, no probing was necessary because the interview was planned and semi-structured. Although the participants displayed varied experiences, many shared some things in common such as whether they worked while in college part-time or full-time, whether they went through the entire program without a break, whether they had to return to the program, and whether they were able to pass the CLAST math section of the test on the first try.
At the end of the interview, all participants expressed gratitude that another person wanted to hear what they had to say and feel. They were assured that no repercussions would occur from being interviewed and no one would know their identities in the study. The lottery tickets appeared to have no impact or incentive to participants.

The participants expressed thoughts which they wanted to pass on to other African-American students:

1. Find someone to mentor them as soon after being admitted to the program as possible to serve as a guide through the education process.
2. Better yet, seek mentoring before getting admitted into the program.
3. Meet as many African-American faculty and staff at the college as possible.
4. Seek out minority scholarships within the college. Every college has some.
5. Once admitted into the program, “GO ALL THE WAY.”
CHAPTER FIVE
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore individual perceptions of African-American at-risk students in an undergraduate teacher education program, specifically continuing students or community college transfer students in a four-year urban university College of Education program. The participants provided their personal thoughts, emotional and motivational feelings, and shared how the institution and the environment may have affected their decisions for not completing the program. This chapter provides a summary of the findings, conclusions, implications, and recommendations.

Data from this study showed four areas of concern. One area of concern was the frustration participants experienced concerning the Florida Board of Education requirements, which declare that all sections of the CLAST exam have to be passed before being admitted into the college. Another area of concern reported by the participants is the miscommunication with professors regarding cultural issues. The third area of concern were financial issues such as having to work, either part-time or full-time, to help pay for tuition and living expenses. A fourth area of concern was the participants’ dissatisfaction with administrative efforts to address diversity and equity issues in the classroom and college as
whole. Overall, students agreed they were receiving an adequate education and were pleased they had entered into the USF COE program.

The participants provided meaningful insight into their thoughts, perceptions, experiences, and feelings at USF’s College of Education. This study was similar but not identical to Tinto’s Longitudinal Model (1975, 1983, 2000). One difference between the two studies is the target population. This study focused on African-American students in the teacher education program while Tinto’s study focused on Caucasian and middle or upper-middle class students. His longitudinal model focused on the integration of student’s persistence in a college environment. The researcher agreed on the six areas of Tinto’s model on the process of departure as it occurs within an institution of higher educations. The six areas were: (a) not being able to take desired courses; (b) not being able to enroll in courses at convenient times; (c) the difficulty balancing academic workload with demands at home or work; (d) being troubled by personal problems; (e) the difficulty financing college expenses; and (f) the difficulty taking desired course. The researcher was also concerned that what was not included in this study was the cultural awareness that existed with administration, faculty, and staff at the university and college level. The researcher brought additional information to the study, contributing the personal thoughts and feelings about how the institution and environment may have affected African-American students who failed to complete a four-year university degree program. This study was exploratory and was mainly derived from the limited research related to retention and graduation rates of African-American students,
specifically those not completing a teacher education program at a large urban university.

Summary

This study used a qualitative design providing in-depth structured interviews to gather information on why African-American students did not complete the teacher education program during fall 1997 through fall 2005. The demographic and psychodynamic characteristics, as well as the thoughts of African–American students who did not complete the teacher education program during fall 1997 through fall 2005 were explored in this study. The semi-structured in-depth interviews reflected the participants’ personal background, academic experiences, college environment, and exit from the college. Discussion of this information contributed to the understanding of expectations of African-American at-risk students, either as undergraduate transfer and/or continuing students.

The study identified 92 undergraduate African-American students as admitted into a Teacher Education Program who dropped out and/or returned to the USF COE program. During a 6-week period, participation in this study was requested by the researcher via letters, emails, and phone calls. Of the 92 African-American students identified, 10 students responded and volunteered to participate in the study. A 22-question semi-structured interview was designed to capture each individual’s personal background, academic information, perceptions about the college environment, and their reasons for leaving the college. The first six interview questions provided the personal background,
demographic information, and their perceptions of factors which impacted their education. Questions 7 through 15 addressed academic information and reasons participants did not complete the program, including (a) source of moral support, (b) participant’s expectations of the college as whole, (c) their feelings of emotional comfort in the college, and (d) descriptions of their relationship with their professors. College environment questions, 16 through 19, addressed participants’ perceptions concerning the college and their classroom experiences. Lastly, questions 20 through 22, addressed issues about leaving the college or motivation to return.

Personal interviews were arranged with the participants at their convenience. All interviews were conducted within a 3-month period. Triangulation was achieved by collecting information in multiple ways including: enrollment data; face-to-face structured interviews; audio-taped of interviews; and observation and field notes. Member checks, in which participants were given the opportunity to review and correct their transcripts, were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the data. Five independent reviewers, using three different procedures generated list of responses along with the researcher’s observation and field notes. This process contributed to the identification of salient themes. The interview instructions on how to identify themes and how to compare randomly selected quotes that were previously transcribed by the researcher.

Validation of themes was accomplished by having the interviews checked for reliability by five independent reviewers. One reviewer compared and validated the researcher selection of salient points. The remaining four
independent reviewers conducted a three-step process. Two reviewers validated the transcriptions of interviews evaluating and identifying salient points for comparison. The last two reviewers performed the second step in validating the quotes by confirming that they were extracted from the original transcripts. The third step was validated by the same two reviewers, who evaluated themes and rated them by indicating “agreement” or “disagreement” on the rating scale.

Conclusions

The major themes of this investigation were based on the research questions established for this study and the responses which were gathered from the participants. Specific themes, which were identified within the research questions, were prevalent in the participants’ responses. The following conclusions were obtained from the data collected from the interviews:

*Motivation to Complete the Degree Program*

Although all participants were highly motivated to complete the degree, other factors often got in the way. It was evident that all participants had a desire and/or were motivated to continue their education to become a teacher. Most participants had to work full-time or part-time to help pay for tuition and living expenses, but all participants were determined to complete the program.

The participants unanimously agreed that having a mentor, who was the Project Thrust Advisor, throughout the program was very helpful, inspirational, and encouraging. Indeed, the participants reported that without her assistance, guidance, and understanding to help with their problems and to be a good listener, they would not have been as successful as they were in the teaching education
program. Participants agreed that SAS provided academic advising to all students when needed.

Perception of Faculty

Most participants felt comfortable in approaching their professors. Others described frustration, stress, and disappointment in communicating with specific professors. All students, especially the African-American students in this study, deal with several issues outside of college that affected their abilities to concentrate on studies and perform well. The lack of cultural awareness influenced the ability to learn and understand course work. The Participants explained that being African-American added stress to educational experiences as they related to particular topics; other people’s lack of understanding and/or cultural awareness added to this distress. Some professors seemed to not understand the importance of cultural awareness and refused to incorporate it into the curriculum, which ultimately caused frustration in the classroom as well as the program itself.

Some participants had a positive experience and relationship with their professors and were still communicating with them. Some participants opted not to communicate with professors once they left the program.

Participation in Retention Programs

The Project Thrust Advisor coordinates and advises the multicultural activities in the college, in which all African-American students are asked to participate. All participants were involved in the Multicultural Organization of Students in Education programs and activities most of the time, when available.
Students who lived on campus reported being more active participants, while students living off campus rarely participated because of work schedules and other responsibilities.

*Expectations in College*

All participants expected to complete their programs and graduate from the USF COE in a timely fashion; however, some were not able to complete their programs because they could not pass the entrance exam and meet graduation requirements. Some completed their major requirements, but were still unable to pass the math portion of the CLAST test. This resulted in an inability to graduate, which caused participants to drop out of the program. This produced a high rate of African-American students who were admitted to the program, but who had to leave without graduating.

*Student Academic Services (SAS)*

For the most part, the participants stated that the Student Academic Services (SAS) support was positive. Participants agreed that SAS provided academic advising to all students when needed. However, several issues were raised relating to misadvisement on the CLAST admission test or not receiving timely information on interning the following semester.

The university and its colleges have an on-line, self-help report program guide designed to assist student with choice requirements for their major. Most students agreed that the advising report was very useful especially when they were unable to see an advisor.

*Actual Experiences*
Another contributing aspect of positive learning experiences was the good communication they had with their peers and the courses they were taking. Indeed, most participants liked their peers and the courses they were taking. They experienced a feeling of togetherness in classes, specifically those with a limited number of students.

Typically, the students did not feel togetherness in the college as a whole, nor did they feel connected to USF or the College of Education. They did not sense a feeling of family or congeniality. During the interviews, the participants expressed opinions relating to being the only one in the classroom. Some felt it was difficult being the only African-American student in several of their classes; some participants felt isolated in the classroom. This feeling of isolation was always a major concern.

All participants expressed their opinions that being the only African-American student in a class could be overwhelming, especially when the classes were large. The participants felt that the classroom experiences, for the most part, were pleasant and rewarding because of the hands-on experiences in most of the COE classes. Often professors had students partner with another person for work. There was a tendency to choose individuals of the same race, which could leave the African-American student without a partner. Some students did not handle this situation as well as other students and tended to do poorly, to drop out of the class, or even to fail it.

*College Environment*
All participants agreed that having classes in a building that offered new technology services, appropriate classroom sizes, and an improved atmosphere in and around the building provided a good learning experience for all students. Participants also realized and expressed how important it was to have a professional image and to project a professional view of education. The participants felt that the USF COE building provided a professional image, sending the message that teaching was actually worth pursuing.

*Support*

Although all participants reported experiencing moral support from both the PTP advisor and SAS department, they still felt a void of support from the administration as a whole. Non-traditional participants felt the administration did not consider that several students had to work every day when they designed implementation plans and programs.

Most of the participants were commuter students who worked to pay for tuition and living expenses. Several expressed frustration that there were not enough course offerings in the evenings and on weekends. Additionally, although all participants received some financial support from family members, most received loans, scholarships, grants, and financial aid to help cover the cost of tuition.

*Leaving College*

All participants described feelings of frustration when reporting their reasons for leaving the college. Emotional stress and disappointment were expressed in every interview when the participants stated why they had to leave.
For most of the participants, the primary reason for leaving was related to the required standardized tests.

Implications

Over the past decade, Tinto’s Model was the basis of research on persistence of students in higher education. This study has added to the body of research on the perceptions of African-American student at-risk students in an undergraduate teacher education program. This included either continuing students or community college transfer students in a four-year urban university college of education program. The study provided participants’ responses to interview questions about their personal thoughts, emotional and motivational feelings, and reflections on how the collegiate environment affected participants’ decisions not to complete their programs.

Previous models of research about persistence of students in higher education ignored the African-American community college transfers to an urban university. The implications of this study indicated that African-American students do not perform well in college if not supported by administration, faculty, and staff. Mentoring and other support and programs are greatly needed, according to the participants.

The results of this study suggest opportunities to address the issues and concerns explored in the research. The following implications for practice are suggested.

Motivation to Complete the Degree Program

Participants felt financial support from the COE was needed to help them
to continue the program. Although the college has some scholarships within the various departments, there is only one minority scholarship through the State Board of Education. This scholarship is the Florida Fund for Minority Teachers Scholarship that offers monies to any African-American student admitted into the COE program. To recruit the best qualified African-American students to the USF COE program, scholarships are the key factor.

Develop and implement, within the COE or the individual departments, “communities” to help address the needs of non-traditional African-American students who work every day from 8-5 p.m. These communities could provide a sense of togetherness that was mentioned as being lacking by participants.

The COE could service the needs of African-American students on specific days after regular working hours or mornings during the weekends to provide advising on course selection and/or college issues and concerns. It is important that the college address the non-traditional at-risk African-American student problems and needs. Specifically, tutoring sessions for the CLAST and GKT test could start after regular working hours during the week and/or weekends.

Perception of Faculty

Several African-American students were confronted with professors who had problems understanding cultural diversity issues. Some professors only taught from their own perspectives that often did not include cultural awareness or understanding of cultural diversity issues. Some of the participants felt that professors were like robots in the classroom, which made it hard for the students
to learn. This communication gap resulted in the students having little or no connection with professors and ultimately not being able to understand many assignments. Some professors failed to understand the importance of cultural awareness and refused to incorporate it into the curriculum, which ultimately caused frustration in the classroom for African-American students.

Sensitivity workshops for professors designed to increase understanding of students from multicultural backgrounds could be offered. This could lessen the degree of insensitivity experienced by students and enhance communication skills throughout the college. Maybe then future students might not report unsatisfactory relationships with their professors who did not know how to relate to issues concerning cultural awareness. This could especially benefit the college as a whole by addressing a variety of multicultural differences including other racial/ethnic differences besides African American.

*Participation in Retention Programs*

Numerous universities and colleges nationwide have retention programs promoting the recruitment and retention of all minority students. It is assumed that retention programs are incorporated within the colleges of education to assist with recruitment and retention of African-American students. Although the USF COE had a Project Thrust Program (PTP) that was housed within the college and was designed to work with all multicultural students, the program was not a part of the college function. Over the years, COE has sponsored several student activities outside of the PTP in which African-American student participation was
limited. The African-American students felt no connection with COE and therefore did not attend the activities.

Recently, the USF COE has adopted a new program and began phasing out the PTP. PTP advisors will no longer be housed in the college. The new approach to academic advising includes group and on-line advising for all students, rather than focusing specifically on African-American students. This new approach raised a concern among African-American students who felt that they may not get the same one-on-one attention that had produced success in the past. The college could consider recruiting an individual to coordinate and facilitate student organizational support. Experiences within organizations teach students leadership, guidance, and participatory skills that will help them throughout their lives. African-American students need moral support and leadership experience to handle many situations that arises. College activities which are supported by administration and faculty are important sources for learning these skills. Guidelines through the college could provide African-American students with the necessary information to become leaders in education.

*Expectations in College*

There were reported concerns that a large number of students were unable to pass the state requirements tests. The COE could offer test preparation for both the Teacher Certification Test and the CLAST test. Particularly for the CLAST test, offering a preview as early as possible for those students who have indicated pre-eduation as their majors might be especially helpful.
The COE could provide the departments a better access of information on African-American students that have dropped out of the Teaching Education Program. This information would provide the departments the avenue to locate and find out why students dropped out of the program and provide some type of assistance in helping them return to the teaching program.

**Student Academic Services**

There is a need for a detailed College of Education (COE) policy for recruiting and supporting African-American students. Finding an individual who understands the responsibilities and the complexities of recruiting African-American students is necessary. Recruitment needs to begin with both freshman and community college transfer students majoring in pre-education to help keep them interested in going into the teaching profession.

Future teachers from high schools who have an interest in education as a career could be recruited for a teacher education program. A recruiter could visit local public schools to explore opportunities for future students to attend USF COE and become professional teachers. Full scholarships to those with high performance records and a vision of a better future in education would be helpful.

**Actual Experiences**

Although the researcher interviewed 10 African-American women, there were concerns of unhappiness and not being comfortable with faculty and administration. In addition, students often complained of isolation in their classes due to communication difficulties with other students who were not perceived to be like them.
A structured diversity program/department could be developed to addressed the needs of African-American students by providing mentoring programs, cultural awareness workshops; and invitation to public school administrators to become involved with COE.

*College Environment*

Technology appears to be a vital aspect of future advising and the COE has the most advanced technology in the state. The university and its colleges have an online, self-help report program guide designed to assist students with choice requirements for their majors. All information relating to students’ majors can be found online. Most students agreed that the advising report was very useful, especially when they were unable to see an advisor. They felt that continued use and refinement of the technology are warranted.

The participants felt the technology had higher priority in the USF COE than helping African-American students feel more integrated into the college environment and encouraging them to be more involved with college activities. COE could recruit an individual to ensure that minority students have the support needed to continue their education.

*Support*

A limited number of flexible course offerings conducive for the non-traditional students, mostly commuter students, might affect the retention rates of African-American students attending college and completing a degree in a timely fashion. Additional alternatives calendar and non-traditional offerings are warranted. The participants recognized the shortage of African-American faculty,
and questioned “why are the numbers of African-American faculty so limited”? The lack of African-American faculty in the COE leaves African-American students without role models; whereas increasing the number of qualified African-American faculty could lead to greater diversity, an increased number of African-American students, and academic integration of African-American students. According to the participants, increasing the number of African-American faculty would improve their experiences and the experience throughout the entire program. Several degree programs lack minority professors, although one department did have multiple undergraduate minority faculty members. If the students had not been admitted to this single COE program that had multiple minority faculty, they might not have any experiences with undergraduate minority faculty; therefore, it is crucial to have minority faculty across as many undergraduate degree programs as possible. Working with someone of the same ethnicity was reported as being beneficial, as both the mentor and mentee shared an understanding of their situation. Several students completed their entire college program without ever having an African-American professor. The COE needs to continue to recruit and retain African-American faculty as role models. Over the years, research studies have verified African-American faculty and staff as role models are making a difference in helping students of the same ethnicity stay in college.

Flexible course selections and offerings conducive for non-traditional students could provide the necessary support and retention of students. Retention strategies can be taught in workshops on college survival such as “How to survive
in the COE.” Tutoring services for all subject areas and advising sessions could be offered throughout the semester. The implications of this study indicated that specific programs geared toward servicing the needs of the African-American students in the COE base on the recommendations.

Leaving College

There were various reasons why most of the participants were discouraged about completing the degree. Many students could not pass the CLAST test and dropped out of classes. Some participants did seek tutoring preparation for the test and re-took it only to miss again by one or two points. It became apparent that a limited number of students are unable to pass the state testing requirements.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study has enhanced research by examining the experiences of at-risk undergraduate African-American students in a teaching education program. The results of this study suggest opportunities for further research. The findings and conclusions drawn from this study indicate there are additional studies needed concerning African-American at-risk students in a teaching education program.

1. This study could be replicated utilizing the same interview questions with African-American male students, since all participants in this study were female. The differences between male and female perceptions could be important in increasing the number of male students in the COE.

2. Future research could compare other African-American at-risk students in teacher education programs within the state university system to give a broader perspective of what is needed across the state of Florida.
3. Hispanic students could be interviewed using the same interview questions as the ones used in this study, both at USF COE and within the state university system. Each ethnic group has its own issues and concerns which, if understood, would contribute to addressing the issues experienced by multicultural populations.

4. A comparison with other colleges within USF using the interview questions and adding questions that would relate to all minorities at-risk students in their colleges might prove useful to the university as a whole. This information would give the university a wide range of diversity issues and concerns from the students that can be used in the future.

5. Replicate the study with all multicultural students across universities within the State of Florida system and compare the results with USF COE. This information could be used to understand multicultural student concerns and needs and pinpoint unique characteristics that might need to be addressed across various universities and their minority students.

6. International students could be interviewed using the same questions to compare their issues and concerns to determine if characteristics and issues specific to their cultural backgrounds have an impact on completion of the teacher education program.

7. Methods to increase the number of participants of the future studies could be identified to substantiate the information being provided by the interviews are necessary. Since only 10 of the 92 African-American
students participated in the study, interviewing closer to the dropout point in time might provide a higher rate of participation.

8. Investigate community college at-risk students with the same interview questions and compare the responses with those of the university programs. This comparison could help in understanding multicultural students at an earlier point in the students’ academic career to determine if there are differences between the community college transfer students and continuing students.

9. The interview questions could be used to gather more data on diverse multicultural groups. Once the research is conducted comparisons cross groups would provide a broader perspective and understanding of unique multicultural group needs and characteristics.
REFERENCES


Jones, S. T. (1999). A study of how the climate on a predominantly white campus of a state funded public urban institution of higher education affects the


Visot, C. (2000). Characteristics associated with persistence among non-traditional-age and traditional-age undergraduate students at a

APPENDICES
Appendix A

Initial Introductory Letter

May 31, 2006

Dear Participant:

I am currently enrolled in the Adult Education doctorate program at the University of South Florida. I am asking for your help in an interview of the pressures you faced at the university and the College of Education. Your experiences will make a valuable addition to the understanding of why African-American students who had intentions of majoring in Education and did the following but not limited to:

(1) admitted into the program and later changed their major
(2) dropped out for personal reasons and
(3) conflict within the college

Your honest input is vital to the college and how it may relate to the academic success of African-American students.

The major purpose of my study is to compare African-American students who did complete the program versus African-American students who did not complete the Education Program.

I would like to start the interviews in August 2006. Compensation or incentives will be included in the interview process. Your participation is completely voluntary and any information given will be held in the strictest of confidence.

Your participation and immediate response on or before June 15, would be greatly appreciated. You can reach me at (813) xxx-xxxx (wk) or email.

Thanking you in advance,

Sharman P. McRae
Researcher
Appendix B

Second Introductory Letter

August 00, 2006

NAME
ADDRESS
CITY, STATE, ZIPCODE

Dear ____:

I am currently enrolled in the Adult Education doctorate program at the University of South Florida. I am asking for your help in an interview of the pressures you faced at the university and the College of Education. Your experiences will make a valuable addition to the understanding of why African-American students who had intentions of majoring in Education and did the following but not limited to:

(4) admitted into the program and later changed their major
(5) dropped out for personal reasons and
(6) conflict within the college

Your honest input is vital to the college and how it may relate to the academic success of African-American students.

The major purpose of my study is to compare African-American students who did complete the program versus African-American students who did not complete the Education Program.

I would like to start the interviews in August 2006. Compensation or incentives will be included in the interview process. Your participation is completely voluntary and any information given will be held in the strictest of confidence.

Your participation and immediate response on or before August, 2006 would be greatly appreciated. You can reach me at (813) xxx-xxxx (wk) or email.

Thanking you in advance,

Sharman P. McRae
Researcher
September 11, 2006

Dear Participant:

I would like to thank you again for agreeing to participate in my research study. Your experiences in the College of Education will make an invaluable addition to the understanding of why African-American students who had intentions of majoring in Education and did not complete the program.

Attached is a copy of the Participant Contact Information Application requesting you to select a month, date, time and location of your choice for the personal interviews. The research study will require one or two personal interviews at one-hour sessions. Please provide three choices for the interviews making the second and third choice for additional interviews if necessary. Also attached are sample questions that will be asked during the initial interview.

If you have any questions are concerns do not hesitate to contact me at (813) xxx-xxxx (work) or (813) xxx-xxxx (home).

Sincerely,
Appendix D

Participant Contact Information

NAME ________________________________________________________________

ADDRESS __________________________________________________________

PHONE (H) ____________________
(W) ____________________
(C) ____________________

EMAIL ADDRESS ________________________________

To set-up a personal interview, please indicate three possible choices from the months, dates, times and a specified location of your choice (home, office or other).

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First Choice
Month __________ Date __________ Time __________ Location __________

Second Choice
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Third Choice
Month __________ Date __________ Time __________ Location __________
Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent for an Adult
Social and behavioral Sciences
University of South Florida

Information for People Who Take Part in Research Studies

Researchers at the University of South Florida (USF) study many topics. We want you to give your perceptions and reasons why you did not complete the Teacher Education Program. To do this, we need the help of people who agree to take part in a research study.

Title of research study: Perceptions of Educational Experiences by At-risk African-American Students in an Undergraduate Teacher Education Program.

Person in charge of study: Sharman P. McRae

Where the study will be done: The face-to-face interviews will be conducted at a location that is agreed upon between interviewer and interviewee.

Should you take part in this study?

You are being asked to participate because your experiences in the College of Education Undergraduate Teacher Education Program can provide valuable insights into the factors and characteristics that influence individuals not to complete his/her degree program.

This form tells you about this research study. You can decide if you want to take part in it. You do not have to take part. Reading this form can help you decide.

Before you decide:

- Read this form.
- Talk about this study with the person in charge of the study or the person explaining the study.
- Find out what the study is about.

You can ask questions:

- You may have questions this form does not answer. If you do, ask the person in charge of the study or study staff as you go along.
- You don’t have to guess at things you don’t understand. Ask the people doing the study to explain things in a way you can understand.
After you read this form, you can:
- Take your time to think about it.
- Have a friend or family member read it.
- Talk it over with someone you trust.

It’s up to you. If you choose to be in the study, then you can sign the form. If you do not want to take part in this study, do not sign the form.

Why is this research being done?
The purpose of this study is to explore individual perceptions of African-American at-risk student in an undergraduate teacher program who are either continuing students or community college transfer students in a four-year urban university College of Education program.

Why are you being asked to take part?
You are being asked to participate because your experience in the College of Education Undergraduate Teacher Education Program can provide valuable insights into the factors and characteristics that influence individuals not to complete his/her degree program.

How long will you be asked to stay in the study?
You will be asked to spend about 4 months in this study.

The face-to-face interviews should take 1-2 hours each with follow-up interview of the same duration when necessary.

At each visit, the person in charge of the study or staff will:
- Interview each participant with semi-structured questions relating to personal thoughts, emotional and motivational factors, and individual perceptions. The participant can choose between personal face-to-face, being audio-taped and/or both note-taking during each interview.
- There are 22 questions divided into four sections for the interview which are personal, academic information, college environment, and leaving the college.

How many other people will take part?
Seven to 10 participants from fall 1997 through fall 2005 will take part in this study at USF.

What other choices do you have if you decide not to take part?
If you decide not to take part in this study, that is okay.

How do you get started?
The interviewer will ask questions.
Appendix E (Continued)

Will you be paid for taking part in this study?
You will not be paid for your participation in this study, but will be given a small reward (e.g., lottery ticket, coupon) at the end of the session.

What are the risks if you take part in this study?
There should be no risk other then revisiting and experience that may renew old emotions or uncertain feelings.

What if you get sick or hurt while you are in the study?
If it is not an emergency, and you get hurt or sick:

- Call the person in charge of this study as soon as you can. They will need to know that you are hurt or ill. If it is not an emergency, and you get hurt or sick: Call Sharman McRae at 813-xxx-xxxx.

What will we do to keep your study records private?
Federal law requires us to keep your study records private.

Only the researcher and the faculty advisor will have access to your answers. They will be stored under lock and key. Names will not appear on any documents connected with this study other than this informed consent form. A code will be assigned to you for the purpose of accumulating the results of the answers from the questions.

However, certain people may need to see your study records. By law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

- The study staff.
- People who make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also make sure that we protect your rights and safety:
  - The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB)
  - The United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)

We may publish what we find out from this study. If we do, we will not use your name or anything else that would let people know who you are.

What happens if you decide not to take part in this study?
Your decision to participate in this research study is completely voluntary. You are free to participate in this research study or withdraw at any time.

If you decide not to take part:
- You won’t be in trouble or lose any rights you normally have.
- You will still get the same services you would normally have.
Appendix E (Continued)

What if you join the study and then later decide you want to stop?
If you decide you want to stop taking part in the study, tell the study staff as soon as you can.
  • We will tell you how to stop safely.

Even if you want to stay in the study, there may be reasons we will need to take you out of it. You may be taken out of this study:
  • If we find out it is not safe for you to stay in the study. For example, your health may get worse.

You can get the answers to your question.

If you have any questions about this study, call Sharman McRae at (813) xxx-xxxx (work) and (813) xxx-xxxx (home).

If you have questions about your rights as a person who is part in a study, call USF Research Compliance at (813) xxx-xxxx.

Consent to Take Part in this Research Study

It’s up to you. You can decide if you want to take part in this study.

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that this research. I have received a copy of this consent form.

_____________________________ __________________________
Signature of Person taking Printed Name of Person taking
part in study part in study
Date

_____________________________ __________________________
Signature of Investigator Printed Name of Investigator
or authorized research investigator
Date
Appendix F
Interview Questions

Section I – Personal Background

- What was your marital status or did you have a significant other or partner at the time you were enrolled in the college?

- How did you finance your education?

- Were you employed at the time you were enrolled in the college and did your job hinder your learning experiences? If so, explain.

- Where did you reside while attending the college?

- Tell me something about your personal background?

- Anything in your personal background that would have impacted your education?

Section II – Academic information

- Can you identify any other reasons why you did not complete your degree other than financial reasons? Explain.

- Where did you get, or who gave you, the most moral support in the college while you were in attendance? Explain.

- What services did you receive from Student Academic Services Office? Were you satisfied or dissatisfied with the services? Explain.

- What were your expectations of the College of Education as a whole?

- Did you feel emotionally comfortable in the College of Education? If yes or no, explain?

- How would you describe your relationship, personally and professionally, with your professor(s)?

- How would you describe your relationship today with your professor(s)?
Appendix F (Continued)

- Anytime during your college experiences have you had anyone who served as a role model or mentor? If so, what ways, did the person(s) influence or impact you?

- What support programs did you participate in the College of Education? How did they help?

Section III – College Environment

- What did you like about the College of Education?

- What did you dislike about the College of Education?

18. What kinds of experiences did you have in the classroom? Give me some examples of pleasant or unpleasant experiences?

3. Did you participate in any College of Education activities outside of classroom such as SCATT, M.O.S.E. and Children’s Festival? If yes, explain?

Section IV – Leaving the College

4. What were your main reasons for leaving the college? Do those reasons still apply?

5. What would it take for you to return to the College of Education?

6. Are you using your skills and knowledge in your job now? If so, how?
Appendix G

Rating Scale Instructions

1= “I disagree that the corresponding identified themes relate to the salient point.”

2= “I somewhat agree there is a corresponding identified theme but there maybe a better option.”

3= “I strongly agree that the corresponding identified themes relate to the salient points.”
Appendix H

Independent Reviewers

Level One Verification
Alene Harrison, ABD., Adult Education

Level Two Verification
Carmeda Stokes, Doctoral Student in Adult Education
Jermaine Donaldson, Doctoral Student in Adult Education

Level Three Verification
Martha Baker, Doctoral Student in Adult Education
John Ireland Gordon, Jr., Doctoral Student in Adult Education
Appendix I

Instructions for Identified Salient Points Form

Thank you for taking your time to evaluate the transcripts of the interviews for my research. The feedback you have to share will not only help me with my doctorate research, but hopefully will be useful in assisting other researchers in understanding why admitted undergraduate African-American students do not complete a Teacher Education Program.

Attached you will find copies of: 1) my Research Questions, 2) The Interview Questions 3) The Interview Transcripts, 4) The Identifying Salient Point Form, and (5) The Identifying Salient Point Sample Form. If you have any questions concerning the procedure or forms, I can be reached at (813) xxx-xxxx (home) or (813)xxx-xxxx or email:

Level One Verification directions to evaluate each of the three transcripts.

1. Take one of the interview transcripts. You are interviewing participants 2, 5 and 8.

2. Review the transcript and find Question 1-record the page number and the line for that question and record the appropriate numbers on the Identifying Salient Points Form.

3. Determine the salient response(s) to the first question and record the corresponding response on the form under the Salient Point section.

4. Repeat the process for each subsequent question and return the completed form to me.
Appendix J

Identifying Salient Points Form and Samples

Sample Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant:</th>
<th>#</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reviewer:</td>
<td>Date of Review:</td>
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<th>Transcript Page/Line</th>
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<td>PERSONAL LOANS, GRANT, SCHOLARSHIPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>EMPLOYED – DURING SENIOR YEAR WITH THREE JOBS</td>
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### Appendix J (Continued)

#### Samples of Identifying Salient Points by Raters

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<thead>
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<th>Salient Point</th>
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<td>1/3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Financial Aid, Loans and Scholarships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Raised in Tampa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lack of school preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Being a statistic/environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/28</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Issue with professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/34</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Student Disability Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/41</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Lack of Student Academic Services support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/45</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Student support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/48</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Getting a good education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/54</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Lack of USF support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/59</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Never felt connected to USF/COE faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/70</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Felt degraded, talked down too, racial issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/76</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Understanding certain populations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/83</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Encouraged to stay in program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/90</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Participation in peer clubs and minority organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/102</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>COE was nice and good to me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/113</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>COE deficient with support, not accepted by teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/133</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Peer interaction, teacher interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/147</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Involved in college activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/153</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Not in school, fighting for degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/204</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Lack of COE cooperation of student completing degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/206</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Retention, supportive, outreach, supportive network</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix J (Continued)

Samples of Identifying Salient Points by Raters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript Page/Line</th>
<th>Q#</th>
<th>Salient Point</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>1/3</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Financial Aid, Loans and Scholarships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2 years on, 2 years off campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Four children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Getting custody of kids and moving them to Tampa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/26</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Emotionally-separation and custody of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/35</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Professor understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/42</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Dissatisfied with services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/50</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>To help with returning to college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/58</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Emotionally comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/60</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Comfortable with COE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/64</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>More of relationship today with professors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/69</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Mother’s moral support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/76</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>SCATT-academic program, MOSE-social organization Chrysaliss-minority program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/97</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Cohesive program, supportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/103</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Misadvising from the SASS department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/124</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Didn’t feel alone, cohesiveness group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/137</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Participant in Children’s Festival-MOSE Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>4/142</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Personal-family issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/158</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Like working with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/158</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Using what learned in college with job</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix K

Instructions for Placement of Salient Points and Themes Letter

Thank you for taking your time to evaluate the quotes from the interviews for my research. The feedback you have to share will not only help me with my doctorate research, but hopefully will be useful in assisting other researchers in understanding why admitted undergraduate African-American students do not complete a Teacher Education Program.

Attached you will find copies of: 1) Selected Quotes from Participants, 2) Identified Themes, 3) Placement of Salient Points and Identified Themes Sample Sheet, and 4) Placement of Salient Points and Identified Themes Sheets. If you have any questions concerning the procedure or forms, I can be reached at (813) xxx-xxxx (home) or (813) xxx-xxxx or email me.

Level Two Verification directions:

5. Scan the Identified Themes sheets to familiarize yourself with the themes identified from all the interviews. This will provide you with an overview of potential groupings of responses from the interviews.

6. Review the Selected Quotes from Participant.

7. Use the Placement of Salient Points and Identified Themes Sample Sheet as a guide for the process of rating the questions.

8. For each question identified salient points and themes, you need to rate the extent of your agreement or disagreement with the identified theme matching the corresponding salient points. Use the following scale from 1 to 3 to rate your agreement or disagreement.

Rating Scale:

1=I disagree with the corresponding identified themes to salient point.
2=I somewhat agree there is a corresponding identified theme but there maybe a better option.
3=I strongly agree identified themes corresponds to the salient points.

9. For the sample sheet, items Question 1-4 have been rated tentatively. Note that if you do not agree with the response, you can use 1=disagree or 2=better options exist.
10. Use the Placement of Salient Points and Identified Theme to place your rating of agreement or disagreement for each Select Quote, Salient Points and Identified Themes.
## Appendix L

Placement of Salient Points and Identified Themes Rating Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript Page/Line</th>
<th>Q#</th>
<th>Salient Point</th>
<th>Identified Themes</th>
<th>Rating Scale</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1/3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>Demographic</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Financial Aid, Loans and scholarships</td>
<td>Finance Education</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Employment/Work</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharman Pride-McRae received a Bachelor’s degree in Psychology from Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Florida; and a Master’s degree in Student Personnel and Guidance and Counseling from the University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, and an Educational Specialist degree in Adult Education from the University of South Florida (USF), Tampa, Florida. Her Doctor of Education degree from at USF is in Curriculum and Instruction, with a Specialization in Adult Education. Sharman has spent 24 years in higher education as an academic advisor and adjunct faculty. She has worked several years in the private and public sector in various positions before working at the USF. She lives in Tampa, Florida and has two adult daughters.