Stopping out: Experiences of African American females at a Midwestern community college

by

Shanna Latisha Fountain

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:
Larry H. Ebbers, Major Professor
Sharon K. Drake
Jan Friedel
Carol A. Heaverlo
Daniel C. Robinson

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

2014

Copyright © Shanna Latisha Fountain, 2014. All rights reserved.
DEDICATION

Dorothy Mae Copeland Howell
(1944-1992)

Mom

Although you have not been able
to see me walk across any graduation stage,
Each time I have kept you in my heart and in mind.

This is dedicated to you
because of your eternal belief in me
no matter what I had asked you to do or try.

Your belief in me as a child
has always kept me focused,
especially as an adult.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

| LIST OF FIGURES | vii |
| LIST OF TABLES  | viii|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | ix |
| ABSTRACT        | x  |
| CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| Background of the Study | 1 |
| Statement of Problem | 4 |
| Purpose of the Study | 4 |
| Rationale for Conducting the Study | 5 |
| Research Questions | 5 |
| Significance of Study | 6 |
| Theoretical Framework | 6 |
| Constructionism | 7 |
| Narrative analysis | 7 |
| Human ecology model | 9 |
| Delimitations | 9 |
| Definition of Key Terms | 10 |
| Dissertation Organization | 11 |
| CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW | 12 |
| Overview | 12 |
| The African American Female Voice | 13 |
| African American Students and Higher Education | 14 |
| Retention of African American Students | 15 |
| African American Students and Higher Education | 16 |
| College preparedness | 16 |
| Financial issues and financial aid | 18 |
| Family, friends, and education | 19 |
| Academic preparedness | 20 |
| Stopping Out | 20 |
| Community College | 22 |
| Programming for African American Students | 23 |
| First Year Experiences (FYE) programs | 25 |
| Mentoring programs | 25 |
| Limitations in the Current Literature | 26 |
| Summary | 27 |
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Introduction 28
Study Design 29
  Human subjects approval 30
  Narrative analysis 30
  Constructionism 31
Theoretical Framework 31
  Black feminist thought 32
  Human ecology theory 34
Site Selection 36
Participant Selection 36
  Criteria for inclusion 37
Data Collection 38
  Interviews 38
Data Analysis 41
  Organization 41
  Memoing 41
  Open coding 42
Consent and Confidentiality 42
Validity and Trustworthiness 43
  Member checking 43
Limitations 43
Positionality 44
Pilot Study 45

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

Experiences of the Participants 47
Ashley 49
  Childhood/Elementary School 51
  Junior High School 52
  High School 53
  Adulthood/MCC Experience 53
  Race and Gender 56
  Stopping Out 57
Danny 58
  Childhood/Elementary School 60
  Junior High School 61
  High School 62
  Adulthood/MCC Experience 63
  Race and Gender 65
  Stopping Out 66
Lisa 67
  Childhood/Elementary School 69
  High School 70
  Adulthood/MCC Experience 71
Recommendations for Practice .......................... 125
  Individuals ........................................... 125
  Families .............................................. 126
  Community Colleges .................................. 127
Recommendations for Future Research .............. 131

APPENDIX A.  HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL .......... 133

APPENDIX B.  PARTICIPANT COMMUNICATION ............ 134

REFERENCES ............................................ 140
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner’s model 35
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Participants 48
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their support during this journey. I am grateful for your participation in my life, especially for your continued encouragement throughout this journey as well as the upcoming new journeys that are on my horizon.

- Dr. Larry Ebbers, my major professor—Thank you for always encouraging me and supporting me, even in moments when I despaired I was not going to make it. Your legacy in higher education and the lives of so many students is top notch!
- My committee—Thanks for your for your patience with me during this entire doctoral process:
  - Dr. Jan Friedel—for opening your home and working with me outside the office;
  - Dr. Carol Heaverlo—for the phone calls and our face-to-face conversations;
  - Dr. Dan Robinson—for your persistent encouragement;
  - Dr. Sharon Drake—for coming on at the end without any questions asked.
- My family and friends—You have always supported me in my educational goals. Although some of you had no idea why I kept going to school, you always checked on me and made me feel that I can do anything I put my mind to accomplish. I love y’all.
- Louis H. Fountain—We have been through ups and downs, but you have always looked out for me and supported me as well. Your support and encouragement has gotten me through many early mornings and long nights, and I will forever love you for that.
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of African American female community college students who stop out, and interpret how their gender and race have influenced these lived experiences. Based on the research questions, a constructivist, narrative analysis was used to capture the experiences of the participants of this study as well as analyze the environment of their personal lives as the institution in which they have all attended.

A total of six participants were interviewed. Three semi-structured interviews were held to provide a clear understanding of each participant’s experiences. When combined and analyzed, the narratives of the six participants revealed that students do not all have the same experience when attending college. African American female students who were currently enrolled at a large multi-campus community college in the Midwest, and have stopped out were invited to participate in this study. For the participants in this study, family, work or the lack there of, had a tremendous effect on their decision to stop out. All of the students had experiences with a job that either caused them to stop out or to return to school after losing that job.

Future research could be done on African American male students who have stopped out of community college to gain a better understanding of serving all African American students. The study could compare and contrast the experiences of the females from this study as well as males to see if there are any similarities in their experiences.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

*If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family (nation).*

African Proverb

Background of the Study

For generations, the number of African Americans attending institutions of higher education has fluctuated. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), African American students made up 10.9% of students in the 1999-2000 school years and increased to 13.7% in 2009-2010. Though these numbers have increased, African American females, unlike their male counterparts, have found themselves in two marginalized groups: being African American and being a woman. Zamani (2003), pointed this out when she stated, “Membership in both marginalized groups often makes African American women invisible in colleges and universities. Given the complex intersection of race and gender, more attention should be paid to the educational, social, and political positions of African American women in postsecondary education” (p. 6). As the African Proverb above states, educating a woman means that knowledge will be passed on to her children and family. For many African American women, this holds true and for that reason, they have gone through adversities and tribulations to make sure they reach their educational goals.

College campuses across the United States continue to seek solutions in retaining and graduating their students in a reasonable amount of time, three years for community college and six years for four-year institutions, or 150% of the normal rate (Selingo, 2012). Research indicates that if colleges are proactive in working with their students, there is a likelihood that students will be more successful during their first term of college and therefore persist to
the next term (Davis, 2011). Community colleges face the challenge of educating a diverse population of students that come through their doors. It is the mission of most community colleges to serve their students and provide accommodations to help all of their students to be successful. With a mission of having an open door policy, community colleges have tried to remove the various barriers that block students from receiving an education (Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2012). The American College Testing (ACT) (2013) reported that 28% of community college students drop out of college in comparison to four year public schools at 12% and private schools at 8%, nationally. In order for community colleges to be successful, attention must be paid to causes of their students not being able to persist. Fike and Fike (2008) stated, “Clearly, community college students have unique characteristics when compared to university students. The specific impact of these characteristics on community colleges retention needs to be further assessed” (p. 71). With this diverse population of students enrolled in community colleges, it is important to develop programming that will benefit all students coming through the college’s door.

Community colleges are attracting students from various backgrounds and demographics. According to the American Association of University Women (AAUW) report in Fall 2010, students of color make up a larger percentage at community colleges compared to four year institutions. One group of students is African American females. According to the AAUW (2010) report, “Three out of 10 women at community colleges are either African American or Latina, compared with only a quarter of female undergrads at public, four-year institutions. Although the gender gap in enrollment favors women overall, it varies by race/ethnicity. The gap is largest for African American community college students, 63% of whom are women” (p. 7). African Americans, because of class and race disadvantage, are
also more likely to start college at the community college level, to have non-traditional enrollment patterns, to work more hours while going to college, to have higher rates of part time attendance, and to have more periods of “stopping-out” (Wassmer, Moore, & Shulock, 2004). Research of the experiences of African American females in community college in comparison to their male counterparts is limited. The research on African American female students who stop out in community colleges can rarely be found in the literature. Thomas and Jackson (2007) made a clear point that there is a disparity in the enrollment numbers of African American males and females but African American females are not studied in comparison to their male counterparts:

While concerted attention is needed toward addressing this gender disparity, it must not be done at the expense of ignoring the challenges and, sometimes, silent suffering of African American women in higher education institutions as they attempt to navigate the interactive effects of racism, sexism, and gender disparities in certain fields of study. (p.358)

It is clear that there is a need to examine the gender disparity of African American women in higher education. Allen (1992) also made this clear when he stated, “In fact, Black women now outnumber Black men in college by roughly two to one. It is important to note, however, that this discrepancy owes more to declines in rates of Black males college attendance than to Black female gains. There is still reason to question rosy portrayals of African-American women’s college experiences” (p. 30). This study used narrative analysis to study the experiences of African American females at Midwest Community College-MCC (pseudonym) who have stopped out and return to continue their education.
Statement of the Problem

The educational experiences of African American female community college students are rarely found in the literature. A focal point for research on African Americans in community college has been focused on African American males (Strayhorn, 2012; Wood, 2013). In 2010, NCES reported that African American females make up 68.3% of the African American student population enrolled in institutions of higher education. Though African American females attend college at a higher percentage than their male counterparts, their stories are not heard. Many of these African American female students have obstacles in their personal life that have caused them to stop out or drop out of college. In Tinto’s (1993) model of retention, the individuals must have their pre-entry college attributes in order. These attributes include family background, skill and ability and prior schooling. If these attributes are not in place prior to entering college, the likelihood of stopping out or dropping out are higher.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative narrative analysis study was to analyze the experiences of African American female community college students who stop out, and to interpret how their gender and race have influenced these lived experiences. In addition, this study analyzed the decision to stop out and the factors that influenced this decision. This study also looked at the decision by the students to return to college and the influences that aided them in making the decision to return as well as add to the literature on African American females who stop out of community college. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to capture the stories about their lives as African American females and its effect on their educational experiences.
Rationale for Conducting the Study

Although African American females attend college, persist and graduate at a higher rate than their male counterparts, there is value in hearing how African American females who stop out decide to return despite obstacles they may have in their life. Few studies exist that analyze the experiences of African American female students who stop out of community college. This study contributes to the literature on African American female community colleges students and adds to the literature on the concept of stopping out of college. Additionally, the findings provide data that identify common barriers for these students as well as make aware the needs of African American females. One goal of this study was to contribute to the literature on student stop out by providing descriptions and analyzing the experiences of these students. Due to the lack research in this area, administrators in higher education do not have resources to refer to when working with students who find themselves stopping out or returning after stopping out of college. Another goal of this study was to help decrease the number of African American female students who stop out by increasing the awareness and understanding of the barriers that impact their lives.

Research Questions

This study has attempted to fill the void in research, not only on stopping out but also the gap of research on African American female students. This study brings to the forefront the obstacles and barriers of the lives of African American female community college students who stop out, that many administrators, staff and faculty may not be aware are happening. The following questions guided this study:
1. How do African American female community college students who have stopped out describe their educational experiences of stopping out and returning to community college?

2. How might factors such as family, work and other roles outside of education encourage or discourage academic progress?

3. What contributes to the act of stopping out for African American female community college students?

**Significance of the Study**

Through this study, a contribution can be made to the literature on African American female students as well as the literature on student stop out. A majority of the literature speaks of what steps colleges and universities can take to prevent stop out but little research has studied the student’s experience of stopping out and reentry back into an educational setting. That is why this study is important. Hearing the experiences of these students offers an insider’s look at the various reasons why students stop out and return. This study focused on the individual lives of these students and not the group. By focusing on the individual, each student was able to give their account of why they stopped out of college and why they returned. They spoke on an individual basis as to what occurred in their life and what their personal barriers are and were. These barriers can serve as a resource for colleges to learn of the needs of this population of students.

**Theoretical Framework**

One of the best ways to consider the experiences of individuals is through conceptual and theoretical framework. According to Anafara and Mertz (2006):
Acknowledging that the term does not have a clear and consistent definition, we define theoretical frameworks as any empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and/or psychological processes, at a variety of levels (e.g., grand, mid-range, and exploratory), that can be applied to the understanding of phenomena. (p. xxvii)

This study was approached with the conceptual and theoretical framework of constructionism through narrative analysis using life history and the human ecology model.

**Constructionism**

Constructionism is one of the best approaches to learn what experiences these students had and how they make sense of their experiences as it relates to them stopping out and returning to reach their educational goals. Crotty (1998) defined constructionism as a way of rejecting the view of human knowledge (p. 8). He stated, “There is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed” (pp. 8-9). Individuals make meaning of or construct their world and their experiences by what they experience, not by what others have experienced. This was relevant for each student in this study in that they have all experienced the phenomenon of stopping out but they all may have different experiences. These students have constructed their own meaning of what stopping out as an African American female in community college means.

**Narrative analysis**

The form of qualitative research that was used for this study is narrative analysis/inquiry. In the literature, both the term analysis and inquiry are used interchangeably. Hendry (2009) stated, “It could be argued that narrative research is the first
and oldest form of inquiry. If this is the case, then all research traditions originate from narrative. Narrative means “to account” and is derived from the term gno, meaning to know” (p.72). According to Merriam (2002), “the key to this type of qualitative research is the use of stories as data, and more specifically, first-person accounts of experience told in story form” (p.9). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) provided a clear definition of narrative inquiry or analysis:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. (p. 477)

Narrative analysis was utilized to ensure that the participant’s stories of their experiences remained the focus of this study. Life history was employed as the method and approach for conducting conversational interviewing when looking at the experiences of the participants.

Since the experiences of these students were reviewed for this study, narrative analysis was perceived to be the best fit. Narrative analysis has no correct way of analyzing the stories. Thus, why is narrative analysis important? Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posited, “Therefore, using narrative, educational researchers intend to interrogate the dominant view of education and try to reshape our understandings of education and schooling through the lived experiences of teachers or students.” The use of narrative analysis enables the researcher to hear the experiences the individuals they are researching and to see the common and uncommon experiences of the phenomenon. Using this approach allows for the stories of the participants to enlighten others culturally, socially and personally on their lives and what effect their race and sex had on their experiences. Narrative analysis
was important to get the true experiences of the participants, to get each individual’s story of the phenomenon of stopping out.

**Human ecology model**

Bronfrenbrenner’s (1979) human ecology model served as a framework to have a clearer understanding of the experiences of the students as they describe their educational experiences. Renn (2004) offered a contextual framework mirrored off Bronfrenbrenner’s (1979) human ecology model that takes the college environment and represents it as a system. The individual systems, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem influence and have an effect on each student in a different way. The microsystem is the main environment for students that their academic settings can be found; the mesosystem is made up of their peer culture and several other microsystems; the exosystem is settings that may or may not encompass the individual; and the macrosystem is the sociocultural environment that affects the student in a much more extensive ways.

**Delimitations**

Like most studies, there were several delimitations to the study. This study was limited to this particular multi-campus community college located in the Midwest. Although the study was limited to this community college, the findings might be transferable to other institutions who serve African American female students. The knowledge that can be gained from these students’ experiences, in many instances, will be similar to other African American college students. Colleges and universities may discover transferrable ideas and knowledge from the experiences of the participants in this study. These experiences could
alert college administrators to pay heed to their own resources available for their female African American students.

The second delimitation was the limited number of participants. Although the college in this study is located in the most metropolitan city of the state which is also a diversely populated area, there were a limited number of students who attended the college who fit the criteria of African American females who have stopped out. A pilot study was completed with participants with the same criteria including males but limited to one of six campuses.

The delimitations of this study does not take away from the relevance and importance of this research. The study not only adds to the literature on African American female students but also contributes to the need for research on student departure on community college campuses.

**Definition of Key Terms**

The following key terms were defined for use in this study:


*Black:* Anyone of African descent but often used as a generic term to refer to African Americans: of or relating to African American people or their culture: of or relating to any population group having dark pigment of the skin.

*White:* A person of European descent or who one identifies as being of European descent with a “whiter” skin or pigmentation.

*Community College:* A two-year institution of higher education that offers different levels of instruction, adapted to fit the needs of the community.
Stop Out (Stopping Out): A student who departs from an institution of higher education and does not reenter after departing for one term or more

Spirituality: The state or quality of being dedicated to God, religion, self, or spiritual things or values

**Dissertation Organization**

This chapter provided an introduction to the study, statement of the problem, purpose of this study, rationale for conducting this study, the research questions, key terms used in the study, significance, theoretical framework, and limitations of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature regarding Black Feminism, Stopping Out and retention of African American students. Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology, design and the methods that will be used for this research. Chapter 4 provides the findings, and Chapter 5 renders the conclusions and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

*Learning expands great souls.* -African Proverbs

**Overview**

The purpose of this review of literature is to examine the research on the departure process of stopping out and returning of African American females attending community colleges as well as examining the background issues relevant to this topic to put the topic into context. Two main areas were the focal point of this study (a) the experience of African American female students in college, especially community college; and (b) the process of student stopping out of college, primarily community college, although there is little research specific to community colleges. Due to the lack of research on stopping out in community colleges in the literature, most references relate to four-year institutions. Community college students are generally at a higher academic risk than students attending a four-year university (Greene, Marti, & McClenny, 2008). This literature review examines factors for student stop out, and stopping out and departure for African American females. It also provides resources for colleges to help students prior to their departure as well as for their reentry to college. Understanding the reasons students choose to leave and choose to return is important for colleges wanting to make a difference in their students’ educational lives.

In order to create a scholarly literature review on the subject, key terms were used in higher education and community college journals, ESBCO Search Engine, Google Scholar, the National Center for Educational Statistics and dissertations. The key term search utilized these words: Black students at community college, minority student completion, persistence, African American female students, women students, community college, stop out, stopping
out, departure, academic issues in community college and retention of minority students. The main focus of the research in this review of literature was on current and recent studies in African American female college students as well at stopping out in colleges. Although some sources date back more than ten years, their relevance was useful in this study. The next section will highlight: (a) The African American Female Voice; (b) African American Students and Higher Education; (c) Stopping Out; (d) Community College; (e) Retention of African American Students; and (f) Programming for African American Students.

**The African American Female Voice**

This study provides a collection of lived experiences of African American females who stopped out of community college. Therefore, it is necessary to review literature on the experiences of African American females who are pursuing degrees of higher education. In African American culture, it is a tradition to pass down stories and accounts of the experiences of family and close friends. This research mirrors that tradition by collecting the stories of these women. African American women have for centuries tried to get their voice heard and though many have succeeded, the African American female voice continues to be unheard.

In order to appreciate the experiences and stories of these African American female students, one must first understand how their voice has not been relevant in American history. In fact, in African American women’s literature, their voice has been denied and has not been heard, and historically, they have been denied the right to be a citizen (Collins, 2000; Hooks, 2000). Historically, in the African American community, the use of music has been used to express the voice of the people. Such artists as Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday and
Ma Rainey used their voice in the 20th century to express themselves and to reach out and unite African American women (Collins, 2000). They used their voices to be heard and represent their experiences and other experiences of African American women (Hooks, 2000). The voices of African American women need to be heard more in the literature: “In addition to quantitative studies, qualitative research is needed to give ‘voice’ to the experiences of African American girls and women in educational settings” (Jackson & Thomas, 2007). The women in this study used their voices to share their experiences as African American women in community college who have stopped out.

**African American Female College Students**

As mentioned previously, African Americans and women can face many obstacles inside and outside of the classroom. African Americans are more likely than other students to feel social isolation and personal dissatisfaction and women are less likely to benefit from role models of the same sex since men dominate the faculty and administration in most colleges and universities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The NCES (2012 reported that, in 2010, African American community college students completed at a rate of 68.3% in comparison to their White counterparts whose rate of completion was 60.9%. These numbers illustrate the increased growth and success of African American Female community college students. African American females now account for earning 68% of associate degrees, 66% of bachelor’s degrees and 71% of master degrees according to the 2009-2010 NCES report. Cross (1999) predicted that, if this trend persists, African American women will receive all degrees awarded by year 2097. African American females, being in two marginalized groups—African American and female—on some college campuses can cause them to be
invisible. Therefore, attention should address the educational patterns of African American females.

**Retention of African American Students**

Since it is well known that more and more African American students are not staying in college, the question is asked, Why not? Are there services available to serve all students and not just African American students, to make sure they return after their first term and each term until they graduate? “Fewer than one third of those institutions had a full-time employee who was responsible for tracking and improving retention,” according to Hoover (2007, p.19). In addition, “Forty-three percent had a retention coordinator with considerable authority to develop new retention program, but only 26 percent said their coordinator had the authority to finance those efforts” (p.19).

When looking at minority students, there are several barriers that need to be looked at, for instance, first generation students. Davis (2011) noted, “First-generation students have difficulty developing a college student identity because they feel out of place among non-first-generation students-and out of place using institutionalized systems created for non-first-generation students-who appear to know what to do and how to behave without even being consciously aware of what to do and how to behave” (p. 8). A large number of African American students are first generation students and, without any prior knowledge of college and what is required of them, they have a higher chance of not being successful. Davis (2011) noted that, if no intentional efforts are made to support these students, how can institutions expect these students to be successful?
African American Students and Higher Education

African Americans have attended institutions of higher education for over 100 years. Unlike their Caucasian counterparts, their history for attending, persisting and completing has not mirrored one another. Historically, education for African Americans has been a means of advancement. Hill (2011) stated:

Education has been used as a toll for both the oppression and the advancement of Black people. It was denied to prevent uprising, limited to insure dependence, segregated to deny equality, and biased to produce inferiority. Yet, throughout history, African Americans have valued education almost as highly as freedom. While in history of “mainstream” society, education has been used to teach citizens to make the most of freedom, among African Americans, education has been seen as a means to achieve it. (p. 9)

Thus, achievement may come with many barriers and obstacles but having an understanding of those barriers and obstacles will allow for college administrators to assist and provide services to aide African American students, especially females. The next sections highlight some of the issues that African American students face while pursuing their higher education.

College preparedness

African American students in higher education have had experiences that cause them to be view their experiences in a lens of oppression (Harris, 2007). This lens of oppression for many African American students has caused them not to be successful with persistence and completion in college. In order to look at the experiences of African American students, one must look at the barriers that caused failure and implications of success.

In order for any student to be successful in college, key elements must be established and maintained throughout their college career. For instance, good study habits, time management skills and good note-taking skills. For many African American college students,
these elements are not established prior to starting college and, in some cases, students are not aware of what is needed to be successful in college. The U.S. Department of Education has identified seven characteristics that can increase a student’s risk of not being successful in college: delaying post-secondary enrollment, receiving a GED or not completing high school, being financially independent of one’s parents, being a single parent, having dependents other than a spouse, attending college part-time and working full-time (Greene, Marti, & McClenney, 2008). In their 2012 report, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) revealed that 66% of students needed developmental coursework in at least one area. Thus, many students, not just African Americans, arrive at community college unprepared. The initial adjustment to college can be harder and sometimes longer for African American students (Eimers & Pike, 1997). Due to the barriers that many African American students face, they are not able to adjust which causes them to be unsuccessful. When working with African American students, institutions should consider the many barriers this population may bring when arriving to their campuses. Seidman (2005) noted:

For both male and female African American students, lack of parental support and limited resources negatively affect college-going rates and retention. Many African American college students are first generation and from single-parent homes, and do not have a positive parental role model. The economic condition for African Americans coming from lower-income groups is highly correlated with the ability to pay for and to stay in college. This finding suggests the strong role that financial aid can play in recruiting, retaining and graduating minority students. (p. 16)

Having financial issues that could affect whether one attends college or have the means to provide for themself is another issue that many African American college students face. The next section discusses some of these financial issues.
Financial issues and financial aid

Many African American students face a barrier caused by financial issues. Financial issues not only cause problems while the student is enrolled in classes but also when the student departs. Leaving with debt and without a degree may cause issues for further education later on in their life (Seidman, 2005). In many instances, students with financial issues or low income are less likely to be involved in college life which in turn could affect their persistence (Bozick, 2007). The barrier of financial issues or concerns is important to many African American students. This is an important barrier for colleges to pay attention to regarding all students, not just African American students. Hoyt and Winn (2004) completed a study on students who drop out, stop out and opt out. Their data revealed that most of the students withdrew or did not return to school for the same reason—financial concerns. One of the factors in the top three was conflict between the need to work and college.

Many African American students base their college choice on the financial aid package they receive. Kim, DeJardins, and McCall (2009, p. 764) found that minorities, especially African Americans, choose not to attend college or limit their options due to the fact they are worried about the cost of enrollment and the aid package they will receive. Hoover (2008, A19) explained that, when it comes to community colleges, on average, 56% of their students fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. Financial aid for some students is a not only a means for attending college but also a means of taking care of themselves and their families. At times, students will utilize their financial aid refund check to supplement their income (Ziskin, Fischer, Torres, Player-Sanders, & Pellicciotti (2014). Making the decision to work or to attend school fulltime is a barrier that many students find themselves having to choose between.
**Family, friends, and education**

Another barrier that many African American students face is the ability to balance education and home life. Students returning to school after sitting out for a period of time find that balancing school and family or work is a challenge. As Schmid and Abell (2003) found in their study of community college students at Guilford Technical Community College, students who have children at home are financially independent, are single parents, and/or fail to graduate high school are less likely to remain enrolled in college. Studies have revealed that female students consistently have conflict with school and families unlike their male counterparts that are rarely mentioned as family concerns (Thomas, 2001). In the study conducted by Thomas (2001, p. 139), the data revealed that women feel an overload caused by figuring out childcare, work hours, and study when they reenter classes. Many of the participants spoke of feeling guilt while sitting in class while a stranger is taking care of their child or children. In this study, their male counterparts made no mention of concerns with children and balancing schoolwork. A study completed by Stratton, O’Toole and Wetzel (2007, p. 477) revealed that household characteristics, such as women’s marital status and men’s marital changes, have an effect on students. Attempting to raise a family and support one’s spouse is hard enough, but adding in education can be overwhelming for some students.

Another influence in educational decisions is that of friends. The research on the influence of friends in college aspiration and college choice has revealed that friends can have a positive as well as negative influence one’s decision to attend, persistent, and graduate college (Holland, 2011). It is nearly impossible to estimate the influence of family/friends and an individual’s decision to attend, depart, and return to education. Although a family and
friends can be a source of encouragement and inspiration to attend an education, it can also deter one from pursuing an education.

**Academic preparedness**

Lack of academic preparedness is another barrier some African American students face (Seidman, 2005). Colleges and universities have to evaluate if their African American students are ready for college ready work or if they are in need or remedial work (Credle & Dean, 1991). Colleges have to create a welcoming environment for African American students that will enable them to be aware of the resources available to them prior to the start of their academic career. African American students should also be aware of the demands and requirements of their degree program as well as what is needed to be successful as a college students (Credle & Dean, 1991). Many researchers feel that students are more likely to be successful if they declare their major or academic program when they first enter college (Nitecki, 2011). Although most colleges incorporate orientations and remedial courses, African American students need to be aware of the importance of orientation and the need for remedial courses if they are placed into them so they can determine their academic readiness. Being prepared academically will not only allow for students’ persistence to be more likely but it will also help them to achieve their goal of graduation.

**Stopping Out**

For most students attending an institution of higher education, attaining a degree is their ultimate goal. In some instances, students attend these institutions and take a break from their educational goal and return at a later date to complete. This pattern of attendance is stopping out, which is an interruption in enrollment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The
term, “stopping out” can be used at both four-year institutions and community colleges. Domonell (2011) stated, “…students who’ve put their education on hold before completing a degree—or “stopped out”—return to finish their bachelor’s degree. Stop-outs are different from drop-outs in that they don’t want to leave school” (p. 10). Students who stop out of institutions of higher education do so because of various reasons and the reasons vary from person to person (Barefoot, 2004). Many students stop out after their first term some stop out closer to time to graduate from college. The stopping out process is not always in a student’s academic plan but happens due to unforeseen circumstances. Students who stop out increase the time-to-degree and are less likely to attain a degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Stopping out not only affects the likelihood of degree completion but it can also lead to debt with no degree.

Reasons for stop-out vary from health and financial issues, to childcare issues. Barefoot (2004) noted, “Whereas the decision to leave a college or university may be permanent for some students—especially those who feel marginal in the first place—other students will take time off to clarify academic and career decisions, deal with external circumstances, or simply group up” (p. 10). Colleges have to be prepared to address the various circumstances students stop out with appropriate policies and procedures that relate to the various sensitive issues for the students’ departure (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). Research at a large urban community college by Grosset (1993) revealed that length of time between initial enrollment and completion of degree requirements increased due to the trend of noncontinuous enrollment behavior (p. 51).
Community College

Many advocates for community college feel that students of color tend to be more successful when starting their academic career at a two-year college. Unfortunately, the need still remains for more understanding and integration of models for community college students (i.e., Pascarella, 1999; Wild & Ebbers, 2000). Community colleges can respond to the growing recognition of economic and social inequalities and demands that four-year colleges cannot enforce (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Therefore, it could be hard to define what success at a community college looks like. A number of students choose to attend community colleges as a means of decreasing the cost of completing a four-year degree (Tinto, 1993). More and more African American students are attending community college. According to the American Council on Education (ACE) 24th annual report (2011), in 1998, 636,252 African American students attended a community college. Ten years later, in 2008, that number increased to 958,183, a 50.6% increase. Strayhorn (2011) noted, “When African Americans do enroll, they tend to be concentrated at historically Black college, less-selective four year institutions, and two-year community colleges” (p. 437). In this article, Strayhorn (2011) made the point that many African American students tend to find community college to be a start for their educational career prior to enrolling into a four-year institution.

According to Bryant (2000), the community college allows a student who has financial constraints to pursue an academic opportunity, so the community college is often a second change for students, especially those who are considered to be re-entry. Most community colleges have lower tuition in comparison to four-year institutions. This allows for students to complete their core courses prior to transferring to a four-year institution.
Mendoza, Mendez and Malcolm (2009) referred to a six-year study on community college students who had intentions of earning a bachelor’s degree, but only 23% accomplished this goal in six years and 39% had not earned a degree or certificate. This is a concern due to the fact that more than 4 of 10 college students enroll in a community college, including a disproportionate number of African Americans (Mendez and Malcom, p. 113).

In order for community colleges to serve their students, there has to be an intentional effort to help students prior to them not being successful. Wood (2011) stated, “While most community colleges provide student services such as career counseling, tutoring and mentoring, too many institutions wait until after there has been a semester of low performance—wherein a student exhibits high absenteeism and low grades—before intervening.” Wood is expressing the importance of community colleges taking a proactive approach when dealing with their students who are at-risk of departure. Community colleges have become a great resource for African American students. While getting them to the community college is important, retaining them and graduating them is even more important.

**Programming for African American Students**

In order for colleges to have African American students who not only persist but complete degree attainment, a conscience effort has to be made on part of the college. Programming must start prior to enrollment until the students have successfully completed their program of study. Institutions who make a conscience effort to recruit and retain minority students will find that early intervention will help these students as well. Seidman (2005) remarked:

> Early intervention is starting an intervention process at the earliest time possible upon identification of a problem. Successful efforts to work with
students and parents in high school—even as early as the seventh grade—in terms of courses and parental commitment (“My child can go to college!”) have proved to be very productive with minority students. Intervention programs and services need to be available as early in such students’ college career as possible, preferably before they consider college. Early and intensive intervention is providing an intervention strong enough to effect change. (p. 12)

Although the recruitment and retention of minority students is the job of all staff and faculty at a college, in many instances, deliberate actions have to be taken to ensure minority students are retained after their first term and year. Some colleges hire a minority recruiter who will assist in getting the student to the college, but what are they doing to make sure the students remain and graduate? The following provides a suggestion from the literature. First, the institution has to make a deliberate effort to develop, implement and evaluate a plan for retention of students of color. Each college and university must, “…look toward consolidating this information into a cohesive and comprehensive plan to promote greater cultural diversity throughout all levels of its structure” (Dumas-Hines, Cochran, & Williams, 2001, p. 5).

Like any good organization or institution, a mission statement should be created for these programs or division, if the institution decides that a division of the institution should be dedicated to this effort. As Dumas-Hines et al. stated: “Each sub-unit, such as the individual college, school and department, should also develop mission statements that reflect/emphasize a cultural focus. Existing faculty and student groups should have opportunists to discuss how the mission of the sub-units can influence and increase recruitment and retention efforts” (p. 5). With colleges making an effort to take a deeper look at their African American students, specifically female, and evaluate the causes of departure
and make the necessary adjustments, there could be a growth in the retention of these students.

**First Year Experiences (FYE) programs**

Four-year colleges and universities have used First Year Experiences (FYE) programs for over twenty years. Community colleges across the country are beginning to incorporate FYE into their curriculum (Cornell & Mosley, 2006). Using FYE programs in community college is a great resource for all students, not just African American students. In FYE, students can find a supportive environment to help with the transition to college (Cornell & Mosley, 2006). Colleges across the country use various formats for their FYS programs. The FYE programs could range from Learning Communities that incorporate students taking a series of courses as a cohort with other first year students or success courses like first year seminar, study strategies and library instruction. Data and survey results reveal that FYE programs can increase student learning, retention and persistence (Cornell & Mosley, 2006).

**Mentoring programs**

Colleges who implement mentoring programs have seen great success in retention of their students of color. Mentors assist their mentee with academic and non-academic issues. Many colleges match mentor and mentee based on race, program of study of other matching demographics. Providing social activities within or outside the institution is utilized by many institutions across the country (Szelenyi, 2001). A study by Crips (2010) revealed that community college students, “Regardless of who provided mentoring support to students or how many individuals (on-or-off-campus) contributed to different aspects of the mentoring
experience, the findings established a direct positive impact of mentoring support on students’ ability to integrate both academically and socially at their institution” (p. 52).

Community colleges have to take a purposeful effort to create an environment that staff, faculty and administrators become formal and informal mentors to their students (Wood, 2012). College employees can play a pivotal role in the student’s academic success or failure. As mentioned by Brittain, Sy, and Stokes (2009) “The presence of role models is one factor viewed as important for African American student retention. African American students may find establishing a positive identity in the university environment difficult without faculty to identify with” (p. 88). Having a professional staff member as a resource for students can make a difference in a student stopping out or completing their educational program.

**Limitations in the Current Literature**

This literature review provided some details on the barriers and obstacles that African American female community college students face. However, there are few studies (Johnson, 2001) that focus specifically to female African American students who attend community college. When it comes to the enrollment pattern of community college students as a whole, there is very limited research available as well. As Nakajima, Dembo and Mossler (2012) stated,

> Although the majority of research on student persistence has been conducted at the four-year college level, several researchers have investigated community college student persistence. However, variables in these studies are somewhat limited compared to the four-year institutions, and the majority of the studies investigated a single variable instead of multiple-variables. (p. 593)
In the case of this study, there are several variables, including: African American, female, community college student and stop out. These variables have not been revealed in a single dissertation or journal article at the time of the current research.

**Summary**

Colleges and universities have to do what is necessary to recruit, maintain and graduate African American female students. By being aware of the barriers that this group of students face when putting programming and policy in place, this group of students can have a higher rate of retention and persistence. Although there are numerous articles and studies on African American females and persistence, very few address the stories and experiences of stopping out. There is still need for further study of this group of students. I hoped to fill this gap by looking at the stories and experiences of African American female community college students who have stopped out. Several studies have looked at this demographic of students but very few, if any, have looked at this population of students who stop out.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The fool speaks, the wise man listens. African proverb

Introduction

As discussed in the literature review, African American female students tend to have more barriers in comparison to their Caucasian counterparts. The literature supports that this is an issue and the issue needs to be addressed on college campuses across the country. Although it is well known that stopping out is an issue for African American female community college students, what is not known is why African American female community college students stop out. The decision to attend college, the decision to leave college, and the decision to return to college has been discussed rarely in the literature. This study explored the experiences of African American female community college students stop out and make the decision to leave college and return to pursue their educational goals.

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the experiences of African American female community college students who stop out, and interpret how their gender and race have influenced these academic experiences. In addition, this research studied the decision to stop out and the factors that influenced this decision. This study also addressed the decision by students to return to college and the influences to make that decision to return. The following research questions framed the study:

1. How do African American female community college students who have stopped out of community college describe their educational experiences of stopping out and returning to community college?
2. How might factors such as family, work and other roles outside of education encourage or discourage academic progress?

3. What contributes to the act of stopping out for African American female community college students?

This chapter reviews the study design, site selection, participant selection, data collection methods, data analysis, consent, and confidentiality measures used. It also addresses ethical considerations, issues of validity and trustworthiness, limitations and delimitations of this study and the positionality of the researcher.

**Study Design**

Based on the research questions, a constructivist, narrative analysis was used to capture the experiences of the participants of this study as well as analyze the environment of their personal lives as the institution in which they have all attended. Jeong-Hee (2008) posited that stories in a narrative analysis inquiry should be used as a starting point of a process of coming to know, and they should be extended by the theory to be connected to the larger society to help us understand the meaning of the individual lives and interrogate the historical, social, and political world in which they are embedded. Jeong-Hee also noted the importance of starting with stories when using narrative inquiry. These stories served as a focal point in the study. Although each participant was an African American female who has stopped out, each provided her own individual account, experiences and stories.
**Human subjects approval**

Prior to the start of the study, approval from the Institutional Review Board was requested and approved on January 15, 2014, IRB ID 13-509 (Appendix A). Once the request was granted, the first step of the research, which is recruiting participants, began.

**Narrative analysis**

There are various forms of qualitative research but the form that will be used for this study is narrative analysis. In the literature, both the term analysis and inquiry are used interchangeably but for this study, the term narrative analysis will be used. Hendry (2009) stated, “It could be argued that narrative research is the first and oldest form of inquiry. If this is the case, then all research traditions originate from narrative. Narrative means ‘to account’ and is derived from the term gno, meaning to know” (p. 72). According to Merriam (2002), “the key to this type of qualitative research is the use of stories as data, and more specifically, first-person accounts of experience told in story form” (p. 9). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) provided a clear definition of narrative inquiry or analysis:

> People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. (p. 477)

Since the experiences of these students were to be analyzed for this study, narrative analysis seemed to be the best fit. Narrative analysis has no correct way of analyzing the stories. Therefore, why is narrative analysis important? Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated, “…using narrative, educational researchers intend to interrogate the dominant view of education and try to reshape our understandings of education and schooling through the lived
experiences of teachers or students.” The use of narrative analysis allows for the researcher to hear the experiences of the participants they are studying and to see the common and uncommon experiences and accounts of a phenomenon. Narrative analysis is important to get the true experiences of the students, to get each individual’s side of the phenomenon of stopping out.

**Constructionism**

I selected constructionism because I am interested in understanding the educational and personal experiences of students and how they make sense of their experiences related to stopping out and returning to college. Crotty (1998, p. 8) discussed the nature of constructionism as a way of rejecting the view of human knowledge: “There is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed” (pp. 8-9). Individuals make meaning of or construct their world and their experiences by what they experience, not by what others have experienced. This was relevant for each student in this study in that all had experienced the phenomenon of stopping out and returning to school but each had different experiences. Each student constructed her own meaning of stopping out as an African American female in community college.

**Theoretical Framework**

The focus of this study was to understand the experiences of African American females who have stopped out of a multi-campus community college in the Midwest. Black Feminist Thought and Human Ecology theory is an appropriate lens to look at and analyze
the experiences of these students. This methodology enables the participants to express their experiences prior to attending college, the decision to attend college and stop out, and the decision to return. Black Feminist thought is a way for the research to understand how the participants’ race and gender effect their decisions with it comes to their educational careers. Human Ecology theory enabled me as the researcher to have a clearer understanding of the environmental contexts inside the college and outside the college as it impacted the women’s experiences.

Black feminist thought

The review of literature has indicated that African American women tend to have barriers that many of their counterparts do not experience. These barriers are found not only in institutions of higher education but also in all aspects of an African American female’s life. Most African American women work hard to achieve a slice of the American dream but find themselves on an unleveled playing field. Black feminist theory takes these individuals and embraces their thoughts and concentrates on understanding and relating to their everyday life. Collins (1990) noted that all Black women share similar life situations and experiences of being both a woman and black in a world that minimizes women of the African Diaspora.

Collins (2000) suggested that African American women’s ideas and concepts are the central point of analysis. Black feminist thought is a way to have a clear understanding of the thoughts and concepts of African American females that, otherwise, may not be clear or understandable. Collins posited that, being a racialized (African American) individual in a predominately-white environment calls for the embodiment of a stream of consciousness and awareness of oneself as the proverbial leader; meaning, in order to survive in an environment
where the majority of the individuals are not like the student, the students must be able to aware of who they are. From where is Black Feminist Thought derived? Guy-Sheftall (2009) noted, “Black feminist studies, which emerged in the 1970’s as a corrective to both black studies and women’s studies, probes the silences, erasures, distortions, and complexities surrounding the experiences of people of African descent wherever they live” (p. 11).

During the Black movement, it was thought that there should be a separate movement for African American women. Hooks (1984) made this clear when she mentioned, “As a group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group. Occupying such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression” (p. 14). Although this statement was published in the early 1980s, it still holds true today. By using Black Feminist Thought, it will give a voice to the participants. Collins (2008) remarked:

Black feminism gives voice to Black women, their experiences no matter how similar yet so varied. It allows researchers to examine the exclusion from positions of power within mainstream institutions that elevate the elite White male interests and the suppression of Black women’s ideas. (p. 7)

This brief summary of Black Feminist Thought can aid in the understanding of the predetermined lives of African American females. Therefore, this thought can serve as a resource and theoretical framework for staff, faculty, and administrators to gain a clearer understanding of the insufficiencies that many African American female students have when they enter college campuses. Therefore, having this understanding will allow for these educators to examine how policies and procedures could be adapted to aid these students.
Human ecology theory

The Ecological Systems theory was developed by the psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner. Brofenbrenner’s book, *the Ecology of Human Development* (1979) provided a clear and descriptive explanation of his ecology systems theory wherein the focus was on the person-environment interactions that, in turn, assist in human development. This environment is comprised of four systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. In this research, the microsystem comprises the main environment of the students’ lived academic settings. The mesosystem is their peer culture and several other microsystems. The exosystem comprises settings that may or may not encompass the individual. Finally, the macrosystem is the sociocultural environment that affects the student in more extensive ways. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979) each system has its own unique characteristics (see Figure 1):

1. A **Microsystem** is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics.

2. A **Mesosystem** comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (e.g., for a child, the relations among home, school, and neighborhood peer group; for an adult, among family, work, and social life).

3. An **Exosystem** refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person.
35

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner’s model

4. The *Macrosystem* refers to consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo) that exist, or could exit, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies.

Black Feminist thought and Bronfenbrenner’s Human ecology theory were used as a lens to examine the experiences of the participants. Although they are very distinct theories, when used together, they aided in understanding the environments in which the participants lived and experienced.
Site Selection

Midwest Community College [pseudonym] was the site chosen for this study for two reasons. First, the college is located in the central region of the state and near the capital city. Its location enabled the researcher to conduct work on all of the campuses because they are in close proximity to one another. The college is comprised of six campuses and several centers spread throughout the central region of the state. This region of the state is more diverse than other areas of the state; therefore, MCC offers potential participants with diverse backgrounds.

Second, MCC was chosen as the site for this study because the college was amenable to the study being held at their location. Support from administrators as well as institutional research was offered for the study. The college was very supportive of this research and was interested in the results of the study.

Participant Selection

First, approval was granted from the Iowa State University Institutional Review Board (Appendix A) to conduct the study. Then the documentation was forwarded to the Executive Director of the Institutional Research Department of Midwestern Community College. An email was sent with a request for the students whom I desired to participate in the study. A list of potential participants was generated by MCC who were then sent an email, inviting them to participate in the study. A copy of the invitation email is provided in Appendix B-1. After one week had passed, a second email was sent, reminding them of the invitation to participate in the study. After two weeks, a third reminder email was sent. There were still not enough participants; thus, recruitment continued for a third week. At that point,
participants were encouraged to speak with their peers whom they thought would qualify for the study and encourage them to participate.

A total of six participants were interviewed. At the start of the first interview, I introduced myself by providing my name, the university I attended as well the program in which I was enrolled. Then I introduced the study and explained why it was important to me. During this time, I explained that I was also a student who had stopped out of college. I also explained that, although I was attending a university, I believed that I would still be able to relate to some of their experiences in community college. Next I explained the three-interview process, and the time commitment as well as the incentive for this study. Lastly, I reviewed the informed consent form (see Appendix B-2) with each participant. Each participant signed the consent form and was given a copy for her own records.

Prior to starting each interview, each participant was asked if they had any questions. As each interview was completed, I reminded the participants that they could withdraw at any time and asked them if they had any additional questions or statements they wanted to make.

**Criteria for inclusion**

African American female students who were currently enrolled at MCC [pseudonym], a large multi-campus community college and have stopped out were invited to participate in this study. For the purpose of this study, “stopped out” was defined as not enrolling in classes for at least one semester, not including summer, and returning at a later date.
Data Collection

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews took place to provide a clear understanding of each participant’s experiences. The interview method is a common research method in qualitative research, Frels and Onwuegbuzie (2013) noted, “Interviews represent one of the most common ways of collecting data in qualitative research because they provide opportunities for the researcher to collect rich and meaning-making data” (p.188). The method itself is complex in that it has various types. From structured interviews to unstructured interviews, researchers can conduct their interviews in various ways and no single way is more right or wrong than another. The structure is based on needs of the interviewer and how she wants to conduct the interview. Many researchers select the interview method to expand their knowledge on a particular method. Some find the interview method enables them to get more details than they might get otherwise.

The way we interview depends on what we want to know. It is a process of finding out what others feel and think about their worlds. The result is to understand the major points of their message and how it compares [similar or different] to your own situation. Not only do you need to be a good conversationalist but a good listener. (Rubin & Rubin, 1995)

Many have compared interviewing with a conversation but in research they are completely different:

A qualitative interview is different from everyday conversation in the following ways. First it is a research tool and a good interviewer must prepare questions in advance, and later analyze and report results. The interviewer guides the questions and focuses the study. Good interview skills require practice and reflection. Finally, beyond the acquisition of interview skills, interviewing is a philosophy of learning. The interviewer becomes a student and then tries to get people to describe their experiences in their own terms. The results are imposed obligations on both sides (Rubin, & Rubin, 1995)
Many choose to use the interview method to find exceptions to the rule or to document historical events and situations. And the data you receive from the interview, in many cases; can be validated by other’s interviews or from other methods. Chadwick, Gill, Stewart, & Treasure (2008) noted, “Interviews are, therefore, most appropriate where little is already known about the study phenomenon or where detailed insights are required from individual participants. They are also particularly appropriate for exploring sensitive topics, where participants may not want to talk about” (p. 293).

Semi structured interviews include prepared questions but as the interview continues, the interviewer may ask additional questions if they feel it is necessary to get additional information for the research. Semi-structured interviews consist of several key questions that help define the areas to be explored, but also allows the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail. So why interviews? As Seidman (2006) mentioned, “At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals’ stories because they are of worth” (p. 9). The interview method allows for the stories of individuals to be heard.

For this study, I used a total of three interviews. The interview protocol I used is based on a three-interview series developed by Seidman (2006). Seidman described the first interview as the “Focused Life History … In the first interview, the interviewer’s task is to put the participant’s experience in context by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time” (p. 17). During the second interview, defined by Seidman as “The Details of Experience … The purpose of the second interview is to concentrate on the concrete details of the participants present lived experiences in the topic area of the study” (p. 18). The third and final interview is referred to
as the “Reflection on the Meeting … In the third interview, we ask participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. The question of ‘meaning’ is not one of satisfaction or reward, although such issues may play in the participants’ thinking” (p. 18).

For the first interview I used a Life History method to determine the educational history of the students. Questions were used to ask the participant’s educational history from elementary school to the present. This interview enabled me to develop a rapport with the participants. It also allowed me the opportunity to engage and share in my own experience of stopping out. During this first interview, questions about the participants’ childhood were also asked.

The second interview asked questions about the process of attending a community college, making the decision to stop out, and deciding to reenter school. Some of the questions were based on the first interview with each participant.

The third interview allowed the participants the opportunity to ask questions in reference to their review of their transcripts of the first two interviews and gave them time to reflect on this process. It also gave me an opportunity to clarify any concerns and questions that might have risen during the interview process.

Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, but some were done via the telephone due to scheduling conflicts. Interviews that were conducted over the phone were audio recorded. All interviews took place on the campus of the participant’s choice. Interviews began on January 31, 2014, and the last interview was conducted on April 29, 2014. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by www.rev.com.
Data Analysis

As stated by Merriam (2002), “Qualitative researchers are not interested in people’s surface opinions as in survey research, or in cause and effect as in experimental research; rather they want to know how people do things, and what meaning they give to their lives” (p. 19). This statement provides an explanation of how the process of data analysis occurs. Although there are several formats to conduct qualitative research, I chose to use narrative analysis. With narrative analysis, I used the process of gathering my data, organizing my data and interpreting my data for analysis (Merriam, 2002). This allowed for the analyses of data to focus on the stories and experiences of the participants.

Organizing

As mentioned previously, all interviews were recorded audibly and then transcribed. Then I reviewed each transcript to check for accuracy. Each participant reviewed their first two interview transcripts prior to scheduling their third interview. This process enabled them to change any inaccuracies, although no one expressed a need to change the transcripts. The third interview transcripts were sent to the participants for review and, again, no one expressed a need to change their transcripts.

Memoing

The use of memoing was incorporated into my study. This is a method used in qualitative research to enable the researcher to make memos of each participant. Memos are like letters or notes to the individual researcher (Esterberg, 2002). I explained prior to the start of the interviews that I would be taking notes throughout the interview. At the end of each interview, I was able to review my notes and write reflections about what I had learned.
as well as my thoughts on the individual participant and interview. These memos helped me with member checking and open coding for data analysis.

**Open coding**

Data analysis was conducted using open coding. Open coding is a system of naming and categorizing the phenomena by the examination of the same phenomena (Merriam, 2002). There are three steps to open coding: (a) assigning code words; (b) grouping the code words around an idea, another word for this is categorizing; (c) creating a code memo or notes (Merriam). After the data were collected and transcribed, I was able to start my open coding. I took each line and or paragraph, and each idea or event, and gave it a name or code to represent the underlying concept (Merriam). I also referred to my observation notes when creating these codes. I had made some important notes during the interviews. Then I grouped the common themes and ideas.

**Consent and Confidentiality**

Prior to the interviews, each participant signed a consent form (Appendix B-2). This consent form included a description of the study, the procedures, potential benefits and risk of the study as well as a statement of confidentiality. This consent form also included contact information for me as well as my major professor. The participant was informed that, if at any time she felt uncomfortable and would like to withdraw from the study, she may do so. Transcripts were shared with the participants for clarification and member checking. The transcripts from this study were maintained on a password-protected laptop. Each participant was giving a pseudonym and any identifiers were also changed. For backup purposes, a key with the pseudonyms were kept on a different file on a password-protected laptop.
Validity and Trustworthiness

There are several ways to ensure validity and trustworthiness. In qualitative research, trustworthiness is a key part in creating credible research. For my study, I chose to use member checking and peer review/debriefing. By using member checking and peer review/debriefing, I was able to assure that my study was conducted in a manner that may be considered as creditable. Creswell (2009) discussed trustworthiness as validity and reliability—these being the key procedures to ensure accuracy and consistency of the methods and analysis.

Member checking

Member checking is a strategy that is often used in qualitative research. It involves having the participants comment on the researchers interpretation of the data collected (Merriam, 2002). The participants reviewed the transcripts of their interviews. I allowed them to make corrections or take away any details from their individual transcripts. I also discussed with them, in a separate phone call, about my analysis of their narratives that I developed from their interviews. These phone calls took place during the months of June and July as I was writing Chapter 4 and 5.

Limitations

Like most studies, there are several limitations. The same held true for this study. The first limitation was this study was limited to this one multi-campus community college located in the Midwest. Although this study was limited to this community college, I believe much of the study may be transferable to other institutions, especially those that are similar.
The second limitation was the limited number of participants. Although this college is located in the heart of the state and considered a very progressive area, there were a limited number of students who attend the college who fit the criteria of African American females who have stopped out. A pilot study was completed with participants with the same criteria, including males, but was limited to one of six campuses. Several of the participants of that pilot study had agreed to participate in this study but declined when the invitation was sent.

**Positionality**

As the primary researcher of this study, I was the primary data collector as well. My goal was to maintain confidentiality and trustworthiness during my data collection and data analysis process. While doing this, it is also important for the researcher to present to the participants her positionality.

I was interested in conducting this research because I had experiences like these women. I am African American and I stopped out of college. I was the first in my family to attend college. Unlike these women, I attended a four-year state college in the South. When I decided to attend college, I had the support by my brothers and sisters in theory. However, when it was time to report to school, my older brother loaded his truck, drove me to campus, unloaded the truck, and hugged me goodbye. After that moment, I was my own primary resource—mentally and financially. During my first term, I was not very successful and was placed on academic probation. Having two jobs did not help in this matter. I was required to meet with an academic advisor who helped me with time management and note-taking skills. Yet, I still needed help financially.
By the midpoint of my second year, I found myself working a full-time job and being depressed. I decided to withdraw from school and I did not return for another year. When I did return, I had a wonderful advisor who happened to be the head of the department. Although I only took one class at a time, she supported me through the entire program, and always had an open door when I had questions and concerns. Although it took me seven years, I was able to complete my bachelor’s degree from the university I initially enrolled in, stopped out from and eventually returned to.

I have worked in student affairs for over eight years at several types of institutions: a four-year state land grant institution, a four-year private school, and a multi-campus community college. Since working at the community college, I have been amazed at the number of students who have returned to school after sitting out a semester, a year, or even longer. As an academic advisor, I was privy to have conversations with the students and learn about their reasons for departure and reentry to college. It was amazing to me to learn about the varied, as well as common reasons, for these occurrences. I found it so amazing that, once I became a doctoral student, I wanted to study the stop-out experiences of these students, specifically African American females.

**Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted during the spring of 2013 for the capstone. During this study, all African American students, both male and female, who attended one of the campuses of MCC were invited to talk about their experiences of stopping out and transitioning back to MCC. There were a total of three participants, one male and two females in the pilot study. The proposed study differed from the pilot study because African
American females from the entire college were invited to participate in this study—no males. Therefore, all the participants had the same variables of being African American, females and attending MCC. Several themes arose in the pilot study that propelled me to conduct this research: Lack of communication from the college once the student stopped out; a lack of clarity of the reenrollment requirements once the decision to return to college was made; and the family support that each student experienced. Through the pilot study, I was able to see where my strengths and weaknesses were when it came to research. My most noticeable strength is the ability to create a safe and open environment for participants wherein they are willing to answer the questions with comfort. One area that I had to work harder was my interview protocol. With the help of my methodologist, I believe I made the necessary adjustments.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of African American women who stopped out of and returned to community college. This chapter provides an introduction of the six participants, and an overview of their similar and not so similar educational experiences and their family dynamics. Following the overview are narratives from the participants which highlight personal stories of their educational journey from childhood to present day classroom experiences. After conducting a formal thematic analysis of the data, and spending a period of time reviewing, coding and identifying themes that emerged, I identified three themes: (a) lack of financial literacy; (b) importance of spiritual life and family support; and (c) lack of parental educational influence and encouragement.

Experiences of the Participants

Six African American female MCC students who had stopped out for at least one semester, not including summer, participated in this study. The participants were enrolled in MCC during the spring 2014 semester when the interviews took place although they attended different campuses and academic centers. One attended an academic center, which is on MCC’s third largest campus. Four attended the most diverse campus within the college district, and one participant took three of her four classes online. And one attends the largest campus which has a traditional campus setting. The participants range from 22-52 years old. One of the participants has attended one other institution beside MCC and two participants dropped out of high school. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants by age, marital status, number of children, degree currently seeking, years of attendance at MCC and if they had attended another college besides MCC.
Table 1. Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Attended MCC</th>
<th>Attended Another School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Six</td>
<td>Human Services</td>
<td>1997-1999</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2013-Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5/2012-Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Committed Relationship</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Associates in General Studies</td>
<td>1/11-1/12</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5/13-Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>Early Childhood Education</td>
<td>1/13-5/13</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1/14-4/14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Business Administration-AA</td>
<td>1/85-5/85</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5/11-Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kara</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Associates of Arts</td>
<td>1/11-8/11</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1/12-Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two of the participants are divorced, three single and one is currently in a committed relationship. All of the participants, except two, have children. Four of the participants were born and raised in the state; the other two are from two different states. None of the participants are only children and each has a minimum of two siblings. Four of the participants were raised since birth by a single mother. One was raised by her mother after the death of her father at the age of eight, and another was raised by an aunt. Only one of the six participants had attended another college besides MCC.

An overview of the family structure from childhood to the present as well as a brief description of their current MCC experience has been provided for the six participants. When asked, each of the women identified themselves as Black or African American. Although they have this in common, each has different experiences and stories. These experiences and stories are important to understand the complexity of Black feminist thought. As explained by Collins, “…clarifying Black women’s experiences and ideas lies at the core of Black
feminist thought” (p. 19). The following sections provide an overview of the participants’ 
stories and experiences in education (e.g., elementary school, junior high, high school and 
MCC), and the stories of their lives.

**Ashley**

Ashley attended the most urban of the six MCC campuses. She was one of the first 
participants to respond to the invitation email and the first to interview. Ashley responded to 
all email correspondence in a timely manner and arrived at all the interviews in a timely 
manner as well. She was the only participant who cried at least twice during the interview 
process. Ashley stated that there were some stories and thoughts brought up during the 
interviews that she had not thought about in years. We scheduled the second interview 
immediately after completing the first interview. Ashley was always well dressed, neat, and 
her fingernails were well manicured. From her physical appearance, one can easily surmise 
Ashley takes pride in her appearance. She was also very well spoken and was able to clearly 
express her thoughts. After reviewing the transcripts from the first two interviews, Ashley 
felt she did not speak well and was surprised at what and how she made her comments. I 
assured her that she did fine—her points were well taken and expressed clearly.

Ashley had no problem opening up about her life during each interview. There were 
not many pauses when questions were asked of her, and she asked questions when she was 
not clear about what was being asked. She was very thankful for the gift card that was given 
to her after the interview and stated that she would have done the interviews without 
receiving an incentive. Ashley mentioned that she had received an invitation to participate in 
another study but felt this topic was more relevant and important. She stated that she was
very open to answering any questions that were proposed to her. Ashley has two sisters, one who is currently attending MCC. She thought her sister would be eligible for the study. I encouraged her to ask her sister to check her email and, if she had received an email invitation, to reply. Her sister had not received an invitation email; therefore, she did not participate in the study.

Ashley is a 40-year-old single mother with six children. One child happens to be her nephew for whom she has custody and is raising. Ashley does credit her family and outside help with giving her support while she is in school. This support comes by way of babysitting or picking up her kids after school. Ashley stated:

*As far as helping me with the kids, it would mainly be my mother. She helps me out quite a bit as far as childcare, something like that. Maybe picking up from school if I have a meeting for school or something, or to help ... allow me time to study. She'll pick them up. As far as offering, she will do the offering.*

Not only does the family help out Ashley but her children also have mentors, except for her daughter. Each will assist when needed. Ashley said, “*...my daughter's the only one that doesn’t have a mentor right now, but I have mentors for all of my boys. If there’s an issue, I may possibly be able to have them pick them up, if necessary. They have set days that they pick them up.*” Ashley was very interested in the topic of the study and stated that she would be interested in reviewing the final results if they were made available. Ashley has worked all of her life and she feels that attending MCC will help her reach her ultimate goal in social services. Ashley is not sure of her future employment goals but she does want to work with families and children in some type of counseling or case management role. Ashley was asked questions that related to her home life and education during each stage of her life. She was open and honest about what she could remember about those stages.
**Childhood/Elementary School**

Her mother and stepfather raised Ashley after her parents divorced when she was about 2 or 3 years old. Her mother married her stepfather when she was about 3 or 4 years old. She grew up viewing her stepfather as her father. She is the youngest of four children; she has an older brother and two older sisters. Both her mom and stepfather worked outside of the home. Her stepfather has worked in a factory all of her life doing assembly. Her mother always had secretarial jobs and worked in a professional office setting. Ashley stated that she was very independent growing up and felt it was due to both parents working outside of the home. Ashley stated, “I was pretty independent and I think a lot of that had to do with no direct involvement. A lot of times both parents were out of the home working or otherwise busy.” Her older siblings did a lot of the directing when she was younger. With her parents being so busy with work and other activities, she felt she raised by her siblings.

When the discussion of her early education came up, Ashley stated that she did not remember a lot. While in elementary school, Ashley said that she moved a lot and she did adjust each time she moved. Ashley stated that she did well academically in elementary school. Ashley stated that, while in elementary school, her grandmother was the librarian and she remembered that well, “…because if I ever got in trouble, I never went to the office, I went to the library.” While in elementary school, Ashley also remembered teachers who were African American. She was able to name those teachers by name, even though it had been over 30 years since she was in elementary school. She called them by name although she did not have a lot of memories about them. Except for one teacher, Miss Jackson, Ashley stated, “I actually still kind of see her off and on, we always talk and everything. She was really down-to-earth, another African-American female teacher. I believe she was from
Texas, so she had that southern slang or slur, however you say it.” She mentioned that she tended to remember those teachers whom others considered hard or mean. They were her favorite teachers, and Miss Jackson was one of those teachers. She stated:

*She [Miss Jackson] was just really down-to-earth. She treated you like you were her child more so than her student. That made me like her more. A lot of people thought she was mean. The weird thing is a lot of the mean teachers used to be the ones that I liked. She was one that I liked.*

Overall, Ashley had a good experience in elementary school and she had teachers whom she still remembers and sees to this day.

**Junior High School**

When the discussion of junior high came about, one of the first comments that Ashley made was about her relationship with math: "*I think I did well there, also. I definitely did well in math, in the area of math. I'm not sure as far as science.*” Ashley felt that she was an overall good student in junior high. She remembered getting along with the other kids more than anything else. While in junior high, Ashley stated that she did not have any teachers that were African American but she did have two that stood out. Her homeroom teacher was a Caucasian woman who was laid back, enjoyable, and she felt she could talk to and joke with her. Although she never had her homeroom teacher for a subject class, she had fond memories of her. She also had a social studies teacher whom she remembered because she looked like the TV host, Sally Jessie Raphael, including the glasses. Like some of her other favorite teachers, she was somewhat mean and Ashley liked that about her: “*She was ... to me, I thought she was cool. She was to the point. That's what I always wanted. Somebody that's to the point, get you back on track if you need to be there, just keep you in line.*”
Ashley had an appreciation for those teachers who were direct with their students and kept them on track while they were in their classrooms.

**High School**

High school for Ashley was a fun experience overall. She did remember that she “was average” when it came to her grades. In addition, she also remembered that high school was when math started to become difficult and she didn’t do well in it. She stated, “Basically, it was a fun time for me. I wish I had that time over to do it a little differently. It was, for the most part, an enjoyable experience.” Ashley stated that she only remembered one teacher from high school—Mr. Drummond, her government teacher. Like her other favorite or memorable teachers, he was mean. Ashley remembered, “He was one of the mean ones. I liked him, because he was one of those ... keep you on task.” Ashley stated that, while in high school, she did not have a mentor or anyone she looked up to, not even in her family. Ashley graduated high school on time but did not go straight to college afterward.

**Adulthood/MCC Experience**

After high school, Ashley decided to move to Virginia. She knew someone who had family there, and thought it would be a nice experience to get away from the Midwest and move to the East coast. Ashley mentioned about her experience in Virginia, “It didn’t turn out the way I expected it to, but I still had learning experiences when I went there. I mean, I don’t know, it was just part of my life, part of my adventure. I tend to enjoy adventure.” Things did not turn out the way she expected and she decided to return home.

After returning home, Ashley decided to attend MCC. She started college in 1997 and stopped attending in 1999. She stated that one of her best friends was about to start attending
MCC so she followed her and majored in Accounting and Bookkeeping like her friend. Ashley mentioned, “She [her friend] was very good at in school and had taken classes. I was like, ‘Oh, okay, I’ll do that.’ But it wasn’t what I wanted.” Ashley stated that she felt going to college was what she needed to do to better herself, and make a better life for her and her son. When Ashley was asked where the decision to go to school came from, she replied:

*I think I was pretty much going through the motions. Like I said, we didn't do a whole lot of discussion, so I was just going with the crowd. Most of the time people go to college right after high school. Basically, the major that I was taking was not anything that I was even interested in.*

Ashley stated that she decided to stop school because she wanted to do something different with her life.

Ashley was in a program of study that she really was not interested in pursuing. Thus, when asked why she made the decision to quit attending school, Ashley replied, “I ended up moving out of state. That was basically it. I wanted something different. I basically wanted to pursue my singing career and I didn’t see any demand for that here. I didn’t see any options as far as studio work or anything like that. My son’s dad’s side of the family have a lot of connections on the East Coast so I moved to the East Coast.” Ashley decided that she wanted to pursue her singing career. She did not feel that where she lived would give her the exposure she needed, so she moved Maryland. When asked about the process of quitting school, Ashley stated that only her voice instructor tried to encourage her to stay: “She [her voice instructor] didn’t want me to go. She was like, ‘If you leave now, you’re not going to finish, you’re not going to do what you intended to do.’” Ashley said she learned the hard way that her instructor was correct:

*And she was right, because when I got to Maryland things didn't end up the way I expected them to. I didn't get the studio time. I ended up working.*
ended up meeting my now ex-husband and basically ended up starting a family. Then all of my time went to my family. It was like pretty much I lost who I was and became mother, wife, and that was it. I didn't pursue any type of self-improvement after that.

After returning home, Ashley worked and raised her family. She did not stay with her oldest son’s dad and later married. She birthed the rest of her children by her current ex husband. She decided to return to MCC after having issues with her job. She felt it was time to go back and finish what she started many years ago:

The issues that I went through with my last employer made me decide that I want to take the skills that I have and be able to do something on my own and be my own boss, supervisor, whatever. I figured in order to do that, with the knowledge as far as my experience in life, I wanted to add to that with the book knowledge so I decided I was going to go back because I ultimately would like to have my own business.

Upon her return, she decided that she would pursue a program in which she was interested—Human Services. When asked about the process of returning, Ashley stated that she did a new application, completed a placement test, and attended orientation. When it came to pay for classes, she stated that she had to do an appeal to get her financial aid due to what happened when she previously attended:

I did have to do an application. I also did an orientation. I did a test. Then, as far as applying for financial aid or anything like that, I think I had to get approved. I had to write a letter explaining my circumstances and why I left in the first place. Then, I was on a probationary period and I had to have a certain grade point average, there were attendance requirements

Ashley was awarded her appeal and was able to pay for her classes. She was set to return but, when asked if she was prepared, Ashley stated, “I think I was prepared, as far as I had my mind set on coming back, versus in 97. My life circumstances outside of school made it so that I wasn't fully prepared.” Ashley credited her success to the TRiO Student Support Services (SSS) program. The mission of SSS is to provide underrepresented student
populations with the added support mechanisms needed to meet the challenges of higher education. Ashley expressed that she could go to her advisor in the program if she was having problems inside and outside of the classroom. She stated that she did not have that before when she was taking classes at MCC.

**Race and Gender**

The subjects of race or gender were not brought up by Ashley although she knew this was an intriguing part of the study. However, when she asked questions that were related to race and gender, Ashley had a lot to say. When it came to her elementary, junior and high school teachers, staff and administrators, Ashley made it very clear that she had never had a male teacher who was African American or of any minority group. Ashley stated that she had never thought about it until she began answering questions for this study. When it came to her MCC experience, Ashley stated that she did not feel that she was treated different inside or outside of the classroom due to her race or gender. In fact, she stated that, at times, she felt as if she was one of the majority students:

*I don't have an issue talking with people. I don't have an issue sitting in a front of the class, raising my hand, asking a question if I don't understand it. I think I was merged into that other, into that majority group, because of that. I would take what I knew and ask that, be able to share it with somebody else, and be able to help someone else out.*

Ashley made several comments that, at times, those of her same race due to the way she spoke and presented herself would look her upon negatively. When it came to looking at the African American community for inspiration, Ashley looked toward the community in a different way to be inspired:

*I use the African-American community to inspire me to do better. I don't want to be a statistic. Just like I tell my boys, I don't want you to grow up to be a*
statistic. Not saying that all of the African-American community is in a negative line, but like I said, I'd use that to make me do better

Instead of looking to her community to take inspiration from, she looked to it to try and make a difference in her life. Ashley stated that she looked to her children for her inspiration, “It inspires me ... that, and my children inspire me to do better. I want to do better so that I can show them this is where we could be. This is where you can get to.” Although her inspiration now came from the African American community, as a whole, her children provided the inspiration she needed to try and improve herself as well as to try and make a better life for her and her children.

Stopping Out

When asked about her experience stopping out of MCC, Ashley stated that, if she had to do it all over again, she would have done a lot of things differently:

*I think I probably would have told myself to speak with an advisor and find out what it is that I truly would like to do, what I see myself doing maybe five years from that point, and maybe take some tests to see what my preferences are as far as career choices. That's on the academic side. Then, on the personal side, I would say to go ahead and finish while I had less on my plate because you never know what's going to happen or transpire in the future.*

Ashley would not only do things differently, she would also advise other African American women to do likewise:

*I think I would tell her to think long and hard about it. Probably weigh the pros and cons of finishing now or possibly having to come back years later, where you would have more going on in your life. Again, talk with an advisor to see ... Advisor or maybe family members or someone who has done it, to find out what some of the advantages are of finishing. And just say stick with it as much as possible and seek additional help if you need it, support systems.*
Ashley understood the need to have support from one’s family and others in order to be successful. Her point to college administrators goes beyond just having checks and balances. She suggested another way of thinking for staff and administrators:

*I would say, to be understanding and to also acknowledge that everybody has different circumstances, everybody is not the same typical student. There may be extreme circumstances, there may be minor circumstances, but everybody may feel like things that are going on in their life might make it hard for them to accomplish getting their education. I would say to be a little more personable as possible. Don’t just make it a general, you can do this because this, this, this. Make it personal. Find out about the person. Maybe ask them what they’re going through or offer resources to some type of counseling or something where they can get the help that you may not be able to offer.*

Ashley’s suggestion that the college staff build relationships with their students and be more understanding is what has helped her be successful during her current time at MCC.

**Danny**

Like Ashley, Danny attended the most Urban of the MCC campuses. She was very excited to participate in the study, which she expressed in her reply to the invitation email. We had several correspondences before a date and time were set for the first interview.

Danny was a student employee for the campuses and was able to interview either immediately before or after work. It was convenient to her because she did not have to make an extra trip to the campus. Danny’s appearance was very memorable because of her long dreadlocks that she tended to wear along with an array of hair accessories in them. Danny’s interviews were the longest among the six participants. She was very passionate about her life and her future. Danny was very interested why this topic was chosen for this study, and stated that she would also like to see the final results. Danny enjoyed being a student worker and she felt it was a great way for her to connect with the students and staff on the campus.
Danny was given a copy of the leading questions prior to the first interview and, upon her arrival, she had already answered and typed them as well. I explained to her that we would still do the interview, especially as additional questions may need to be asked. She agreed that this would be fine and was excited to participate in the study. Danny was attentive during each of the three interviews, and was very expressive with her hands and body language. One could tell she was passionate about each subject she discussed. It was also apparent that she had had an adventurous life and has been in contact with a lot of people in various arenas. Two subjects of discussion were immediately obvious she was most passionate about her children and her education.

Danny is a 52 year old single mother of three children. Her oldest son is 35 years old, and she has two daughters who are 14 and 17 years old. Danny made it very clear that, without the help of her ex-husband, she would not be able to attend school fulltime and support her children in all of their extracurricular activities. Both of her daughters are involved in sports that do not work well with her schedule: “That's a big thing; so, it's like, ‘Okay, what games can I attend? What games can you attend’? If I had to do that on my own it'd be just crazy.” Danny stated that she had a great working relationship with her ex-husband for the sake of their children. Danny did not have any additional support in the area and did not have any family living nearby as well. Not having family in the area made it harder when she was in need of extra help with her children. Danny responded to all the questions with enthusiasm and passion when she was asked about her life and the many transitions she had to make.


**Childhood/Elementary School**

Danny was born in Oakland, California and lived there until she was in 2nd grade, after her parents divorced. Her father remarried and her mother decided to move to the Midwest. This was an adjustment for Danny because the community where she first lived was predominately African American. After she moved, there were very few African Americans in the town in which she lived. Although this new city did not have a large African American population, many members of her mother’s family lived nearby, and she was surrounded by aunts, uncles, and cousins. Her larger family lived in California and she missed that connection after she moved to the Midwest. Her father owned his own business and Danny thought that was very inspiring to her as a child, and even today as an adult.

Danny is the older of two children; she has a younger brother who is nine years younger. She had two cousins who lived with her for a period of time; one was the same age as Danny and the other was two years younger. Danny did not talk much about her mother’s occupation or about her brother’s father.

Danny had many stories about her elementary school after moving to the Midwest. It was very clear that the teachers in her school cared about their students during the school year as well as the summer. Although Danny did not have a single African American school teacher, staff or administrator at her elementary school, she still had memorable moments. Until this day, Danny said she maintains contact with one of her elementary teachers: “Oh yeah, which is interesting because I still have contact with one of my elementary teachers, not a lot, but every now and then I’ll hear.” This same teacher put together a summer program for the elementary school students that involved them visiting a family in a small town. Danny talked about the experience:
It was real interesting, we went there for a week to learn about smaller towns and stuff and there was no diversity there. We stayed with people; each of us kind of got farmed out to a family. One of the greatest experiences of my life. I remember the little girl had beautiful blond hair and we decided she could have Afro puffs, so we stayed up one night and I back combed so she had puffs.

Danny also talked about other experiences she had outside the classroom with her teachers: “We would go to the Y [YMCA] with one of our teachers sometimes, too, and do swimming and different stuff. It was like they really seemed to care about us out of school hours.” Clearly, the teachers at Danny’s elementary school wanted to make sure their students were exposed to as much as possible inside and outside of the classroom. Danny also spoke about her second elementary school principal and the memories she had with him: “...the second one because I loved school so much, I strived to do my best because he was one of the best buds. You could go in his office and listen to Carole King on his stereo, which was really funny and everybody was really giving.” Although her principal did not look like her and was not a female, she had great memories of times spent with him. Overall, Danny had a great elementary school experience. When observing the expressions on her face and the tone in her voice, those experiences had a great impact on her life.

Junior High School

Danny did not have any African American teachers or administrators in junior high. Danny did not have much to say about her junior high experience except that she remembered not doing well in math, a subject she still struggles with today. Danny talked about her summers where she would become a teacher for her brother and cousins: “That meant I had to get extra papers and stuff so I could teach them in the summer. Dragging home paper, I think that's my love of paper. School for me was important because I had to
learn because I had to teach, so I taught them.” Because Danny was as a teacher to her younger brother and cousins, she took it as a great responsibility to learn so that she could teach them.

**High School**

Danny’s high school career did not last very long because, after a year, she discovered she was pregnant. Although she wanted to remain in school, her mother made the decision for her to drop out. Danny talked about her conversation with her mom about staying in school:

_I was like, "There are pregnant girls." She goes, "No. Pregnant girls do not go to school, in our family." That was the understanding and so she pulled me out. For a while I did homework and then sent it in. There must have been just to finish up or something. When I went to school, 10th, 11th, and 12th was high school, so it makes a little bit of a difference there. So, when I got done high school just wasn't going to work for me, so we decided that I would, at first do alternative, but I had issues with child care providers when they're not able to do it. It started out she was going to do it, but then sometimes she'd be too tired because she worked the night shift. It became really difficult; it was like, "Okay. Well I'll figure this out. I have to graduate._

Danny made it very clear in her interview that she wanted to remain in high school and graduate with her classmates. Instead, she completed her GED after two years. She spoke about that experience:

_Ended up taking my GED, but that was like, I would say, two years late, actually. I tried to do, like I said, the alternative and when I was there I made great credits and stuff, but it was just difficult. It was interesting because I actually started doing my GED, went in tested, tested out of two classes I think it was, and then went back. It took me three times, three different times. I didn't take classes, but three different times to get prepared. I struggled with Math. On my third day that I went I passed out of all of it._

Although Danny’s path was probably not one she planned or imagined for her life, she completed her GED and felt that was a huge accomplishment in her life.
**Adulthood/MCC Experience**

Due to having a child at a very young age, Danny found it necessary to work to take care of herself and her son. When Danny starting working at a day care, they required that she take the Early Childhood Education program at MCC. She started the program in 2009 and stopped in 2010. Initially she did no plan to attend college; and, if she would go, it would not be to study Early Childhood Education. She had nearly completed the certificate degree and was planning on pursuing the diploma but lost her job at the day care, which paid for her classes. She had lost her job due to governmental funding issues and, although she was re-offered her job a few days later, she decided not to return. She spoke about that experience:

> Well, this is so funny. One day I went in, they talked about budget cuts, and were like, "Okay, so we're gonna have to lay you off," and they were talking to 3 of us, I think; so, I said, "Okay." I mean, I'm not stretching that; it's like, kind of now. But, then the next day I don't go in because we're laid off. She calls me and she goes, "Well, I found some money." She goes, "I just want to keep you as long as I can." Like, "What? Oh, okay." Technically, I was fired and rehired the next day, which told me my stability ... you don't know where your funding is coming from. I have a family and it may not be the right time.

At that point, Danny did not think twice about going back to MCC and completing her education. Because her main focus was providing for her family, she continued to work and has a rich history of social services positions she has held.

Danny decided to return to MCC when she was laid off by her job due to a massive governmental lay-off:

> I lost my position. Was making decent money, had no problems at work, and lost my position because of the fact I didn't have a 4-year degree. They changed the law and let either 74 or 77 of us go across the state, and no one was grandfathered in, and it was like, "Okay, I don't want to be jostled around." I'd never had that happen to me before, and it was like, "Is this the change? Is this the wave? How am I gonna provide for my children later on in life? They'll be in school, in college and stuff." It was like, "I have to do something permanent. I need to get more education."
Once again, Danny thought about her children when making a decision. Although she had continued to educate herself by taking Continuing Education courses as well as a few classes at a local private university, she felt it was important to return to MCC and get a fresh start on her education.

The process for Danny was different from Ashley in that Danny did not have to attend an orientation:

*I didn't have to go to orientation, which was interesting because I was already a student, and just the way it progressed. But I had to see an advisor, and I talked with an advisor and got some information, and it was like, "Okay, what are my steps?" I'm always like, "Okay, what are the steps that I must do?" Because then I judge my ... I balance my time. I'm real funny about time.*

When talking about her return to MCC, Danny spoke about whether or not she was prepared:

*I was unemployed, and so I felt like I could focus on school. I was like, "I could do something that was going to allow me to really see if I could succeed in school." Was I scared? Oh, my gosh. I was terrified, because one of the issues was, I know I was going to be one of the oldest, students, and I was like, "There's going to be a lot of young students. They're going to get stuff quick, and I'm just mellow." It was like, "Oh, my goodness. What if I can't speed my brain up to that level?" That was my big fear.*

Not only did Danny worry about being able to keep up with the younger students in her classes, but she also had to find a balance between her student worker job, school and taking care of her daughters:

*A lot of ... My problem now is I don't try to keep up with anyone else. I definitely work to my own pace, but I found a lot of times, because I get so anxious, I'm usually ahead. Which sometimes, it's the problems whereas I think something isn't due because I worked ahead, and then I'm over here doing something else, focusing on ... because I'm running school, church, my internship, my children, all of these things, and I'm like, "Okay, we're doing it."*
Danny also mentioned having to change her attitude about school. The first time she attended MCC she did not have the best attitude about school because she was forced to attend. This second time around, although she returned after being laid off, it was still her choice. She had a better attitude and was also motivated to do well:

*I think it was my attitude that changed the most, to be honest with you. The attitude, now that I look back was pretty sucky. I wasn't as motivated as I could have been, and it was a slow pace, and it was just like you had class, and it's like, "Oh, yeah." Just wasn't a big deal, so I would have to say it was my motivation, because I can recall turning in some information; and my problem was I would turn in stuff late. But to be honest with you, I can sit down and put it together in a relatively short time. I have a tendency to be a procrastinator, even still.*

Having a better attitude and being motivated has enabled Danny to be successful inside and outside of the classroom. Like by many of peers, she is highly motivated and also motivates many of her classmates to do well.

**Race and Gender**

Although Danny had an understanding of this study, very rarely did she bring up race or gender in her comments. Unless questioned, she mentioned race only when speaking of the family in the country with whom she lived during a summer or the community where she lived in California. When the questions switched to asking about how she feels she is treated differently or if she feels different due to her race or gender, Danny felt it is something else, she says,

*Not so much here. In other places I believe it does. It doesn’t play a huge role because there are so many African-Americans at this campus, so it’s a very comfortable campus. I think it’s been an eye-opener for some. I think my age plays a part, a bigger part. It hit me, I'm older and so I've seen a lot of things, done a lot of things and someone just talking with students and those kinds of things. I run into the problem a lot of times and I get a little following, it's like, "Beloved, I can appreciate you, but you probably need to go and work on*
Danny felt that her age had given her an advantage at certain times, and has enabled her to be an example to her younger classmates. She also felt that she had great experiences with her instructors and they did not treat her differently:

*It's been really good, because to be honest with you, here I have felt like I'm on equal footing with a lot of the professors, they don't talk way down to me, and I only ask if I really am concerned about something and need to know. Sometimes it's nice to talk to them and we'll banter back and forth and it's fun. I've had nothing but great experiences with my instructors here.*

Danny has found her place at MCC. She has thoroughly enjoyed being on campus and helping others as well as sharing her experience and knowledge with those who will listen.

**Stopping Out**

In Danny’s eyes, the main reason students stop out of community college is because of finances:

*Finances. It is really hard to try if you're a single parent, and I'm sure. I'm sure even if you're not a single parent, it's hard; but having two children, they have sports needs, they have school fees, and just because I'm not working doesn't mean that their life stops. Something their dad is very supportive in that kind of thing and he would help as much as ... more than he's expected to. But it's just one of those things, that's like, "No."*

Danny spoke on several occasions about being able to support her children— not only being there for them physically but also financially. Danny also expressed what she felt college administrators need to do to support students, who have stopped out:

*I would say you really need to stress that there is a support system, and maybe pull them together to talk about things, to help them to understand. There are some great diamonds in the school that people don't know about, and it's like they're open to people, but people don't understand them. To be honest with you, no one wants to feel like they're stupid, so it's like...*
Through her participation in the TRiO program, Danny mentioned there needs to be more information given to students about the program as more students need to take advantage of it. This program provides an assigned advisor for students whereas most do not have someone to help them. Danny also felt that the college should require all students—whether they are new or returning—to attend an orientation:

*I'm in awe of the fact that students can ... aren't all required to go to orientation, because they learned a lot of stuff that took me a while to learn. That is the big help in itself. I really think, just the support piece of saying this is a go-to person you can talk to, understanding where they're coming from and their need.*

Stopping out and returning did not hinder Danny when she returned. She had to learn a lot along the way. Becoming involved in the TRiO program as well as being a student worker has enabled Danny to gain much more support than she did her first time at MCC.

**Lisa**

Lisa attends the technology campus of the college as well as one of the academic centers. She does not live close to any of the campuses so she takes classes at the campus that best fits her schedule. Lisa replied to the second recruitment email with a response of, *“How can I help?”* which I found not only very interesting but also very appropriate once I met her.

When Lisa entered the room, she had a very bold presence. It appeared that she was “very well put together” and very organized. Her hair and clothes were extremely neat and she had a bright smile. Although she appeared to you be young in age, one could easily surmise she was mature. Lisa was very comfortable talking about her life experiences and her mistakes. She took credit for a lot of the issues she has had and the past but she has learned
from each one. Lisa was very optimistic about her future and showed a courage about her that could be admired by women twice her age.

Lisa was always early to her interviews. Each time I arrived, she would be waiting on me to help set up the interview. After the first interview, we would begin each meeting by discussing how things were going in her personal life prior to starting the recording. It appeared that she was very comfortable with me before, during, and after the interviews. One evening, I received a text from her, inquiring where should she and her boyfriend should go for a nice place to eat in the local area. She also mentioned that she would not be having her children for the weekend and wanted to go to a nice restaurant. I suggested several and wished her luck with choosing one. It was very apparent that Lisa was very comfortable with me, which presented a safe environment for each interview. Although she appeared comfortable in her interviews, her answers were short and to the point. When asked if she had anything additional to say, she usually replied, “No.”

Lisa is a 26-year-old mother of two boys who are 4 and 7 years old. She has been in a relationship her son’s father since she was 17 years old. She credits her partner, Kevin, for moving her from her hometown to the small town where she lived, as the best decision they could have ever made. Lisa perceived the move was not only good for their relationship but also enabled them able to work on themselves, individually, to better themselves. Lisa felt that, since the move, Kevin has acquired skills and a job that will enable him to take care of her and the boys and live a very stable life, which was a new experience for her. Lisa was excited to see what the future will hold for her and her family.
**Childhood/Elementary School**

Lisa was raised by her aunt when her mother became unable to take care of her and her four sisters. Then her grandmother stepped in when her aunt was no longer able to take care of Lisa and her sisters. Lisa’s mother has been on drugs ever since Lisa can remember, and continues the struggle, even today. Lisa’s said aunt was her first role model and she credits her for the woman she is today: “I guess my aunt was a big role model. She kind of taught me ... kind of how to be a woman. What I was suppose to be doing. I did.” Lisa did not see herself as coming from a bad family even though her mother has continually struggled with drugs:

*I probably always knew what I should have been doing, but I just didn't necessarily want to because my mom she was on drugs. I didn't have direction from her, but my grandmother was always there for us. I don't think we came from a bad family. I guess I could probably whine and complain about her being on drugs and stuff like that. We never lived in crack houses. I never even experienced her actually doing drugs. I knew as I grew up, but we have a lot of family behind us that kind of made up for her.*

Many people in Lisa’s situation growing up would complain about their parent being on drugs or use it as an excuse. Lisa felt the support for her family is what helped her when she was younger.

Lisa first lived in a state that is North of her current residence. In that state, she lived in the capitol city and on the side of town that is known nationwide for its high crime rates. Lisa stated that she knew nothing different—it’s the only life she has known. Lisa lived in a predominately African American neighborhood, which meant that all of her teachers and administrators in elementary school were African American.

Lisa had a difficult time during the early years of her education: “*Elementary school was okay. I probably had a hard time up until the fourth grade. I have an IEP (Individualized*
Education Plan).” For many students with learning and behavioral problems, the school prepares an IEP to help develop a plan for these students while they are in school. Lisa spoke highly of one of her teachers in elementary school: “I worked with someone who was absolutely amazing. Her name was Ms. Jack and feel that you can communicate with her to this day. She kind of helped me to get to where I needed to be, eighth grade.” Lisa’s elementary school went from K-8th grade, so there was no middle or junior high school. She went directly to high school after completing the 8th grade.

High School

Lisa moved a lot when she attended high school. Moving around so much did not sit well with her. She felt it caused her to make a decision that she wished she could go back and change:

\[In\ high\ school\ I\ dropped\ out\ in\ my\ junior\ year.\ I\ think\ at\ junior\ year\ or\ right\ before\ it.\ Just\ because\ we\ moved\ around\ a\ lot\ and\ there's\ a\ lot\ chaos.\ I\ pretty\ much\ do\ whatever\ I\ wanted\ to\ do.\ Dropping\ out\ was\ my\ choice.\ I\ don't\ know,\ I\ did\ well\ in\ high\ school.\ I\ could\ do\ the\ work\ it\ wasn't\ that.\ I\ just\ didn't\ have\ any\ direction,\ so\ I\ just\ dropped\ out.\ That's\ pretty\ much\ it.\]

Lisa felt she needed more stability, discipline and support in order to stay in high school. By that time in her life, she had met the father her of children who was much older than her. Lisa remarked that she should not have been with her sons’ father but, at that time in her life, she did not have anyone to advise her otherwise. Her older sisters were living their lives and she started to live hers.
Adulthood/MCC Experience

Lisa moved soon after having her second son. Her father was sick and Kevin wanted to be closer to his father to build a relationship with him. His father is doing well and the move has proven to be good for them:

Kevin is just from circumstances. He didn't have a really good childhood either. He went to prison and he was there on the majority of his younger years up until his mid 20. When he got out, he didn't want to go back. When we moved here he got an electrician's license. The people there are so great. Our neighbors at the time, Kevin was walking around putting in applications and stuff like that. He stopped and he picked them up and he picked them over to the Exile that's what it was called. He pretty much recommended him of just the fact that he was walking around putting in applications. They gave him a job, they told him that it was contingent on his driving record being clean. He was full and upfront with them about his past and everything. He got an electrician's licenses through them.

Kevin has since progressed in his field and now is a manager. When it comes to Lisa, her journey has been different since her move. She started attending MCC to complete a program that would allow her to take college credit while completing her high school diploma. She received her diploma and decided to enroll as a fulltime credit student. However, problems at home caused her to have to drop out of school:

Kevin and I were not getting along a lot because I'm kind of selfish. Well, I don't know, we just weren't getting along because he didn't like all the time that I was spending doing my stuff, so I moved out. I never lived alone in my life. I went from my mom's or family members' houses to living with him, and so when I moved out I kind of had to work, so I worked, and that was pretty much it. It was just too stressful, arguing with him and trying to the homework, and, yeah, so it was just way too much stress.

Lisa felt that she could not do her schoolwork and have peace at home, too, so she decided to leave. When asked how her family felt when she quit school, Lisa said, “The two semesters I sat out at MCC? I didn't tell them.” Lisa stated that she did not feel it was necessary that she tell her family she was quitting school. She stated that she did not see a
difference. She was no longer living with Kevin, so he did not see her and the rest of her family was in an entirely different state.

Regarding support and encouragement, Lisa felt that her out of state family provided what she needed: “It’s more encouragement. We don’t necessarily talk about school in general. Just life encouragement from my sisters.” Lisa is the first in her family to go to college. She has some aunts who live in the South who have degrees, but they did not raise her or have much influence on her life when she was younger. She stated that her sister went to a trade school but no one close by has attended college for an associates or bachelor’s degree. Lisa credited her main support system to the people who live near her as well as her sisters:

Their dad, the boys, our church family where we live, my sisters, my three sisters. One of them she’s younger than me. She doesn’t have any direction. Obviously, I love her, but we don’t do the same things or we’re just not the same people. It’s harder to kind of mesh with the stuff she likes to do.

Lisa is aware of the importance of the need to have support and encouragement to continue her education. She wants to be a great example for her sons so she continues to work hard on her schoolwork.

**Race and Gender**

Lisa was very comfortable with talking about race and race issues in her interviews. She has not felt a need to be helped and she has had no problem expressing how she feels. When asked about her experiences in the classroom regarding race and gender, and if she has experienced any differences, Lisa simply responded:

Yes! Just because ... I can't necessarily say ... I guess I can say in class. Because I don’t know sometimes like the stuff that they whine or complain about I’m like, "Seriously, shut up." I don’t know if it has anything to do with
being a parent and being 26 and being still at this point in my and they're right out of high school. It's like you don't even know, so stop complaining. Just get there now and don't worry about the rest of it. Is that kind of what you are.

Lisa was referring to the Caucasian students in her classes. The campus and center she attends are comprised predominately white students between the ages of 18-24. Lisa perceived that, because they have not had to live a life anywhere comparable to the life she has experienced, those students feel privileged to have what they have and that they should not complain about anything. This was the only example that Lisa could recall while at MCC that relates to race. As a woman, she said she has not had any problems in the classroom regarding discrimination.

**Stopping Out**

Lisa made the decision to stop out of MCC due to her home circumstance. Unlike most of the women in this study, Lisa spoke with an advisor before deciding to leave:

Yes, yeah. It wasn’t like, just because that information is out there, but I don’t think there was any specific information that I was given that said, okay, because I called and I was talking to Sherry, or whoever, she worked at Southern Branch. She retired now, but I was asking her what are the consequences and what’s going to happen and stuff like that, and she was saying that I’d probably go on academic probation, but I could start the following semester, which I tried to start the following semester, but after you have your financial aid pay out, then you have to pay that back, so I had to save the money to pay that back and everything.

Lisa had an idea of what she was getting herself into when she returned, because she had spoken with an academic advisor. What the advisor did not tell her was that, once she returned, she could pay the money owed with the new financial aid money she would be getting the next semester:
When I went back, I was trying to set up for them to just pull the money from my taxes, so that I wouldn’t have to worry about it. Well, I found out anyhow that if you have enough financial aid to cover the semester that you can use that money towards paying it, and I didn’t know that. I probably wouldn’t have been out the amount of semesters that I was if I had known that.

Lisa worked to save up the money to pay back her financial aid; however, she may have had the opportunity to return to school sooner if she knew she did not have to pay it back using her out-of-pocket dollars.

When discussing the process of stopping out and returning, Lisa made a great point to others who may be thinking about dropping out of college to speak to someone before leaving:

Yeah, I know it’s a lot of people or whatever, but maybe if there was something that ... Maybe if there was someone to talk to, you know, someone who you could try to help the situation first before you sit out. I know there’s a lot of people, and I know that most people won’t even use it, but there could be that one person who actually will use it and needs to use it, and I guess when you come back the same thing. I know the support is there, but if you don’t know or if you don’t go looking for it, then you’re pretty much screwed.

Lisa shared that she now understood the importance of speaking with someone when needing to make a decision, and how this ultimately helped her when she decided to leave and return.

When asked about her decision to return to school, Lisa stated that she spoke with advisor in order to register:

I had to meet with an adviser and I couldn’t register online like regular. You have to actually come in and see someone, and it wasn’t necessarily talking about how come I decided to come back and have things gotten better so that I can stay or anything like that.

Lisa made several comments that, although she spoke with an advisor, she did it only because it was required—she had a “hold” on her account and she could not register. In addition, she felt that when she met with the advisor, the advisor should have asked about her
personal issues to make sure she would not have to drop out of school again. That did not happen.

Lisa had advice for any woman who is thinking dropping out of school that some may find interesting:

Obviously you don’t want to sit out, but if it’s … I don’t know, I feel like I made the right decision in sitting out just because I didn’t want to fail and not necessarily at the classes but I think that would have taken over me if I would have failed that semester instead of just trying to sit out, but I don’t know, I guess I would say to sit out and try to figure it out and then go back. I don’t know if that’s like quitting, but it was too much. It was just too rough, and to me it made more sense to sit out.

Lisa felt that, if students need to stop out or sit out, before doing anything, they should figure out the issues in their life. Regardless, the important part is to go back and finish.

**Tina**

Tina was the 4th participant in this study. She attends the two largest of the MCC campuses. Tina asked several questions prior to the first interview. I found it refreshing because only a few of the prospective participants asked questions. Tina was very open and willing to meet with me, and she offered several times for availability. Tina was afraid that she would not remember a lot or have stories to tell about her educational experience and, at times, additional questions had to be asked in order to get more details of her experiences.

Although she was very soft spoken, when Tina spoke of certain experiences, her voice became louder and there was excitement in her face as her expressions changed. Tina filled her interviews with laugher. She laughed about happy and sad experiences. She was great at correspondences with me, except for our last interview. It took several attempts by phone and email to set up the last interview. Tina was preparing for the end of the semester
and graduation, so her focus was concentrated on wrapping up the semester. I told her that I understood. Tina is a 50-year-old single woman with no children, and she has never been married. Tina has focused on working and spending time with her family. She has been very active in her church and spends a lot of her time working at the church and attending church events. Tina’s ultimate goal is to own her own hair salon that caters to all people, especially those from various cultures and backgrounds.

**Childhood/Elementary School**

Tina’s mother and father raised her until she was eight years old and her father passed. Three months before his death, Tina’s father completed his bachelor’s degree. Tina is the youngest of four children; she has two sisters and a brother. She talked about being the youngest, “I'm the baby. I'm the baby, the one that was always protected.” Tina made it clear that, after her father passed, her siblings were always there for her, even until today. In addition, Tina said she remembered that her mother attended MCC after her father passed:

*Matter of fact though, after my father passed, my mother actually attended MCC so with ... Even though my brother was out of school by that time, me and my other two sisters were in school, she still did work full-time and came into classes here at MCC for an Associate’s degree.*

Tina stated that she was very proud of her mom for returning to school and completing her Associate’s degree, even though she was very young at the time. She talks about her elementary school experience as being a good one:

*It was pretty good. I went to Mulberry Elementary in the neighborhood. It was more of a diverse school as far as ... for that time because there were other that would have been probably considered a little bit more Black, and that one, at least in my eyes was a little more diverse.*
Tina talked about attending elementary school with the children in her neighborhood and how it was a good experience. Nevertheless, there was only one other person she saw in school with whom she was familiar: “A little strange for me because my mother was an associate there. I would say, when you have your mother there working at the school you're not one that can get in a whole lot of trouble.”

Like Ashley, Tina had a family member who worked at the school but, in Tina’s case, it was her mother. Nevertheless, Tina did mention there were teachers at her elementary school who were African American. She said there were more in elementary school than any other time in her educational career.

**Junior High School**

Tina spoke very little about her junior high experience. When describing her experience, Tina mentioned that part of her life did not start in a good way:

*Junior high, just not so good. Different changes happened and with that, because I actually ended up at one junior high school, found out I was in the wrong district after about ... well I had been enrolled for all of summer and then two or three days into the semester it was, "oh you're in the wrong district." I'm taken away from my friends and having to start all over, it just wasn't...*

Tina stopped her statement at that point. She did continue about her academics in junior high:

“I would say average. I wasn't on honor roll or anything but I was average.” When asked if she wanted to talk more about that experience, she did not want to say anything further. It was obvious that switching schools after being around her friends and starting over was hard for her. She recalled there were not many African American teachers in junior high—there were counselors but no teachers. Tina did not have many stories or examples of her junior high days, so I did not delve further as it appeared to be a hard time for her.
High School

It seemed that high school was much better for Tina, and she was able to remember a little more from that time. When asked about high school and her teachers, she replied:

_Different. There was some African American teachers that were my ... matter of fact, oh God now we're going back 30 years but ... You know, my homeroom teacher was African American but actual teacher-teachers, I do not remember. He was a teacher-teacher but he didn't teach me anything, but I don't remember any other African American teachers. Coaches and things of that nature I remember but as far as teacher-teachers, I don't remember._

Tina made it clear that she was never the best student while in school, but she did enjoy going to school. Seeing her mother and father go to college did encourage her to want to do well in school, even though she felt she was an average student at best.

Adulthood/MCC Experience

After high school, Tina worked for about six months before attending MCC. She made it obvious in her interview that she went to MCC because it was what her mother wanted her to do. When Tina attended MCC the first time, she was 19 years old and a fulltime student majoring in Liberal Arts. Tina recalled that, at that time, she did not know what she wanted to do with her life so school seemed like the best option. Tina mentioned that there were a lot of barriers when she first attended MCC. Living in a state that snows in the winter, it vital to have transportation and Tina did not have a car:

_I would say, as badly as I didn't want to come back to school, I probably didn't think a few things through. For one, I came back in January, no car. I didn't live far away from here but coming home from work it's like, I don't want to be cold._
Tina talked about not preparing for the winter and having to find a ride to school was not working out for her. Another issue she had was taking classes her mother thought would be good for her:

Two, my other thing was, is that I had come and taken accounting and there was some things I just don't think that I was mentally prepared for. At the time there was no computers, a lot of things pen and paper. I never thought about taking a two-hour class and having four to five hours’ worth of homework. Probably the first hour was just trying to get your pen, paper and rulers in order. It was just a little much.

She added that her mother thought Accounting would be a good program and classes for her to take but no one explained the time and effort she would have to into taking those classes.

Tina made it clear that attending classes in the cold and at night did not work for her:

Well, I didn't really think it through too much when I-I really had wanted to go back, but I went back in January when it was cold. I didn't have a car. I actually worked across the street, and I didn't live very far, but I only wanted to be cold once. So I would just, it would be cold, and I would think, I can't do it, I'm just going to go home. And too, my mother was insistent, she would make me go, since I had begged. These were the classes that she, they were night classes I was there for. And that accounting class was just hard. There was no computers to do it on at the time, you had two-hour class, and four hours worth of homework, and it seemed like 2 of those hours was arranging papers before you could even get started. It just, it became just a little much.

Once Tina decided she was not going to stay in school, she went to the bookstore to return her books, and she recalled, to this day the strange occurrences and her own resolution: “There were people that tried talking me into staying, but as I was returning my books, cause then they were talking to me, I just wanted my money back.”

Tina had her mind made up that she was not going to return to school, even though there were people trying to encourage her to stay. One those people was Mr. Deville, a bookstore clerk:
I would say in a way yes, but there's people who are like, go on and get it done, just to really keep you encouraged because there's times that you just want to quit or you're doing it or you're doing good. One of my instances that I really wanted to refer back to, there was a person here who used to work in the bookstore. I don't know why that sticks with me. His name was Mr. Deville. When I was here, I remember really not wanting to be here. Matter of fact, I'm trying to turn in my books and he's still trying to talk me into staying. His words about, to stay with it, and I remember him telling me that there was somebody that had encouraged him to go to school. That for some reason that stuck with me.

It is interesting to note that it was not a teacher, advisor or counselor Tina recalled, but a bookstore clerk who encouraged her to stay, and she remembered what he said. This reveals the importance of all those who work on a college campus.

When Tina was asked about how her family felt when she stopped out of school and she stated, “Disappointed. My mother was really disappointed.” With the difficulty of the classes and lack of transportation to and from school, Tina dropped out of school. From that point, Tina worked and eventually went to school to study cosmetology and worked as a licensed cosmetologist for several years. She also worked different odd-and-ends jobs to take care of herself. However, when the economy declined Tina was laid off her job and decided to return to school in 2011.

**Race and Gender**

Tina attends classes at two campuses and noted the two campuses have a very obvious difference in race. The largest campus is much more traditional and the majority student population is Caucasian. The more urban campus is comprised of students from different countries and ethnic backgrounds. When talking about the more urban campus, Tina noted:
It's just a different culture. It's what I would say, I would call it a little bit more urban. It seems a little bit more less in some things. When I'm in the classroom, it doesn't, and if the teacher's allowed to do what it is that she needs to do then it doesn't seem that it's any different, but ... another reason why I said this is because I haven't been here and sometimes I hear students that want to argue with the teacher and try to teach the teacher and it's like, "no."

Tina perceived that, at the more urban campus, students do not have respect for their teachers and disrupt the class. At the other campus her concern was not about race but she felt it was different in another way. Although the larger campus is comprised mainly of Caucasian students, Tina said she was not worried about walking in the classroom and not seeing anyone who looked like her: “Because of my age I really wasn't concerned about being the only black person. I'm just the only old person.” Like Danny mentioned previously, the race or gender is not the concern but age and being able to keep up with the technology and learning is Tina’s concern.

When asked what role does the community college play in the African American community, she made the following point: “I think it plays a big part if people would allow it. If people would allow it, there's some things that, not necessarily myself but ... people are here to help if people would just take advantage of the help. I think it plays a big role.” Although Tina did not have the same understanding when she first attending MCC, she now understood the importance of the community college as an institution that enables people achieve their life/career goals.

**Stopping Out**

As mentioned previously, Tina stopped out due to the lack of transportation as well as lack of interest in the subject she was studying. Tina noted that, for many who stop out of
community college, it is primarily due to financial reasons: “At this point I would say probably funds. Especially if they're an older, working adult.” She felt that many working adults find themselves having to stop out of school so they can work to take care of themselves and their families. She offered advice for those who may be thinking about stopping out:

Get back to it as soon as you can. Get back to it. If I had to do it all over again, and if I would've known then what I know now, I would've stuck with it and got it over with. I understand sometimes home situations will require people to have to sit out. But just stay with it.

Now that she is older, Tina noted that it takes her more time to learn her material and she has to get a lot of tutoring and additional help for some of her classes, especially statistics. She was very apprehensive with taking statistics this semester, especially as it is the last semester for her program. Nevertheless, she was able to complete the course with a good grade after long hours studying independently and with the assistance of a tutor.

Tina also had recommendation for the faculty, staff and administrators when regarding working with students who are about to stop out or who are returning after stopping out. She remarked that staff need to make students aware of all the opportunities that are available to them. She feels that, in her case, advice could have been given to her that would have helped her in the long run:

There's some things I think that may have fallen through the cracks, but I don't know if it's because they maybe just assume that I knew, but I mean it was nothing that's really horrendous. I don't think it was done maliciously... One of my things is that I didn't know that they have the forgiveness program here. Where if you had those bad grades...which I did when I came here 25 years ago. I was never told until I had actually completed my entrepreneurship diploma that I could have had those grades taken off which would have made a big difference in my grade point.
When Tina returned to MCC after almost 26 years of being out, she completed a new student application. She did not attend orientation or meet with an advisor after she was accepted. Tina remarked, “I think I was supposed to attend orientation, but somehow I think that got by me. I don’t know why. There was some paperwork that I did have to fill out.” Tina realized quickly how important it was to meet with a counselor or advisor:

I did seek some information from a person that works as a counselor. I found out that it actually wasn't their primary job, but I had known them before, so that's why I came and talked to them first. They helped me with some of my things for my schedule, but then ... before the initial person I would just go and sit in the lobby and do it. But then I found that some things, after I scheduled myself one time for an accounting class and a business math class, and it's like, who told you to do that? One right after the other, okay, I'll let somebody help me get it together.

Tina made the point that students should always see an advisor or counselor after her own incident. A advisor ensured her that she was taking the appropriate classes and not putting herself in danger by taking the wrong combination of classes in the same semester.

For Tina, returning to school would not have been possible without the support of her siblings. She talked about the importance of support:

The first time that I was back I didn't have a computer, and I'm on unemployment, money’s not going very far, and had problems ... My brother was nice enough, first off, because they had the internet, he would let me come over and do my homework. Then after a while he got tired of me. Come the final times and I really needed to finish, it was like, oh, you got to go somewhere else to get done. But then my sister knew of the problem, and she managed to talk my other sister into buying me lap buying me a laptop. Then I had problems where I needed to scan in homework. She gave me money towards a scanner. It wasn't a real expensive scanner, but it does the job.

Tina’s sisters and brother showed how important it is for a student to have family support when attending college. Support from her siblings helped her be successful while at MCC.
London

London attends one of the off-site centers of MCC, this center is dedicated primarily to health sciences programs. London’s main questions about the study were regarding the location and times of the interviews. She wanted to make sure she had the time to participate and it would not interfere with her other commitments. London was a No Show for her second scheduled interview, and apologized when we spoke afterward. She mentioned she had a lot of responsibilities outside of school and her time tends to slip away from her.

London was never short of words and, at times, would text or email me with additional comments or thoughts she had after returning home following an interview. It appears that she thought about the study a lot after completing each interview. Each time she would say, “I thought of something else I should’ve said in the interview.”

London is short in stature but mighty in her thoughts and words. The one area she worried about was being identifiable in this study. I explained to her the process of using pseudonyms for call and reporting aspects of the study. She agreed to participate, and we used her pseudonyms during all communication, whether by text messages or email correspondence. London mentioned that she did not see the recruitment emails for a while because she does not check her MCC email like she should. She not only gave numerous stories and examples when she was asked questions, but she also offered a lot of additional information. London has been through a lot although she is young. She has many responsibilities other students or people her age do not have to consider.

London is a 34-year-old single parent of one child. Her 9-year-old son was diagnosed with autism when he was younger. There was no mention of her son’s father during the entire interview process. London lives with her father and son in the house in which she was raised.
She relies a lot on her father to help her by babysitting when she needs to run errands and attend classes. Ashley has worked all of her life and mentioned she had to grow up quickly once she had her son, especially with all of the help he needed at a younger age and continues to require. London made it very clear that she loves her race and the people in her life. She marked that she would not have it any other way although sometimes life is hard.

**Childhood/Elementary School**

London’s mother and father raised her. Her parents were both married before and brought their children into the union. Her father had five children with his first wife and London’s mom had one child in her first marriage. Once London’s parents were married they had her and her younger sister. Combined they have eight children. London expressed on several occasions that her parents where strict when she was being raised. Both of her parents dropped out of high school—her father in the 11th grade and her mom in 10th grade. London did not mention why her parents dropped out of high school.

London described herself as a quiet person when she attended elementary school. Initially, she did not have many friends:

*Elementary school, quite a quiet person. Didn’t really start off having a lot of friends but I guess, gradually, as the friends progressed and kind of finished, most really kind of develop friends, started kind of opening up, talking to people, creating a bond with certain people...*

London attended one elementary school but remembered having two principals, one of whom was African American. When it came to her teachers, she stated that she did not have any teachers who were African American, and did not recall there were any teachers in the school who were African American. London talked about how she did academically in elementary school and how she struggled with math:
At first I struggled with math. Math wasn't my forte. I liked the science. I liked the art. Other areas I did a little bit better in, but math I kind of shied away from it. I tried to avoid it. It's like I almost had anxiety when I had to go to math or take math tests. So math was, I tried to avoid that. I never wanted to do math at all. But, like I said, elementary, middle school, it was a struggle. Didn't really get the grades that I really should have got. I was kind of like okay as long as I passed, and that probably wasn't the attitude I should have had.

London mentioned that she did not care about school until she got into high school. Although she did not care about her school, her parents made sure she did her schoolwork:

“My mom and dad, they were strict. So it was mandatory, like, get your homework out, get it done, let's look at it. Did you get it finished? Then I had chores. Then I helped with dinner, so yeah.” Her parents did not finish high school but they did the best they could to make sure she went to school and did her homework.

**Junior High School**

While in junior high, London’s parents, specifically her mother, tried to continue to make sure she did what she was supposed to do when it came to school. She talked about her relationship with her mom regarding school:

*Middle school, it was a challenge. I mean, like I said, my parents were strict so it wasn't no hanky panky. My mom was strict about who I hung with, wanted to know who I hung with and did you get your homework done? She was going to find out if I didn't do good or not in school. She was an understandable parent. She expected ... she wasn't hard if I did not get all A's. She wasn't hard, hard on me like that, but she wanted me to do my best. But if I did get bad grades and I explained to her why, of course, she wasn't happy about it but she understood it, as long as I worked hard to get the grade up.*

London described her mom as a very understanding parent who knew her children’s limitations and what they could and could not do.
However, London did not feel that her teachers supported her in school. She recalled that she and her friends were somewhat picked on and put into special education:

_Some parts of school, I liked it, but the fact that, once again, we ran into the teachers not being really supportive. I kind of felt like the teachers almost aggravated us, like the Blacks. I think we got targeted not getting high test scores, so we automatically was all in special ed. Every friend I had, we were put in the same special ed math class, same special ed language and arts class. It was like, as us being younger, we were kind of like, "Why are we all in here and the white kids are like in ...?" You know, we considered "the nicer classes". What could we do about it?_

She did not feel that she needed to be in special education, nor did her friends. Being in special education classes set them apart from their peers.

Similar to elementary school, London did not have or see Black teachers. The librarian at her school was Black. However, London did not feel that she had any Black role models in her school:

_Black teachers? No. They didn't have no black teachers. They had a black librarian, but we didn't have a role model, a person that kind of made you feel motivated, like, "Oh. We have a black teacher, so this is going to make us want to do well or make us something" Instead we had white teachers or we had foreign teachers._

London felt that, if she had teachers in her elementary and middle schools who were African American, they would have motivated her and her friends to want to do better. They could have served as role models to them, giving them a reason to be like their teacher(s).

**High School**

High school was a turning point for London. This was a time where she realized that she became more serious about school, not because someone forced her but because she wanted to make something of herself:
High school. That definitely was different. It was just more, you know? Elementary was one thing. That was like intro to the little world. Middle school was like I'm getting the hang of how life is, and high school is like, wow, this is the real thing. A lot of my friends were pregnant. They had, teenage pregnancy was really high the year I went to school. Then again, we had the special ed classes again. I'm like, "Can we ...?" I'm like, "This is like the serious time now." It got introducing that, "Hey, this is the time to get serious about college." You have to have certain grades to actually get in to certain schools.

She participated in two programs in high school that encouraged students to attend college.

She credits the programs for encouraging her to do well in and steering her to consider attending college:

Then at the time, when I was in high school I was in Educational Talent Search and also Upward Bound. We got introduced to that. So we were all into that. That kind of motivated us as African American kids to be like, "Wow! People do care about us. People do care about if we do good in school. Now I am excited about trying to do well in school so I can go to college." I was looking to go to Atlanta. I wanted to go to Spelman. Maybe it wasn't a real big dream at the time, but my mom didn't want me to leave out of state and I kind of understood. I was like, "Okay. I'm okay with just going to a community college or whatever.

London credits these programs for introducing her to college and assuring her that she could go on to college after high school. Spelman College was the college of her dreams, but her mother did not want her to go out-of-state. Upward Bound enabled her to travel out-of-state and visited college campuses. When she went on a college tour to Spelman College, she decided she wanted to attend.

Despite her blossoming enthusiasm to do better and consider applying to attend college, London did not have teachers or administrators who were African American. She remarked that she and her friends recently had a conversation about high school and lack of role models:
Nope. Nope, and they wasn't really ... honestly, looking back on it, and me and my friends, we still talk about it every now and then. We really did not have teachers that motivated us. We came to the terms that if we want to succeed, we were the one that had to open them books late at night or after school or get together and get the work done, because the teachers really did not care about the black kids in school. I'm like, seriously, they didn't. They were just kind of like, if you get it done, fine. There wasn't no caring, nurturing teacher, like, "Hey, do you need extra help, this and that." If you've got to ask, you've got to ask. There was nobody pushing you to succeed.

Although London did not have the support in school, she found it in the Education Talent Search and Upward Bound programs. The staff in Education Talent Search were not African American but the staff in Upward Bound were, and she felt like they were role models to her and they cared about and supported her.

**Adulthood/MCC Experience**

Although London had great experiences with Education Talent Search and Upward Bound in high school, she did not go to college immediately after high school. She decided to work and eventually she had her son. When her son was diagnosed with autism, it caused a strain on her ability to work out her home. Eventually London decided to attend MCC. She was very open and honest that the main reason for attending MCC—financial assistance through loans and grants. When she discussed her decision to leave school, she was also clear about the reason:

*Finances ... I went full time in the spring and I was working towards taking classes over the summer, but I only needed certain classes. It would be like two classes to complete, but financial aid wouldn't cover that. They wanted me to pay out of pocket, which the whole purpose of going to school is to kind of balance that out. I had to take a break. I had to take a semester off to figure out what I was going to do. That's why I end up reapplying and ended up going full time, and I basically am taking extra classes that I really don't even need.*
London was clear about her reason for her class load. In order to receive full financial aid package, she must take the required number even though she actually needs fewer classes to complete her program of study.

**Race and Gender**

London was very open and comfortable with talking about race and gender from childhood though adult life. She often expressed throughout her interviews that she wished she had more African American teachers and administrators during her educational journey. When asked of her experiences in the classroom at MCC, London recalled:

*I guess it's just that feelings get ... I don't know. I try not to feel that way, but feel like that certain places I go, just the way I enter a room, where I go, I always feel like the color of my skin. I'm not never being looked at of who I am, what potential I actually have in my heart. I don't think people take the time out to see goodness in you. They automatically see that you're black and they're just like, 'Oh ...' They automatically judge, and I do think that now, just going to class.*

London made it very clear that she felt that the color of her skin made a difference about attitude(s) toward her when she attended classes. Her response to the question about her instructors was revealing:

*I'm like, when I go to class, I feel like the teacher does not really care about listening to my input. I know sometimes I'll get looked over and then to see the white girl or a white person, whoever else other than my black skin, they'd rather get their input or their opinions on it. I just feel like, I just think that people just look at the color of my skin. I don't think people ever look at who I am as a person. I sense it all the time.*

Unlike the majority of the other participants, London felt that her race made a difference to her peers and her instructors at MCC. London mentioned that she did not let this stop her from commenting in class and participating in group activities. She did not want her race to be a hindrance in class.
London continued throughout the interviews to talk about how proud she was to be African American or black and how she got strength from those who had come before her:

*I love being black. I think it's a beautiful thing. I wouldn't change it. I don't care how hard times it is. I mean, it might be white people making it. I get emotional about it, because we are the race that has it hard. We go through hell, if I can say that. I don't know if there's actually somebody here, in town, that I can say I look up to, but Maya Angelou, she's my inspiration. I love her to death. I mean, there's so many. Just people iconic like that, I guess, if I can't find nobody else in my family that can push me, I will go look up and listen to speeches or read her poems to keep me going.*

Maya Angelou has become a role model with whom London connects through her poems and speeches. When Maya Angelou came to visit her city, London went to hear her speak and described it was a memory she will never forget. Although London does not have local individuals as role models, she finds encouragement and motivation in the celebrities she admires, such as Maya:

*At home I put a collage up and then I look through magazines of people that I admire, or I read their stories and I cut their pictures out and I put them on my wall. Oprah's one. Maya Angelou, love her, like I said. Who else was I going to say? Tyra Banks. Music wise India Arie I like, Janet Jackson, Chrisette Michele. I admire people driven in them, you know, their power. Even though it's hard, I don't know how I'm going to make it to that end of the light, I'm just going to work at it until I find myself at the end. That's what pushes me. Music is my motivation.*

Although these individuals are not accessible to her, London has found motivation and inspiration through the music of these artists as well as their lives.

**Stopping Out**

The decision to drop out of college was not an easy one for London. When London decided to leave MCC, she did speak to a financial aid advisor:

*I spoke to financial aid and I spoke to an advisor, and let them know what could I do, because I did want to finish my classes, and what alternatives did I*
have. Really, I didn't have any. Either I had to pay the out of pocket expense or pick up three or four classes and basically just be ... have no life. That's what they offered me, and I was just like, "Well, thanks for nothing, really."

London did not want to take the additional classes in order to receive her financial aid because she had so many other responsibilities outside of school and she felt it would be too overwhelming, so she dropped out.

The decision to return to MCC came after there appeared to be no other option:

I was discouraged. I felt like I was against the wall with no doors opening. I felt like I wasn't getting anywhere if I didn't present something to a current employer, like, "I have a current degree, I have a current certificate, I just completed school." I felt like I didn't ... I was out of touch, and I felt like I had to go back to school to prove something to myself as well as others.

London felt that she had to prove to herself and her family that she could return to school and be successful. Once she returned, she took it upon herself to meet with an advisor because she wanted to make sure she was on the right path:

She was very helpful, thankfully. I just was straight up with her. I was just like, "I got to do something for myself. I want to make sure I'm on the right path. I need your help to make sure I'm taking the right classes. I want to feel comfortable with what I'm doing, so just put me in the right direction so I am getting registered for the right classes so I can get this done this time."

London felt that being able to speak with an advisor who was honest with her would enable her to be more successful than she was the first time she attended MCC.

London offered several recommendations for students who are thinking of stopping out: “If you can do it, try. Because all you're doing is holding yourself back. I wouldn't recommend it unless you have a plan B. I didn't. School was plan A. Try to fight it out, just try to do it.” She stated it is important to have a plan when it comes to college although she did not have one. She also had specific recommendations for MCC administrators and staff:
Be encouraging. Motivate them as much as you can. Be really encouraging to them, because you don't know what people face in life. People don't tell you their pain. People don't show you that they're crying inside. A lot of people are going to school for a reason, people aren't just going for fun. I think they need to keep in touch with us. I think if we are trying to make an appointment or trying to see them, I think they really need to get on our level to really help us.

London remarked that, if the students are heard and the staff understands what they are going through, the students would be able to have a better experience. She also noted that the college has to do a better job of keeping in touch with students when they do not return. When her father became ill during the conclusion of my interviews, London found that, once again, she was facing the need to make a decision whether she should stay in school or drop out. After consulting with several nurses and doctors, she decided to take a medical withdrawal from MCC, two weeks before the end of the semester of classes. She currently has to attend to her father’s needs 24 hours daily with the assistance of an in-home nurse. Her plan is to return during the spring of 2015.

Kara

Kara was the last participant in the study. Kara and I had a very hard time scheduling her appointments. She did to show up for two of the scheduled interviews; although, at one point, I thought she would end up not being a part of the study. Eventually she was able to participate and was very excited to let her voice be heard. Like others in my study, she did not have an issue with answering questions, and she was very open and honest. Kara made it clear that, although she was young, she felt what she had to say was important. Like the others in the study, Kara requested a copy of the final results. Kara said she was interested in
seeing what the other ladies in the study had to say. She wondered if they had the same experience that she had.

Kara is a single 22-year-old woman with no children. Although she does not have any children of her own, Kara often finds herself with a younger sibling, niece or nephew at all times. Kara has taken all of her classes—except one—online. Her lone face-to-face class is on the most urban of all of MCCs campuses. Kara stated that, due to her work schedule, she is not able to take more than one class face-to-face. During the second interview, Kara began to get teary when she talked about some experiences, but she was able to get through the interview. With tears in her eyes, Kara expressed her concerns about her education from childhood until the present.

**Childhood/Elementary School**

Childhood memories for Kara were not always positive. Kara was raised by her mother and father in their home. She stated that she was not sure how many siblings she had because her dad had fathered so many children: “To be honest, I don't know, but I actually know I have 3 brothers and 5 sisters.” Kara went on to explain that her mother birthed her, and then her brother and her sister who are both younger than her. She talked about her talks about her childhood and the memories she had growing up. Her parents have had a lot of domestic violence issues, and she felt that school was her saving grace:

> He [my father] beat my mom and then my sisters who I didn’t really know that well, came to live with us. They would always laugh at my mom because my dad would beat her up and stuff, so I just did not like my sisters. Maybe that's why I liked school so much because I wasn't at home, but I did like my friends.

Kara’s father had custody of her older sisters from his first marriage and she was not fond of them. Kara’s father and mother were together until she was about 10 years old:
Yeah, they were together my whole childhood. When I was a baby when they were together--of course, they were together before that--but, they stayed together up until 12 years ago. He went to prison and when he got out he just hasn’t been in my life.

Kara’s parents were never married while she was being raised; thus, when her father was released from prison, she did not know of his whereabouts until last year.

Kara’s memories of elementary school were all good memories. She talked about how she did well in school: “Well, elementary I went to Jackson. I did really good in school in elementary school. I was on the honor roll. I was in the gifted and talented program, drama club. I was in every club. I had good grades and everything.”

When she was talking about elementary school, I could tell by the expressions on Kara’s face that this was a great time in her life. Kara did not remember many of her teachers by name. However, when the discussions about teachers, staff or administrators who were African American were addressed, the first person she talked about was her grandmother. Her grandmother was a teacher at her elementary school. Besides her grandmother, she also remembered a teacher’s assistant who was also African American but was not her teacher’s assistant. Overall, elementary school was a great experience for Kara.

**Junior High School**

Junior high for Kara was very different than elementary school. Just before she started junior high, Kara and her family moved to another side of town, which she felt was the beginning of her bad behavior: “Then, we moved to the East side. I didn't know nobody. That's when I got in middle school and I just started acting out. I didn't have any friends and so the friends who were drawn to me were not, I guess, the best kids to hang around.”
Kara did not have many memories that she wanted to talk about, or teachers she bonded with while in junior high. After moving away from her friends and making new friends who were not well-behaved, she found herself doing the same things those students were doing and she did not try to change or be different.

**High School**

All of Kara’s friends from junior high school ended up all going to the same high school as Kara. Going to class was not important to Kara although she never missed school:

*The same friends from middle school I went into high school with, and I messed up all through high school. I just didn't, I just didn’t like going to class. I would still stay at school, but I would just sit in one of my teacher’s classrooms. I just didn't like going to class.*

Unlike elementary and junior high school, Kara had fond memories of one of her teachers, who just so happened to be African American: “*Her class necessarily wasn't a class that interested me because we weren't doing a lot of activity in the class, but her as a person made the class worthwhile and she was the only teacher in the school who seemed to have any faith in me period.*”

Kara connected with her drama teacher and found herself in that teacher’s class when she was supposed to be in another class. Kara talked about the reputation she had while in high school with the other teachers: “*If the teacher ... Teachers I'd never even had as my own teacher would see me in the hallway and say negative things to me and I didn't appreciate that, 'cause I don't even know you. You'd never been my teacher before, so ...”*

Kara was asked why she thought the other teachers felt that way about her, and she said she did not know why. She perceived that, because her family had attended this school, the teachers felt she was like them. However, those family members had different last names
as Kara so she could not see the connection. With behaviors such as skipping class and not getting her work done, Kara almost did not get to walk with her class at graduation. She explained what happened:

I didn't get to walk with my class. I had to walk with ... There was a program that year, thankfully. There was like 10 other kids from all the public schools in the city who were 1 or 2 credits away from graduating and they let us all take online classes and we all walked together like a month later, but ... Yeah. Because of acting out and not going to class, I almost didn't graduate.

Kara was proud of herself when she finished school because many of her friends did not graduate and still do not have their GED.

**Adulthood/MCC Experience**

After high school, Kara moved out-of-state for a while and worked. At that point, she did not have a desire to attend college and did not think it was an option. At that time, no one in her family had attended college. She enjoyed the money she was making and loved where she lived. When that did not work out, she moved back and enrolled in MCC. When she initially enrolled at MCC, Kara was a fulltime student and majored in Human Services. She did not have a job at the time so she felt she would be able to do the required school work. While taking a full schedule at MCC, Kara decided she needed to work and make money, so she began applying for jobs. Different from the other participants, Kara stopped out multiple times from MCC. She explained that process:

The first time I think I just either quit my job or found a new job, but I needed my availability to be wider so I couldn't go to school and try to find a job because I wouldn't know my hours were going to be, try to work around that. The second time was I believe for the same reason. The third time is because I couldn't find a job here so I moved to North Dakota for a little bit because they've got a lot of jobs up there. I came back just so I could finish school. I want to go to back.
Kara had always known that she could return to MCC. As a result, she did not think twice about dropping out of school each time. She was motivated this time to go to MCC and finish school:

*So I can have it knocked out. I want to keep going. School is not something that today at this date and time I necessarily have time for, but I don't want to keep letting it get behind me when I'm this close to being done. I do this every time. Okay, I'm not going to miss class. I don't want to miss too much because I work full time and have a life full time so I have to end up dropping classes and I don't want to go one more term and I don't want to keep doing that. I want to get all my school done as far as I'm going to go ... not as far as I'm going to go, but I want to get as much done as I can by twenty-five because I just don't want to be in school forever.*

Kara made it very clear that she wanted to finish school at MCC, transfer to a four-year college or university, and be done by the time she was 25 years old. Now she is 22 years old and had come to realize this is a realistic goal.

**Race and Gender**

Kara made it very clear that she felt that her race was very obvious in the classroom. She gave several examples of times when she thought instructors did not handle certain situations correctly in the classroom since she has been at MCC. Kara talked about one incident in particular:

*I had a class, it was two terms ago with my mom. It was a sociology class, I want to say it was criminology class. I believe it was criminology. My mom had that same instructor with one of the same people that was in her class and watched a lot of movies about gang violence and just a bunch of different crimes. The woman was like, "Yeah, those people are always blah blah blah. Why don't they just get out of there if the hood is so bad?" It was just like ... I guess maybe she didn't realize she was saying "those people," but that's offensive. Whether or not you meant it directed towards me, whatever. I mean, believe me, if somebody could just up and move out of that situation, they'd be gone. After class he'll (the instructor) come up to us and be like, "Yeah, I know. She's blah blah blah." You need to say something to her because addressing us after the fact is not helping.*
Kara had very strongly feelings about this situation. She felt that the instructor should have addressed the student and not apologize for the student’s behavior to the Black students in the classroom. She talked about what she told the instructor:

*The fact that she says it weekly is ... You apologizing to me is not going to stop her from doing it every week. She's the one that needs to be addressed. It's already been said and done, you didn't say it so your apology ... Yeah, it offends you, but it doesn't do anything for me. It would have been better to me if he would have, you know ... try a little bit, but that wasn't that.*

Kara continued to be very upset about the aforementioned incident. However, this was not the only incident that she felt a difference in her class. She felt the same about many of her instructors:

*A lot of my instructors I feel have treated me differently. I feel like ... but I don't want to be paranoid about it, you know. I feel that was the case. The professor I was just talking about, he was cool. I liked him. I liked his class and everything. Just that one woman, she didn't sit right with me. I liked that class overall and him as an instructor. It was really not any of my Caucasian instructors I feel that act that way towards me. It's usually a Hispanic one, or a Russian one, or an Asian ... I feel like they're the most, I don't know how to say it, funny acting towards me.*

Kara talked about incident after incident where she felt different in her class, but her instructors were not the only ones with whom she has had problems. Kara felt that many of her Caucasian classmates do not have to work as hard as her outside of class, which they revealed by their behavior:

*They have different stuff in their life. To them, I mean ... I'm not saying that education is not important to black people because that's the most important thing to my mom. When you have other things going on in your life, school's not on the front burner. They have, not everybody, but your parents will take care of this while you go ahead and do your schooling so you don't have to worry about nothing else. They still don't go to school because they want to party hard. I don't get to party hard. I still have to maintain life in school and try to stay on top of it. I don't see that being their issue. Having to worry about just life ... you know what I mean?*
The burden of having to work while going to school was evident in Kara’s interviews and she clearly felt that her Caucasian counterparts do not have that same burden.

**Stopping Out**

The process and decision to drop out of MCC and return appeared to be an easy decision for Kara because she needed to work each time she faced the issue. Kara felt that most students stop out because of laziness and life. When she referred to life, she was talking about all of the obligations a person has:

*Laziness and life. When you're in high school and stuff, that's what you're supposed to do is just go to school. When you're an adult, you have other obligations so it's hard to maintain good grades and deal with life at the same time.*

Kara also felt there is a difference between the reasons men and women stop out of college:

*I would say with men it usually is more laziness, because I don't really see a lot of men even get to school so they can drop out. A lot females have started school and quit or they had a baby or something and just something to determine life and they couldn't go to school. I don't know too many guys that are in school that I know personally.*

Although she did not have children of her own, she understood that, for some women, they may need to take a break when they have a child or if they are not able to take care of their children while attending college.

Regarding advice she would give to other students who are thinking about stopping out, Kara said:

*Honestly, it depends because just generally I would say just knock it out while that's on your mind. If they're sitting out because you feel like that's something you can't do right now, I wouldn't do it either because if you're not focused on what you're going to do, that's a waste of your time and money. You got to pay it all back so you might as well do it when that's where your mind's at.*
The money that Kara discussed is the financial aid loan money that many students receive. Kara believed that, if she eventually has to pay the money back, she should be able to go to class and get an education without being forced to stop out for lack of funds. Kara also had a lot to say about recommendations to administrators and staff:

*I think that they need ... I don't want to say more services, but different services. I understand there's the achievement center or whatever and they have the library or whatever. Their advisors sometimes not the friendliest people. They don't seem as if they want to help you sometimes. Some people I would say need more than, "Okay, what do you want your schedule to be? Blah blah blah." You know what I'm saying? This is life decisions and they need somebody who knows what they're talking about. If I went home and asked someone, nobody would know how to help me get back in to the school. If I'm talking to an advisor, I would expect an advisor to advise me. If you can't advise me, you need another job. You need to do something different. A lot of the programs they have aren't available after certain hours and the fact that the achievement center or maybe the testing center or anything like that isn't open when I'm able to come there.*

Like the others in my study, Kara felt that the staff need to care about the students and be resourceful when they meet. Kara made a good point of saying that, when she is talking with an advisor, the person needs to advise her. Kara expects advisors to know the answers to her questions; if they do not know the answer, she hopes they would help her get those answers.

**Themes**

Three themes emerged this study of African American female community college students who have stopped out: (1) Joblessness; (2) insufficient parental educational influence and encouragement, and (3) relevance of spiritual awareness. The first theme that emerged from the participants deals with the lack of financial literacy and employment. The students lacked financial literacy when dealing with both finances and their knowledge of financial aid while attending MCC. A majority of the participants also showed some
correlation with their lack of employment and financial need to return to MCC. The second theme that emerged highlights the insufficient parental educational influences and encouragement not received by the participants either as a child and/or as an adult. Relevance of spiritual awareness was mentioned by all of the participants and emerged as the third theme.

**Joblessness**

All six participants spoke about lack of finances and joblessness as a reason to either attend MCC or as a reason why they dropped out of school. Their lack of knowledge of how to handle their personal financial as well as the consequences of losing their financial aid either hindered or encouraged their enrollment status at MCC. Although each participant had a different story relating to how they lost their financial aid, lost their job or needed a job, they shared the experience of lacking financial literacy. Regardless, the lack of employment was overwhelmingly the main reason most of the women returned to MCC.

Not having employment caused a ripple effect for many of the participants, propelling them to attend MCC for an overpayment check from their financial aid. Tina stated that if she knew about that check when she first attended MCC, she probably would have stayed. She explained that she left because she did not have a car and, if she had received a check, she probably could have bought a car or put a down payment on one to get her to and from school.

Tina along with Danny, Ashley and London all returned to MCC after losing their jobs. Each of these women discussed how important finances are in their lives.
Over half of the participants decided to attend MCC after losing a job. For instance, when Tina was asked the barriers she faces, she stated:

*Financing. At this point, I'm single, so I may have to—I won't say I'll maybe not reach it, but I guess that could be too. But it may be a little bit longer to get it done. As opposed—if I had someone else that had income coming in. Right now it's like, I have to work once I get done just to get some income coming in, and then ...*

Like other women in this study, Tina is single and does not have a job, so pursuing her education once again led her back to MCC. Tina also perceived that, for many students, finances are the main reason they stop out of college: *“At this point I would say probably funds. Especially if they're an older, working adult.”* Tina strongly believed that working adults who are no longer employed or have the means to take care of their family, are not able to stay in school but, in many instances, leave school to pursue a job.

Danny was candid about her struggle to attend classes and raise her two daughters, and the financial burden she encountered as a result. Danny also considered that, since she lost her job, she could put all of her focus on school. Although her goal was to return to work, she felt that she would be making a better use of her time by going to school fulltime.

Ashley brought up the battle she had with her former employer to receive her benefits so that she could continue to care for her children while she finished her program. Ashley was placed on medical disability and eventually lost her job. Although she had started school while on disability, once she lost her benefits and job, it caused a financial burden on her.

London talked about losing her job, needing money, and having to decide to work or go to school because of bills and finances. London assessed her situation:

*Because bills don't go away, so sometimes you have to make sacrifices. I do want to go to school, I do want to become successful and do something with myself, but also I have to take care of lights, and water, and phone, and*
daycare, and all that. When that kind of interrupts or distracts you then that makes you kind of put school on hold to find a job to take care of that.

Overall, it became apparent that the common theme of joblessness had opened a door for most of these ladies to return to MCC. Kara worked a fulltime job so she had chosen to work and go to school fulltime by taking more of her classes online. In the past, she had to drop out of school to free up her availability for work. During other times, she could not balance her work and school schedule. Kara explained this process when describing why she stopped out of MCC:

*The first time I think I just either quit my job or found a new job, but I needed my availability to be wider so I couldn't go to school and try to find a job because I wouldn't know my hours were going to be, try to work around that. The second time was I believe for the same reason. The third time is because I couldn't find a job here so I moved to North Dakota for a little bit because they've got a lot of jobs up there.*

Kara thought she would be able to stay in North Dakota and work, but it did not work out as planned. Although she has plans to move back to North Dakota, she is focused on working and finishing her degree at MCC. Lisa, on the other hand, is able to work a part-time job for extra money since her partner is responsible for the bills in their home. Of all of the women in the study, Lisa was the only one who relied on her partner for total financial assistance.

**Insufficient educational influence and encouragement by family**

A very obvious and relevant theme that emerged amongst the participants was the insufficient educational influence and encouragement by family. Although some women grew up in homes where education was discussed, most of the women did not have memories about this. As children and adults, many of these women made several comments about the lack of support and encouragement during their educational career.
As a child Ashley remembered conversations in her household that focused on family. Ashley stated, like most children, she remembered playing school with her siblings, which was the only activity she did outside of school that had to do with education:

*The only thing that I did outside of school that would have anything to do with education, would be when my siblings and I would play school at home. I was the youngest of four, so it would be my older sister probably doing, so she was the teacher, whatever. That's the only thing...*

There were not only no activities in the home or outside of school that related to education, but also there were no conversations in the home about education. Ashley mentioned that college or education was never the focus in her family:

*We were very family-oriented. We did a lot of things as a family. We did activities and different things. Most of our, as far as lessons and education, most of our lessons were more so geared toward family. How you do family, what type of job would support your family? Those types of things. There wasn't a whole lot of expression as far as education.*

Ashley later explained how this was different for her, and influenced how she is raising her children. She perceived that education is the only way they can be successful. She felt that, with her leading by example, her children will be able to have a role model to develop good study habits.

Regarding encouragement, Ashley made it clear that she did not get encouragement about going to school from her family, although she received support from babysitting her children and picking them up from school when she needed it. When the decision to stop out of MCC was made, she did not speak with anyone or ask for her family’s opinion. Ashley perceived her family didn’t know how to encourage her about her education but they did show support. Although Ashley did not receive encouragement from her family, she found that TRiO Student Support Services and her best friend provided her the most
encouragement. She credited the staff in the TRiO program for support and resources, and her best friend as a role model as someone she can go to for encouragement when things are not going well in school.

Unlike most in this study, Danny can remember talking about education in her house as a very young child. As mentioned previously, she had childhood memories of playing school and being the teacher. Although divorced and living in two different states, both her parents always made it clear how important education and college was to their family: “It was very interesting. My parents said schooling was important and you do your best and that's where my thought came from, my thought was, Teachers are wonderful.” Danny always had a love and admiration for education and college. However, once she attended college, the encouragement and support she received from her family in elementary school was no longer there: “Nobody was really excited, but I wasn't excited either.” Danny explained how she initially attended MCC for her job and it was not something she wanted to do. When Danny returned to MCC after stopping out, her family encouragement was any greater than before:

> I have a ways in my life so it was like, "I'm going to go back to school and I'm going to do this." They're like, "Cool, if that's what you want to do, okay." As times got rough at different points, they have always been there and they're like, "When are you graduating? Wow." It's two years, it's not a four year degree, don't get excited.

Danny continued that that she believed her family is proud of her for going back to school, but she came to realize they do not know how to show their excitement. Like Ashley, Danny credited the staff in the TRiO program for helping and supporting her since she enrolled in the program. She was grateful for their support and encouragements, and believed she could go to them for any question she may have.
Lisa made it clear that education, college, or “making something of yourself” was not discussed during her childhood. Due to the face that her mother was on drugs and she moved from her mother’s house to her aunt’s house then to her grandmother’s house, there were no consistent conversations about education. Today, Lisa felt that her support and encouragement comes from her church, her boyfriend, and sons. Although her sons are not old enough to say anything that is encouraging, they respect her when she is working on her schoolwork and allow her to be away from them when she takes classes. Due to the fact that she goes to school fulltime, her boyfriend does not expect her to work at all even though she has a part-time job at the local library. When asked about her role models growing up or people she looked up to, Lisa mentioned her aunt whereas now she does not have a role model. Lisa did mention that the advisor at MCC gives her a lot of support, and she felt “they’ve always been helpful” when she needed assistance.

London made it clear that her parents wanted her to succeed at whatever she chose to do. Her parents never forced her to go college or talked about it with her. As mentioned previously, London’s parents did not finish high school and they wanted her to do better than they did:

*They wanted me to succeed. It wasn’t ... I mean, they liked the fact that I had a plan to do something. It wasn’t like you had to go, but they were happy that I wanted to go, because they, neither one of them didn’t get to go, and with their education it wasn’t, they didn’t get to grab a lot of attention as I did. I think that they dropped out early. I think it was ... I mean, they didn’t stress it a lot, but in a sense they did. They wanted to see me do a little, way, way better than they did.*

Today, London’s father supports her every way he is able. She perceived he does not know the words to say to encourage her so he does it by helping with her son. London perceived that, if she had conversations about going to college when she was growing up, she would be
in a more stable place than she is now. London mentioned on several occasions during each of the interviews that she did not have support or encouragement from her family. Even though she has a large family, no one supported her in what she is doing and they do not ask her how her schoolwork is going, which is very frustrating. Ultimately, her dad has been her support system: “My immediate family, my dad, he's my everything. He watches my son. We sit up and talk, we're close.” Even though London’s father was ill near the end of the interviews, she continued to have him as a support.

Kara’s story about education and the need for it was different from most encountered in this study. When she started MCC, it was around the same time her mother started MCC. Although her mother had been attending a local state university in the previous years, she never finished. Kara made it very clear that going to college was not an option when she was growing up, and she said no one in her family talked about education or going to college. Kara’s grandmother had a college degree but she made an interesting point about her grandmother: “My grandma's a teacher, but she's also a Jehovah's Witness, so she's not too big into the whole being smart thing...” Kara felt that her grandmother’s religion did not encourage education so her grandmother never encouraged her to go to college. Today, Kara’s mother does support her going to college although it is not with words. Kara did not perceive she receives encouragement from her friends or family. She mentioned that she did not have a single friend who has attended college; in fact, none of her friends graduated high school. Kara felt she provides support and encouragement for everyone in her family, but no one encourages her or tells her they are proud of her for going to college.
Like Danny, Tina has known the importance of education and college all of her life:

_Especially when my father was ... My father was really big on education and yes, my mother was too but she was probably a little bit more lenient as things went. Matter of fact though, after my father passed, my mother actually attended MCC so with ... Even though my brother was out of school by that time, me and my other two sisters were in school, she still did work full-time and came into classes here at MCC for an Associate’s degree._

Danny talked about how she remembered seeing her father prepare for school as well as her mother. Danny always knew she needed to further her education one day, even when she stopped out of MCC many years ago. Today, Danny’s family has been very supportive and encouraged her to further her education. She acknowledged that, without their help, she would not be as successful in her classes as she has been.

**Relevance of spiritual awareness**

Six different definitions and meanings of spirituality and spiritual awareness emerged from the participants in this study. From support from a church family to considering one’s spiritual life as their backbone, each of the women in this study revealed that their spiritual life was important to them. Spirituality was revealed as the lone common denominator for all six women. Although some spoke about their spiritual awareness and spiritual life more openly than others, each discussed spirituality at some point. During the 3rd interview for each woman, I brought the topic up to get a clearer understanding of what it means to them. Although the 3rd interview was the shortest interview for them, I gained a better understanding these women than I had prior to this interview.

For Ashley, spirituality was fluid throughout her interviews. She made mention in her first two interviews of the importance of attending church, being involved in the church, and having her children attend church. She felt that spirituality helped her to maintain balance in
her life and get through the problems and situations she deals with on a day-to-day basis. She described spirituality as the foundation of her life—as being important as well as the backbone of her relationship with God. Ashley felt that, for Black women, it is important to have a sense of calmness which she receives that from her spiritual life and from attending church. Ashley talked about her spiritual life as a child and which was mainly comprised of attending church and weekly Bible study with her family. She added that, “Right now, my spiritual life is different than what it was when I was younger.” She perceived that meditation and prayer were essential today to maintain a healthy mind, body and soul. Ashley said her spiritual life has helped her when she returned to MCC. She felt she has more of a balance in her life than ever before.

When it came to Danny and her spiritual life and awareness, like Ashley, she brought it up throughout her interviews with a question I asked. Danny’s definition was different from Ashley’s. Danny felt that one could be a spiritual person without attending a church or place of worship. Danny perceived that being spiritually aware has more to do with how one treats others and how others treat her. Danny believes that a person should help others, which is why it is important for her to find a job that involves helping others. Danny remarked that she felt her jobs on campus was part of her “work” to help others and to be an example for the young people who come through the doors of MCC. Danny said her “work” will never be done, no matter if she is at home, school, in the grocery store, or the mall. Danny mentioned she attended a local church and has belonged to a church since childhood but her spiritual life has increased since then. She teachers her daughters that it has to be more than just “going to church every Sunday” but what one does after leaving church. Danny noted that she believes that everyone should have some type of spiritual life but one that works best for him or her.
Danny believed in the power of prayer and, when asked what she would recommend to other women who are thinking about stopping out of school, the first thing she said was, “I would say rethink it. Rethink it and pray over it.” Danny now feels that prayer can bring about an answer from a higher power as well as peace for that individual when making a decision.

Lisa did not speak much about her spiritual life throughout her interviews. However, she mentioned on several occasion, how important her church family it to her. Being that Lisa lived so far away from her family and was currently living in a small town, her church family has become part of her family and they mean a lot to her. When asked about her spiritual life and spirituality, Lisa’s answer intrigued me:

A good person. Someone who knows who they are. I don't necessarily relate it to religion. Just someone who is grounded and just knows who they are not like out there searching or letting ... I know this is probably bad but like a book or a chant or whatever to tell them who to be but someone who takes that and conjure into goodness instead of like ... not a punishment but by ... I don't think it should be fearful. It's to be something that's naturally come from that. It won't do and not be afraid of, not also something like they're going to be a consequence for stepping at a certain type of vial. I think that's it.

In this scenario Lisa is talking about her spiritual life in a way that does not relate to a church or organized religion. Her answer was intriguing due to the fact that she talked about her church family on numerous occasions whereas, when it came to spirituality, church or religion was not brought up at all. Lisa’s definition of spirituality or a spiritual person has more to do with an individual’s behavior than what a book or “chant” says they should be doing. Lisa felt she is a good person, and she tries to model these behaviors to her sons and with her partner. Lisa said her spiritual life is a part of her and her everyday life. She felt she does not have to prove it to anyone or have any specific sign or apparel to show her beliefs.
Tina stated she was very active in her local church. She had to cancel or reschedule one of the interviews because someone in her church had died and she needed to attend the funeral. When asked if this was a family member or someone she was close to, she stated that they were not but she felt that it was important to help out and volunteer in the church when something like this happens. When the discussion of spirituality was brought up, Tina made it clear that Jesus Christ is her Lord and Savior. Tina felt strongly about the concept of belonging to a local church, being active in that church with whatever “talents and gifts” a person has, and to give [financially] as a person is able. Tina has attended the same church for the majority of her life. Most of her family attends the same church, too. She said that “…everything happens for a reason according to God’s plan,” including her leaving school almost 30 years ago. Tina perceived that this was God’s plan and she had no real regrets about it. Tina said she has tried her best to live a live that is “pleasing to Christ” and set a good example for others. Tina denoted that spirituality and being a spiritual person means one has to pray, read the Bible, attend church, and have her own person relationship with Jesus Christ.

London’s spiritual life was multifaceted. She did not feel that one can place spiritual life in a box and narrow it down to one thing. When speaking about spirituality, Lisa stated it is comprised of many things: “strength, belief, faith, God, just being hopeful.” Lisa remarked that, without her spiritual life, she was not sure how she would have made it through the death of her mother seven years ago, with her son’s Autism diagnosis, and now with the illness of her father. Her spiritual life has kept her grounded and with hope that things in her life will get better sooner or later. Lisa said she does go to a church although she does not go “every Sunday like some people.” Lisa said her mother raised her to go to church and always
have faith that God will work every problem out eventually. It appears that Lisa’s spiritual awareness is full of hope and means to believing that better things will happen in life.

In Kara’s interviews, spirituality was mentioned very sparsely but, when brought up in the 3rd interview, she had much to say. Kara made it clear that she did not attend church when she was younger. Her grandmother is a Jehovah’s Witness so she spent a lot of time with her and her place of worship. As Kara got older, she said she began to become more aware of “self” and how important it is meditate and be aware of her surroundings and those with whom she associates. Kara said she does not belong to a local church but visits churches at times with her friends and some family members. Kara believed that because she is so young, she not ready to be committed to one church or religion but she does believe in prayer. Prayer is important to Kara and she noted, when she has health issues, she uses prayer to help her ease her mind about the illness or sickness. Spirituality to Kara encompasses all aspects of one’s life so she does not think a person has to be a perfect person to be spiritual; however, one has to do and say what is best for herself to find inner peace and understanding. Kara also feels that a people need to surround themselves with people who are going to aid them in bettering themselves and vice versa.

**Summary of Themes**

To assume that all six participants would have experiences of stopping out of community college that mirror one another is unrealistic. Three themes emerged from the participants’ experiences. Each of the participants traveled a different journey that brought them to MCC during the spring of 2014. Many of the participants revealed that the lack of employment and/or financial knowledge caused them to return to MCC or depend upon their
financial aid. Although some worked part-time, fulltime or even as a student worker, the majority perceived they had returned due to the loss of a job and/or the need for additional financial assistance by way of a loan check they receive each semester. This lack of employment and financial literacy affected each of the participant’s lives inside and outside of the classroom.

The influence of family, in most cases, determines an individual’s outcome in life. For many of the participants, the lack of discussion about education and furthering their career as well as the lack of encouragement while in college was very evident. Although many of the participants had support of their families, no words or acknowledgement of their pursuit had been communicated to them. Although none of the participants complained or recognized that there was a lack of encouragement, this emerged in most of the interviews. For some of the participants, their parents wanted them to do well in life but did not always express that college was a way getting to their definition of success.

The participants all recognized that there is a need for some type of spiritual connection in their lives. Although each of the six participants had a different definition and explanation of what spirituality is, collectively they felt it was an important part of their life. This was evident in the various practices each participant discussed when revealing their spiritual awareness is a part of their day-to-day activities. For the majority of the participants spirituality has been a source of comfort and peace.

Reflective Essay

My personal experience included stopping out after attending college for one year. Although I always knew I would return to school because it was my mother’s dream that I
would receive a college degree, several barriers in my life made the journey difficult. When I returned, I was determined not only to graduate but also to be an example for my nieces and nephews who looked up to me. After taking one class at a time, and sometimes two, I completed my bachelor’s degree in seven years. I understand the need to stop out of school and I also realize that each individual has a different story and reason for their stop out. This personal lifelong challenge sparked my interest in the stories of African American females who stop out of community college. I have a strong interest in these women because their stories, are not heard in much of the literature.
CHAPTER 5. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of African American female community college students who stop out, and interpret how their gender and race have influenced these lived experiences. This study analyzed the decision to stop out and the factors that influenced this decision. This study looked at the decision by the students to return to college and the influences that aided them to the decision to return as well as add to the literature on African American females who stop out of community college. This chapter summarizes and discusses the results of this study and emergence of themes, with focus placed on connecting the results to the theoretical framework. Lastly, recommendations for future research and practice are presented to enable African American female community college students and staff to utilize as they seek to provide the necessary support for students who enter into, drop out of and return to community college. After a brief review of the research questions that framed the study, the chapter is divided into four sections (1) Brief overview of the research; (2) Needs of the students who have stopped out and returned and emerging themes; (3) Recommendations for practice and for future research.; and (3) Conclusion, which will tie together the themes and knowledge the women gained through their participation of the study.

Research Questions

Three research questions framed this study:

*Research Question 1: How do African American female community college students who have stopped out of community college describe their educational experiences of stopping out and returning to community college?*
When combined and analyzed, the narratives of the six participants revealed that students do not all have the same experience when attending college. This question addressed the overall purpose and goal of this study of this research. A review of the findings presented in Chapter 4 is made.

**Research Question 2. What factors such as family, work and other roles outside of education encourage or discourage stopping out?**

For the participants in this study, family, work or the lack there of, had a tremendous effect on their decision to stop out. All of the students had experiences with a job that either caused them to stop out or to return to school after losing that job.

**Family**

All of the participants in this research spoke of various scenarios of family either supporting them as they attend college but very felt they received little encouragement. Support came in forms of babysitting and purchasing laptops, but an encouraging word was not often heard. Many of the families did not have a rich history in higher education; therefore, they may not know how to encourage the participants.

**Work**

Joblessness was a key theme in this research. All of the women were affected by losing a job or decided to attend MCC until they could find a job. Many of the women, including Danny and Tina, had lost a job through budget cuts, and felt that going back to school was their best option. Kara left MCC twice because she needed to earn money to pay her bills. She was able to find a job when she returned this time to MCC—one that would work with her class schedule.
Research Question 3: What factors cause African American females to return to community college after stopping out for at least one semester?

As mentioned throughout the research, several factors caused these participants to stop out, notably, a desire to pursue a music career, lack of resources (car), finding a job, and family issues.

Black Feminist Thought

Although race and gender were not brought up by the participants, it was important to reflect on how their race and gender made a difference in their lives compared to others who were not like them. Black Feminist Thought was used to help me gain a greater understanding of the topic as I listened to their comments and learned from their experiences.

Human Ecology Theory

Human Ecology theory provided a theoretical framework for this study by using narrative analysis as the research methodology. To provide a clear understanding of how this theory relates to the study, the four systems are reviewed and associated with the study’s findings.

Microsystem

A Microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics. In this study, the participants’ microsystem could include the college, other students, instructors, staff, and administration. The participants found that their relationships with the college, staff and instructors either had a positive influence on them or negative one. Their relationships while in the environment of the college were varied. Some of the
participants, like Tina, had a bookstore worker who was very influential to her. Lisa spoke of having a good relationship with her advisor, and she made sure to speak with her advisor prior to stopping out.

**Mesosystem**

A *Mesosystem* comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (e.g., for a child, the relations among home, school, and neighborhood peer group; for an adult, among family, work, and social life). All of the participants mentioned that their return to MCC was the result of the need to work or being laid off from a job. Their lack of employment affected their decision to return to MCC as well as leave MCC. Although parents and MCC staff and instructors do not have relationship, the participants found that what happened in their personal lives affected their enrollment. For example, London’s decision to leave MCC during the end of the study was due to her father’s illness.

**Exosystem**

An *Exosystem* refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person. In this research, Danny and Ashley needed to adjust their school schedule to fit with their children’s school schedule. This is a great example of Exosystem. Although the participants did not attend their children’s schools, what happens at their children’s school determines when they can attend their classes; therefore, affecting their environment.
**Macrosystem**

The *Macrosystem* refers to consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo) that exist, or could exit, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies. The participants’ spiritual lives, although not a direct connection to their experience at MCC, affected their personal beliefs and how they dealt with family, coworkers, peers, classmates, staff, and instructors.

This chapter includes summary of the research, discussion, and conclusions. In addition, implications for practice and recommendations for further research are presented.

**Summary**

This research was developed based on my own personal desire as an African American female whose career has embraced the higher educational system as well as an individual who stopped out of college. I had personally experienced this phenomenon, I wanted to understand the stopping out and returning process. For me, this included stopping out after attending college for one year. Although I always knew I would return to school because it was my mother’s dream that I would receive a college degree, several barriers in my life made it difficult for me to achieve. Once I returned, I was determined not only to graduate but also to be an example for my nieces and nephews who looked up to me. After taking one class at a time, and sometimes two, I completed my bachelor’s degree in seven years. I came to understand the need to stop out of school, and that each individual has a different story and reason for her stop out. I was interested in the stories of African American
females who stop out of community college because these women’s stories are not heard in much of the literature.

My desire to conduct this research also stemmed from my experience working at a community college. On several occasions, I met students who have attempted to attend the school as many as three or four times. I came to realize that each time they were not successful, they many left due to circumstances beyond their control. Although many believe that some of these students come to receive a financial aid check, this may not always be true. It was important for me to interview African American females for two reasons. First, being an African American female who stopped out of college, I believed I would be able to relate to the participants and enable them to talk freely about their experiences. Second, I perceived that the voice of the African American female is still unheard in the higher education literature as often as their male or Caucasian counterparts.

For these reasons, I used a narrative analysis that focused on the experiences of African American female community college students who stopped out. Narrative analysis enabled me to hear the voice of the participants and use their stories as data. This small population of students who have stopped out was important to study due to the mere fact that there are limited studies that focus on African American female community college students who have stopped out. Chapter 3 provides an overview of studies on African American female students, stop out and community college, but I found it difficult to find any study that combines all of these characteristics.

All six women in my study had different stories as to why they first attended MCC and the reasons they stopped out and later returned. The similarities among the participants were that they were African American, females, attended MCC, stopped out of MCC and
were enrolled in classes during the spring semester of 2014. In addition, all of the participants were over the age of 20. Although they had many differences, each knew that they needed support and encouragement from the college, and family and friends in order to be successful in college.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

The study site was a delimitation in this study and the difficulty of recruiting participants was a limitation. Data collection at one community college limits the transferability of the findings of the study. In addition, the limited number of the data pool was due the limited of number of participants.

First, the site of the study was limited to one location. It was limited to one location in order to gain a clear understanding of issues and experiences the students of that particular community college faced and experienced, and to determine if there was any consistency in their experiences. Although data were collected and findings were developed, they were limited to the experiences of these participants and may or may not mirror the experiences of other female African American community college students who stop out. With one community college being studied, it limits the generalization that other colleges can make when regarding working and supporting this population of students based on these findings. This study could be expanded to other community colleges in the same state. Not only being limited to one community college but also being limited to one geographical area of the country is a limitation in itself. The study was conducted only in the Midwest. There could have been rich data collected if other regions of the country had been studied as well.
The main limitation came during the recruitment stage of the study. After approval was received from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), it was forwarded to the research and assessment department of MCC. The first pool of participants that were sent to me was incorrect. After I received three to five email responses stating that they [students] did not qualify for the study, I resubmitted my request to MCC's research and assessment department. It was found that MCC had giving me all of the female African American students of the college, not just those who had stopped out.

When the correct list was finally distributed to me, a list of over 400, I was able to send an additional email to the potential participants. After a week, I received several emails stating that respondents were not interested in participating in the study. During the second recruitment email, I sent an email to the school’s email address as well as the personal email address that had been provided to me. After the third recruitment email was sent, more individuals responded who indicated were interested. At one point, there were a total of eight potential participants. When I scheduled interview dates, three participants backed out, limiting me to only five participants. Then had to go back and send another recruitment email to those who had not responded to my initial emails. I was able to find one more person, enabling me to have a total of six participants. During the recruitment stage of the study, I had hoped that eight participants would be a part of this study but this did not happen.

Conclusions

The six women who participated in this study had six different experiences while attending MCC. Their age varied and they had different backgrounds. MCC is the largest community college in the state and prides itself on being centralized and offering courses and
programs, from career and technical to liberal arts degrees. The largest percentage of African
American students can be found at its most urban campus. This study revealed that the
participants in this study all had challenges that caused them to have to drop out of MCC. On
hand, each started and stopped attending MCC during different years, returned during
different semesters, and viewed her stopping out process differently. On the other hand, they
were African American females who attended MCC and had stopped out. They talked about
their experiences with education from childhood to the current day. They also shared
experiences of having and not having teachers and administrators in school who were
African American and what that meant to them.

The findings of this study revealed common links among all six of the participants. It
was revealed that the influence and discussion of education by many of the participant’s
families were missing throughout their life. A lack of encouragement from family was also
revealed, which was discouraging to many of the participants. Although most participants felt
their families supported them, it is questionable that their families knew how to appropriately
encourage them to continue pursuing their degree. In addition, a lack of financial literacy
regarding financial responsibility and financial was apparent. Although all the women
worked or have worked in the past, they seemed to face issues or completely lacked
knowledge of how to maintain their financial aid or use the school as a means of resource. At
no point in the study did a woman speak about having her tuition paid by a family member or
having a trust fund in place before attending college.

The common link between all of the participants was spiritual awareness. Although
each woman expressed a different way of expressing her own spirituality, they all felt it was
important as a part of their life. The spiritual life for these six participants appeared to be
something that was important to them even when they were not enrolled in classes. From church services to meditation, the spiritual lives of these participants revealed a common thread among them.

Based on the findings revealed in Chapter 4, the following three conclusions were made:

1. Family support and encouragement is vital in the success of African American female community college students.

2. Having a sense of spiritual connections allows for a more balance life and allows for hope.

3. Community colleges must provide students information to improve their financial acumen.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The following recommendations for practice are based on the findings, conclusions of this research and from the participants, themselves. The recommendations are for: (a) individuals; (b) families; and (c) community colleges. It is important for community colleges to take an active look to determine how they can best assist not only African American female students but also all students who may be considering dropping out or students who have returned after sitting out for a period of time.

**Individuals**

*Return when you are ready.* When the six participants were asked what advice they would give to another African American female student who was thinking about stopping out or has stopped out, they basically said, one way or another, that they would recommend coming
back when they are ready. For some of the participants, ready meant the student was mentally ready to take on the workload. For others, ready meant having the self-discipline to attend classes, take care of a family, and do their homework.

**Set goals prior to returning to college.** Several of the participants made it clear that they did not initially have goals when they started attending college. Many of the participants were attending for a job, or because a family member or friend felt they needed to go to college, or it was what a person does. Having a clear goal in mind when attending college will enable a student to have a clear understanding and be able to focus on why they are in college.

**Become familiar with all campus resources and take advantage of them.** Two of the participants participated in TRiO Student Support Services and found that this has helped them to be more successful this time they are in classes. Many of the women talked about getting assistance from their advisor as well tutoring services.

**Prior to dropping out, speak with an academic advisor or counselor.** When asked, many of the participants stated that they did not speak with anyone prior to leaving MCC. Although they did not, they believed that they would have been more aware of their options and maybe even returned sooner if they had spoken to someone prior to leaving the college.

**Families**

**Support and encouragement from family is vital in the success of African American female community college students.** All of the women in the study either credited or discredited their families for giving them support or encouragement when they first started college or during their return to college after dropping out. This support for many is the only way they can attend classes. Whether it is for childcare or financial support, many of the
participants have needed that additional help from their families. Like the participants, many of the families need to have an understanding of what is involved for their family member to attend college. Most of the participants are first generation college students and their families do not understand the time commitment outside of classes in order to be successful.

**Community Colleges**

*Hire a retention specialist or director.* Many colleges across the country have increasing realized that, in order to maintain students after their first term or year, hiring a retention specialist has aided in this effort. As stated by Barefoot (2004), “Charging someone with the primary responsibility for retention may serve to focus needed attention on the retention problem or may simply absolve everyone else, especially course instructors, of any sense of responsibility” (p. 13). A retention specialist can serve all involved, the college, students, faculty and administration. This individual can develop programming that may include a tracking system, having all parties involved, focusing their efforts taken by staff to encourage students to seek the necessary assistance they need to progress and graduate.

*Require all students to meet with an advisor prior to withdrawing from all classes.* Each student has been recommended to meet with an academic advisor prior to withdrawing from all of their classes; however, the college should have a policy and system in place where this procedure is mandatory. This meeting with the advisor will enable the advisor to offer all options to the student as well inform them about what needs to be done in order for them to return. This would also give the advisor the opportunity to explain any ramifications there may be with Financial Aid as well.
Set up and maintain a follow up system for students who have not enrolled in classes after sitting out for two semesters or more, not including summer semester. The decision to return to college after sitting out for a period of time is never easy. For many of the participants, something drastic, like losing a job, aided in their decision to return. Developing a system that will follow up with students after sitting out for a period of time would allow for the student to know that the college is aware that they are no longer in classes and enable the college to welcome them back. London made suggestions regarding implementing this procedure:

*I know they're busy just like everybody else is, but there is technology, there's email. I mean they text us when school's canceled, so they could text, "Hey, you doing? Do you need help? What can we do to help you?" Do something to show that somebody cares, other than yourself, you know?*

London’s point is well taken and considered. A follow-up system that sends a quick email or text message offering support to the student who is no longer attending may be a way to get the student back into classes. Many times students do not realize they are eligible to return because they left after a bad term. Sometimes they have a family issue and they need support in order to return to college. This follow-up system could invite them in to speak with an advisor who can help them determine how they can return to classes. Not only could this help enrollment numbers but it might also help improve the graduation rate of the students.

Require all returning students to attend an orientation specifically for returning students. Although MCC requires mandatory orientation for all new students, according to some of the participants, they did not attend orientation when they returned after stopping out or, as Lisa explained, she never attended orientation. Danny recommended that all students attend orientation:
Helping them to explain ... I'm in awe of the fact that students can ... aren't all required to go to orientation, because they learned a lot of stuff that took me a while to learn. That is the big help in itself. I really think, just the support piece of saying this is a go-to person you can talk to, understanding where they're coming from and their need.

If a student sits out for a brief or long period of time, there is a chance they may not be aware of policy changes and new requirements for their program. Requiring students who have dropped out to attend an orientation would enable them feel they’re up-to-date and welcomed as well. At this time MCC does not have mandatory advising; therefore, requiring the returning students to attend an orientation will create an environment wherein the student feels welcomed back.

Danny also felt that, during orientation, all of the support services that are provided at the campus should been explained:

I would say you really need to stress that there is a support system, and maybe pull them together to talk about things, to help them to understand. There are some great diamonds in the school that people don't know about, and it's like they're open to people, but people don't understand them. To be honest with you, no one wants to feel like they're stupid.

A refresher orientation would allow for the opportunity to provide details about support services that a student may not otherwise know about or remember from when they attended previously. Ultimately, each community college will need to determine the number of semesters a student sits out and if they need to attend a refresher orientation.

**Offer daycare service and after school programs at all campuses.** Most of the women in this study had a child or children. Those who have children talked about the need to rely on family and friends to assist watching their children in order for them to attend classes. Ashley made this point when it came to weather issues,:
One of the things that I have an issue with that I was just thinking about recently, with the weather and everything, is that not all of the campuses are equal. I know with this campus there are several people that have a need of child care or those types of options and it's not an option here.

Although MCC offers daycare service at one of their campuses, it is for children ages four and five, and there is currently a waiting list. Several of the participants talked about the public schools closing due to bad weather but MCC staying open. When this happens, they are forced to miss class. Therefore, having an after school program for the children of students would enable parents/caregivers to drop off their children while they attend classes.

**Provide resources for families of students.** By providing orientations for families, they will be orientated on what to expect of their loved ones as they start their college career. In addition, providing family portals that allow families to log on to the college website and know the latest college news, they will feel connected.

**Develop a parent/family portal.** If the college invites families and parents to attend a special orientation, this could also provide an opportunity to introduce them to the parent/family portal. This portal would be a log-in system that would allow the parents and families to see the upcoming events for the college, from registration dates to a reminder to complete the Free Application for Federal Financial Aid (FAFSA) each year. Not only will this keep the parents and families abreast of upcoming events, but they could also have access to grades and financial aid information with the approval of their student. This portal will enable parents and families to feel that they are involved in their student’s academic life.

**Offer text messaging for college communication.** With text messaging being the main source of communication for many individuals today, this could also provide an expeditious way for colleges to communicate with their students. Reminders about registration, FAFSA,
events and school closings could go out to all students or those who choose to receive text messages. Although many schools use text messaging for emergency purposes, it could be used in the same manner to disperse other college information. Students could choose what information they want text to them and opt in or out at any time.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

In research, questions are answered but, in most cases, more questions and topics arise. After reviewing the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made for future research on African American female community college students who have stopped out:

1. This research looked solely at African American female students who have stopped out of community college. To gain a better understanding of serving all African American students, research could be done on African American male students who have stopped out of community college. The study could compare and contrast the experiences of the females from this study as well as males to see if there are any similarities in their experiences. Specifically at MCC, this research could bring together recommendations that would benefit all African American students who stop out.

2. A majority of the women in this study had issues with joblessness. A study could be done to examine if there is a relationship between low social economic status and African Americans who have stopped out of community college.

3. A study could also be conducted to determine if there are similarities between African American and Latina women who have stopped out of community college.
4. A majority of the women in this study were nontraditional students who were over the age of 25. A study could examine African American female community college students under the age of 25 who have stopped out. This research could ascertain the differences, if any, between the two groups. Are their needs the same? What factors contribute to their stopping out?

5. A quantitative study could be conducted to look at the various attributes of students at MCC who stop out. In this study, the success rate of students who return could be viewed. In addition, the number of semesters that students sit out could be compared to see if it makes a difference to their success once they return. Another angle for this study could be to look at the demographics of the students who stop out, where they are from, what they receive for a financial aid package and high school they attended, as well as other demographics.

6. Lastly, a study could examine the success rate of African American female community college students who stop out, return, graduate, and transfer. The study could also examine if the students complete a four-year degree, stop out while they are attending a four-year college or university and, if they do stop out, look at the reasons they stopped out.
APPENDIX A. HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL

133

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
1138 Pearson Hall
Ames, Iowa 50011-2317
515-294-5966
FAX 515-294-2767

Date: 1/15/2014
To: Shanna L. Fountain
8610 EP True Parkway Unit 11003 West Des Moines, IA 50266

CC: Dr. Larry Ebbens
N256 Lagomarcino Hall
Dr. Carol Heaverlo
218 Carver Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Stopping Out: The Experiences of African American Female Students in Community College

IRB ID: 13-509

Approval Date: 1/15/2014
Date for Continuing Review: 1/14/2016
Submission Type: New
Review Type: Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.
- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personal Changes form, as necessary.
- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.
- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.
APPENDIX B. PARTICIPANT COMMUNICATION

B-1. Interview Protocol

Demographic Questions/General Questions
1. Share with me your educational experience.
2. Where did you go to school?
3. Did you obtain a certificate or degree?
4. What is your major/program you are currently pursuing?
5. What semester and year did you first enrolled at XXXX?
6. During your first semester, what your major/program?
7. During your first semester enrolled at XXXX, were you a full time (12 or more credits) or part time (11 or less credits) student?

Stopping Out
1. Share with me the reason(s) or events that ledup to the decision to leave school.
2. What do you think is the main reason students drop out or stop out of school?
3. What was the main reason for your return to school?

Family and Support System
1. Are you married? Do you have children?
2. Who would be included in your main support system?
3. How did you family and support system feel when you decided not to return to school?
4. How did you family and support system feel when you decided to return to school?
5. What kind of support do you get from your family and support system, i.e. babysitting, financial support, encouragement?

Success and Goals
1. Do you feel you were prepared to return to school when you did?
2. What behaviors did you change when you returned to school, if any?
3. Who were your role models when you were younger? Who are they today?
4. What barriers do you see in your life at this present time that could cause you not to reach your goals?

Multiculturalism, Race and Gender
1. Do you feel your cultural background makes a difference in the classroom in comparison with persons of different backgrounds, particularly the majority students?
2. What were the experiences you had with your counselor/advisor/instructors during your college career?
3. Had racism or sexism affected your educational career?
4. How do you look to the African American community for your inspiration?
5. What role does the community college play in the African American community in helping you achieve your academic goals?

Community College
1. Before you left college, what did the college do to prepare you to leave?
2. What could they have done upon your return to support you and your goals?
3. What was your goal when you enrolled, certificate, diploma, associate’s degree or to obtain new skills?
### General Questions

1. What year were you born?
2. How do you classify your race/ethnicity?

### B-2. Interview Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Name</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
<th>Interview Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashley Interview 1</td>
<td>January 31, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley Interview 2</td>
<td>February 7, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danny Interview 1</td>
<td>February 7, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Interview 1</td>
<td>February 13, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danny Interview 2</td>
<td>February 14, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Interview 1</td>
<td>February 27, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina Interview 1</td>
<td>February 28th, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London Interview 1</td>
<td>March 7, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley Interview 3</td>
<td>March 7, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danny Interview 3</td>
<td>March 7, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina Interview 2</td>
<td>March 10, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Interview 2</td>
<td>March 12, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London Interview 2</td>
<td>March 14, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kara Interview 1</td>
<td>March 28, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kara Interview 2</td>
<td>April 1, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London Interview 3</td>
<td>April 25, 2014</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Interview 3</td>
<td>April 25, 2014</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina Interview 3</td>
<td>April 28, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kara Interview 3</td>
<td>April 29, 2014</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
B-3. Recruitment Email

Dear Student:

I am requesting your assistance with a study conducted by me at Iowa State University on students who stop out or sit out of Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) after initially enrolling in classes. You may have decided to sit out your second semester or any other semester after your first semester. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate and you must be a current DMACC student who sat out for at least one semester not including summer semester. The initial interview will take you approximately one to two hours, a set of prewritten questions will be asked of all participants. A second interview will occur that will result from the comments made from the first interview. In this interview, questions will be developed from responses from the first interview. This interview may take up to two hours. A third wrap up interview will occur as well. We will also review the transcript from the first two interviews. This interview may take up to an hour to two hours. Also, any questions you may have can be answered asked during any of these three interviews. If you choose not to respond within the first week, I will send you a reminder in one week. Note that instructions on how to discontinue your participation in the study and stop receiving emails from me appear at the end of this message.

All participants will receive a $10 gift card from the Bookstore on the campus they attend after each interview.

I have pledged to keep your data confidential and only to report aggregated results in any published scientific study.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from participation at any time. If you would like to withdraw from the study or stop receiving emails about this study please contact me at:

2006 S. Ankeny Blvd.
Ankeny, IA 50023
515-964-6441

Or reply to this email with, “Please remove me” in the subject line and/or body of the email.

Thank you,

Shanna L. Fountain
B-3. Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: Stopping Out: The Experiences of African American Female Students in Community College

Investigator: Shanna L. Fountain-Student  Dr. Larry Ebbers- Supervising Faculty

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to evaluate and assess the stop out process and transition for African American female students enrolled in Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) and to identify resources and strategies the college may offer to assist the students in overcoming this process and transition.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You should read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) female student who has sat out of classes at least one semester, not including summer semester and returned for a later semester and completed.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate:

1. You will be interviewed and asked a series of questions that relate to your experience at the DMACC. Some questions will be open ended and will allow for you to have the opportunity to express what you feel about the questions being asked.
2. Your interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed for analysis.
3. The initial interview will take you approximately one to two hours. During the first interview, all participants will be asked the same questions. During the second interview, additional questions will be asked that may or may not be the same for each participant. These questions will be developed by the researcher from the review of the transcript of the initial interview. This interview may take up to two hours. The third interview will be consisting of a review of the participants’ transcripts from the first two interviews. This interview may take up to an hour to two hours.

Your participation will last for no longer than three interviews, no longer than three months.

RISKS

While participating in this study you may experience the following risks: Expect that any risks, discomforts, or inconveniences will be minor and we believe that they are not likely to happen. Since you will be talking about your personal behaviors and your personal life may come up, this could cause some emotional and psychological discomfort when answering questions. If discomforts become a problem, you may discontinue your participation.
BENEFITS
It is not likely that you will benefit directly from participation in this study, but the research should help us learn how to improve services for future students who may decide to sit out of school or for those students who decide to return to school after sitting out for one or more semesters. This study does not include procedures that will improve your academic record.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION
You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will be compensated with $10 gift cards from the Bookstore at the campus you attend after each interview.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: Confidentiality will be maintained by means of a pseudonym for your name to let the principal investigator and supervising faculty know who you are. Your name will not be used in any of the information from this study or in any of the research reports. When the study is finished, the list that shows which code number goes with your name will be destroyed.

If you plan to use or mention names of other individuals who may be identifiable, we ask that you a pseudonym for those individuals. This will allow for those individuals name to not be used in the study or report. If you have questions about this, please ask prior to the start of the interviews.

Once the transcripts have been received, I will edit any identifiable information, i.e. titles, locations, buildings, positions, that may identify anyone being referred to in the research. I will create generalized identifiers that will not make the position, title or location identifiable when results of this study are reported.

The tape recordings will be heard by a transcriber at www.rev.com, an online transcription company. Once the transcripts have been reviewed, www.rev.com will be notified to destroy all recordings. At that point, transcripts will not be viewed by anyone outside the study. The tapes and transcripts will be destroyed three years after the end of the study.
QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS
You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact:
  Mrs. Shanna L. Fountain                       Dr. Larry Ebbers
  Student                                          University Professor
  2006 S Ankeny Blvd                                N221A Lagomarcino Hall
  Ankeny, IA 50023                                  Ames, IA 50011
  515-964-6441                                      515-294-8067

- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

******************************************************************************************

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE
Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant’s Name (printed) ____________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________

(Participant’s Signature)                                                   (Date)
REFERENCES


