PERSPECTIVES ON WHAT MAY CONTRIBUTE TO SIX-YEAR COLLEGE COMPLETION RATES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN AND HISPANIC STUDENTS AT GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

by

Alisha Scruggs
A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy
Education

Committee:

Chair

Program Director

Dean, College of Education and Human Development

Date: April 23, 2012

Spring Semester 2012
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
Perspectives on What May Contribute to Six-Year College Completion Rates of African American and Hispanic Students at George Mason University

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

By

Alisha K. Scruggs
Master of Social Policy
University of Pennsylvania, 2007

Director: Penelope Earley, Professor

College of Education and Human Development

Spring Semester 2012
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family: my loving parents, Mrs. Karen Scruggs Walton and Dr. Allie Wilbur Scruggs, my sister, Gabrielle Kada Scruggs, my stepfather, Robert Francis Walton, my sister’s significant other, Toussaint Amiri McClellan, and my significant other, Oscar Alfonso Martinez, for their support and inspiration.
I would like to thank:

- My mother, Karen Scruggs Walton, for your guidance, listening ear, and continual support that helped me through my most challenging moments during this process. You have instilled in me an unparalleled fervor for excellence and persistence to overcome any adversity. You are and will always be my most significant influence.

- My sister, Gabrielle Kada Scruggs, for all of your support, laughter, and friendship from the beginning of time. I have completed this dissertation as a direct result of your insight, transcription, and partnership. I will forever be thankful to you for everything you have ever done and will do as my best friend and sister.

- My late father, Dr. Allie W. Scruggs, for planting the seeds of academic curiosity and being an unspoken source of support through any obstacle, no matter the size, in this process and in my life.

- My stepfather, Robert F. Walton, for always making me smile and appreciate family so much. You have always supported me in every endeavor, and for that, I am thankful.

- My significant other, Oscar A. Martinez, for being one of the greatest sources of joy in my life. You have been selfless and shown me what true partnership is. I am so appreciative for you providing me the space to complete this project on weekends and evenings. Thank you for celebrating every small victory with me.

- My chair, Dr. Penelope Earley, thank you for being a guide for the past four years. You have pushed me toward excellence. You have been a profound model to me in so many ways. I appreciate you for being my advisor and an advocate when I needed your support the most. This has been a long journey and you have been the best possible advisor I could have ever asked for. I am so very thankful for your wisdom, support, and friendship.

- My doctoral committee, thank you for your support and belief in me. You each have played a unique and significant role in my development as a scholar.

- The participants who were interviewed in my study, I thank you for your valuable contributions and insights. This dissertation would not have been possible without your involvement. I am grateful for your participation.

- My very good friend, Dr. Jackie Vitaz, for your advice, friendship, and support.

- My friends, colleagues at the Department of Education and previous workplaces, and colleagues in the doctoral program at the College of Education and Human Development at Mason, especially those who participated in member checks.
• My editors, Noel Pratt, Jackie Vitaz, and Oscar Martinez, for their time, dedication, and flexibility to edit this dissertation.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of Obtaining a Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications of African American and Hispanic Students Graduating at a</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Rate than White Students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of Solutions to the College Completion Problem</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals of the Study</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions of Terms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Literature Review</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of Earning a Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controversy over Benefits of Obtaining a Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Completion</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Research Site: George Mason University</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Trust Data</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controversy Over Using Graduation Rate as a Measure</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Higher Education Studies</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research about George Mason University</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Method</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods Pilot</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants and Setting</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Sources</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundaries</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Findings</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Models</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Final Findings .................................................................................................................. 159
Summary ......................................................................................................................... 172
5. Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 173
   Implications .................................................................................................................. 174
   Recommendations ....................................................................................................... 179
   Future Research ......................................................................................................... 184
   Limitations ................................................................................................................... 191
Summary ......................................................................................................................... 192
Appendices ....................................................................................................................... 194
A. Graduating Senior Questionnaire .............................................................................. 194
B. Graduating Senior Interview Guide .......................................................................... 196
C. University Staff Interview Guide ............................................................................ 197
D. Flyer Seeking Participation ....................................................................................... 198
E. Recruitment Email to Graduating Seniors ................................................................. 199
F. Recruitment Email to University Staff Members ...................................................... 200
G. Informed Consent Form for Graduating Seniors ...................................................... 201
H. Informed Consent Form for University Staff Members .......................................... 203
I. Payment Form for Graduating Seniors ..................................................................... 205
References ....................................................................................................................... 206
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Six-year graduation rates of first-time postsecondary students (1996-2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Six-year graduation rates by race/ethnicity from 1996 to 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Conceptual Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Undergraduate demographic breakdown at Mason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Recent six-year graduation rates at Mason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Six-year college graduation rates at Mason by race/ethnicity (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Transition Resource Center courses (University 100-400)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Mason campus offices overseen by University Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Concept map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Graduating Seniors’ Cultural Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>University Staff Members’ Cultural Model</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

PERSPECTIVES ON WHAT MAY CONTRIBUTE TO SIX-YEAR COLLEGE COMPLETION RATES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN AND HISPANIC STUDENTS AT GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

Alisha K. Scruggs, Ph.D.

George Mason University, 2012

Dissertation Director: Dr. Penelope Earley

This study explored what graduating seniors and university staff perceived contributed to high college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students at George Mason University (Mason). To understand what Mason may have been doing to support African American and Hispanic students toward college completion, in-depth interviews were conducted and analyzed. Through application of constant comparative analysis (CCA), two cultural models resulted as an overlay following data analysis. The themes evident in the graduating seniors’ cultural model included: (a) how graduating seniors elected to describe Mason’s campus environment, (b) how graduating seniors described Mason’s campus personnel, (c) how graduating seniors chose to describe campus resources, and (d) how graduating seniors chose to be involved on Mason’s campus. The themes evident in the university staff members’ cultural model were: (a) how university staff members described Mason’s campus environment, (b) how university staff members...
depicted campus offices, (c) how university staff members depicted campus personnel, (d) how university staff members described campus resources, (e) how university staff members described retention strategies, and (f) how university staff members described student involvement. These themes represented what participants in this study perceived to contribute to the high college completion rates among African American and Hispanic students at George Mason University.
CHAPTER I

National college completion data indicate that African American and Hispanic students do not obtain a bachelor’s degree within six years of enrolling at four-year institutions of higher education (IHEs) at the same rates as White students. Persistent gaps in college completion among African American, Hispanic, and White students are evident from six-year college completion data aggregated by race/ethnicity collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). For all cohorts beginning in 1996, when these data were first collected, through 2001, White students graduated from four-year IHEs at higher rates than African American and Hispanic counterparts (Figure 1).
Figure 1. Six-year graduation rates of first-time postsecondary students (1996-2001).

Note. These data indicate that African American and Hispanic first-time degree seekers do not obtain a bachelor’s degree within six years of enrolling at the same rates as White students. Adapted from “Table 331: Graduation rates of first-time postsecondary students who started as full-time degree-seeking students, by sex, race/ethnicity, time between starting and graduating, and level and control of institution where student started: Selected cohort entry years, 1996-2001.” Copyright 2010 by the National Center for Educational Statistics.

Using these college completion data of six-year graduation rate for the 1996 through 2001 cohorts, African American completion rates are between 36.8 and 40.8% and 42.1 and 46.0% for Hispanic students, compared with 54.3 and 57.5% for White counterparts. More specifically, these six-year college completion rates reflect:

- a graduation rate gap of 17.5 percentage points between White and African American students and 12.2 percentage points between White and Hispanic students for the 1996 starting cohort;
• a graduation rate gap of 17.2 percentage points between White and African American students and 12.8 percentage points between White and Hispanic students for the 1997 starting cohort;

• a graduation rate gap of 16.8 percentage points between White and African American students and 12.8 percentage points between White and Hispanic students for the 1998 starting cohort;

• a graduation rate gap of 16.6 percentage points between White and African American students and 11.1 percentage points between White and Hispanic students for the 1999 starting cohort;

• a graduation rate gap of 16.3 percentage points between White and African American students and 11.1 percentage points between White and Hispanic students for the 2000 starting cohort; and

• a graduation rate gap of 17.4 percentage points between White and African American students and 11.8 percentage points between White and Hispanic students for the 2001 starting cohort.

These graduation rate gaps are shown in Figure 2.
Figure 2. Six-year graduation rates by race/ethnicity from 1996 to 2001.  
*Note.* These data indicate that persistent gaps in college completion among African American, Hispanic, and White students are evident for all cohorts from 1996 to 2001. Adapted from “Graduation rates of first-time postsecondary students who started as full-time degree-seeking students, by sex, race/ethnicity, time between starting and graduating, and level and control of institution where student started: Selected cohort entry years, 1996 through 2001.” Copyright 2010 by the National Center for Educational Statistics.

These six-year college completion data reported by NCES provide evidence that there are significant gaps in six-year college completion rates among African American, Hispanic, and White students. These data suggest that four-year IHEs have not successfully graduated African American and Hispanic students at rates similar to those of White students. The definition of *success* used in this study is the following: first-time, full-time undergraduates completing a degree in six years.

More recent research indicates that the college completion problem still exists.
According to Williams (2009), African American and Hispanic students “are more likely to depart college prior to earning a degree at both two and four-year colleges than are White and Asian students” (p. 924). Further, Swail et al. (2004) found that

Of only those eighth-grade students that went on to postsecondary studies, 43.4 percent received a bachelor’s degree and 12.6 percent received a certificate or associate’s degree. Forty-four percent of those who went on to postsecondary education did not receive a degree by 2000. Among Latinos, only 23.2 percent received a bachelor’s degree and 12.8 percent a certificate or associate’s degree. Almost two thirds (64 percent) of Latinos who entered postsecondary education did not receive a degree by 2000. (p. vi)

Lynch and Engle (2010b) report, “the average graduation rate for African American students in four-year colleges and universities is about 20 points below that of their White peers” (Lynch & Engle, p. 1). The same researchers write, “fewer than half of Hispanic students who enter four-year colleges and universities graduate within six years, compared with about 60 percent of White students” (Lynch & Engle, 2010a, p. 1). Therefore, the research problem addressed in this study has been a persistent challenge for four-year IHEs that are consistently unsuccessful in graduating African American and Hispanic students when compared with White students within six years of enrolling as full-time, first-time freshmen.

In summary, since NCES collected six-year college completion data aggregated by race/ethnicity in 1996, significant gaps among African American, Hispanic, and White students have persisted. Four-year IHEs continue to have difficulties in graduating
students from African American and Hispanic ethnic backgrounds. This challenge has implications beyond merely having or not having a degree from a four-year IHE; African American and Hispanic students are not accruing the many benefits of obtaining a bachelor’s degree evident in research, benefits which are discussed in detail in the next section.

Benefits of Obtaining a Bachelor’s Degree

A bachelor’s degree benefits not only the individual, but also society, as evidenced in research. Those who earn a bachelor’s degree are more likely to receive higher earnings, volunteer in a civic or community organization, and have health insurance, and are less likely to receive public assistance (Perna, 2005). According to analysts at the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) (2011), over a lifetime, an individual with a bachelor’s degree will have a positive economic impact for that individual and society. Analysts at the USDOE (2011) also report that benefits will accrue to businesses from employees’ higher earnings as well. The same analysts at the USDOE write,

Benefits will accrue not only to individuals but also to businesses in the form of higher earnings and to state, federal, and local governments in the form of increased tax revenue. Each four-year college graduate generates, on average, $5,900 more per year in state, federal, and local tax revenue than each high school graduate. Over a lifetime, each generates, on average, $177,000 more in tax revenue than those with only a high school degree. (p. 1)

In summary, empirical evidence shows an impact to the individual and to society when
that individual obtains a bachelor’s degree. In the following section, the implications for the failure of IHEs to graduate African American and Hispanic students are discussed.

**Implications of African American and Hispanic Students Graduating at a Lower Rate than White Students**

The implications of the failure of four-year IHEs to graduate African American and Hispanic students are many: they include projections of more diverse students entering postsecondary institutions and increasing levels of knowledge and skills required to perform jobs of the future. The economy of the future will require higher levels of education, knowledge, and skills. According to analysts at the USDOE (2011) more than half of all new jobs in the next decade will require a postsecondary certificate or degree. Already, new jobs in the economy require new levels of education. Analysts at the USDOE (2011) speculate, “In the coming decade, individuals with professional certificates and postsecondary degrees at the associate's, bachelor’s, and graduate levels are projected to continue to experience higher levels of employment and wage growth than those without” (p. 1).

Analysts at the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2002) and Whitehurst (2011) report findings similar to those of the USDOE and argue that the demand for higher levels of knowledge and skills may be exceeding the supply at present. The analysts at the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2002) go on to write that “even the most conservative workforce projections predict a significant shortage of qualified workers between now and 2020 in jobs that will require at least some college” (p. 15). Whitehurst (2011) adds,
Recent changes in the U.S. economy have highlighted an increasing economic divide corresponding to the level of education a person has achieved…More years of schooling prepare them [these people] for the higher-paying jobs, that in turn, bolster the tax base and reduce budget problems. Since so much of the education industry is public, there is no immediate market-based solution to dramatically cutting this public investment. (pp.1-2)

This claim from Whitehurst supports the assertion that changes in the American economy require individuals to have more years of education to be prepared for new jobs.

According to analysts at the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012), engineering, nursing, and teaching jobs are projected to experience the highest growth. Subgroups of professional and related occupations, which include healthcare practitioners and technical occupations, are expected to increase by 21% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). The analysts report, “As the number of older people continues to grow, and as new developments allow for the treatment of more medical conditions, more healthcare professionals will be needed” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012, para. 3). Additional occupations in education, training, and library occupations are “anticipated to add more than 1.3 million jobs, representing a growth rate of more than 14 percent” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, para. 3). Thus, these researchers write, “as the U.S. population increases, and as a larger share of adults seeks educational services, demand for these workers will increase” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, para. 3).

As the expectation that postsecondary education will be necessary for future jobs becomes widely accepted, the number of persons of color entering two-and four-year
IHEs is expected to increase to more than 19.9 million by 2015 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Some researchers have reported that college enrollment will include students with certain demographic profiles. According to analysts at the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) (2006),

Over the coming decade, it will become increasingly important for the higher education system to close enrollment gaps and educate a growing share of low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color. Projections indicate that the number of public high school graduates will increase by 10 percent between 2001-02 and 2017-18, with more than 40 percent of the graduating seniors representing a racial or ethnic minority by 2014. Similar demographic changes are predicted for students enrolled in college. Between 1995 and 2015, the number of undergraduate students will increase by 19 percent; 80 percent of the new students will be African American, Hispanic, or Asian/Pacific Islander, and by 2015, students of color will represent 37 percent of all enrollments. (p. 10)

Therefore, it is imperative for IHEs to address gaps in six-year college completion rates among African American, Hispanic, and White students if more students of color are expected to matriculate at IHEs in the future.

In closing, this section presented the implications of not graduating African American and Hispanic students at rates similar to those of their White counterparts. The expectation is that postsecondary education will be necessary for future jobs and that more persons of color are expected to enter two- and four-year IHEs. Knowledge of
strategies on how to graduate students from African American and Hispanic backgrounds at IHEs must be sought.

Evidence of Solutions to the College Completion Problem

Recently, publications by the Education Trust (2010), a Washington-based national education advocacy organization that focuses on racial and ethnic achievement gaps, named 11 higher education institutions nationwide with little or no disparity in graduation rates between African American and Hispanic students and White students. The 11 IHEs are these (listed in alphabetical order not a ranking in itself):

- George Mason University
- Georgia State University
- Loyola Marymount University
- Loyola University of New Orleans
- Purchase College in the State University of New York system
- Stony Brook University
- Towson University
- University of California at Riverside
- University of Miami
- University of North Carolina at Charlotte
- University of Tampa

The IHEs named in the reports, representing both public and private institutions, provided evidence of success in erasing the disparity in African American and Hispanic versus White graduation rates (Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b). The Education Trust used the
average of the six-year graduation rate in 2006, 2007, and 2008 to support these findings.

Significantly, at two of the 11 identified IHEs, George Mason University (Mason) and Towson University, there was no graduation rate gap for African American and Hispanic students and White students between 2006 and 2008. Both of these IHEs are four-year public institutions. These 2010 Education Trust reports indicated that from 2006 and 2008 at Mason…

- The average African American six-year graduation rate was 62.6%, compared with 56.8% for Whites (Lynch and Engle, 2010b).
- The average Hispanic six-year graduation rate between was 58.5%, compared with 56.8% for Whites (Lynch & Engle, 2010a).

Mason’s minority student persistence and graduation rates are higher than the national averages of similar institutions (Institutional Research & Reporting, 2011). Returning to the college completion data reported by NCES, for all cohorts between 1996 and 2001, six-year college completion rates among African American students ranged between 36.8 and 40.8%, and 42.1 and 46.0% for Hispanic students, compared to 54.3 and 57.5% for White counterparts. According to the Education Trust data for Mason, 23% more African American students and 16.5% more Hispanic students graduated, on average, than the national averages reported by NCES.

The graduation rates among African American and Hispanic students at Mason captured national attention. An analyst at the Chronicle of Higher Education reported that Mason is among one of four public research institutions where college graduation rates are increasing the fastest. Ensign (2010) wrote,
While many colleges have suffered declines in their graduation rates in recent years, some have increased their rates significantly. In fact, 150 colleges saw increases in their respective college graduation rates by at least 10 percentage points between the six-year periods ending in 2003 and 2008. Four of the fastest gainers among public research institutions were San Diego State, George Mason, Georgia State, and Temple Universities. (p. 1)

It was unclear from Ensign’s analysis if she was referring to four- or six-year college completion rates or if these rates were for African American and Hispanic students or for the student body overall.

According to Mason’s Institutional Research and Reporting Office, “Mason's minority student persistence and graduation rates are higher than the national averages of similar institutions reported by Consortium of Student Retention Data Exchanges (CSRDE)” (Institutional Research & Reporting, 2011). A recent Washington Post article stated that “Mason is notable for having virtually no disparity in graduation rates among [W]hite, [B]lack and Hispanic students” (de Vise, 2011). This study was conducted based on the premise that Mason’s continued success in graduating African American and Hispanic students within six years at higher rates than national averages may be due to certain policies, programs, and approaches at the university. It should be noted that the Institutional Research and Reporting Office’s published graduation rates are self-reported.

**Goals of the Study**

The Education Trust’s published data indicate that African American and
Hispanic students at Mason graduated at rates higher than the national average during a specific period (2006-2008). The University’s web site confirms that this phenomenon is a continuing trend (Institutional Research & Reporting, 2011). This study explored what may have contributed to these higher-than-expected six year college completion rates, during the 2006-2008 period targeted by the Education Trust, among selected minority students who are now seniors at Mason and were admitted in the fall of 2008. The study relied on interviews with a small but thoughtful group of participants (both Mason students and staff) to learn as much about this phenomenon as possible. The study focused on three goals: (a) to document African American and Hispanic graduating seniors’ perspectives on what may be contributing to higher-than-national averages in college completion among these ethnic groups at Mason; (b) to document university staff members’ perspectives on what may be contributing to higher-than-national averages in college completion in this same group at Mason; and (c) to generate two cultural models about what may have contributed to high college completion rates from the perspectives of participants interviewed in the study.

**Importance**

This study may contribute to the understanding of why African American and Hispanic students have graduated within six years of enrolling at Mason at higher rates than national averages, based on the perspective of a small group of participants. Conducting qualitative research can help researchers gain a better understanding of a phenomenon. Merriam (2002) writes that qualitative researchers are interested in understanding particular contexts, especially as they relate to exploring how individuals
experience, interact, and make meaning of certain contexts. She writes, “Qualitative research attempts to understand and make sense of phenomena from the participant’s perspective” (p. 6). She also argues that if there is a lack of understanding to adequately explain a phenomenon, a qualitative study could be useful. In this case, a researcher would gather data (observations and understanding gleaned from the field) to build concepts deductively to increase understanding of the phenomenon under question. Patton (2002) argues that qualitative inquiry with an inductive approach can yield understanding. Mason was intentionally chosen for this study both because it has successfully graduated African American and Hispanic students at rates higher than national averages and because, clearly, qualitative data collection techniques—in this case, interviewing a small group of participants—can yield understanding.

There are few single institutional case studies at present examining factors that could be contributing to a reversed graduation gap among African American and Hispanic students when compared with White students. Some analysts at educational organizations have put forth that IHEs may be employing certain strategies to increase the graduation rates of African American and Hispanic students (Carey, 2008; Lynch & Engle, 2010a, b; Lynch & Theokas, 2010), but these claims are unsupported by any methodological studies.

Findings from this study may inform IHE staff about factors that could contribute to African American and Hispanic students’ college completion rates. Educational organizations and school districts who work directly with higher education staff to provide insight into factors that can increase the college completion rates of minority
students may benefit from the findings. IHE administration may be able to gain a better understanding of the specific needs of African American and Hispanic students. The findings may reveal areas where students and university staff can better align campus policies, programs, and strategies to increase college completion rates of students from African American and Hispanic ethnic backgrounds. It should be noted that other factors could influence the high college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students aside from institutional initiatives, policies, programs, services, and strategies. An examination of all of those possible influences, however, is beyond the scope of this study. This study was limited to a small, but thoughtful, group of participants, both students and staff, who shared knowledge of what may contribute to African American and Hispanic students’ college completion rates.

**Research Questions**

Two research questions guided this study:

1. From the perspective of graduating seniors from African American and Hispanic backgrounds, what is George Mason University (Mason) doing to support students from those ethnic backgrounds toward college completion at Mason?

2. From the perspective of university staff members, what is George Mason University (Mason) doing to support African American and Hispanic students toward college completion at Mason?

Informed by the literature review presented in the next Chapter, these two research questions addressed the three goals of the study:
● To document African American and Hispanic graduating seniors’ perspectives on what contributed to higher-than-national-average rates in college completion among African American and Hispanic students at Mason.

● To document university staff members’ perspectives on what contributed to higher-than-national-average rates in college completion among African American and Hispanic students at Mason.

● To develop two cultural models as an overlay following data analysis about what may have contributed to high college completion rates from the perspectives of participants interviewed in the study.

**Conceptual Framework**

A review of research guided the development of a conceptual framework for the study. As previously stated in this Introduction, there are no institutional case studies, at present, examining factors that could be contributing to a reversed graduation gap among African American and Hispanic students when compared with White students. A qualitative case study exploring what may be contributing to African American and Hispanic students will add to the scholarship on this recent phenomenon. As previously discussed, three goals guided this study. The choice of setting was also intentional and limited to one IHE: George Mason University. This IHE was selected as the case for this study because of the college completion rates among African American and Hispanic students, who are reported to be higher than national averages. The choice of interviewing graduating seniors and university staff was intentional. Graduating seniors were chosen as interviewees because their student profiles (the selection criterion is
discussed in Chapter III) resemble those of students who had already graduated from Mason during the period of high graduation rates for the target ethnic groups. The sample of students who participated in the methods pilot discussed in Chapter III as well as this study may have had experiences similar to those of students who graduated at higher rates in previous years. University staff members were interviewed for their unique knowledge of the institution’s activities, institutional programming, policies, and strategies that are in place to increase the retention and college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students. The university staff had access to knowledge that the student body may not have had and vice versa. The conceptual framework (Figure 3) was based on the following premises:

- Students from African American and Hispanic ethnic backgrounds are a subset of undergraduate students who tend to be underrepresented in the graduation pool (Carey, 2008; Engle & Theokas, 2010; Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b; Williams, 2009).

- Also, according to Mason’s Institutional Research and Reporting Office, Mason’s minority student persistence and graduation rates are higher than national averages of similar institutions (Institutional Research & Reporting, 2011)


- A handful of postsecondary institutions were reported to have closed or reversed a graduation rate gap between African American and Hispanic
students when compared with White students (Engle & Theokas, 2010; Ensign, 2010; Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b).

- Researchers have reported a need for research on institutional factors advancing retention of minority students (Choy, 2002).

- Recent research from the national education organizations indicates that higher education institutions can employ certain institutional practices and programs that may result in higher college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students (Carey, 2008; Engle & Theokas, 2010; Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b).

- Research on institutional services, programs, policies, and strategies have been reported by educational analysts but such claims are not grounded in any kind of methodology to validate assertions.

- The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2006) found that research has demonstrated that “campus and system policy, practice, and culture do affect student persistence, and completion, making institutions an important stakeholder in the promotion of student success” (p. 1).

- The Education Trust data reported that between 2006 and 2008, African American and Hispanic students were graduating, on average, at higher rates than White students at George Mason University (Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b).

- Institutional case studies at IHEs where the graduation gap has been closed or reversed are not evident in research.
Figure 3. Conceptual Framework.
*Note.* This is a visual representation of the conceptual framework that depicted the process of the knowledge base which resulted from this study. The sample selection was driven by the justification from Education Trust (2010a, 2010b) and Mason’s Institutional
Research and Reporting Office (2011) that indicated Mason’s six-year college completion rates were higher than national averages of similar institutions. Data were collected through interviews. Constant comparative analysis (CCA) was conducted which led to the development of two cultural models. Copyright pending by A.K. Scruggs.

Summary

According to the National Center for Education Statistics data, persistent six-year college completion gaps between African American and Hispanic students, when compared with White students, have been evident. Between 2006 and 2008, Mason had no evidence of disparity in six-year college completion rates between African American and Hispanic students and White students. Data put forth by the Education Trust and more recent data from Mason’s web site (Institutional Research & Reporting, 2011) provided the foundation for this study to explore what, if anything, may have contributed to these higher-than-national-average six-year college completion rates among African American and Hispanic students at Mason. Conducting a study of this case could inform broader audiences including – IHEs, school districts, higher education staff members, and other interested parties – about possible contributing factors that may be positively affecting African American and Hispanic students’ six-year college completion rates at Mason.

Definition of Terms

The study was guided by two research questions: (1) From the perspective of graduating seniors from African American and Hispanic backgrounds, what is George Mason University (Mason) doing to support students from those ethnic backgrounds toward college completion at Mason? (2) From the perspective of university staff
members, what is George Mason University (Mason) doing to support African American and Hispanic students toward college completion at Mason? An understanding of the following terms and concepts will help the reader to understand the context of this study.

- **African-American or Black:** “A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa. Normally excludes people of Hispanic origin except for tabulations produced by the Census Bureau” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). In this study, the term African American was used.

- **Asian:** “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, e.g., China, India, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Korea” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

- **Associate’s degree:** “A degree granted for the successful completion of a sub-baccalaureate program of studies, usually requiring at least 2 years (or equivalent) of full-time college-level study. This includes degrees granted in a cooperative or work-study program” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

- **Bachelor’s Degree:** “A degree granted for the successful completion of a baccalaureate program of studies, usually requiring at least 4 years (or equivalent) of full-time college-level study. This includes degrees granted in a cooperative or work-study program” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).
• **Cohort:** “A specific group of students established for tracking purposes” (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2012).

• **Degree:** “An award conferred by a college, university, or other postsecondary education institution as official recognition for the successful completion of a program of studies” (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2012).

• **Educational attainment:** “The highest grade of regular school attended and completed” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

• **Enrollment:** “The total number of students registered in a given school unit at a given time, generally in the fall of a year” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

• **Faculty:** “Persons identified by the institution as such and typically those whose initial assignments are made for the purpose of conducting instruction, research or public service as a principal activity (or activities). They may hold academic rank titles of professor, associate professor, assistant professor, instructor, lecturer or the equivalent of any of those academic ranks” (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2012).

• **Family:** “A group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption residing together. All such people (including related subfamily members) are considered as members of one family” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

• **Financial aid:** “Federal Work Study, grants, loans to students (government and/or private), assistantships, scholarships, fellowships, tuition waivers,
tuition discounts, employer aid (tuition reimbursement) and other monies (other than from relatives/friends) provided to students to meet expenses. This excludes loans to parents” (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2012).

- **First-generation college student**: Those whose parents’ highest level of education is a high school diploma or less” (Nunez et al., 1998, p. 7).

- **First-time student**: “A student who has no prior postsecondary experience attending any institution for the first time at the undergraduate level. This includes students enrolled in academic or occupational programs. It also includes students enrolled in the fall term who attended college for the first time in the prior summer term, and students who entered with advanced standing (college credits earned before graduation from high school)” (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2012).

- **Four-year institution**: “A postsecondary institution that offers programs of at least 4 years duration or one that offers programs at or above the baccalaureate level. Includes schools that offer post-baccalaureate certificates only or those that offer graduate programs only. Also includes free-standing medical, law or other first-professional schools” (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2012).

- **Full-time student-Undergraduate**: “A student enrolled for 12 or more semester credits, or 12 or more quarter credits, or 24 or more contact hours a week each term” (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2012).
• **Graduate:** “An individual who has received formal recognition for the successful completion of a prescribed program of studies” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

• **Graduation rate:** “The rate required for disclosure and/or reporting purposes under the Student Right to Know Act. This rate is calculated as the total number of completers within 150% of normal time divided by the revised adjusted cohort” (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2012).

• **Hispanic:** “A person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

• **Institution of higher education (IHE):** “A term formerly used in Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and Higher Education General Information Survey to define an institution that was accredited at the college level by an agency or association recognized by the Secretary, U.S. Department of Education. These schools offered at least a one-year program of study creditable toward a degree and they were eligible for participation in Title IV Federal financial aid programs” (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2012).

• **Race/Ethnicity:** “Classification indicating general racial or ethnic heritage based on self-identification, as in data collected by the Census Bureau or on observer indication, as in data collected by the Office for Civil Rights. These categories are in accordance with the Office of Management and Budget
standard classification scheme” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

- **Retention rate:** “A measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage. For four-year institutions, this is the percentage of first-time bachelor’s (or equivalent) degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall who are again enrolled in the current fall. For all other institutions this is the percentage of first-time degree/certificate-seeking students from the previous fall who either re-enrolled or successfully completed their program by the current fall” (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2012).

- **Socioeconomic status (SES):** “For the High School and Beyond study and the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972, the SES index is a composite of five equally weighted, standardized components: father’s education, mother’s education, family income, father’s occupation, and household items. The terms high, middle, and low SES refer to the upper, middle two, and lower quartiles of the weighted SES composite index distribution” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009)

- **Student:** “An individual for whom instruction is provided in an education program under the jurisdiction of a school, school system, or other education institution” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

- **Student Right to Know Act:** “Also known as the "Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act” (P.L. 101-542), which was passed by Congress
November 9, 1990. Title I, Section 103, requires institutions eligible for Title IV funding to calculate completion or graduation rates of certificate- or degree-seeking, full-time students entering that institution, and to disclose these rates to all students and prospective students” (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2012).

- **Title IV**: “Refers to a section of the Higher Education Act of 1965 that covers administration of the federal student financial aid program” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

- **Title IV eligible institution**: “A postsecondary institution that meets the criteria for participating in the federal student financial aid program. An eligible institution must be any of the following: (1) an institution of higher education (with public or private, non-profit control), (2) a proprietary institution (with private for-profit control), and (3) a postsecondary vocational institution (with public or private, not-for-profit control). In addition, it must have acceptable legal authorization, acceptable accreditation and admissions stands, eligible academic program(s), administrative capability, and financial responsibility” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

- **Tuition**: “A payment or charge for instruction or compensation for services, privileges, or the use of equipment, books, or other goods” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

- **Undergraduate students**: “Students registered at an institution of higher education who are working in a program leading to a baccalaureate degree or
other formal award below the baccalaureate, such as an associate degree” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

- White: “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, North African, or the Middle East. Normally excludes people of Hispanic origin except for tabulations produced by the Census Bureau” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

This Chapter presented an introduction and provided a context for the study. Discussion of the gaps in six-year college completion rates between African American, Hispanic, and White students were presented, followed by benefits of obtaining a college degree, implications of not graduating African American and Hispanic students at the same rates as White students, and IHEs with evidence of higher six-year college completion rates among African American and Hispanic students. The research questions and conceptual framework that guided this study were grounded in the research. The review of the research is presented in Chapter II.
CHAPTER II

The purpose of this synthesis is to frame the study by providing an overview of research that has been explored in four major areas. Each section provides support for the larger examination of the four- to six-year college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students, which represents the final outcome of interest in the theoretical framework. This review provides a contextual foundation for the current study, presenting gaps and flaws in the research, and provides suggestions for further research. The literature review led to the development of two research questions: (1) From the perspective of graduating seniors from African American and Hispanic backgrounds, what is George Mason University (Mason) doing to support students from those ethnic backgrounds toward college completion at Mason? (2) From the perspective of university staff members, what is George Mason University (Mason) doing to support African American and Hispanic students toward college completion at Mason?

The literature review begins with data and studies on the benefits of earning a bachelor’s degree. This section establishes a foundation for how obtaining a bachelor’s degree can benefit individuals and society, and supports the conclusion that individuals who do not earn such a degree may face life-long limitations in terms of income and quality of life. This section also presents information on some of the controversy over the benefits of earning a bachelor’s degree. With a subset of the undergraduate pool, namely,
African American and Hispanic students, not graduating at similar rates as White students, this could suggest that minorities may face lifelong disadvantages by not completing a bachelor’s degree at institutions of higher education (IHEs).

Research on college completion rates provides information on the historical trends in college completion. This section presents information on legislation that requires IHEs to report college completion data. Historical data on college completion of African American and Hispanic students when compared to Whites, and college completion gaps between African American and Hispanic students when compared with White students, is also presented.

The next section provides information on the research site of this case study: George Mason University (Mason). The history, mission, and accreditation of this IHE are presented as well as information about the Fairfax campus of Mason. The characteristics of the undergraduate pool of students and more recent graduation rates are presented. Some of the programs and strategies that support access, retention, and college completion are presented.

The section that follows the discussion of Mason addresses the findings reported by analysts at the Education Trust that certain colleges and universities can achieve higher-than-national-average college completion rates for African American and Hispanic students. This includes information on the criterion used by the Education Trust to collect and manipulate data. The graduation rate data on Mason reported by the Education trust is also presented. This section presents information on some of the controversy around using graduation rate as a measure of student success. That particular
section presents viewpoints from analysts who believe using graduation rate as a measure unfairly represents student success. This study seeks to document from the perspective of graduating seniors from those ethnic backgrounds and higher education staff what may contribute to the college completion rates at Mason, reported to be higher than the national average.

The section that follows the discussion of the Education Trust data addresses some general case studies that explored factors that may have contributed to minority students’ college completion rates. However, these studies were not conducted at IHEs with evidence of a reversed graduation rate gap. These general case studies explore reasons for higher-than-expected graduation rates among minority students from the 1990s to the present.

The section that follows the discussion of previous higher education studies presents research specifically on Mason. The limitations of previous research are presented to explain the development of the methodological decisions for the current study. These previous institutional case studies present the need for a qualitative case study of one institution where African American and Hispanic students have evidence of graduating at rates higher than the national average. This section relates to the research question of the current study because this section illuminated limited research in this area. The review of the research concludes with a summary of the six sections as well as a synthesis of areas yet to be studied.

**Benefits of Earning a Bachelor’s Degree**

In 2002, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (NCPPPHE)
presented *Measuring Up: 2002*, the second in the series of biennial, state-by-state, 50-state report cards. According to the *Technical Guide Documenting Methodology, Indicators, and Data Sources*, these data included in *Measuring Up: 2002* were from state educational agencies. The intent of analysts at NCPPHE was to “assist states in improving higher education opportunity and effectiveness” (p. 9). The six categories in these report cards assess the performance of institutions of higher education (IHEs), one of which includes benefits of individuals earning a bachelor’s degree. Analysts at NCPPHE define benefits as, “the economic and societal benefits that the state receives as the result of having well-educated residents” (p. 19). To determine states’ report card grades on ‘benefits,’ NCPPHE uses data collected from the states on respective individual and societal benefits.

This report highlighted some of the economic benefits for individuals obtaining a bachelor’s degree within six years. The researchers at the NCPPHE note that in the state of Maryland there was an increase in the number of people with a bachelor’s degree and as a result the personal income generated within the state increased by 13% (p. 27). The report also described some of the civic benefits in evidence when a state tends to have highly educated populations. The civic benefits in this case refer to voting and charitable giving. The authors note that in Minnesota 32% of the adult population had a bachelor’s degree, and that the state observes the highest voting turnout in the nation. These claims are interesting, but need to be reviewed with caution because the increase in personal income and civic participation could be attributable to factors besides educational attainment.
The analysts at NCPPHE on in the same report indicate, using data from the 2000 Census, that the incomes of individuals with some college education have increased both in real terms and in comparison with those with less education (p. 15). They write, “for example, in 1975 the annual income of a worker with a bachelor’s degree averaged 1.5 times that of a high school graduate. By 1999, the advantage had increased to 1.8 times (p. 15). These findings indicate that earnings for a college graduate far exceed those of the high school graduate. The same analysts go on to report that,

Compounded over a lifetime, these differences in educational level represent average lifetime earnings of $1.2 million for a high school graduate, $1.5 million for those with some college education but no degree, and $2.1 million for bachelor’s degree holders. (p. 15)

What this suggests is that the benefits of earning a bachelor’s degree are evident in annual income as well as lifetime earnings. Thus, college graduates can expect to earn more over a lifetime than will high school graduates. There are some limitations of the NCPPHE study. These data were provided by state educational agencies and it should be noted that “data are not systematically collected each year” (Technical Guide Documenting Methodology, Indicators, and Data Sources: The State-by-State Report Card for Higher Education, p. 10). It should also be noted that analysts at the state educational agencies supplying these data to NCPPHE “may lag behind recent changes or incompletely capture the most recent initiatives that state policymakers have implemented” (p. 10). Thus, these data presented in the Measuring Up report may be problematic because data are not collected systemically each year and may not accurately
Baum and Payea (2004) conducted a report for the College Board on the benefits of higher education for individuals and society. In this report, Baum and Payea use publicly available government statistics along with less familiar academic research to study the benefits of higher education and how these benefits are distributed (p. 5). Throughout this report, Baum and Payea offer individual and societal benefits of obtaining a bachelor’s degree, including higher earnings, greater job satisfaction, increased likelihood to have health insurance, more volunteerism, and providing blood donations. When more of a population obtains a bachelor’s degree some of the benefits to society include fewer individuals being unemployed, decreased incarceration rates, and less reliance on social programs.

Baum and Payea (2004) determined that both average earnings and average tax payments are higher for people with higher levels of education. This claim was made through analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2004: PINC-03) and Internal Revenue Service (2003). Baum and Payea note that the average full-time year-round worker with a bachelor’s degree in the United States earned $49,000, 62% more than the $30,800 earned by the average full-time year-round worker with only a high school diploma (p. 10). Another claim by Baum and Payea is that median earnings for those with some college but no degree were 16% higher than those for high school graduates, and adults with associate’s degrees earned 22% more than high school graduates (p. 10). They further purport, “The average college graduate working full-time year-round pays over 100 percent more in federal income taxes and about 78 percent more in total federal,
state, and local taxes than the average high school graduate” (p. 10).

From analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau publication, *The Big Pay Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings*, which used current population reports of March 1998, 1999, and 2000, Baum and Payea (2004) concluded that the typical bachelor’s degree recipient can expect to earn about 73% more over a 40-year working life than the typical high school graduate earns over the same time period (p. 11). Baum and Payea report that average lifetime earnings for individuals with associate’s degrees are almost 25% higher than the same earnings for high school graduates (p. 11).

They also found that for all racial and ethnic groups, higher levels of education correspond to higher incomes. This finding suggests that African American and Hispanic college graduates can expect to earn about 60% more than typical high school graduates from the same ethnic backgrounds. It should be noted that the earnings premium reported by these researchers reflect full-time year-round workers ages 25-34 and that the proportionate difference in earnings between high school and college graduates within racial/ethnic groups is usually larger among older age groups (p. 13). For example, the authors write, “in all racial/ethnic groups, median earnings for people ages 55 to 64 with a B.A. or higher degree are more than twice as high as median earnings for high school graduates” (p. 13).

Baum and Payea (2004) analyzed data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2001) to conclude that within each household type, the poverty rate for college graduates is about a third of the poverty rate for high school graduates (p. 17). They found the poverty rate
for single mother households with children under 18 is 49% for those who are not high school graduates, 30% for high school graduates, 20% for those with some college, and 10% for those with a bachelor’s degree or higher (p. 17). It should be noted that according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the official poverty line in 2004 was $19,157 for a four-person household with two children under age 18 (p. 17). It should also be noted that single mother households make up 25% of the U.S. families with children under 18 and 59% of these families live below the poverty line (Baum & Payea, 2004). Thus, the poverty rate is significantly lower for single mothers with a bachelor’s degree when compared with single mothers with less education. The same pattern appears for married couple families. Married couple households comprise 69% of U.S. families with children under 18 and 33% of these families live below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004, POV-15). This suggests that married couple families with a bachelor’s degree or higher are significantly less likely to be in poverty than married couple families with less education.

Using data from the 2004 National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), based on the National Health Interview Survey administered by the National Center for Health Statistics, Baum and Payea (2004) report that there are improved perceptions of health correlated with educational levels, as well as with age and income levels. The same researchers write,

Within every income group, the percentage perceiving themselves as very healthy increases with higher levels of education. For example, 73 percent of college graduates with incomes between $35,000 and $54,999 report being in excellent or
very good health, compared to 62 percent of high school graduates in the same
income bracket. (p. 18)

These findings suggest that regardless of income, more college graduates report being in
very good or excellent health than do individuals with only a high school diploma. Baum
and Payea (2004) looked for correlations with age as well. They found that within every
age group, the percentage of individuals perceiving themselves as very healthy increases
with higher levels of educational attainment. More specifically, for individuals between
45 and 54 years of age, 78% of college graduates reported being in excellent or very good
health, compared with 55% of high school graduates (Baum and Payea). For individuals
65 and older, there were no differences in the percentage of college graduates and high
school graduates reporting they were in excellent or very good health. These findings are
important but there is the caveat that the survey instrument used by the National Center
for Health Statistics was not available for review.

Baum and Payea (2004) found that smoking rates declined more rapidly among
college graduates than others when information about the risks of smoking became
public. In a report published by the World Bank titled, *Education, Information, and
histories were presented. These data sources included 16 smoking supplements from
different years of the National Health Interview Survey between 1978 and 2000 to create
smoking histories going back to 1950 (deWalque, 2004). The author of the report
published by the World Bank constructed 373,738 smoking histories of adults aged 25
and above at the time of the interview (deWalque). Baum and Payea write,
Smoking rates in the U.S. increased in the 1940s, leveled off at about 45 percent in the 1950s, and began a steady decline in the late 1960s. College graduates were at least as likely as others to smoke before the medical consensus on the dangers of smoke became clear. By 1970, when information was widespread and clear public warnings mandatory, the smoking rate among college graduates had declined to 37 percent, while 44 percent of high school graduates smoked. In 2000, when only a quarter of the adult population reported smoking, 14 percent of college graduates and 28 percent of high school graduates smoked. (p. 19)

These findings suggest that college graduates may have responded to the public warnings, and that could have attributed to a decline in smoking. However, Baum and Payea (2004) are assuming this causality and an individual’s decision to stop smoking could be attributed to a number of possible factors, exclusive of the information on public warnings being available. The author of the World Bank report found that statistical analysis reveals that even after controlling for income, educational level explains a significant portion of the difference in smoking patterns (deWalque). These findings suggest that significantly fewer individuals reporting a choice to smoke happen to be college graduates than happen to be high school graduates.

These findings should be reviewed with a degree of caution due to the composition of the sample. Because data on smoking prevalence between 1940 and 1977 is gathered from surveys taken between 1978 and 2000, only individuals who survived up to the year of the survey could be interviewed. Therefore, some individuals are not able to be included in the interviews and could create a “survivor bias” (deWalque). To
circumvent this possible constraint with the sample, the author of the report published by the World Bank chose to select respondents less than 60 years of age at the time of the survey. Another limitation was that survey responses reflected self-reported data. These data reflect the opinions of the respondents, and some may not have reported accurately.

Baum and Payea (2004) find that the incarceration rate of adults with some college education is about one-quarter that for high school graduates. This finding was made based on data reported by Harlow (2003), in a report titled, *Education and Correctional Populations*. These data included several Bureaus of Justice Statistics Surveys, including *Survey of State Prison Inmates, 1991* (NCJ 136949), *Substance Abuse and Treatment State and Federal Prisoners, 1997* (NCJ 172871, 1/99), *Profile of Jail Inmates, 1989* (NCJ 129097, 4/91), *Profile of Jail Inmates, 1996* (NCJ 164620, 11/98), *Characteristics of Adults on Probation, 1995* (NCJ 164267, 8/9), *Census of State and Federal Adult Correctional Facilities, 1995* (NCJ 164266, 12/9), and *Census of Jails, 1999* (NCJ 186633, 9/01). Using the report by Harlow to found their claims, Baum and Payea report,

> Almost 2 percent of adults who had not graduated from high school were incarcerated in 1997, as were 1.2 percent of those with a high school diploma, but only 0.3 percent of adults with some college experience and 0.1 percent of college graduates were incarcerated. (p. 20)

These findings suggest that individuals with higher levels of education are less likely to be incarcerated than individuals with less educational attainment. Caroline Harlow (2003) found that
About 41 percent of inmates in the Nation’s State and Federal prisons and local jails in 1997 and 31 percent of probationers had not completed high school or its equivalent. In comparison, 18 percent of the general population age 18 or older had not finished the 12th grade. (p. 1)

This documents that the composition of individuals in the nation’s state and federal prisons is predominantly that of persons who had not completed high school. Harlow (2003) also found that 68% of state prison inmates did not receive a high school diploma.

Drawing upon data from the National Household Education Survey and Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Baum and Payea (2004) found that young children of college graduates have higher cognitive skill levels and evidence greater ability to persist at tasks than children of mothers with lower levels of education (p. 21). These findings suggest that higher levels of educational attainment among mothers may contribute positively to their children recognizing letters of the alphabet, being read to, and displaying eagerness, compared with mothers who are high school graduates.

Baum and Payea (2004) report that higher levels of education are associated with higher levels of participation in volunteer activities. They found,

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 29 percent of adults volunteer through an organization. Among college graduates, the volunteer rate is 46 percent, over twice the 22 percent rate for high school graduates. Among those who volunteer, the median number of volunteer hours increases with educational attainment, with the 46 percent of college graduates who volunteer averaging 60 hours during the year, compared to 52 hours for those with some college, and 48
hours for high school graduates and for the adults with less than a high school diploma who volunteer their time. (p. 22)

These findings were presented using data from the 2003 Bureau of Labor Statistics study and suggest that individuals with higher levels of educational attainment are more likely than high school graduates to participate in volunteer activities.

Again using the 2002 U.S. Census Bureau data, Baum and Payea (2004) conclude that in every age group, adults with higher levels of education are more likely to vote than those who have less education (p. 23). A possible limitation of these findings is that differences in voting patterns between adults with higher levels of education may not be entirely attributable to education. Upon reviewing the U.S. Census Bureau table Voting Registration in the Election of 2002, Baum and Payea note, “In the 2000 presidential election, 74 percent of U.S. citizens who were college graduates between the ages of 25 and 44 reported voting, compared to 45 percent of high school graduates.” These data indicate that voting in the 2000 presidential election among college graduates exceeded voting by high school graduates by nearly 30 percentage points. This increase in voting could be somewhat related to higher levels of education. To take this research a step farther, Dee (2004) controlled for other characteristics and estimated that even enrolling in college increases the probability of registering to vote by 18%, and the probability of voting in a presidential election by 29% (Baum & Payea).

Baum and Payea (2004) report that college graduates are more likely than other adults to donate blood. Using data put forth by DDB Worldwide, an advertising agency that collects survey data, the authors found that after using statistical analysis and
controlling for age, race, and income, those with some college are about two percentage points more likely than high school graduates to be blood donors, and college graduates are five percentage points more likely to donate regularly. Baum and Payea, completing the calculations themselves found that,

In 1994, about 17 percent of college graduates were regular blood donors, compared to 13 percent of those with some college, 11 percent of high school graduates, and fewer than 6 percent of those who had not graduated from high school. (p. 24)

These findings tell readers that higher levels of educational attainment may be a contributing factor to an individuals’ decision to donate blood.

In summary, the findings by Baum and Payea (2004) suggest that there are individual and societal benefits that result from obtaining a bachelor’s degree. There are some limitations that should be noted. One possible limitation is that it is hard to quantify the direct benefits of obtaining a bachelor’s degree for individuals. Further, it is difficult to ascertain how much a benefit is actually attributable to other factors. For example, motivation and skills required for success in college may increase earnings even for those with less postsecondary education. In addition, not all benefits of obtaining a bachelor’s degree can be quantified. These benefits may involve personal satisfaction and enhanced lifestyle, which are impossible to measure. Another limitation is that the Baum and Payea (2004) report that earning differences among male and females can be traced to a host of factors including occupational differences and labor market discrimination.

Perna (2005), recognizing the limitations of previous research, built from the
work of Bowen (1977), the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2002), Ingels et al. (2002), and Baum and Payea (2004). Perna understood that previous work described the relationship between educational attainment and benefits received from it; however, she explored the extent to which educational attainment and benefits other than earnings, vary across ethnic groups. These data were extracted from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS: 92/20), which tracked the educational and occupational progress of a group of students beginning in 1998. Perna noted that the sample is limited to students who were high school graduates in 1992 and who participated in the 1994 and 2000 follow-ups. The total number of cases included in the sample was 9,773. In her analyses, she examined how the benefits of higher education vary across sex, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic (SES) groups. She used descriptive and multivariate analyses to explore sex, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic group differences in several economic and noneconomic benefits. This analysis included cross-tabulations and analysis of variance (ANOVA) to identify observed differences in benefits by educational attainment, sex, race/ethnicity, and SES. Her analysis went a step beyond previous research by looking beyond the benefit of earning solely and exploring other possible noneconomic benefits. Perna defines economic benefits as economic, fiscal, and labor advantages (Institute of Higher Education Policy, 1998).

In her study, Perna (2005) measured economic benefits by annual income in 1999, fringe benefits (such as health insurance coverage), and receipt of any type of public assistance in 1999. Noneconomic benefits were measured by aspects of health-related
behaviors (such as participation in fitness activities daily and alcoholic consumption).

Educational attainment was the primary independent variable. Perna explored two research questions: (1) What economic benefits did 1992 high school graduates who attained various levels of education realize by 2000? How do the economic benefits that are associated with various levels of educational attainment vary by sex, race/ethnicity, and SES? (2) What noneconomic benefits did 1992 high school graduates who attained various levels of education realize by 2000? How do benefits that are associated with different levels of educational attainment vary by sex, race/ethnicity, and SES?

For economic benefits Perna (2005) found in her descriptive analyses that income varied by educational attainment. She found that 88% of 1992 high school graduates who attained a bachelor’s degree had some amount of income in 1999 compared with 84% of 1992 high school graduates with no postsecondary education (Perna, 2005). The average income for individuals with a bachelor’s degree was higher ($30,570) than for individuals with no postsecondary education ($25,237), some postsecondary education ($24,611), a certificate or license ($23,707), or an associate’s degree ($23,707). After conducting two-way ANOVA tests, the average incomes were found to vary by sex, race/ethnicity, and SES, and the effects of both sex and SES on income to vary by educational attainment. Perna writes,

The gap between the average incomes of high school and college graduates was larger for women than for men. Among women, average salaries of college graduates were 55 percent higher than the average salaries of high school graduates; among men, the premium was 17 percent. The college earnings
premium was smaller among individuals in the second quartile of SES than among other students (5 percent versus 21 percent overall) but was comparable across racial/ethnic groups. (p. 30)

Her findings also suggest that gender differences were most pronounced for women. She writes, “Women who attained an associate’s, bachelor’s, or advanced degree average [had] incomes that were 32 percent, 45 percent, and 81 percent higher, respectively, than women with no postsecondary education” (p. 30). From her findings, it is evident that educational attainment can be associated with an increase in earnings, and that gender differences reveal that women with a bachelor’s degree, as compared with women without one, may see the greatest difference.

In terms of health insurance coverage, Perna (2005) found that as educational attainment increases, so does the likelihood of having health insurance. The largest differences by race were observed among African Americans who attained some form of postsecondary education. These individuals were seven percentage points more likely to have health insurance than Blacks with no postsecondary education. For public assistance, Perna found that in 1999 a minimal number of individuals who obtained some sort of postsecondary education received public assistance. Public assistance in this case is defined as food stamps, welfare, housing assistance. The differences can be observed in the following breakdown: individuals who attained an associate’s degree (0.6%), a bachelor’s degree (0.3%), or an advanced degree (0.3%). These values compare to 4% of high school graduates who completed no postsecondary education and 3% of high school graduates who completed only some postsecondary education (Perna, 2005).
For job satisfaction, Perna (2005) found that high school graduates who attained a bachelor’s degree generally appear to be more satisfied with their jobs than high school graduates who completed only some postsecondary education (p. 36). Her findings indicate that 79% of those with some postsecondary education were satisfied with their jobs, compared with 89% of those who attained a bachelor’s degree (p. 36). When Perna controlled for sex, race/ethnicity, and SES, she found that high school graduates who attained a bachelor’s degree or advanced degree were more likely than high school graduates with no postsecondary education to be satisfied with their jobs. For African Americans who obtained some form of postsecondary education were 13 percentage points less likely than African Americans with no postsecondary education to be satisfied with their jobs (Perna, 2005).

For perceived benefits, which include five employment-related benefits (e.g., better jobs, higher salary, more responsibility, opportunities for promotion, and improved job performance), the percentage of high school graduates who perceived higher education as a cause of the five benefits was higher among those with bachelor’s degrees than among those with lower levels of education (Perna, 2005). Perna (2005) states, “one third (34 percent) of high school graduates who attained only some postsecondary education, but 78 percent of high school graduates who attained a bachelor’s degree, perceived that their educational attainment contributed to all five of these benefits” (p. 37). With respect to racial/ethnic differences, Perna (2005) found that “the perceived connection between higher education and employment-related benefits is greater for Blacks who attained an advanced degree rather than some postsecondary education than
for their White counterparts” (p. 37). There were several economic advantages, identified by Perna, for the individual who obtains a bachelor’s degree. The same researcher also proposed non-economic benefits of obtaining a bachelor’s degree, discussed next.

Perna (2005) concluded that, contrary to popular belief, frequency of daily fitness activities was higher among those with less education. However, there were several noneconomic benefits that were observed for individuals with a bachelor’s degree. Perna noted the percentage of high school graduates who reported smoking cigarettes declined as the level of educational attainment increased. Perna found that 32% of those with no postsecondary education to 12% of those with a bachelor’s degree smoked cigarettes. High school graduates who attained an associate’s degree were nine percentage points less likely than their counterparts with no postsecondary education to smoke, compared with those with a bachelor’s degree (14 percentage points) and advanced degree (15 percentage points) (Perna, 2005). For leisure activities, educational attainment is positively related to some indicators of leisure activities. Compared with individuals with no postsecondary education, higher numbers of high school graduates with a bachelor’s degree reported reading books daily (19% vs. 12%) and attending a play or concert at least twice per month (29% vs. 21%).

Perna (2005) determined that civic engagement is positively related to educational attainment. Perna’s findings indicate that only 26% of high school graduates with no postsecondary education voted in the 1996 presidential election and in other elections within a recent two-year period, compared with 42% of high school graduates who completed a bachelor’s degree (p. 43). After controlling for sex, race/ethnicity, and SES,
individuals with some form of postsecondary education were more likely to vote regularly than high school graduates with no postsecondary education (p. 43). Women who attained an advanced degree were more likely than women who attained no postsecondary education to vote regularly (p. 43). In Perna’s descriptive analyses, she found the following: “A substantially smaller share of Hispanics than Whites with no postsecondary education voted regularly (14% vs. 28%), but comparable shares of Hispanics and Whites with some postsecondary education (35%) regularly voted” (p. 44).

She also found that the rates of volunteering in a civic or community organization increased with educational attainment. Her findings indicate that 16% of those who completed no education beyond high school volunteered, compared with approximately 30% of those who attained a bachelor’s degree (p. 44). She writes,

> After controlling for other variables, high school graduates who attained an associate’s, bachelor’s, or advanced degree are respectively 11, 16, and 13 percentage points more likely to volunteer in a civic or community organization than high school graduates with no postsecondary education. (p. 44)

However, none of the interactions tested between sex, race/ethnicity, and SES were statistically significant. In closing, Perna (2005) indicated there are several noneconomic benefits for individuals who obtain a bachelor’s degree compared with individuals with no postsecondary education. Her study illuminated the economic and noneconomic benefits that are associated with various levels of educational attainment for 1992 high school graduates included in the sample. A few conclusions should be noted from her findings. The first is that there are a host of economic and noneconomic benefits from
obtaining a bachelor’s degree. There are also differences in sex in economic and noneconomic benefits from obtaining a bachelor’s degree. Some of these benefits include higher average incomes, greater likelihood to have health insurance, lower likelihood of receiving public assistance, and greater perceived connection between higher education and employment-related benefits (p. 45). These findings grant some important insight into what effect obtaining a bachelor’s degree has overall and for women.

Many of the findings of earlier studies were confirmed by Perna’s work. Perna (2005) determined that obtaining a bachelor’s degree can result in economic and noneconomic benefits. Some of the economic benefits included higher earnings, fringe benefits (such as health insurance coverage), and less likelihood to receive any type of public assistance. Some of the noneconomic benefits that Perna found included health-related behaviors (such as participation in fitness activities daily and volunteerism). She also found such noneconomic benefits as less likelihood to smoke cigarettes, something found in earlier studies.

Although Perna’s findings are significant, there are some limitations to her analysis. In terms of her data collection, it is unknown how long it took participants in the sample to graduate from high school and whether or not GED recipients were included in the sample. This variation presents only a small concern. Another possible limitation is that the findings were not aggregated by the type of postsecondary institution participants attended. Instead, findings of the overall benefit of educational attainment appear to be grouped together, not allowing for analysis of differences in benefits of obtaining a degree by type of institution. Another possible limitation is that the researcher used eight
years for the participant to complete college. This presents a concern because in most analyses, and the analysis used in this proposal, college completion rates are based on a six-year graduation rate. Similarly, Perna (2005) notes that there are a few challenges that make measuring public and private benefits of higher education somewhat constraining: the outcomes of higher education are diverse and complex; higher education is only one of the many potential causes of any potential benefit; and the effects of higher education are not restricted to a specific outcome at one point in time but can be generated over the course of an individual’s lifetime (p. 25). With these items being considered in the analysis, Perna’s findings can still be trusted to provide a basic understanding of some of the possible benefits of receiving a bachelor’s degree.

**Controversy over Benefits of Obtaining a Bachelor’s Degree**

Some argue that benefit of an individual obtaining a bachelor’s degree is overrated. Recent articles and editorial pieces have focused on the impact of repayment of student loans and difficult economic situation where finding a job immediately after college is in doubt. In a blog posted by gfish titled, “are the benefits of higher education shrinking?” it was argued that not everyone can benefit from attending college during troubling economic times. The author of this blog reports that students are being forced to get more education to make themselves “more valuable to tomorrow’s employers” (p. 1), but also argues that the traditional four-year college is not for everyone and could burden students with debt. If an individual obtains a bachelor’s degree and is unable to find employment directly upon graduating, this person may opt to pursue a graduate degree. Thus, this same individual could possibly incur additional loans and debt in the pursuit of
an additional degree. Another argument is that college admissions offices have criteria to boost enrollment without any regard for the cost that will be endured to create more dorms, retain staff, and keep services for students. These additional expenses could result in additional local taxes to support public institutions. These claims have some validity to them; however, they are based on the opinion of the author and do not reflect the findings of any research. Therefore, these findings should be viewed with caution.

In 2011, the Pew Research Center staff published a report titled “College Presidents, Public Assess, Value, Quality, and Mission of Higher Education” to glean from a small, random sample of Americans their perceptions of the value of a college education. To gather these data, the general public survey included telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 2,142 adults ages 18 and older living in the continental United States. A total of 1,052 interviews were completed with respondents contacted by landline telephone and 1,090 with those contacted on cellular phones. Survey interviews were conducted under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International, in English and Spanish, in March 2011. Another data collection tool was an online college presidents’ survey conducted through the Chronicle of Higher Education, and this went out to presidents of 1,055 two-year and four-year private, public, and for-profit colleges and universities. The survey was designed by the Chronicle along with Pew. There were 1,022 interviews completed online and 33 interviews completed by phone. Survey interviews were conducted in English under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International. The following is a summary of key findings as they pertain to cost and value:
57% of the sample report that the higher education system in the United States fails to provide students with good value for the money they and their families spend.

75% of the sample report that college is too expensive for most Americans to afford (Pew Research Center, 2011).

These findings provide evidence that among this sample of randomly selected Americans, the majority report that college is too expensive and does not provide students with good value for the cost. In terms of monetary payoff, the findings from the same surveys indicate that:

- The sample of four-year college graduates perceive they are earning $20,000 more per year as a result of receiving a bachelor’s degree.
- Those with no college degree perceive they are earning $20,000 a year less as a result of not obtaining a bachelor’s degree (Pew Research Center, 2011).

These findings support the previous discussion of the benefits of earning a bachelor’s degree reported by Perna and others. These findings in 2011 support the previous research on individual perceptions of the benefits of a bachelor’s degree. The Pew Research Center (2011) found that interns reported debt upon leaving college, with the following specifics:

- 48% of the sample of students leaving college report having substantial debt burden and report that paying off their student loan debt made it harder to pay other bills.
- 25% of the sample of students leaving college with the student loan debt
report that it made it harder to buy a home.

- 24% of the sample of students leaving college with the student loan debt report that it had an impact on their career choices (Pew Research Center, 2011).

These findings on student debt support the blog post by gfish presented earlier in this section. College graduates may experience difficulty in paying off student loans when other bills (e.g., mortgage) need paying, plus face tougher career choices.

In 2011, Paul Heroux, a policy consultant and writer, composed an article for The Huffington Post titled “Is College Worth It?” discussing the difficulty recent college graduates are having finding a job in the economy. Elaborating on some of the same concerns raised by gfish’s blog and the Pew Research Center’s recent survey findings, Heroux reports that the cost of college being “three and a half times” what it was 30 years ago means “the value of college is understandably in question” (p. 1). Heroux argues that there is research supporting the benefits of college, but questions the utility of receiving a bachelor’s degree. Similar to the assessment of the blog reported by gfish, these claims have some validity; however, they are based on the opinion of the author and do not reflect the findings of empirical research. Therefore, these claims should be viewed with caution. It is generally understood that the completion of a bachelor’s degree cannot always supersede the impact of economic downturns.

In summary, obtaining a bachelor degree has been reported to have an impact on an individual’s ability to pay other bills, buy a home, and make career choices. There is evidence from this Pew Research Center report that a sample of Americans report that
difficulty in paying bills, buying a home, and deciding on career pursuit is impacted by student loan repayment. This discussion relates to the research questions because there is evidence of what the benefits to individuals who obtain a bachelor’s degree will be, but there are also some disadvantages in terms of student loan repayment that should be considered.

**College Completion**

Institutional graduation rates are required for disclosure and/or reporting purposes Under the Student Right-to-Know Act (SRTK). The SRTK, also known as the "Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act" (P.L. 101-542), was passed by Congress on November 9, 1990. This law requires institutions that participate in any program under Title IV of the Higher Education Act (HEA) to make available to students the enrollment data and graduation rates of students, by race and gender. As a result of this legislation, institutions were required to begin collecting data for the entering cohort of 1996-1997. The U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) developed the Graduation Rate Survey as part of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and this survey requires the tracking of individual students over a period of time (Russell, 2009).

NCES collects graduation rate information for students who began their studies as full-time, first-time degree- or certificate-seeking students. Institutions are asked to report on students who complete a degree or other award, such as a certificate, within 150% of normal time for completing the program in which they are enrolled. As a result of SRTK, they must also report graduation rates by race and gender. However, the reporting was
not made mandatory until 1995, which meant that institutions did not need to report six-year graduation rates until 2001. The first full set of graduation rates, including rates broken down by students’ gender and race/ethnicity, was not made public until early 2004 (Carey, 2008). Institutions provide this information by completing the annual Graduation Rate Survey (GRS), and reporting the number of first-time postsecondary students who started as full-time degree-seeking students by (1) sex, (2) race/ethnicity, (3) time between starting and graduating, (4) level, and (5) type of postsecondary institution where the student started. Therefore, the best available data by race/ethnicity of six-year graduation rates are collected and reported by NCES. As previously presented (see Chapter I), NCES collects annual data on the college completion rates of students who completed a bachelor’s degree at a public, four-year public institution within six years after enrollment. These data indicated that a graduation rate gap existed between African American and Hispanic students and White students between 1996 and 2004. As stated in the Chapter I, the six-year graduation rate gap between African American and White students who attend four-year public institutions was 16.96 percentage points and 11.96 percentage points between Hispanic and White students.

The Research Site: George Mason University

Mason is a large, four-year, public research institution of higher education (IHE). A relatively young IHE, Mason was founded in 1972 and is located in Northern Virginia. At the time of this study Mason had more than 1,300 full-time instructional and research faculty members from a broad range of fields (About George Mason University, 2011). The majority of the university’s 32,000 students are from Virginia; however, all 50 states
and Washington, D.C. as well as 130 other countries are represented in the student body (About George Mason University, 2011). There are 71 undergraduate degree programs, 114 graduate (Master’s - 78; Doctoral - 36) and 1 Professional (Law) degree programs offered at Mason. Mason is considered a “distributed university,” which means there are several regional campuses in Northern Virginia. The regional campuses are located in Fairfax, Arlington, and Prince William counties, and at satellite sites in Loudon County, Herndon, Reston, and Front Royal. At each one of these regional campuses, students have access to all of the university’s resources.

History of George Mason University

According to the institution’s website, the concept of creating Mason was born in 1949 when the Northern Virginia University Center, an adult-education extension of the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, was opened by John Norville Gibson. In March 1966, the General Assembly of Virginia authorized the expansion of Mason into a four-year, degree-granting institution and gave it the long-range mandate to expand into a major regional university. The first senior class received degrees in June 1968, and graduate programs began in September of 1970. The first master’s degree was conferred in June 1971. From 1972 to the present, enrollment has risen from 4,166 to more than 32,000 students. In 1979, Mason was given authorization to grant doctoral degrees and began offering doctoral programs. Also in 1979, the university acquired what became Mason’s School of Law, which is located on the Arlington campus. In 1985, Mason partnered with area businesses to develop an engineering program which is now the Volgenau School of Engineering.
Mission and Accreditation of George Mason University

According to the university’s website, Mason is “innovative and entrepreneurial in spirit” (About George Mason University, 2011). Mason’s mission is to

- Educate the new generation of leaders for the 21st century—men and women capable of shaping a global community with vision, justice, and clarity (About George Mason University, 2011).

- Encourage freedom of thought, speech, and inquiry in a tolerant, respectful academic setting that values diversity (About George Mason University, 2011).

- Provide innovative and interdisciplinary undergraduate, graduate, and professional courses of study that enable students to exercise analytical and imaginative thinking and make well-founded ethical decisions (About George Mason University, 2011).

- Nurture and support a highly qualified and entrepreneurial faculty that is excellent at teaching, active in pure and applied research, capable of providing a broad range of intellectual and cultural insights, and responsive to the needs of students and their communities (About George Mason University, 2011).

- Maintain an international reputation for superior education and public service that affirms its role as the intellectual and cultural nexus among Northern Virginia, the nation, and the world (About George Mason University, 2011).

Mason is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees. Due to the
scope of this study – which involved exploration of what may be have contributed to the high college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students from the perspective a small group of thoughtful participants, predominantly at the Fairfax campus and owing to previously established relationships with faculty, staff, and students at this regional campus location, and under constraints in access to other campus locations – discussion will be limited to the undergraduate institution as it relates to characteristics of the Fairfax undergraduate institution; the discussion will also consider policies, programs, and initiatives that have been enacted with an objective to increase the access, retention, and college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students.

About the Fairfax Campus of George Mason University

The Fairfax campus is situated on 677 acres located in a suburb outside of Washington, D.C. This campus is considered a “medium full-time four-year, selective, transfer-in” IHE (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2011) and has a “Research High” Carnegie classification (College Results Online, 2010). The resident student population is expected to grow to more than 5,800 between 2011 and 2016 as new residential units continue to be constructed. In addition to new residential units being constructed, Mason has several other buildings available to students on campus, which include the Center for the Arts and the Patriot Center.

George Mason University Undergraduate Student Characteristics

According to the 2011-2012 “Facts and Figures,” available on Mason’s website, the school has 20,194 undergraduate degree-seeking students (Facts and Figures, 2012), and there were 2,665 first-time freshmen during the 2011-2012 academic year. According
to “Facts and Figures,” the total tuition and fees in the fall 2011 was $9,266/year for in-state undergraduate and $26,744/year for out-of-state undergraduates; average room costs were $5,350/year and board, which included 19 meals per week, was $3,600/year; there were 5,477 students living on campus; and in terms of student aid for the FY2010 academic year, 52.6% of students received aid (this includes undergraduate and graduate student populations) (Facts and Figures, 2012).

For the incoming freshmen class in 2010, the median SAT Verbal score was 550, the median SAT Math score was 565, and the median ACT composite was 25 (College Results Online, 2010). The percentage admitted in fall 2010 was 62.7% (College Results Online, 2010). The federal loan default rate was 1.9% (College Results Online, 2010). In terms of student characteristics, 19% of the 2011 freshmen class received Pell grants (College Results Online, 2010). The student body was 13.6% underrepresented minorities (which include American Indian, African American, and Hispanic students) (College Results Online, 2010) (refer to Figure 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage of Undergraduate Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4.* Undergraduate demographic breakdown at Mason.  
*Note.* These data indicate the undergraduate demographic profile of students by racial composition at Mason. Adapted from College Results Online (2010)
The gender composition was 53.7% female and 46.3% male (College Results Online, 2010). The most recent student success data of first-time full-time freshmen at Mason reflect a first-year retention rate of 84%, a four-year graduation rate of 38.7%, a five-year graduation of 57.8%, and a six-year graduation rate of 63.6%. Refer to Figure 5 for recent (2009) college completion data.

![Graph showing six-year graduation rates 2004 to 2009](image)

*Figure 5.* Recent six-year graduation rates at Mason.

*Note.* These data indicate that Mason has experienced an increase in the overall six-year graduation rates for first-time, full-time freshmen in 2004 through 2009. Adapted from College Results Online (2011).

Refer to Figure 6 for the six-year graduation rate in 2009 by race/ethnicity.
Figure 6. Six year college graduation rates at Mason by race/ethnicity (2009).

Note. These data indicate the six-year college completion rate in 2009 for first-time, full-time freshmen aggregated by race/ethnicity. Adapted from College Results Online (2010).

These data, presented in Figure 6, indicate that Asian students graduated within six years at the highest rate (66.2%), followed by White students (63.6%), Hispanic students (62.1%), and African American (57.9%). As noted in Chapter I, Mason’s minority student persistence and six-year graduation rates are higher than the national averages of similar institutions (Institutional Research & Reporting, 2011).

George Mason University’s Institutional Policies

Mason has general policies that help govern the undergraduate institution. Some of these include conduct within the university community, equal opportunity and nondiscrimination policy, drug and alcohol policy, responsible use of computing policy, parking policy, and several other policies and regulations (General Policies, 2011). The objective of this section is to discuss only those institutional policies put in place to
support the access, retention, and college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students.

**Access.** According to Mason’s website, the institution “is community driven and a community driver” (Community Relations, 2011). The same website discloses, “The university’s contributions to quality of life, together with the billions of dollars the university contributes to the economy, truly make Mason an important and engaged partner with the local community” (Community Relations, 2011). In 1999, Marcelle Heerschap was named the Dean of Admissions and Enrollment Development at Mason. The press release on May 20, 1999, reads, ‘Marcelle Heerschap has been named dean of admissions and enrollment development. With her leadership skills and recruitment experience, Marcelle Heerschap will direct this ongoing effort and thereby help enhance the overall quality of our institution,’ he [President Merten] said.” This press release provided evidence that Mason was committed to the improvement of the institution. Part of this commitment is tied to recruitment of the best students possible.

According to the Princeton Review in 2006, Mason ranked number one in diversity due to “George Mason’s positive environment, student organizations and faculty, staff and student training programs” (Laskowski, 2006). In 2009, the *U.S. News & World Report* ranked Mason as the number one university to watch. A Mason press release at the time highlighted an increase in student retention (2009). The press release stated,

Rates are up over fall 2008 for almost every level of student. This…accounts for about 500 more undergraduate students than projected. The most encouraging
trend is the significant increase in the sophomore to junior retention rate at Mason—nearly 17 percent more students than projected elected to continue their education at George Mason University after their sophomore year. (Walsch, 2009)

This suggests a commitment to the improvement of the university in terms of recruitment and retention of undergraduate students.

**Articulation agreements.** Articulation agreements have been used historically to promote links between two- and four-year institutions of higher education. Articulation agreement is defined as a

systematic coordination between an educational institution and other educational institutions and agencies designed to ensure the efficient and effective movement of students among those institutions and agencies, while guaranteeing the students continuous advancement in learning. (Ernst, 1978)

An articulation agreement between Mason and a local feeder two-year college, Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC), was implemented in 2005. The articulation agreement was established to improve transfer opportunities to two and four-year degrees in Northern Virginia among students who may not be able to access a postsecondary education as easily as others. The intent of the articulation agreement was to increase access, smooth transitions, and increase the total number of students attending higher education and eventually obtaining a bachelor’s degree.

The achievement of the goals outlined in the articulation agreements are meant to be accomplished through three identified parts/mechanisms.

- The first mechanism is through coordinated efforts between Mason and
NVCC to accept students who wish to transfer from Northern Virginia Community College into any baccalaureate program offered at Mason under the following conditions: NCVV students applying to Mason must graduate with an Associate in Arts (AA) or Associate in Science (AS), have earned at least 24 semester hours of transferable work at NVCC, and have a cumulative grade point average of at least a 2.75 to be guaranteed admissions to Mason.

- The second mechanism is through acceptance and application of credits where Mason awards a minimum of 60 credits to be applied at Mason for students who completed an AA or AS degree at NVCC and met all other requirements outlined in the agreement.

- The final mechanism is through collaboration among the IHEs who meet annually to review the agreement and relevant transfer course equivalencies (Articulation Agreement between Mason and Northern Virginia, 2006).

The Pathway to Baccalaureate Program and the articulation agreement between Mason and NVCC are still in place. This articulation agreement illustrated the commitment of Mason to broaden the access of students to attend Mason. This program could ease the transition of certain populations, namely, students who may not have been able to easily access a postsecondary education, first-generation college students, and students from African American and Hispanic backgrounds. It should be noted that the samples in the present study do not represent Pathway program participants because one criterion for inclusion in the study was that participants must have entered Mason as first-time freshmen.
**Early Identification Program.** The Early Identification Program (EIP) began in 1972. The program encourages first-generation college-bound students to enroll in college and succeed (Early Identification Program, 2011). EIP has a vision to “produce civically engaged first-generation college bound students who value learning and are actively pursuing higher education” (Early Identification Program, 2011). The goal of the program is “to improve students’ quality of life by providing academic enrichment, personal development, and community engagement” (Early Identification Program, 2011). To do this, EIP works with participants to make sure they are “equipped with the knowledge and skills to become productive and responsible global citizens” (Early Identification Program, 2011).

The program offers academic, career, and personal/social resources to promote lifelong learning by instilling a value for education in participants, as well as respect, ethics, and advocacy among them. EIP engages middle school students and has the following mission: “EIP will inspire students towards higher education and the development of professional goals” (Early Identification Program, 2011). This program applies a holistic approach to educate students and encourage them to maximize potential and academic achievement (Early Identification Program, 2011). The EIP program works in partnership with local school divisions, the private sector, and the Mason community (Early Identification Program, 2011). The program is designed to

- Provide access to resources that are beneficial to student and parents. Families will acquire skills pertinent to the college application process.
- Provide a safe environment for students to learn and grow through the
exposure to collegiate life at Mason.

- Provide students with knowledge and equip them with skills that are current and helpful in completing a high school curriculum and enrolling in a postsecondary institution.
- Collaborate with school divisions, parents/guardians, the private sector, and the community to provide additional resources for our students (Early Identification Program, 2011).

The program offers specialized activities, such as the Summer Academic Enrichment Program (SAEP), Strengthening the Family (STF), Math and Science Power Aid (MSPA), Service Learning & Cultural Programs, and an Academic Mentoring Program (AMP). These programs are designed to provide academic enrichment, increase parental understanding of the issues their children may be facing in the educational system, afford opportunities to increase students’ understanding of the world around them, and provide opportunities to work with mentors to receive academic assistance. Students also have opportunities to participate in service learning projects to increase their sense of appreciation of community and understand the importance of giving back to communities in need (Early Identification Program, 2011). There are workshops offered throughout the academic year and summer that focus on college preparation, career development, goal-setting, and life skills. All of this programming is intended to expose students to as much academic preparation as possible so that they will gain valuable skills to help them succeed in college. These activities are usually offered on Mason’s Fairfax campus, where the majority of undergraduate classes are offered, and are in place to decrease the
number of obstacles students face in pursuing a college education. The following section highlights some programs enacted at Mason that may have affected six-year college completion rates among African American and Hispanic students.

**George Mason University’s Retention and College Completion Efforts**

In addition to broader recruitment and retention efforts, there are programs and services in place at Mason to support targeted student populations. These include courses offered by the Transition Resource Center. Other efforts are evident in offices that the University Life division oversees.

**Transition Resource Center.** The Office of the Provost oversees Mason’s Transition Resource Center. This center is available to undergraduate students and provides courses, programs, and services to “facilitate students' personal and academic success” (Transition Resource Center, 2011). Each course is described in Figure 7.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Title</th>
<th>Course Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University 100</td>
<td>This course focuses on the freshman transition from high school to college. In addition, this course is to “assist first year students with their transition to Mason” (Transition Resource Center, 2011). It should be noted that a number of University 100 sections are designed for specific student populations who must be part of a particular program to enroll (Transition Resource Center, George Mason University, 2011). These sections include ACCESS, athletes, Early Identification Program (EIP), Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP), and University Scholars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University 200</td>
<td>This two-credit course uses &quot;self-assessment tools, research and networking to help students decide on a major&quot; (Transition Resource Center, 2011).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University 300</td>
<td>This course focuses on junior experiential learning and leadership development. The University 300 course is required for students who would like to be Patriot Leaders for the Office of Orientation and Family Programs and Services (OFPS).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University 400</td>
<td>This course focuses on senior readiness to transition beyond college to graduate school or the workplace (Transition Resource Center, 2011). It was unclear from the Transition Resource Center’s website how many credits are issued for students who opt to take this course.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 7. Transition Resource Center courses (University 100-400).*

*Note:* Each of these transition courses has predetermined objectives, but all share a common theme: to assist students in the transitions through the college experience. These transitions are from high school to college, high school to Mason, selection of a major, and the selection of postgraduation options.

**Offices that University Life oversees.** University Life is a division in Mason that oversees several offices that work with students. The vision of University Life is to create “purposeful learning environments, experiences, and opportunities that energize all students to broaden their capacity for academic success and personal growth” (University Life, 2011). The mission of University Life is to engage “students in educationally purposeful experiences resulting in student learning and development, academic success, and degree completion” (University Life, 2011). To actualize this mission, University Life outlined seven strategies:
1. Foster self-discovery and teach students to successfully navigate transitions throughout their Mason experience.

2. Create opportunities and communities for student learning, involvement, and engagement with peers, faculty, staff, and administrators.

3. Engage Mason's diverse, global, and multicultural community to enrich the educational environment, promote mutual respect and civility, and develop global citizens.

4. Foster individual and community responsibility and hold students accountable for ethical practices, academic integrity, and high standards of personal conduct.

5. Empower students to be socially conscious leaders committed to democratic and civic engagement.

6. Promote wellness, healthy lifestyle choices, and a culture of safety.


Refer to Figure 8 for the list of offices that are overseen by University Life.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mason Campus Offices that are overseen by University Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol, Drug and Health Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Services, Counseling and Psychological Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dean of Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity Programs and Services (ODPS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Identification Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing and Residence Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Programs and Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judicial Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Education and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multicultural Research and Resource Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-Campus Student Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation and Family Programs and Services (OFPS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Empowerment Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Assault Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Health Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women and Gender Studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 8.* Mason campus offices overseen by University Life.

*Note.* There are 23 offices that are overseen by University Life. Adapted from University’s website (University Life, 2011).

Some of these programs and offices are discussed in greater detail in the following sections. The selection of which offices to present in this Chapter was driven by the content of a demographic questionnaire (discussed in Chapter III) provided to participants in the study. The offices include Career Services, Early Identification Program (EIP), Housing and Residence Life, Office of Diversity Programs and Services (ODPS), Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP), and Student Involvement.

**Career Services.** Career Services has a mission to “assist them [students] in their academic/career decision-making and goal setting” (Career Services, 2011). The Career Services website offers several links to assist students, employers, parents/family members, and community members. Content on the website covers the areas of career selection, job searches, and interviewing tips.

**Housing and Residence Life.** This office offers Living Learning Communities (LLCs) to the Mason community. The Office of Housing and Residence Life runs the
LLCs on campus. LLCs offer an opportunity for students in campus housing to live with a group of people who share similar interests. LLCs “give residential students a unique, inclusive living experience that connects learning in and out of class” (University Life, 2011). There are several different LLCs at Mason, with most LLCs catering specifically to first-year students. Each LLC has a “common curricular focus or topic” (University Life, 2011). Students who wish to live in an LLC are encouraged to be actively involved, and to broaden their perspectives and understanding of the world through increased interaction with peers, faculty, and staff. The purpose of this type of approach “complements classroom experiences and lays the foundation for you [student] to become better prepared to succeed in life beyond college” (University Life, 2011).

**Office of Diversity Programs and Services (ODPS).** The Office of Diversity Programs and Services (ODPS) is “committed to the success of all members of the Mason community” (Office of Diversity Programs and Services, 2011). The mission of ODPS is to “promote students’ overall success (academic, social, and personal) in Mason’s highly diverse campus community, with specific attention to students with diverse backgrounds and/or life experiences which may impact their retention and success” (ODPS, 2011). The goal of ODPS is “to provide a campus environment where diversity is valued, appreciated, and celebrated,” to increase “awareness and knowledge of issues important to community harmony,” and help make “students’ hopes, dreams, and goals become a reality (ODPS, 2011). The purpose of the program is to assist students, faculty, and staff with admission, retention, satisfaction, graduation, and alumni connection. The staff of this office work to “ensure equitable levels of inclusion,
participation, and engagement” (ODPS, 2011) for students as well as advise student organizations, offer programming and leadership development for various cultural organizations, and sponsor cultural celebrations and heritage awareness observance (ODPS, 2011). The Office of Diversity Programs and Services assists with the following:

- Recruiting, retaining, and graduating students from diverse backgrounds.
- Orienting new students to services available at Mason to facilitate their scholastic, cultural, and social transition.
- Foster the development of a campus climate where the accomplishments of underrepresented student groups are valued, appreciated, and celebrated.
- Promote cultural awareness, involvement, and student leadership.
- Work collaboratively with University entities to ensure a climate conducive to the scholastic attainment of underrepresented groups.
- Counsel students experiencing personal and academic issues, including time management, goal setting and attainment, and good study habits.
- Educate the campus community about issues related to diversity through workshop presentations and seminars.
- Administer the Student Transition & Empowerment Program (STEP).
- Support the University Administration in creating policies where the interests of underrepresented students are represented (ODPS, 2011).

According to ODPS’ website, the programming and events fall into three major categories: Student Advocacy, Training Opportunities, and National Cultural Celebrations. For student advocacy, students can receive assistance and guidance in a
number of topics. The services offered by ODPS are Broadside Diversity Page; Coalition for Social Action – Collaborative programming to raise awareness and change attitudes; Diversity Workshops & Seminars; Information & Referrals; Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender & Questioning (LGBTQ) issues; Limited Free Tutoring; Minority Jobs; Scholarships & Internships; ODPS E-Mail Network; Student Leadership Development; and the Vision Awards -- annual student, faculty and staff recognition awards for academic achievement, leadership, and social action (ODPS, 2011).

The Aguilas Mentoring Program was established in the fall of 2008 through ODPS (ODPS, 2011). The Aguilas program was created to provide Latino freshmen, sophomores, and transfer students with a strong academic and professional network of upperclassmen and Mason alumni. AMP assists students in transitioning successfully to Mason and to the professional world by fostering leadership and academic excellence through various programs and services. Although Aguilas is oriented toward Latino cultures, they welcome all students (ODPS, 2011).

In addition to the programs described above, ODPS offers two mentoring programs and the Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP). The Mariposas Mentoring Program is “a coordinated effort between Latinas Promoviendo Comunidad/Lambda Pi Chi Sorority, Inc., Mu Chapter and the Office of Diversity Programs and Services to create a support network for freshmen, sophomore, and newly-transferred Latinas at George Mason University” (ODPS, 2011). One of the goals of the program is to promote academic excellence and leadership on campus; related to it is “to provide Latinas at Mason with a strong foundation and network, and to encourage
academic excellence and campus involvement” (ODPS, 2011).

The Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP) is a Mason initiative established to enhance the recruitment, satisfaction, and retention of a diverse undergraduate student body (ODPS, 2011). The program is offered throughout the summer and is five weeks in duration leading up to the beginning of the academic year. The program gives students “a jump-start to their scholastic endeavors through academic preparation, cultural awareness, and identity development programs, and personal empowerment services” (Student Transition Empowerment Program, 2011). In order to participate, students must be Virginia residents accepted by and committed to attending Mason, first-generation college students, or members of underrepresented groups.

**Student Involvement.** The mission of the Office of Student Involvement is to enhance “the Mason community by creating dynamic involvement opportunities and fostering student success through co-curricular experiences” (Office of Student Involvement, 2011). This office oversees Greek life, Program Board, Student Governance, Student Organizations, and Weekends at Mason. These are discussed in the next sections.

The Greek Community is served by this office and began in 1970 with the local founding of two fraternities and one sorority. There are four councils that govern the Mason community. At present (2011), there are 1,250 students, 38 organizations, and four councils on Mason’s campus (Office of Student Involvement, 2011). Program Board is a student-run program also offered through Student Involvement. According to the website, Program Board is responsible for providing activities that are “entertaining,
interactive, and educational” (Office of Student Involvement, 2011). There are five committees (Comedy and Speakers, Concerts, Film, Special Events, and a Street Team) that offer activities and events to the Mason community.

The Office of Student Involvement oversees Student Governance, and according to them, “students strive to represent the interests of the student body and aim to use the feedback of the constituent to improve campus life” (Office of Student Involvement, 2011). Student representatives seek to be a resource for student organizations, university offices, and the broader Fairfax community. Student Government features an elected student Senate and Executive branch.

The Office of Student Involvement also helps fund and offer support to recognized student organizations (RSOs). There are over 250 student clubs and organizations that are separated into six categories that make up the RSOs. All of the RSOs can be accessed at “Collegiate Link,” a website that can be accessed from the Office of Student Involvement’s website. The site provides descriptions of all of the RSOs on Mason’s campus. RSOs works very closely with faculty advisers in order to provide them with the necessary support to offer a positive learning experience for the students. There is an RSO Leadership Team (RSO LT) made up of six student leaders who are selected to serve as resources and advocates for their peers. This leadership team is responsible for providing a variety of programs to RSOs and the Mason community.

Finally, the Office of Student Involvement offers a program called “Weekends at Mason.” This program was established in 2008 and offered through the Office of Student Involvement. The objective of the program is to “foster community on campus Thursday
Sunday through coordination of events, promotion of events, and outreach/collaboration with others in the Mason community” (Office of Student Involvement, 2011).

Writing center. The Writing Center is a free resource to students. The center is located on three of the Mason campuses (Fairfax, Arlington, and Prince William) as well as virtually. The center is run through the English Department in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and offers student tutors who work with students. Tutors are recruited from departments and disciplines across the university, and represent both undergraduate and graduate students. Tutors receive intensive training on how to work with writers and diverse writing assignments (Writing Center, 2011). In order to become a tutor, a student must have excellent writing and interpersonal skills and meet the following prerequisites: (a) 60 completed credit hours, (b) a grade of "A" or proficiency credit in English 302, (c) an overall GPA of at least 3.0, and (d) an overall GPA of at least 3.5 in one’s major (Writing Center, 2011). The Writing Center’s website also provides information on the tutors, resources on the different aspects of the writing process, FAQs, and information for faculty members.

Summary. There is evidence of institutional policies, initiatives, and strategies to support the access, retention, and college completion of students at Mason. The questions embedded in the demographic questionnaire asked participants about the programs presented in this section. The objective to include these questions was to learn from participants if any of these policies, initiatives, programs, and strategies were perceived as contributors of college completion among graduating seniors who participated in this
study.

**Education Trust Data**

The 2010 Education Trust reports, which were a catalyst for this study, published findings on graduation rates to identify institutions doing a good job (or bad job) graduating underrepresented students. In The Education Trust’s publications “underrepresented students” was defined as American Indian, Black, and Hispanic students. Graduation Rate Survey data collected by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics were analyzed and resulted in two reports by the Education Trust (*Big gaps, small gaps: Some colleges and universities do better than others in graduating Black students* and *Big gaps, small gaps: Some colleges and universities do better than others in graduating Hispanic students*). These data were self-reported by institutions and collected from Title IV-eligible four-year postsecondary institutions. These data are for first-time, full-time students seeking a bachelor’s degree who enroll at that particular institution and graduate within six years from the same institution.

College Results Online does not include every four-year Title IV-eligible higher education institution in the United States (N = 6,759) (College Results Online, 2011). The sample included in College Results Online, and was subsequently used for the Education Trust publications, only included institutions that met a certain criterion: schools that are in the public or private not-for-profit sector as well as institutions in the private for-profit sector, schools that award bachelors’ degrees, which may include two- or four-year institutions, and schools that have had a graduation rate cohort within the last
three years, from 2006 to 2008 (College Results Online, 2010). After applying this
criterion, the sample of IHEs that were included in the sample was 2,091. These
institutions included public and nonprofit Title IV, degree-granting, nonspecialty schools
with graduation-rate cohorts in at least two of the following years: 2006, 2007, and 2008.

The graduation rate data presented represents the average graduation rates across
three years (2006, 2007, and 2008). According to the Education Trust analysts, the
reasoning behind this decision to present the average graduation rates was that of
―smoothing one-year abnormalities‖ (Lynch & Engle, 2010a, p. 8). One limitation of
―smoothing‖ data are that this process ignores outliers. Institutions with White or
Hispanic Graduation Rate Survey cohorts of fewer than 30 in any of the past three years
from the sample were excluded for reliability purposes. Additionally, institutions that
primarily grant associate’s degrees are excluded from the sample. Therefore, graduation
rates used in the reports were based on the percentage of first-time, full-time, bachelor’s
or equivalent degree-seeking freshmen who earn a bachelor’s or equivalent degree from
the institution where they originally enrolled. Thus, undergraduates who begin as part-
time or nonbachelor’s degree seeking students, or who transfer into the institution from
elsewhere in higher education, are not included in the Graduating Rate Survey or the
subsequent analyses of these data.

The Graduation Rate Survey data used for the Education Trust publications
included two of three full cohorts of entering freshmen in the classes of 2000, 2001, and
2002 who graduated within six years of entering the given higher education institution.
For example, students who began in fall 2002 are considered to have successfully
completed their degree within six years if they earned the degree on or before August 31, 2008. These data included graduation rate data broken down by race/ethnicity and gender, including four-, five-, and six-year graduation rates. It should be noted that the publications put forth by the Education Trust should be reviewed with some degree of caution. This graduation rate data does not include transfer students. Another caveat is that some students were excluded from these data, as institutions are allowed to exclude students who fail to earn a degree for the following reasons: (1) they left school to serve in the armed forces; (2) they left school to serve with a foreign aid service of the federal government; (3) they left school to serve on an official church mission; and (4) they died or became permanently disabled.

The 2010 publications by the Education Trust identified 11 IHEs that closed or severed the graduation rate gap between underrepresented minorities (Black/African American, Hispanic, and American Indian) and White students: Georgia State University, Loyola Marymount University, Loyola University of New Orleans, Stony Brook University, Purchase College in the State University of New York system, University of California at Riverside, University of Miami, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, University of Tampa, Towson University, and George Mason University (Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b). More significant, at two of these 11 IHEs, Mason and Towson University, there was no graduation rate gap for African American or Hispanic students and White students during the 2006 and 2008. These publications served as a catalyst and provided context for this study to learn more about what strategies may have contributed to high college completion rates among African American and Hispanic students at
Controversy over Using Graduation Rate as a Measure

Not everyone believes that using graduation rate is an effective measure of student success. In a policy brief, Russell (2009), a Senior State Policy Consultant for the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), claims that using graduation rate as a measure is inadequate and provides misleading metrics because it does not measure student success, but rather reflects characteristics of entering students. She states, “Disclosure of such rates – and public policy based on them – unfairly condemns institutions whose access missions lead them to accept ‘at-risk’ students” (p. 1). This claim indicates that graduation rates are unfairly applied by institutions with missions to accept “at-risk” students. Russell (2009) also found that the current graduation rate metric is “based on an outmoded model of student behavior that assumes linear and timely progression through a single institution” (p. 3). But using this model to calculate graduation rates does not account for unpredictable attendance patterns of both full-time and part-time students, enrollment in multiple institutions, transfer students, and students who choose to stop out of an institution (Russell, 2009). She further claims that the GRS cohort (the “denominator”) excludes part-time students, adults with prior college coursework, students who began at a different institution but transferred into a particular institution, and students who began in any term other than fall semester. The GRS definition of “success” (the “numerator”) excludes students who transfer and graduate to another institution and students who take longer than the allocated time to graduate (150% of the normal graduation rate) (Russell, 2009).
Russell (2009) argues that the graduation rate metric does not take into account students’ actual enrollment behavior and therefore current graduation rate data lead to misleading conclusions about institutional performance (Russell, 2009). On the other hand, some of the possible components that could be considered in evaluating student success include incorporating information on student behaviors, student characteristics, type of institution (i.e., open enrollment vs. highly competitive institution), and institutional services (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2006; Russell, 2009), to provide a fuller picture of institution effectiveness. The claims reported by Russell should be reviewed with a small degree of caution because they are not grounded in any methodology. Instead, these claims were found in a policy brief and the views reflected in this particular policy brief are based on the opinion of the author, who is employed by AASCU.

The perspective of Russell represents one point of view from AASCU, but others in the organization (2006) write, “in the field of higher education accountability, few metrics have attracted as much attention – or controversy– as the institutional graduation rate” (p. 1). Graduation rates of students can serve as one indicator of student success, but the same analysts at AASCU go on to write, “It is important for advocates of this measure to recognize that graduation rates represent just one part of a broader outcomes picture and should not be viewed as the sole indicator of student success or campus performance” (p. 1). The major conclusion from these findings was that graduation rate can serve as an indicator of student success, but should not be relied upon as the only indicator of student success. These claims were found in an occasional policy
paper series by the AASCU and are not based on empirical research. The papers in which these claims were made was part of a series “focus[ing] on key state policy issues affecting public colleges and universities, including access (financial and academic), fiscal conditions and trends, and government/management” (p. 14) and may reflect organizational bias.

In closing, the major conclusions from the controversy over using graduation rates as a measure of student success are two: (1) using graduation rates for less selective higher education institutions could be a less important measure of student success, and (2) using graduation rates in general only present one component of a vast amount of possible variables related to student success. For the purposes of this study, graduation rate was assumed to be an effective measure of student success to explore what strategies may contribute to high college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students.

**Previous Higher Education Case Studies**

Several databases were searched to determine what case studies were conducted between the 1990s to the present on factors that may contribute to higher than expected graduation rates among minority students. Databases included Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Education Research Complete, PsychINFO, Education Full Text, Dissertations and Theses, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, JSTOR, Academic Search Complete, and educational organizations’ websites. From this research, it was determined that few case studies were conducted from the 1990s to the present on contributing factors to higher-than-expected graduation rates among minority students.
Richardson (1991) conducted a preliminary study to test and potentially modify a survey of public colleges and universities with good records for graduating African Americans, Hispanics, or American Indians. The survey was sent to institutions across the United States, resulting in feedback from 10 states and 142 public, four-year institutions. Information was provided on the intensity and duration of institutional practices associated with high, or improved, equity outcomes during the 1980s (Richardson, 1991). Richardson found that colleges and universities with strong graduation records for minority students have faculty who are committed to helping students learn, instructional leaders who plan and implement required interventions, and managers who set goals, develop action plans, and allocate resources. Richardson reported that “institutions with the will to improve participation and graduation rates for underrepresented groups can do so” (p. 35). This study provided knowledge about the kinds of institutional practices that were helpful during the 1980s among institutions with good records for graduating African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indian populations.

Richardson’s findings are somewhat problematic because the U.S. Department of Education did not require IHEs to collect and report graduation rate data by gender and race until 1996. Therefore, these graduation rate data provided by institutions by race must be reviewed with some level of caution. Another possible limitation is that the survey data were self-reported from the institutions themselves and self-reported data is often unreliable (Sappington et al., 2002; Moore, 2004). These two limitations present serious implications for Richardson’s findings. However, these limitations aside, the
study by Richardson brought forth some helpful ideas on institutional practices that could affect student success.

Glenn (2003) appeared to take Richardson’s (1991) study a step further because aggregated graduation rates were available and used as a measure of student success in his study. Similar to Richardson, Glenn (2003) was interested in exploring institutional programs and policies that were designed to enhance the retention and graduation of African American males. The procedure included determining the graduation rates of the top and bottom quartile community college institutions, developing and disseminating an institutional questionnaire, collecting the survey data, conducting in-depth case studies of two institutions, and analyzing these data. Using a case study method, Glenn attempted to analyze factors that contributed to the high college completion rates among African American males at these two community colleges. The case study method was chosen to focus on examining the setting, policies, procedures, programs, and culture of each campus “for clues concerning each institution’s success with male graduation” (p. 128).

Glenn (2003) created the institutional questionnaire to elicit information on practices and policies related to the retention of African American male students. This questionnaire was mailed to each college in the top and bottom quartiles. Data collection involved interviews, observations, and the collecting of institutional artifacts. Data were collected from multiple sources including observations of and interviews with students, faculty, counselors, administrators, residence hall supervisors, bookstore employees, campus organization leaders, and parents. The data included descriptions, opinions, perceptions, and other personal information that was relevant to the purpose of the study.
One of the questions that guided interviews with students was, *What do you like most about this college?* Glenn conducted on-site observations at one institution from both the top and bottom quartiles to examine the setting, policies, procedures, programs, and culture of each campus to explore factors influencing African American males’ retention rates. The observations included interactions with students, staff, and others involved with the college. The questionnaire data were analyzed to gather descriptive information on institutional policies and practices related to retention of African American males. Additional information was collected by the author on course catalogs, class schedules, school papers, bulletin boards, syllabi, brochures, and student handouts.

Some of the promising practices Glenn offered (2003) included mentoring, tutoring, remedial courses, and pre-enrollment summer, catch-up programs. Some of his findings were that the college with successful graduation rates among African American males employed several strategies: (1) counseling, mentoring, teaching assistance, and summerbridge programs; (2) collaborative or interactive learning component in the classes; (3) on orientation program that stresses study skills, degree planning, and involvement; (4) student volunteers who are on call the first semester to answer questions from new students; and (5) institution sponsors to recruit students in poor neighborhoods (Glenn, 2003). These findings relate to the research questions in this study because they could be potential factors that can attribute to high college completion rates of African American males undergraduates.

A concern with Glenn’s study involves using community college graduation rate data because the cohort group can be quite small compared with the entire community
college population. Another area of concern is the trustworthiness of the data collection process. Furthermore, it is unknown whether Glenn’s questionnaire was validated. The response rate was not clear in terms of the specific number of institutions that actually completed and submitted the questionnaire. The author only indicates the percentage of questionnaires that were completed. Further, Glenn reported that 67% of the questionnaires were completed and returned for the top quartile institutions and 47% were completed and returned from the bottom quartile colleges. It was hard to determine how Glenn defined terms (strategies, policies, procedures, programs, and culture) or computed his data analysis.

In 2008, the Education Sector, a think-tank based in Washington, D.C., published a report on minority student college completion (Carey, 2008). This document highlighted Florida State University’s Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE). The CARE program was established in 2000 with a mission to reach out to low-income and first-generation students as early as eighth grade and provide advice and support through their high school and college careers (Carey, 2008). Carey reported that six years later, “the university posted its highest-ever six-year graduation rate for [B]lack students – 72 percent” (p. 1). According to Carey, this graduation rate was higher than the rate for White students at Florida State and for African American students at the state’s more selective flagship university, the University of Florida.

Carey (2008) hypothesized about what programs may be contributing to the higher-than-expected graduation rates among African American students. To reach this conclusion Carey merely describes his data collection method by noting that “a number
of other institutions…were contacted in late 2007 and early 2008 and asked why, in their judgment, they were able to close the [B]lack/White gap” (p. 8). What is missing from this entire report is the actual research methodology employed to gather qualitative data to support his conclusions. The protocol employed for the conversations with higher education staff mentioned in the report, as well as actual quotes from the participants, are not evident anywhere in the report.

Analysts at the U.S. Department of Education published the *College Completion Tool Kit* in 2011. This toolkit presents strategies to increase persistence and college completion rates. The authors of *College Completion Toolkit* write,

> The U.S. Department of education will provide technical assistance, target available resources to assist states in their college completion efforts, and report by January 1, 2012, where states stand in terms of college completion goals, numeric objectives, plans, and early achievements. (p. 3)

One of the strategies offered in the toolkit is to set college completion goals and assist consumers to develop an action plan (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). One initiative mentioned was a partnership of 24 states and Complete College America, an independent nonprofit organization that “help[s] states establish short- and long-term college completion goals and accompanying performance indicators” (p. 4). Some states, like West Virginia, worked with the National Governors Association (NGA) and Complete College America to establish goals for their state as well as with each institution of higher education within their state (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The goals established in the West Virginia example were disaggregated for subgroups
(which included racial and ethnic minorities, nontraditional adult learners, and low-income students) year-by-year and emphasized closing the “attainment gap” among target populations (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Another strategy indicated in *College Completion Tool Kit* is “Embrace Performance-Based Funding of Higher Education Based on Progress Toward Completion and Other Quality Goals” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). This strategy entails a process by which states revise higher education funding formulas to consider, in addition to enrollment, performance measures such as institutional achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The institutional achievement, in this case, can be judged against possible indicators. These indicators include (but are not limited to) general outcome indicators (e.g., levels of and improvement in the number of degrees conferred) or subgroup outcome indicators (e.g., the level and improvement in closing attainment gaps between groups and their peers). In January 2010, Tennessee’s state legislature passed the Complete College Tennessee Act, which enacted “a comprehensive set of higher education reforms designed to increase the number of citizens with a postsecondary credential” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p. 7). These initiatives signal a growing concern over the college completion rate of target populations, including racial and ethnic minorities.

**Research about George Mason University**

Moving from general research on studies about factors impacting African American and Hispanic students’ college completion rates in community colleges and four-year institutions, there has also been research about Mason. In this section, research
specifically on George Mason University is presented. This research links with the research questions of this study because it has been propagated by previous researchers that institutional culture, policies, initiatives, and strategies could impact the retention and college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students.

Researchers at the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), undertook a two-year study called the Documenting Effective Educational Practices (DEEP) project, using IHEs with high graduation rates as an indicator of student success (Kuh et al., 2005). The IHEs in the sample for the DEEP project were selected on the basis of graduation rates and student engagement as indicators of student success. The sample included 20 four-year colleges and universities that had both higher-than-predicted graduation rates and scores on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The 20 institutions were Alevemo College, California State (Monterey Bay), The Evergreen State College, Fayetteville State University, George Mason University (Mason), Gonzaga University, Longwood University, Malcalester College, Miami University, Sewanee: The University of the South, Sweet Briar College, University of Kansas, University of Maine (Farmington), University of Michigan, , University of Texas at El Paso, Ursinus College, Wabash College, Wheaton College (MA), Winston-Salem State University, and Wofford College. For data collection, the research team visited each institution included in the sample twice for several days and interviewed more than 2,700 people; they also observed dozens of classes, and spent time in libraries, cafeterias, and other campus venues. Hundreds of print and electronic documents were also reviewed.

Kuh et al. (2005) found common themes from these data. There were six factors
that appeared to be most common: (1) “Living” mission and “lived educational philosophy”; (2) “Unshakeable focus on student learning”; (3) Clear pathways to student success; (4) Environments adapted for educational enrichment; (5) Improvement-oriented campus culture; and (6) Shared responsibility for educational quality and student success (Kuh et al., p. 46). The authors write, “One of the most important conditions is an intentional focus on institutional improvement” (p. 46). Some of the practices involved in this “intentional focus on institutional improvement” were the following:

- a commitment toward innovation;
- adopting practices from other institutions to improve teaching and learning;
- investing in student success;
- decision-making informed by data;
- providing leadership from every corner;
- strong leadership from the president with perspective grounded in student development;
- institutional responsibilities for student success;
- recruiting and retaining high quality staff and faculty;
- converting challenges into opportunities;
- and cultivating a campus culture that makes space for differences. (Kuh et al., 2005)

There are a few limitations in this study. It is unclear how interviewees were selected or what interview procedure was followed. The interview procedure, if any, was not disclosed, nor were the data analyses techniques.
Mason was reported by Kuh et al. (2005) to have an inclination to innovate “due in part to its relative youth and its self-perception as an ‘underdog’ in the Virginia higher education system” (p. 47). Similarly, Mason was cited as an institution that has faculty responsive to the state-mandated assessment that requires data-informed decision-making. Kuh et al. (2005) stated that the faculty at this institution developed a portfolio assessment for each course designed to elicit information from students on ways to change and improve the courses. Other colleges at this institution used student focus groups to solicit feedback from students on course offerings and pedagogy.

Because of the omission of description about research methodology for the data collection, this specific study conducted by Kuh et al. (2005) leaves room for future exploration of the perspective of students, staff, and other college personnel. Through purposeful sampling in the form of a case study, research could be conducted using multiple data sources to learn more about what, if any, setting, policies, procedures, programs, and culture at Mason could be influencing the higher-than-expected graduation rates of African American and Hispanic students. The methodology could involve reviewing institutional artifacts, interviewing students, staff, and other college personnel, and observing campus activities. By interviewing higher education staff and students, a future study could unveil a more in-depth analysis of contributing factors at one higher education institution.

In a follow-up paper, Whitt (2005), one of the researchers from the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, using data collected for the DEEP project, provided additional details about the role of student affairs in IHEs. Based on the 20 four-
year colleges and universities profiled in the DEEP project which have higher-than-predicted graduation rates, Whitt described eight “lessons for student affairs practice” (p. 1): (a) focus on the educational mission; (b) create and sustain partnerships for learning; (c) hold all students to high expectations for engagement and learning, in and out of class, on and off campus; (d) implement a comprehensive system of safety nets and early warning systems; (e) teach new students what it takes to succeed; (f) recognizing, affirm, and celebrate the educational value of diversity; (g) invest in progress and people who demonstrate contributions to student learning and success; and (h) create spaces for learning. Whitt (2005) elaborates on some of the notable descriptions of these practices.

For focus on educational mission Whitt writes,

> At educationally-effective colleges and universities, student affairs policies, programs, and services reflect a sustained commitment to achieving the institutions educational mission…What distinguishes student affairs policies and practices at educationally-effective colleges and universities is the degree to which they focus on creating seamless learning environments in which boundaries between in-class and out-of-class learning are fuzzy, if not invisible. (p. 2)

In this excerpt from Whitt’s (2005) paper, it is evident that creating learning environments that reflect a commitment to an institution’s educational mission is central to the work of student affairs policies, programs, and services.

Another salient point from Whitt’s (2005) paper explores how to create and sustain partnerships. She mentions the importance of collaboration among faculty and student affairs, as well as having a plethora of co-curricular programs that “foster and do
not compete with or undercut, student achievement” (p. 2). Some of the examples of the co-curricular activities include having new student orientation and welcome week, where time devoted for intellectual and academic content far exceeds the amount of time dedicated to social events (Whitt, 2005). Another point related to creating partnerships for learning includes setting “an appropriate tone and expectations for college life” (p. 2). She notes that programs and experiences that are of “uniformly high quality and [in which] large numbers of students participate” (p. 2) are an important element for educationally effective colleges and universities. Whitt (2005) notes that,

George Mason University sponsors more than 200 student clubs and organizations and goes to considerable lengths to involve students of different ages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds in these and other out-of-class activities. The university attracts nontraditional-age students to such activities by offering academic credit for certain bona fide learning experiences. (p. 3)

Whitt (2005) also indicates that implementing a comprehensive system of safety nets and early warning systems is evident at educationally effective institutions. This depicts the process by which institutions “make sure students do not fall through the cracks” (p. 2). This process could be conducted by residence life staff members to see first-hand how students spend their time or from academic advisers and faculty members. Also mentioned is teaching students what it takes to succeed and providing the “affirmation, encouragement, and support as well as information about what to do to be successful” (p. 3). Whitt described how students could be provided information during student recruitment, summer orientation, registration, and events throughout the early
weeks of college (p. 3) with a purpose to teach newcomers “about campus traditions and rituals” (p. 3). Whitt (2005) affirmed that diversity is an educational value that is celebrated. She writes, “students who report more exposure to diverse perspectives in class and out of class also report higher levels of academic challenge, more frequent involvement in active and collaborative learning, and a more supportive campus environment” (p. 3). Further, Whitt argues that high-performing institutions demonstrate a “commitment to diversity by socializing newcomers to this value, encouraging students to experience diversity by featuring diverse perspectives in the curriculum and co-curriculum, and recruiting and supporting students, faculty, and staff from backgrounds historically underserved by higher education” (p. 3).

Another component of a highly effective institution is one that invests in programs and people who demonstrate contributions to student learning and success (Whitt, 2005). She concludes, “Where and why an institution invests its resources makes a big difference, not only for what gets funded, but also the messages sent about institutional priorities and values” (p. 3). Her final component of highly effective institutions is creating spaces for learning. She writes about the investment in new construction, space renovation, campus extension, and others to create spaces and settings were learning and teaching can flourish (Whitt, 2005). Whitt wrote that Mason’s “Student services are centrally located and easy to find, and spaces for informal interaction between students and faculty or staff and among students are plentiful and accessible” (p. 3). Whitt went on to write, “George Mason University’s Johnson Center is an entire building devoted to providing student academic services, such as tutoring, career
counseling, and so forth amid a food court, the library, and several other offices” (p. 3).

Rachel Ensign’s (2010) article in the Chronicle of Higher Education cited four ways that colleges have raised graduation rates. The author of this article used conversations with higher education staff to make the claims. Ensign writes, “Administrators at these and other colleges attribute their graduation-rate increases to a number of factors. While most agreed that higher admissions standards helped, they also cited new programs and organizational changes” (p. 1). These four strategies were: focus on likely dropouts, building up advising services, involving diverse voices, and making logistical changes. Similar to flaws presented in some previous research, these claims could be accurate, but lack sound methodology or information for the reader to understand how such findings were reached. This raises the question: Why may these institutions named as “fast gainers” be making so much progress with respect to increasing the graduation rate of certain student populations?

Summary

Guided by a conceptual framework presented in Chapter I, the literature review provides context for the elements of this study. Each section of this review builds a foundation for the next, but collectively these sections call attention to a gap in the research. The articles summarized thus far have provided both research-based and practical recommendations for institutional practices that may impact the completion rates of African American and Hispanic students. However, the research presented does not include the perspectives of students and university staff members on what may have contributed to high college completion rates of students from African American or
Hispanic backgrounds. Instead, research published by analysts from educational organizations has been anecdotal in nature (Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b; Carey, 2004; Ensign, 2010). Research is not clear about what African American and Hispanic students and university staff members perceive to contribute to high six-year college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students at IHEs with evidence of success in six-year graduation rates among students from these ethnic backgrounds.

This qualitative case study was conducted at an IHE with evidence of six-year college completion rates among African American and Hispanic students. This study sought to document the perspectives of African American and Hispanic graduating seniors and university staff members on what these groups perceived to contribute to be high six-year college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students at Mason. As stated in Chapter I, Mason’s minority student persistence and graduation rates are higher than the national averages of similar institutions (Institutional Research & Reporting, 2011). The 2010 Education Trust reports indicated that between 2006 and 2008,

- the average African American six-year graduation rate was 62.6%, compared with 56.8% for Whites (Lynch and Engle, 2010b), and
- the average Hispanic six-year graduation rate between was 58.5%, compared with 56.8% for Whites (Lynch & Engle, 2010a).

Previous research failed to incorporate perspectives of the population of interest and to provide strategies of what may contribute to high six-year college completion rates among African American and Hispanic students. There was a need to document the
perspectives of students from these ethnic backgrounds and university staff members on what this group perceived to contribute to high six-year college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students. The perspective of students was important because participants offered personal accounts on strategies that affected collegiate success. The perspectives of university staff members helped provide knowledge of the context of Mason and what may have contributed to six-year college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students.

The purpose of this study was to document graduating seniors’ and university staff members’ perspectives on what contributed to high six-year college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students at Mason. Interviews were used to gain insight with these participants into this recent phenomenon. Information from participants, which is documented in Chapter IV, may provide insight to IHE staff on strategies that may improve the six-year graduation rates of African American and Hispanic students. Two research questions addressed the three goals of the study:

1. From the perspective of graduating seniors from African American and Hispanic backgrounds, what is George Mason University (Mason) doing to support students from those ethnic backgrounds toward college completion at Mason?

2. From the perspective of university staff members, what is George Mason University (Mason) doing to support African American and Hispanic students toward college completion at Mason?
CHAPTER III

This Chapter details the methodological strategies employed in this study. Analysis of these data follows in Chapter IV. The Chapter begins with a brief overview of the methods pilot, an overview of the study’s design, and a re-introduction of the research goals and research questions. The next section provides details on the participant and site selection. Two data sources are presented, followed by a detailed chronological description of the study’s procedure. Data analysis strategies are addressed, followed by the boundaries and generalizability of the inquiry. The Chapter concludes with a statement on the importance of this study.

Research Design

This study explored the perceptions of students and administrative staff at one IHE (George Mason University) to determine if institutional programs or policies contributed to this higher-than-expected graduation rate for the targeted population (African American and Hispanic students). Two research questions guided this study:

1. From the perspective of graduating seniors from African American and Hispanic backgrounds, what is George Mason University (Mason) doing to support students from those ethnic backgrounds toward college completion at Mason?

2. From the perspective of university staff members, what is George Mason
3. University (Mason) doing to support African American and Hispanic students toward college completion at Mason?

A concept map was constructed and guided the development of the goals, research questions, methods, and statement of trustworthiness. This concept map was created to illustrate the research design, and is not an overlay of an external concept map but applied from the components of Maxwell’s concept map (2005). (Figure 9)
Research Goals
1. To document African American and Hispanic graduating seniors’ perspectives on what contributed to higher-than-national-average rates in college completion among African American and Hispanic students at Mason.
2. To document university staff members’ perspectives on what contributed to higher-than-national-average rates in college completion among African American and Hispanic students at Mason.
3. To develop two cultural models as an overlay following data analysis about what contributed to high college completion rates from the perspectives of participants interviewed in the study.

Research Questions
1. From the perspective of graduating seniors from African American and Hispanic backgrounds, what is George Mason University (Mason) doing to support students from those ethnic backgrounds toward college completion at Mason?
2. From the perspective of university staff members, what is George Mason University (Mason) doing to support African American and Hispanic students toward college completion at Mason?

Conceptual Framework
Students from African American and Hispanic ethnic backgrounds are a subset of undergraduate students who tend to be underrepresented in the graduation pool. (Carey, 2008; Engle & Theokas, 2010; Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b)

Mason’s minority student persistence and graduation rates are higher than the national averages of similar institutions reported by Consortium of Student Retention Data Exchanges. (Institutional Research & Reporting, 2011).

A handful of IHEs have closed or reversed a graduation rate gap between African American and Hispanic students when compared to White students. (Engle & Theokas, 2010; Ensign, 2010; Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b)

Research from national education organizations indicates that IHEs employ certain institutional practices and programs that may result in higher college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students. (Carey, 2008; Engle & Theokas, 2010; Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b)

Literature on institutional services, programs, policies, and strategies have been asserted by educational analysts but such claims are not grounded in any kind of methodology to validate these assertions. (Carey, 2008; Engle & Theokas, 2010; Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b)

Analysts at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2006) report that research has demonstrated “campus and system policy, practice, and culture do affect student persistence, and completion, making institutions an important stakeholder in the promotion of student success.” (p. 1)

Analysts at The Education Trust have presented NCES data indicating between 2006 and 2008, African American and Hispanic students were graduating, on average, at higher rates than White students at Mason. (Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b)

Methods
1) In-depth interviews
2) Demographic questionnaire

Trustworthiness
1) Member checks with colleagues in Ph.D in Education program at the Graduate School of Education at George Mason University.
Note. This figure illustrated the five components that contributed to the research design: the conceptual framework, three research goals, two research questions, two data sources, and a technique applied to aid trustworthiness. Each section of the figure will be further depicted in the appropriate section in this Chapter.

Methods Pilot

A methods pilot was conducted in the spring of 2011 and as a result, subsequent modifications were made to the present study. In the spring of 2011, interview guide questions were tested with eight participants. This was an opportunity to gain experience interviewing participants and to see how well the interview guide questions worked in practice. Four graduating seniors were interviewed from African American and Hispanic ethnic backgrounds. The graduating seniors self-identified as African American and Hispanic and were members of the graduating class of 2011. Three of the four participants entered Mason as full-time freshmen in 2007. This was during the time period when graduation rates for minority students were reported as above the national average. Participants were required to meet the desired selection criterion for the methods pilot: (a) self-identified as African American and Hispanic; (b) en route to graduate in the class of 2012 (e.g., December 2011, May 2012, and Summer 2012); and (c) entered Mason as full-time freshman between 2005 and 2007. One participant in the pilot study transferred to Mason so particular care was taken in the present study to limit student participants to those who entered Mason as full-time, first-time freshmen. A 41-item demographic questionnaire was used to learn more about the participants. Questions included pre-collegiate activities, family involvement, and self-perception of motivation.
to attend college. Upon review of the questionnaires and analyses from the pilot study, it was determined that the questions in the methods pilot exceeded the scope of the study. The updated demographic questionnaire is presented later in this Chapter. The interview guide was composed of 12 questions. These questions included a few items at the beginning to serve as an ice breaker – for example asking, “Tell me a bit about yourself – like what high school you attended, what is your major, and what you like to do for fun.” Several of the following questions centered on graduating seniors’ collegiate experience at Mason. Some examples: “Describe your experience at Mason” and “What do you like about Mason?” The research indicates that certain institutional programming could impact retention and college completion of African American and Hispanic students (Carey, 2008; Engle & Theokas, 2010; Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b). Therefore, the interview included questions to gain insight on available services that they were involved in. For example, the question “Describe some of the co-curricular activities that you have found helpful at Mason” was asked of participants. Directness was desired with the participants so as to learn from their perspective potential contributing factors to successful college completion rates among African American and Hispanic students. For example, “Why do you think Black and Hispanic students are successfully graduating at such high rates from Mason?” At the end of the interview, an opportunity was provided the participants to share any additional information.

Four university staff members, additionally, were interviewed. The selection criterion to staff members was guided by research suggesting that institutional policy, programs, services, and initiatives can help increase the college completion rates of
African American and Hispanic students (Carey, 2007; Engle & Theokas, 2010; Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b). Thus, the university staff members invited for interviews were personnel with specific knowledge of Mason as it related to institutional policy, programs, services and initiatives that could potentially increase college completion rates for the population of interest. The selection criteria applied to university staff participants were (a) possess specific knowledge of Mason’s policy, programs, services and initiatives that could potentially increase college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students; and (b) be willing to participate. An eight-item interview guide was used to guide the conversation. Similar to the interview guide for the graduating seniors, the opening question served as an ice breaker (―How long have you been working at George Mason University?). The next questions centered on learning what these participants’ perceive to be contributing to the successful college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students. Examples of these questions are, “How has George Mason University been addressing student retention since you began working here?” and “Describe some student services that have been put in place to support retention.” It was later learned that some of these questions were not directly tied to the research goals of this study.

Participants and Setting

Setting

Mason was selected as the setting for this study, because according to analysis of graduation rate data, evidence suggests the graduation rate of this IHE was higher than national averages during a three-year period (Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b). Merriam
(2002) writes, “the case study is an extensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution or community” (p. 8). Merriam (2002) depicts a case as a bounded integrated system that can be selected “because it was typical, unique, experimental, or highly successful” (p. 8). The unit of analysis is “a critical factor in the case study… It is typically a system of action rather than an individual or group of individuals” (Tellis, 1997, para. 38). Thus, the unit of analysis in this study was George Mason University. This unit was selected because of interest in the perspectives of a group of individuals to learn what they perceived Mason to be doing to support the college completion rates of the targeted population. This small group of participants from the unit of analysis, Mason, is an example of a “highly successful” (Merriam, 2002) case where the measure of success was six-year graduation rates. The Education Trust reports (2010), discussed in Chapter II, indicated that the average college completion rate between 2006 and 2008 for students of interest for this study revealed the following:

- African American students graduated at an average rate of 62.6%, compared with 56.8% for Whites. (Lynch & Engle, 2010b, p. 3)
- Hispanic students graduated at an average rate of 58.5%, compared with 56.8% for Whites. (Lynch & Engle, 2010a, p. 2)

As previously presented (in Chapter I), Mason’s minority student persistence and graduation rates are higher than the national averages of similar institutions (Institutional Research and Reporting, 2011).
Participants

This study is population-specific (Schram, 2006). Because the research questions for the study were based on the perceptions of African American and Hispanic graduating seniors and university staff, graduating seniors from this population and university staff with knowledge of Mason were interviewed. Selection criteria is a technique used to “select information[-] rich cases whose study who will illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 2002, p. 46). Fourteen participants were interviewed in the current study (seven graduating seniors and seven university staff members). Knowledge gained from the interviews provided knowledge of the successful institutional programs in place at Mason that may potentially increase high college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students.

Graduating seniors. Three selection criteria were applied to identify graduating-senior participants of this study. Graduating seniors had to (a) self-identify as African American or Hispanic; (b) belong to the class of 2012 (e.g., intend to graduate in December 2011, May 2012, or summer 2012); and (c) have entered Mason as full-time freshmen between 2006 and 2008. The goal was to interview students who met this selection criterion for better alignment with a previous study by the Education Trust and assertions made by the Office Institutional Research and Reporting (2011) at Mason that students with this profile were among the pool of students who graduated at higher rates than the national average between 2006 and 2008. Therefore, it was intentional to interview students who met the same profile: those who were of African American or Hispanic backgrounds, who graduated within six years of enrollment, and who entered
Mason as full-time freshmen. In addition, some of the participants interviewed in this study could have potentially benefitted from some of the same college access and retention programs (discussed in Chapter II) as students who graduated from 2006 and 2008.

**University staff.** The two selection criteria were guided by research that suggests institutional policy, programs, services, and initiatives can help to bolster the college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students (Carey, 2007; Engle & Theokas, 2010; Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b). Thus, the university staff members invited for interviews were personnel with specific knowledge of Mason’s institutional policies, programs, services, and initiatives that may increase college completion rates for the population of interest. The selection criteria for the current study were limited to personnel who (a) had specific knowledge of the context of Mason policy, programs, services and initiatives that could bolster college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students; and (b) were willing to participate. Seven university staff members were interviewed in the current study and worked in a variety of offices on campus. The university staff represented five offices across Mason’s campus.

**Boundaries of participation selection.** Some researchers have reported on the boundaries of participant selection. Reybold et al. (2009) write, “the richness and completeness of our findings definitely suffered due to the limitations in participant selection” (p. 20). There are some boundaries because of the selection criteria applied in this study. Graduating seniors interviewed self-identified as African American or Hispanic, but do not represent all of the experiences or perspectives of that group.
Graduating seniors may have been informed about this study from a staff member, or reviewed a flyer, owing to increased involvement in the campus community. Thus, participants in the sample may be more apt to be student leaders or work in campus offices. With this in mind, participants involved in this study potentially may not reflect an entire student group (e.g., African American males, Latina females). Another boundary is that participants may have had positive experiences at Mason. Thus, these participants may have been more willing to share those experiences in an interview.

**Data Sources**

There were two data sources for the study: a demographic questionnaire for graduating seniors and interview transcripts that resulted from in-person, face-to-face, one-on-one interviews with students and staff. Graduating seniors completed the demographic questionnaire. Interviews took place at a convenient location on George Mason University’s Fairfax campus.

**Demographic Questionnaire**

The graduating seniors completed demographic questionnaires. The demographic questionnaire for the study included 17 items pertaining to basic demographic information and collegiate experiences (Appendix A). The questionnaire was used as a tool to ask questions that may not have been included in the one-on-one, face-to-face interview due to time constraints imposed by the time available between participants. The seven graduation seniors (four women, three men) selected for this study entered Mason as full-time freshmen in the fall of 2008 and were projected to graduate in 2012. Five of the graduating seniors self-identified as African American and two self-identified as
Hispanic. Questionnaire findings indicated that 100% of the sample (n = 7)

- were from high schools outside of Fairfax County,
- volunteered for a Mason program or event,
- attended events offered by Student Involvement,
- were involved in student organizations at Mason, and
- were student leaders of an organization at Mason.

For academic achievement (measured by grade point average on a scale from 0-4.0), four of the participants (57%) reported having a grade point average of 2.01-3.00 and three of the participants (43%) reported having a grade point average of 3.01-4.00. As mentioned in Chapter II, Mason offers programs to increase the college access, retention, and college completion of students. One participant was a member of the Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP), Early Identification Program (EIP), and served as a mentor in the STEP program at Mason. As discussed in Chapter II, Mason offers transitional courses (University 100-400). Three of the participants (43%) reported taking one of the University 100-400 courses. Mason offers “Living, Learning Communities” for students who reside on campus. None of the participants reported having lived in a “Living Learning Community.” Five of the participants (71%) reported attending a Career Services session. Academic services are also provided by the university. Two participants (29%) attended Academic Services sessions. There was an open-ended question included in this demographic questionnaire; this question was, “Is there anything else you would like to tell me about yourself?” One student wrote about involvement in an ethnic-based organization and a leadership role assumed on campus. Another student
wrote, “Very involved, love Mason.”

**Interviews**

Interviews were selected as a method for participants to share their experiences. They were selected because they “yield direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (Patton, 2002, p. 4). Interview guides were used in the current study to guide the conversation with participants. Further, these interview guides helped to adequately “communicate someone else’s experience of the world in his or her own words” (Patton, 2002, p. 47). According to Patton there are advantages to using an interview guide. Patton (2002) identified the following advantages:

- Maximizes time available through construction of thoughtful questions.
- Allows for systematic and comprehensive questioning across participants.
- Keeps the interview interactions focused and, at the same time, individual perspectives and experiences to emerge.

The open-ended questions in the interview guides for participants allowed for authentic responses. Each guide was modified from the methods pilot (previously presented in this Chapter) and is described in the following section.

**Graduating senior interview guide.** The interview guide for graduating seniors contained 13 questions (Appendix B). The interview opened by asking how each participant would describe him- or herself to someone else, what they liked about Mason, and what experiences at Mason had been most important to them. Other questions centered on what the participants believed Mason had offered to help them graduate,
services that they found helpful, activities they participated in, and why participants believed African American and Hispanic students successfully graduated from Mason. These questions were extensions from the methods pilot and supported by research that indicated certain institutional programming could impact retention and college completion of African American and Hispanic students (Carey, 2008; Engle & Theokas, 2010; Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b). Time was provided at the end of the interview for participants to share any pertinent items they believed they did not have an opportunity to share.

**University staff members interview guide.** The interview guide for university staff included 10 questions (Appendix C). The interview opened with two ice breakers: “How long have you been working at Mason?” and “How would you describe your role?” The questions following asked about factors the participants believed contributed to the college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students at Mason. Some of the questions were, “What do you see Mason doing to support the retention and college completion of African American and Hispanic students?” and “What student services do you know of that have been put in place to support retention and college completion of African American and Hispanic students?” Time was provided at the end of the interview for participants to share items that they believed they did not have an opportunity to share.

**Analytic writing in memos for interviews.** Analytic writing was applied to assist in the completion of memos about the interviews conducted. Analytic writing is a technique used to draw connections from reflections and insights (Emerson et al., 1995).
Memos were written to understand what participants shared during interviews. Memo writing is helpful to draw connections between interviews and to better understand the perspective shared by participants and was used in this study. Memo writing was used in Stage Four of data analysis (discussed later in this Chapter) to “form a repository of ideas, which the researcher can then rethink, revise, toss out, organize, and present in varied ways” (p. 1169) to make continued theoretical discoveries (Charmaz, 1990).

**Procedure**

This section describes the data collection techniques applied in this study. This process consisted of obtaining approval from the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB), recruiting participants, and conducting the interviews. Each component of the process will be depicted in the sections next.

**HSRB Approval and Recruitment**

Based on the time needed to complete the pilot study and the new components (updated consent forms), additional time was allocated to collect data. One month was allocated to receive HSRB approval and two months to recruit participants and conduct interviews. Once approval was granted in September 2011, participants were recruited. The interviews took place at a convenient location on one of George Mason University’s Fairfax campuses. Graduating seniors were recruited by pilot study members, through personal connections, or responded to a flyer they saw on Mason’s campus. Flyers were posted around Mason’s Fairfax campus in offices and general areas to solicit participation (Appendix D). Seniors were recruited via email correspondence or, in one case, one participant personally reached out after reading the flyer (Appendix E). University staff
members were recruited through purposeful sampling based on their specific knowledge of institutional efforts, programs, or strategies. University staff were invited to participate in interviews in September 2011 via email correspondence (Appendix F).

Data Collection

Each one-on-one, face-to-face interview took place at one of Mason’s campuses. The participant reviewed the consent forms (Appendix G and H) and any questions were answered. Participants were provided consent forms to keep. Prior to the start of the interview for graduating seniors, these participants completed the demographic questionnaire (previously presented in this Chapter). Interview protocols guided each interview (Appendix B and C). Graduating seniors were asked a total of 13 questions. The questions for graduating seniors sought to understand the experiences of students, what they liked about Mason, what services and activities they had participated in, and why they believed African American and Hispanic students were successfully graduating at such high rates from Mason. University staff members were asked a total of 10 questions. The questions for university staff members sought to learn about programs and initiatives, and what staff members’ believed contributed to college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students. Both groups of participants were asked follow up questions and prompts that emerged from responses. At the end of the interview with the graduating seniors, participants were provided a small stipend for participation and completed a payment form (Appendix I). Interviews were conducted in September and October 2011.
Data Analysis

Guided by the research goals of this study, the purpose was to document graduating seniors’ and university staff members’ perspectives. Based on these perspectives, two cultural models (one for the graduating seniors and one for the university staff members) were developed as an overlay following data analysis concerning what participants in this study perceived to contribute to the high college completion rates among the targeted population. Prior to discussion of the data analysis technique applied, a brief discussion of cultural models is presented, followed by description of the rationale for using the constant comparative analysis (CCA) technique.

Cultural Models

When research is conducted to understand the perspectives of individuals, cultural models can be used to illustrate concepts that emerged from learning about an individual’s (or group of individuals’) perspectives. D’Andrade (1987) defines a cultural model as “a cognitive schema that is intersubjectively shared by a social group” (p. 112). Quinn and Holland (1987) define cultural models as, “presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared...by members of a society and play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behavior in it” (p. 4). These definitions convey how cultural models can display how individuals understand the world and “their behavior in it.” It should be noted that the term ‘culture’ is “not to be defined by ethnicity or geography” (Reybold, 2002, p. 539). In contrast, cultural models “consist of a small number of conceptual objects and their relations to each other” (D’Andrade, 1987, p.112) and represent a “cognitive organization” (Quinn & Holland, 1987, p. 4) of
concepts illustrate “the way human beings think” (Quinn & Holland, 1987, p. 4). Thus, cultural models were used in this study as an overlay following data analysis to illustrate what participants perceived contributed to high college completion rates of the targeted population. The themes included in the two cultural models are presented in Chapter IV.

**Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA)**

Turning to the data analysis technique, constant comparative analysis (CCA) was the data analysis approach selected in this study. CCA is an “analytic approach where all units of data are compared to all other units to raise questions and discover properties and dimensions in the data” (O’Connor et al., 2008, p. 31). The rationale for using the CCA was to identify “variations in the patterns of the data and allows for classification for concept grouping” (O’Connor et al., 2008, p. 31). The CCA was developed in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss and has been elaborated by other researchers. Researchers use the CCA as an analytic process to develop codes, categories, and themes. The benefit of using of the CCA is that it will allow “important analysis dimensions to emerge from patterns found in the cases under study without presupposing in advance what the important dimensions will be” (Patton, 2002, p. 57). Corbin and Strauss (1990) find that such comparisons help to “achieve greater precision” (p. 9). Inductive analysis led to the development of two cultural models. The two cultural models that were developed were an overlay follow data analysis to represent the perspectives of participants in this study. It should be noted that the intention was to develop two cultural models based on the perspectives or “personal theories” described by participants in the current study. The personal theories shared by participants were sought through interview questions to learn
about participants experiences at Mason, the context of Mason, and their perspective on what may have contributed to the high college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students. Personal theories that were described in this study were not intended to create or test out existing formal theories. Formal theories, being those that are used “to guide data analysis of data, to be tested, or to explain data…[or used] to extend, rethink, reconstruct, and refine… theory (Daly, 1997, p. 347), were not sought or explored in the current study. As previously discussed, the goals of this study were to document the perspective of participants and to develop cultural models grounded in these data. Thus, a hybrid version of the CCA analytic approach was applied. This adapted version applied versions of CCA from Glaser (2004), Boeije (2002), and Charmaz (1990). Glaser applied three distinct stages in the analysis: (1) incidents being compared with incidents, (2) concepts being compared with more incidents to generate new theoretical properties of the concepts and more hypotheses, and (3) concepts being compared with concepts. After these three comparisons took place, the development of two cultural models occurred as an overlay following data analysis in the fourth stage.

To arrive at the development of the two cultural models presented later in this Chapter, four stages of analysis were conducted on interview transcript data of participants. The interview transcripts were reviewed through four stages of data analysis through (1) open coding, (2) axial coding, and (3) selective coding. In the fourth stage of data analysis, two cultural models were developed to illustrate the perspectives described by participants. These perspectives were illustrated as themes in the two cultural models that were developed. Once the two cultural models were completed, they were
compared against one another.

**Stage One.** The first stage of analysis consisted in comparing incidents with other incidents. The aim of this stage was to develop conceptual codes and emergent concepts. Open coding was used to summarize the core message of each interview. Open coding is defined as, “line-by-line open coding of the data to identify the substantive codes emergent within the data” (Glaser, 2004, p. 12). Codes were handwritten along the columns of each interview transcript. Guided questions were used in Stage One and included, What is the core message of the interview? How are different fragments related? Is the interview consistent? Are there contradictions? and What do fragments with the identical code have in common? (Boeije, 2002). As a result, concept maps were created that included conceptual labels for each participant. Upon the first stage of analysis, several conceptual codes and emergent concepts were developed for both groups (graduating seniors and university staff members).

**Stage Two.** The emergent categories that emerged in Stage One were further compared in Stage Two. In the second stage of analysis, the emergent conceptual labels developed in the first stage of analysis were grouped together to develop characteristics of the concepts. To conduct this grouping, axial coding was conducted on the relevant transcript data of the emergent concepts from Stage One. Axial coding is defined as “searching for indicators and characteristics for each concept in order to define that concept” (Boeije, 2002, p.398). The aim of this stage was to sharpen the concepts, outline the conditions under which the concepts develop, and look for consequences of the concepts for participants (Charmaz, 1990). During this stage, the comparisons focused on
incidents contained in the transcript data for relevant emergent concepts, the properties of
the emergent concepts were described, and the development of more defined concepts
was started. Guided questions used in Stage Two were, Is Participant A talking about the
same thing as Participant B and so forth? What combinations of concepts occur? What
interpretations exist for this? and What are the similarities and differences between
interviews A, B, C, and so forth? (Boeije, 2002). The result of this stage of analysis was
concepts with thick descriptions.

Some of Charmaz’s (1990) techniques were used in this stage as well as memo
writing. Charmaz compares respondent’s responses in interviews to examine issues
systematically. The purpose of this kind of examination yields thick description and
analytic insight (Charmaz, 1990). The researcher looked across participants’ thoughts to
expand code words until all relevant labels were captured and described (Charmaz,
1990). Memo writing was used to elaborate on insights and ideas. In the beginning of
data analysis, initial memos were written on “a series of discrete phenomena, topics, or
categories” (Emerson et al., p. 143). As a clearer sense of the ideas or labels began to
emerge, memos became more focused (Emerson et al., 1995). Charmaz uses memo-
writing as “an analytic handle on the materials and a means of struggling with
discovering and defining hidden or taken-for-granted processes and assumptions within
the data” (p. 1169). Memo writing was helpful in determining which concepts may be
able to be grouped together. For example, one concept was “Career connection” and
another concept was “Student organizations.” Upon axial coding on relevant transcript
data of these two concepts and memo writing about the possible connections between the
two, it was determined that students described how they chose to be involved on campus in both instances. Thus, the concepts embedded in “career connection” and “student organizations” were grouped together in Stage Two and further analyzed in Stage Three. In Stage Three, these two concepts became an organizing concept titled, “Student Involvement.”

**Stage Three.** During this stage, the characteristics of the concepts developed in Stage Two were unified around organizing concepts. The purpose of creating these organizing concepts was to develop the “main analytic idea” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 14) of the concepts that emerged from Stage Two. Thus, during this stage the transcript data of the characteristics of the themes that emerged in Stage Two were further compared through selective coding. Selective coding was used to determine themes, which can be described as coding “variables that relate to the core variable in sufficiently significant ways” (Glaser, 2004, p. 14). By this end of this stage of analysis, it was determined which data were relevant to the emergent conceptual framework (Glaser, 2004) that was later developed in Stage Four. For example, the external factors described by participants went beyond the scope of the study and were not included as a theme because these external factors were not directly tied to the research questions that guided this study. This stage of analysis resulted in themes shared by both groups of participants.

**Stage Four.** During this stage, the cultural models described by participants were illustrated in two cultural models. The aim of this stage was to successfully connect the perspectives described by participants. Cultural models were used as an overlay following data analysis. Memo-writing was used in this stage to further discover elements
of the perspectives described by participants. Charmaz (1990) used the memo-writing in similar stages of analysis to “form a repository of ideas, which the researcher can then rethink, revise, toss out, organize, and present in varied ways” (p. 1169) to make continued theoretical discoveries (Charmaz, 1990). The outcome of Stage Four was two cultural models that were reflective of the perspectives of each participant group in the current study.

Comparison of the two Cultural Models. When the time came to compare the graduating seniors and university staff members’ cultural model against one another, guided questions were used. These questions helped yield some of the similarities, differences, and nuances between the two cultural models. These questions included: (a) What do group one (graduating seniors) and group two (university staff) say about certain labels? (b) Which labels appear in one group but not another? (c) Why do both groups view issues similarly or differently? and (d) What nuances and additional detail or new information do members of group one and group two share? (Boeije, 2002). Memos were also composed to answer the following questions: (a) How did participants relate to the dimensions of the cultural model? (b) Which participants related to the dimensions of the cultural model? (c) Did participants with relationships similar to the dimension of the cultural model(s) share commonalities? What where those commonalities? These questions assisted to compare the two cultural models.

Selection of exemplars. Guided by the questions discussed in the previous section and written memos, exemplars were identified in each participant group. Exemplars were selected “because they stood out” (Fraas & Calvert, 2009, p.319) and “serve[d] as expert
accounts” (p.319). Four participants stood out as exemplars of the labels embodied in the two cultural models. They stood out because each of the participants selected as an exemplar because they had a relationship with each of the labels that emerged and were presented in the cultural model for each group. Quotes from each of the four participants are used to highlight the labels (Fraas & Calvert, 2009) and are presented in Part A of the “Final findings” section in Chapter IV.

**Techniques that Aided in CCA.** Various aids were used in this study to assist in the application of the analytic techniques. These aids included memo-writing, close reading and re-reading with use of highlighting (Saldaña, 2009), and data displays (Glesne, 2006). As previously discussed, memos were written to: (a) understand what participants shared in the interviews, (b) draw connections between interviews, (c) continually revise the cultural models that were created throughout the data analysis process, and (d) to make continual discoveries (Charmaz, 1990). Techniques were applied prior to open coding on the interview transcripts. Drawing on the data analysis techniques of Saldaña (2009), during the researcher’s first reading of an interview transcript, highlighting was used to draw attention to words and phrases that appeared to be important. These techniques aided in the familiarization of data collected and analyzed.

Another technique that was used was the creation of data displays (Glesne, 2006). According to Glesne (2006), data displays help “to identify the elements” (p.156) and “see the overall patterns” (p.156) in a study. Data displays were used to put emergent labels from the open coding on interview transcripts for each participant. These data
displays were helpful for looking across participants in each participant group to
determine emergent categories. The data displays were also helpful in exploring possible
labels that could be included in the cultural models throughout the data analysis process.
The data displays became more detailed as labels in each group of participants became
more developed. Each of these techniques helped the researcher throughout data analysis.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, techniques are applied to enhance a researcher’s ability to
demonstrate rigor and reliability of the methods and findings to audiences that consume
knowledge gained from a study. Triangulation is used to reduce the likelihood of
misinterpretation (Stake, 2000). Stake (2000) defines triangulation as a “process of using
multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or
interpretation” (p. 443). Triangulation “serves also to clarify meaning by identifying
different ways the phenomenon is being seen” (Stake, p. 444). This definition was
applied in analyst triangulation to provide rigor and reliability in this study.

Analyst Triangulation

Analyst triangulation refers to the use of additional analysts to review findings.
Analyst triangulation is not used to reach consensus, but rather to provide opportunities
for a researcher to hear how other analysts make meaning and interpret data. Member
checks were incorporated with fellow colleagues in the doctoral program in the Graduate
School of Education at Mason. Five doctoral students met in November 2011 to discuss
the data analysis methods. The member checks occurred over two days where those
colleagues offered feedback on the definitions of emergent conceptual labels and
descriptors of those labels, and provided recommendations to the researcher. The member checks were helpful to complete data analysis. More specifically, analyst triangulation provided opportunities to obtain feedback from colleagues about the data analysis process and “talk through” the researcher’s thinking; this was an invaluable strategy to gain feedback and draw connections.

**Benefits of Triangulation**

Triangulation was used for internal trustworthiness and reliability purposes. Cho and Trent (2006) argue that triangulating is a good way to “bolster accuracy and reliability” (Cho & Trent, p. 322). Triangulation was used to deepen analytic insights and successfully apply the techniques and procedures required of the CCA. Triangulation through multiple data sources allows for each of the data sources to “permeate[d]… understanding and interpretations” (Holloway et. al, 2010, p.8). According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), the use of member checks “open up one’s analysis to the scrutiny of others” and can help “guard against bias” (Corbin and Strauss, 1990, p. 11). Analyst triangulation provided opportunities to obtain feedback from colleagues about the data analysis process and “talk through” my thinking, which was described earlier, as an invaluable strategy to gain feedback and draw connections. It should be noted that this form of triangulation can be helpful, however presents limitations. Triangulation as a method infers a set of assumptions, which cannot be ignored (Denzin, 2010). In critiquing the analyst triangulation method for the current study, a few limitations should be noted. First, colleagues invited to participate in the member checks brought their own way of knowing and assumptions. Some of these assumptions and “personal theories” may have
guided how they constructed meaning from what was being articulated as far as data collection and analytic techniques. There were also time constraints under which the member checks took place. Some participants might not have had an opportunity to share personal observations of data collection and analytic techniques. Further, member check participants may not have been comfortable sharing personal reflections in that type of environment.

**Boundaries**

There were boundaries in this study. The term boundary refers to the parameters of a study. The boundaries are discussed here to inform the reader how to evaluate the quality of the current study. Limitations, however, are generally associated with the trustworthiness of a study and are discussed in Chapter V. One boundary was the population-specific nature of the study. Because the focus was narrowed to a group of participants, participants may not reflect the entire group’s perspective or experiences at Mason. Another boundary was that the participants who completed the demographic questionnaire provided self-reported information. Data collection that requires self-reported data are often unreliable (Sappington et al., 2002; Moore, 2004).

**Importance**

The research on institutional case studies has lacked rigor and the majority of reports represent the perspective of a handful of educational researchers who work for national education advocacy organizations (Carey, 2008; Engle & Theokas, 2010; Ensign, 2010; Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b). As previously discussed in this Chapter, Mason was selected as a setting for this case study because it is an example of a highly
successful case (Merriam, 2002). Flyvberg (2006) argues that case study “produces the type of context-dependent knowledge...[that] shows to be necessary to allow people to develop from” (p. 221). Case study research can focus attention on the context of cases rather than theory (Ruddin, 2006). Mason was considered as an example of a highly successful case due to evidence of high six-year college completion rates of first-time, full-time African American and Hispanic students. Thus, grounded in assertions offered by Flyvberg (2006) and Ruddin (2006), it was determined that findings from the current study, which were based on the perspectives of individuals who were familiar with the context of Mason, may be generalizable to other public four-year IHEs with evidence of high six-year college completion rates of the targeted population. Reybold et al. (2009) writes about the importance of Creswell’s “process approach” (p. 9), where “researchers should outline their selection choices so that readers may know to which populations the results can be generalized” (p. 7). Reybold et al. (2009) add, “Even case studies can be generalized to larger theories and findings from small samples can offer case-to-case transferability where ideas or strategies that emerge in data inspire the reader to think and act in new ways” (p. 11). For generalizability purposes, selection criterion has been well documented and, through this transparency, we can anticipate that the findings from this study could be generalized to similar groups of four-year, public institutions of higher education that measure six-year graduation rates among first-time, full-time African American and Hispanic students.
CHAPTER IV

Chapter III outlined the methods used to collect and analyze data to answer the research questions. The two research questions that guided this study were: (1) From the perspective of graduating seniors from African American and Hispanic backgrounds, what is George Mason University (Mason) doing to support students from those ethnic backgrounds toward college completion at Mason? (2) From the perspective of university staff members, what is George Mason University (Mason) doing to support African American and Hispanic students toward college completion at Mason? The analytic techniques described in Chapter III were applied to answer these two research questions and the results are presented in this Chapter.

Findings

This section focuses on three goals. First, the two cultural models resulting from the application of the constant comparative analysis (CCA) are introduced. Second, themes included in the two cultural models are expanded upon, beginning with those encompassing graduating seniors and followed by the themes of the university staff members. Each theme is introduced and quotes are included to further explain the themes. For the third goal, both models are compared and four exemplars are encompassed to highlight similarities and differences between the two models.
Cultural Models

Cultural Models Introduction

For the research questions of interest in this study, this CCA revealed two cultural models, the graduating seniors’ cultural model and the university staff members’ cultural model. From each of these models, separate themes emerged. These two models are presented in the following sections.

Graduating seniors’ Cultural Model

Four stages of CCA resulted in the development of four themes. These themes represented graduating seniors’ perspectives on what may have contributed to the high college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students at Mason. The four themes are as follows: (1) how graduating seniors chose to describe Mason’s campus environment, (2) how graduating seniors described Mason’s campus personnel, (3) how graduating seniors chose to describe campus resources, and (4) how graduating seniors chose to be involved on Mason’s campus. These themes are further illustrated in the graduating seniors’ cultural model (Figure 10).
Figure 10. Graduating seniors’ Cultural Model.
Note. This is a visual representation of what graduating seniors perceived to contribute to collegiate success among African American and Hispanic students. This cultural model was developed as an overlay after data analysis across and within the transcript data of seven interviews with graduating seniors at Mason. Copyright pending by A.K. Scruggs.

University staff members’ Cultural Model

Application of the CCA technique resulted in six themes surrounding the university staff members’ perceived contribution to the high college completion rates of the targeted population. These six themes were (1) how university staff members
described Mason’s campus environment, (2) how university staff members chose to describe campus offices, (3) how university staff members depicted campus personnel, (4) how university staff members described campus resources, (5) how university staff members described retention strategies, and (6) how university staff members described student involvement. The six themes are presented in Figure 11.
Cultural models summary

This section presented the two cultural models that resulted from four stages of CCA on interview transcript data. The following section will present description of each theme. An introduction of each theme is presented first, followed by quotes from the participants from each group.

Themes

Themes in the Graduating Seniors’ Cultural Model

Six themes were developed upon application of four stages of CCM analysis of graduating seniors’ transcript data. These themes were: (1) how graduating seniors chose to describe Mason’s campus environment, (2) how graduating seniors described Mason’s campus personnel, (3) how graduating seniors chose to describe campus resources, and (4) how graduating seniors chose to be involved on Mason’s campus. Description of each theme is presented, followed by quotes of the graduating seniors.

How graduating seniors chose to describe Mason’s campus environment.

This theme represented how students chose to describe Mason’s campus environment. Graduating seniors reported that the campus environment was diverse in terms of the campus body and staff, had a good location, relatable peers, enjoyable campus activities, and was safe. Each one of these descriptors contributed to graduating
seniors being comfortable on Mason’s campus.

Graduating seniors described seeing diverse peers, professors, and staff on campus. The additionally discussed multiple opportunities to attend events on campus. The location of Mason’s campus to public transportation (e.g., Metro) was perceived as a benefit for students due to the feasibility of experiential learning opportunities, internships, and the ability to establish connections for future employment opportunities. Students observed that their fellow peers applaud successes, share common goals, and create paths toward success. For example, students described how members of the African American community self-organized study groups. Campus events appeared to serve as a mechanism to bring people together in a positive and inclusive way. Students attended events offered through Student Involvement, Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), Housing and Residence Life, and Office of Diversity Programs and Services (ODPS). Conversations with participants revealed that events were well attended and enjoyed among the student body. These events were described as “enriching,” “exciting,” “fun,” “inclusive,” and “open,” and additionally offered opportunities to “intermingle” with peers and meet new people. In summary, the outcome of this type of environment—one that is diverse, offered events that students could connect with, centrally located in close proximity to several businesses, and a place where students can engage with others possessing similar goals as themselves—contributed to a feeling of collective comfort. As a result of these campus attributes, students appreciated the campus environment.

Students shared perspectives about their personal benefits from the campus
When asked why one participant believed African American and Hispanic students were graduating at high rates from Mason, Graduating Senior A responded, “It’s probably from the type of environment that Mason creates. It’s…so culturally diverse that students may feel really comfortable coming here and actually staying here.” Graduating Senior A commented, “The staff is diverse…I’ve seen a lot of different cultures standing in front of classrooms and I appreciate it.” This perspective was confirmed by Graduating Senior G, who commented, “That’s what I appreciate most…the opportunity to sit down and get to know somebody else’s culture.”

Graduating seniors expressed that the location of Mason was a great advantage. Graduating Senior G commented,

Mason’s close to DC, the opportunity was there…There’s such a connection between organizations and companies in DC to Mason it’s not as hard to…go to Vienna and catch the Metro and go out to your internship. Kind of like what I did last summer…I took advantage of that.

Graduating B confirmed this perspective and added, “We’re so close to so many businesses and corporations here…They hand out contacts and these contact people help me out so much…Hopefully if everything goes well, I’ll be able to find a contact for post-graduation.” As such, students took full advantage of the proximity of Mason to local businesses and corporations for internships.

Students also shared thoughts on their ability to find relatable peers at Mason. Graduating Senior B commented, “There’s a lot more people that I can relate to here.”
Students shared about what attributes of their peers they found relatable. Graduating Senior F commented, “everyone here is very driven…everyone wants to be successful…they all have these huge amazing dreams and they’re taking…the necessary steps to get there.” Graduating Senior C commented, “We’re all here for our education…It’s encouraging to see…You applaud those who are doing great work.” This perspective was confirmed by Graduating Seniors B, D, and G. Students also observed “unity” found in certain cultural/ethnic-based communities. Graduating D commented, “We’re a very small community on the campus, but we’re a very united group.”

Students also enjoyed the opportunity to attend events offered by various offices and student organizations. Graduating Senior A commented, “I feel like something’s going on at least every other day.” Graduating Senior B commented,

[Hispanic Heritage Month] That’s something that might seem small to…a student that’s kind of used to it, but…coming into that freshman year and continuing that is [what] just makes me want to come back to school and keeps me interested in the topics.

These events, according to students, were open to the entire campus and offered opportunities to “intermingle” with peers and “sit with someone different.” One participant described the safety of the campus and said, “I feel very safe…I have never ever had a problem here and I really value that.”

This theme presented how graduating seniors described the campus environment. Students noted perceived advantages from the campus diversity and location, as well as exposure to relatable peers, enjoyable campus activities, and a feeling of comfort that
resulted from the safety of the campus. Each of these components contributed to the theme of how graduating seniors described the campus environment.

**How graduating seniors described campus personnel.** This theme represented how students chose to describe personnel on Mason’s campus. Graduating seniors described the campus personnel as supporting them toward college completion. Findings indicated that students felt supported by: adjunct faculty, Office of Diversity Programs and Services (ODPS) faculty, professors, staff, and teaching assistants (TAs). It should be noted that students described the staff from ODPS as “faculty.” Students perceived that they could access help and gain support toward various endeavors at Mason from these campus personnel. Students described these campus personnel as accessible, aware, committed to student success, helpful, invested, knowledgeable, receptive, and supportive. Adjunct faculty were perceived to be helpful in organizing internship placements, and TAs for obtaining learning material from class. Participants described professors as receptive, committed, and knowledgeable. Several students did not perceive academic advisors as having these attributes, due to their limited guidance and primary form of contact via mass emails. Participants also chose to discuss the primary locations of positive interactions with faculty and staff. The locations included the Office of Diversity Programs and Services (ODPS) and New Century College as examples.

Students shared that the campus personnel contributed to an enjoyable experience at Mason which contributed to their desire to stay year-after-year toward graduation. When asked what Mason may be doing to support the college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students, Graduating Senior C said, “The people working
here…made it not [only] possible, they made it, the experience, so enriching that you
couldn’t help but to stay and continue.” Professors were also mentioned as a group of
personnel that were supportive from the perspective of graduating seniors. Graduating
Senior F commented, “[Professors] They really want you to succeed. They…put all their
time and energy and go above and beyond to really see that you succeed.” This
perspective was confirmed by Graduating Senior D, who added, “They’ll give you the
skills and direct you to the people that can help you get up those weak spots…I love how
they use the resources within the school.” Graduating seniors appeared to enjoy having
access to faculty and staff who were committed to their success. Another observation was
that students appeared to understand they needed to reach out for help in a college
environment. Students reported that, when the students reached out to faculty and staff
for support, those personnel were receptive and offered support. This type of receptivity
was observed with regard to adjunct faculty, staff from various offices on campus,
professors, and teaching assistants. Students perceived the staff support rendered to be
authentic and genuine.

As previously discussed, there were mixed feelings about interactions and level of
support received from advisors. Only one participant said an advisor helped to set a
schedule “well enough.” Negative relationships were described as, “she really didn’t give
me any guidance…she didn’t try to get to know me.” This perspective was confirmed by
Graduating Senior G, who added, “They send a mass email and it’s…open-door
policy…I just didn’t feel comfortable going in there.” In summary, students perceived
that adjunct faculty, faculty, professors, staff, and teaching assistants were supportive and
contributed to students’ desire to return to Mason each year.

**How graduating seniors chose to describe campus resources.** This theme represented how students described campus resources available at Mason. Graduating seniors described places they went to for support, some programs that helped them, and leadership opportunities they had on campus. The students cited a combination of campus offices and centers they went to for support. The reason students went to these offices and centers was generally to receive support from staff in these offices, but there were also examples of more tangible purposes, including free printing and general information. The offices and centers most commonly referenced included: Career Services, Office of Diversity Programs and Services (ODPS), Student Involvement, and the Writing Center. Career Services was mentioned by several participants in terms of the helpful staff, the workshops offered, and the *HireMason* website. ODPS was described as the “home for the multicultural organizations,” a place that offered free printing, and a site where students could “hang out.” The Office of Student Involvement was portrayed as an office that was supportive to organizations, provided funding, and was open to the development of new organizations. The Writing Center, which is run through the English Department in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, was referenced by several participants as being a useful campus resource. Participants shared that the staff were helpful, nice, and provided useful information in the form of strategies and tips. Students did not appear to conceptualize campus resources in terms of how offices performed certain functions, but rather how they personally consumed information, gained skills, and received support.
The programs that were portrayed by students as being helpful with both the transition into and throughout their educational career at Mason included the Early Identification Program (EIP), the Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP), and courses offered by the Transition Resource Center. One participant cited one of the benefits of their participation in EIP and STEP was the opportunity to become familiar with Mason’s campus and learn about the campus resources offered. Several participants mentioned taking one or more of the courses (University 100 through 300) offered through the Transition Resource Center which helped to learn about the resources offered at Mason, select a major, and gain leadership skills.

In terms of positions offered, students assumed leadership roles in the following offices: Admissions, Housing and Residence Life, Judicial Affairs, ODPS, Office of Orientation and Family Programs and Services (OFPS), and Student Involvement. Students were leaders in roles such as Mason Ambassadors, Program Board employees, board members, mentors, Patriot Leaders, and RAs. Students were involved in the planning for campus events such as Hispanic Heritage Month and Orientation. Graduating seniors in this study reported enjoying planning these events. Hispanic Heritage Month offered a month-long series of events planned by university staff and students, to celebrate Hispanic culture and offered many opportunities to acquaint new students to the university. Another event that students assisted in the planning of was Orientation. Graduating seniors in the study depicted how the Office of Orientation and Family Programs and Services (OFPS) staff would work alongside student Patriot Leaders to design Orientation. Students who were involved in the planning of Orientation
as Patriot Leaders enjoyed the opportunity to plan the events with peers over the summer. Students recognized the long hours required to plan Orientation, but also referenced making new friends and developing a strong bond with other Patriot Leaders in that process. Students were responsible for designing activities and skits that new students would observe. The former Patriot Leaders who were interviewed in this study felt that being a Patriot Leader made them want to come back a following year. The same participants shared that they loved working with new students and gained many valuable skills when they were responsible for planning these events. An observable outcome was, when students were offered such leadership roles, they appeared to develop a strong affiliation toward Mason and sought to return, for the next academic year. Thus, these positive experiences were transformed into leadership positions which allowed these students to engage current and new students. As a direct result of these leadership roles, students gained many new skills, such as how to plan an event and work well with other students and adults.

Students described the places they went to for support, programs that helped them, and leadership opportunities they had on campus. Graduating seniors depicted campus resources as the transition courses they took (University 100-300), programs they participated in (Early Identification Program and Student Transition Empowerment Program), and places where they went to gain support (e.g., Career Services or Office of Diversity Programs and Services). Students perceived campus resources in terms of how their basic needs could be met and appeared to benefit from available university resources. Students described going to Career Services, Student Involvement, the Writing
Center, and taking the University 100-300 courses. The students appeared to conceptualize campus resources as a means to gain immediate assistance to: (a) solve an issue, (b) master class material, and (c) achieve a better understanding of what campus resources were available. It appeared graduating seniors thought of campus resources in terms of *What can the institution do to help me right now with a certain issue* or *How can the institution help me with something that will be taking place in the very near future?* and *How did receiving that support or help make me feel?* These needs were met when students accessed the resources mentioned. In addition to sharing about the places they went to for support, students spent just as much time with description of how they felt as a result of getting this support from the campus personnel who offered the services. Students described why they found campus personnel helpful and why they continued to access these resources. For example, regarding the references to places students went to for support, when asked what has contributed to African American and Hispanic students’ college completion rates, Graduating Senior C Commented, “With ODPS…they do so much for different organizations…they take care of many different aspects of different things…They all share information with one another. I…think the connection with that… office is what helps…the most.” Students also mentioned the Office of Student Involvement and the Writing Center as locations for support. One student referenced the Office of Student Involvement and commented,

[Office of Student Involvement] They’re very supportive of…all…organizations …They’re always welcome to new organizations coming and…that’s really great…for them to fund it is just amazing to me…that’s one of the
greatest things that they’ve done for the students.

This particular office oversees 250+ student organizations, as well as funds eligible student organizations. Graduating Senior D confirmed this perspective, and added,

The opportunity to have money to put on events for the community…pretty much at free will to do whatever you wanted and they didn’t try and limit student organizations. They want those programs to happen…Mason has done an excellent job of…giving us the free will to touch our community and touch not only the Black community but the Mason community.

Graduating Senior E confirmed both of these perspectives, but added, “If it wasn’t for those services I probably wouldn’t be as well rounded as a student I am as in being in all those organizations without [Student Involvement] that office being there.” Another office that was referenced was the Writing Center. Graduating Senior A commented, “[Writing Center staff] They actually go through your work with you and…give you…improvement and tips, hints instead of just proofreading for you and sending you on your way.” This perspective was confirmed by Graduating Seniors D and F.

Graduating seniors also shared perspectives about some of the programs in place at Mason that helped them. Graduating Senior E commented, “I took University 100, 200, and 300…it really helped me as a person.” Graduating Senior E commented that the University 100 course offered opportunities to do “group work…teambuilding activities…we learned different things about Mason” and that the University 200 course “help[ed] me kind of generate what exactly I should be majoring in.”

Students reported many opportunities to gain leadership experience on campus in
various leadership positions. Graduating Senior E commented, “I liked it [being a Patriot Leader] so much I wanted to come back another year…it was a great experience.” When asked to describe some of the skills learned from one of these positions, Graduating Senior F commented, “Learning how to plan an event…communicate with people…Everything I’ve done so far has given me something to use in the future.” These student leadership roles were meaningful experiences to students and they wanted to likewise share those positive experiences with other students.

Students assumed roles in various campus offices as Patriot Leaders, Mason Ambassadors, and similar roles because these opportunities sounded fun and they wanted to be able to interact with other students. As a result, they developed a strong affiliation toward Mason and cultivated a desire to continue attending Mason, year-after-year. In summary, the description of campus resources by the graduating seniors included places they went to for support, programs that helped them, and leadership opportunities provided through various offices on campus. The places they went to for support included both offices and centers. Students enjoyed the opportunity to be participants in programs and courses that provided information about resources at Mason. Finally, students assumed leadership roles where they were the architects of campus activities and events that infused positive energy and excitement into the broader campus community. In turn, these student leaders gained skills that they believe will help them develop as leaders beyond Mason. These leadership roles assumed by students served to put many individuals at an advantage—the campus body, incoming and current students, and the graduating seniors—because each group was able to participate in these activities and
thus, benefitted both the consumers and producers of such activities.

**How graduating seniors chose to be involved on Mason’s campus.** This final theme represented how students chose to be involved on Mason’s campus. Graduating seniors described being involved in student organizations, gained practical experience in experiential learning opportunities including internship placements and on-campus jobs, and served as mentors. Students appreciated the variety of opportunities to become involved at Mason and benefited from such involvement. Student organizations that participants of this study were involved in were common interest, ethnic-based, Greek, and recreational. Students described how they learned from the leaders of such organizations. These participants elected to share that student leaders modeled for them how to both lead and be successful at Mason.

Involvement in these organizations also offered opportunities for students to organize and participate in events where they would be surrounded by “like-minded individuals.” Students referenced joining organizations: to be with students of a similar interest, use time constructively, to be commensurate with long-term career goals, as a mechanism to develop a broader network outside of Mason, and as a way to meet friends. Participants attributed their successful involvement to the ease of joining an organization, good timing, interest, “it sounded fun,” and the abundant variety of organizations available on campus. Students also sought to be involved in ways that could help people, especially with respect to active participation in an ethnic-based community. The ethnic-based organizations referenced were: African Student Association (ASA), Black Student Alliance (BSA), Caribbean Student Association (CSA), George Mason University
Collegiate Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Hispanic Student Alliance (HSA). Several participants were involved in Greek life, a community that included one co-ed fraternity, three fraternities, and one sorority. As a result of such involvement, students reported making new friends, organized meaningful events, and gained access to networks of people beyond the walls of Mason.

Students were also involved in many career opportunities on campus. Students referenced face-to-face interactions with Mason alumni, representatives from Fortune 500 companies, and guest speakers. These face-to-face interactions appeared to serve as motivators to the students as well as provide an opportunity to build a network. Students also mentioned opportunities to participate in practical experiences outside of the classroom. Students gained experiences through experiential learning opportunities, internships, and on-campus jobs. It appeared that participants valued exposure to these types of experiences and felt better prepared for roles in full-time settings upon graduation. Finally, students also served as mentors to new students. The Black Student Alliance runs the AKOMA Circle mentoring program and ODPS helps run the Aguilas and Mariposas mentoring programs. Students appeared to enjoy the experience of being mentors.

When participants described involvement in the cultural/ethnic-based groups, students focused on the advantages of being members, which included skills learned in leadership roles, family and network created, faculty support, and observation of effective leadership among upperclassmen. This was evident when Graduating Senior C
Graduating Senior C commented, “I got second-hand leadership and it brought us up to a different level…when you’re surrounded by people of a higher caliber you bring yourself up and go on that same level…That really motivated me to continue on that path and…I learned the ins and outs…and…was able to kind of navigate for myself.

It appeared from this statement Graduating Senior C was positively affected by the leaders of the Hispanic Student Association and was motivated to “continue on that path.”

Students also reported opportunities to hear from and meet with Mason alumni. Graduating Senior F commented, “They bring back…Black alumni who have made it in a sense…and who have done well after getting their degree.” This perspective was confirmed by Graduating Senior G, who commented, “You see one of them make it and you’re not too far off,” and went on to say, “I can make it too.” Outside of alumni who visited Mason, participants referred to guest speakers and representatives from Fortune 500 companies. Graduating Senior E commented, “Students get a hands-on experience on campus…I don’t know of any other university that really has those opportunities on their campus.”

Students also participated in various internships to gain real-life experience. Graduating Senior E commented, “The best part about Mason has been my internship.” A different participant felt excited about postgraduation opportunities as the result of an internship. Graduating Senior F commented, “I’m really excited for the next steps…I’ve done a lot of practicing subjects…now I just want to see and be in the atmosphere where
I can do it full-time.” Graduating Senior B commented, “I just got to work with a lot of
different offices and a lot of different people…network…they all just prepared me.” As a
result of all of this involvement in each of these activities, students gained lifelong skills
and felt prepared for postsecondary success after Mason.

Students shared their perspectives about being mentors to new students. In this
role, mentors provide information, invite mentees to hang out, and make an effort to get
to know mentees. Graduating Senior G commented, “I’m constantly throwing
information at [student name].” One participant described that the relationship was hard
at first but got a bit easier over time. Graduating Senior E commented,

It’s been hard because a lot…of freshmen come in…kind of buck wild…You try
to just tell them or give them a head’s up about how it’s going to be here. So it
was kind of hard at first, but after you make those connections with them and you
start talking more…I probably wouldn’t have hung out with you [mentee] before,
but…this organization brought us together and it’s a good friendship.

A few participants were also mentors with the Aguilas and Mariposas mentoring
program. Graduating Senior B commented, “One of the projects I feel like is kind of like
one of my babies in a way is a mentoring program here on campus called the Aguilas
Mentoring Program.” Graduating Senior B commented, “It’s steered towards Latino guys
here on campus…to build an academic and social network between upperclassmen,
underclassmen and alumni and…Ever since my sophomore year is just something I’ve
held a passion for.” Mentoring programs appeared to be an important aspect of several
participants’ experiences at Mason. In summary, students were involved in various
organizations, experiential learning opportunities, and as mentors on Mason’s campus. All seven of the graduating seniors reported being involved in student organizations, and four of the seven graduating seniors participated in experiential learning opportunities and as being mentors on Mason’s campus. This final theme of the cultural model represented how graduating seniors’ described how they were involved on campus.

Summary of the graduating seniors’ cultural model. There were four themes that emerged upon analysis of the graduating seniors’ interview transcripts: (1) how graduating seniors chose to describe Mason’s campus environment, (2) how graduating seniors described Mason’s campus personnel, (3) how graduating seniors chose to describe campus resources, and (4) how graduating seniors chose to be involved on Mason’s campus. Each of these themes was related to one another in that they each depicted factors that graduating seniors perceived to impact their ability to graduate from Mason. The following sections will describe the themes evident in the university staff members’ cultural model.

Themes in the University Staff Members’ Cultural Model

Six themes were developed upon application of four stages of CCA of university staff members’ transcript data. These themes were: (1) how university staff members described Mason’s campus environment, (2) how university staff members chose to describe campus offices, (3) how university staff members depicted campus personnel, (4) how university staff members described campus resources, (5) how university staff members described retention strategies, and (6) how university staff members described students’ involvement on campus. Description of each theme is presented followed by
pertinent quotes from the university staff members.

**How university staff members described Mason’s campus environment.** This theme represented how the university staff members described Mason’s campus environment. University staff members’ reported that the campus environment was diverse, incorporated student spaces, offered events, benefited from a great location, and that students could create a sense of community in this type of environment. Each of these descriptors contributed to university staff members’ perception of the campus environment.

Many university staff members described the different cultures represented at Mason. Participants depicted how the exposure to diversity may be helpful to students upon graduation because employers seek candidates with experience in diverse environments. Another participant shared that part of being comfortable at Mason is attributed to its diversity. Many participants discussed the student spaces on campus. University staff members perceived the JC to be a venue where students create a “sense of community.” Other spaces included programmatic offices such as Office of Diversity Programs and Services (ODPS) or the Early Identification Program, and Student Union Building I (SUB I). University staff members perceived that these spaces offered for students to hang out, complete homework, study, and relax.

Several university staff members provided descriptions of events (Greek Step contests, Hispanic Heritage Month, etc.) that they perceived to contribute to an inclusive and positive campus environment. University Staff members discussed these events as illustrative of “historical culture” and “dance” and “food that…you grew up with” to
contribute to the creation of an inclusive campus environment. The location of the
campus was mentioned in terms of the public schools that surround the campus, the
diversity in the Northern Virginia area, and the regional opportunities. University staff
members described the sense of community that students could build in both cultural/
ethnic-based communities as well as heterogeneous settings. Staff members believed
optional opportunities to build networks as an advantage toward being able to
“expand beyond their community.” The networks, in turn, helped students become well-
rounded and want to remain enrolled at Mason.

University staff members’ shared perspectives about the environment being
diverse, as well as where student spaces were available, events being offered, as a
campus the benefits from a great location, and a place where students are able to create a
sense of community. One participant mentioned that there are “130 countries
represented” on campus. One participant discussed how campus diversity plans were
created to focus on “historically underrepresented groups” and the manner in which
different academic units “[could] make their environment more welcoming.” Student
spaces on campus, according to University Staff Member D, “give them [students] a
sense of belonging” and a feeling that “the university cares.” This perspective was
confirmed by University Staff Members A and F. The events that were offered included
“academic with cultural components” which accommodated “the development levels
[of]…students,” and were “fun.” This created “a winning combination.” This perspective
was echoed by University Staff Member C who commented, “They’re staying because
they enjoy campus…the activities…the events.” The events appeared to bring students
together, generate a lot of positive energy, and provided an opportunity to say, “Hello, you’re here, we’re here and you belong here.”

Description of the location was evident when University Staff Member D commented, “A lot of the students can see that this is the next step in the process,” referring to the proximity to internships, jobs, and Networking opportunities. When participants described the sense of community that students can build at Mason, University Staff Member G commented, “It’s that connection to community…I don’t know if it’s necessarily a strategy, but they’re finding people like themselves…and seeing others be successful.” This same participant went on to comment, “Then they’re not just in a group that is all African American…They’re…Patriot Leaders or…RAs…finding other opportunities to interact with those that are like themselves…stretch those boundaries.” In summary, university staff members focused the discussion on the attributes of the campus environment which were described in terms of the diversity of the campus body, the student spaces, the events that were offered, the location, and the sense of community that was built among students.

How university staff members chose to describe campus offices. This theme depicted how university staff members described the campus offices. Offices that were mentioned included Academic Advising, Leadership Education and Development (LEAD), Learning Services, Office of Diversity Programs and Services (ODPS), Office of Orientation and Family Programs and Services (OFPS), Student Involvement, and Housing and Resident Life. Participants most commonly cited the functions performed by staff members in the ODPS and OFPS offices. It appeared, from the perspective of
university staff members, that initiatives were taken in these offices to provide students with information, resources, and create a campus climate that is supportive of student needs. This support was apparent in academic outreach efforts, funding for student organizations, the incorporation of peer-to-peer interactions throughout Orientation, and the manner in which these available campus resources are advertised to the student population. For example, participants discussed ODPS’ consistent communication with students, their outreach, and the interactions of staff and students. Another example was when one participant focused on how the Office of Academic Advising and Learning Services helped students plan academic programs and offer workshops.

Outreach in ODPS was depicted as a process that was composed of the following steps: receipt of an academic appraisal received from the Registrar’s office; identification of “students who aren’t doing as well”; outreach to “let them know what kind of services are available on campus”; and the message that “if there’s any way [ODPS] can be helpful or at least can connect with another service on campus that can help them,” assistance would be given. One university staff member had the perspective that the Office of Academic Advising helped students, especially from African American and Hispanic backgrounds, “in terms of planning their academic program, making sure that their on target to graduate.” The Learning Services Office was mentioned due to the function of “providing not only counseling but…workshops…to keep them motivated.” One university staff member mentioned the Leadership Education and Development (LEAD) Offices as “one of those venues where students can go and learn…how to become more effective leaders and…explore themselves.” Only one staff member
referenced the Office of Student Involvement because “they give a ton of money” to student organizations “that broaden the horizons of the whole campus.” In summary, university staff members appeared to focus on the functionality of various offices on campus that help students be successful at Mason.

How university staff members depicted campus personnel. This theme represented how university staff members described themselves, colleagues, and other campus personnel at Mason. Participants chose to describe personnel and observations of colleagues’ approaches to work with students. University staff members described campus personnel as collaborative, cooperative, and effective; as having the ability to connect with students; and as understanding of the needs of these students. Participants referenced high levels of collaboration and cooperation among offices such as calling one another for help, providing resources to students, and executing campus events or initiatives.

Participants chose to describe particular groups of campus personnel who had an impact on the lives of students. Among these personnel were faculty advisors to student organizations, Mason administration, ODPS staff, and professors. Staff members in ODPS also served as faculty advisors to cultural/ethnic-based student organizations. In this role, they were able to interact with students on a regular basis, provide guidance, and support students. Participants referenced ODPS staff as empathetic, and observed their ability to connect with students, deliver positive messages, and work with students. The Mason administration were described as accessible, as diverse, and as people who engage with students and alumni as well as provide support for campus-wide initiatives.
One participant referenced the professors in Modern Languages, in particular, due to their actions to help students. Albeit outside of the formal “campus personnel” structure, one participant referenced alumni networks as a group of personnel who may impact student success.

University staff members described campus personnel as collaborative, cooperative, and effective. This was evident when one participant provided an example of how students partnered with the University’s onsite catering company, Sodexo, to bring pupusa trucks on campus. University Staff Member F commented, “The flexibility of different offices to be open to meet the needs of the students who are here and reflect that diversity…it’s just a small example of something that has bigger ramifications for retention.” Participants also had the perspective that campus personnel have the ability to connect with students and an understanding of the needs of students. University Staff Member E commented, “People understand that they’re here for the student. That’s our primary reason for being here.” University Staff Member C added, “If we’re doing it right, we’re taking full advantage of our resources and…to a large degree we do and we’re able to really connect with our students.” University Staff Member A confirmed this perspective and commented that the ODPS office tries to “reach out to other offices who have stronger or more focused resources to utilize them.” Another participant shared, “our job [is] to put people in a position to be successful and let them be great…we’re doing it in a way that people understand…it’s genuine and…tied to success.”

Faculty advisors for student organizations from ODPS reported that they imparted
messages. One message was that skills learned from leadership roles in organizations could provide the “beginning of some people’s resume.” In addition, these advisors would ask students, “Where are your grades?” because these advisors believed it was necessary to help students “to look at the big picture.” Professors were referenced as a group of people who have “cultural competency,” exhibited through the correct pronunciation of students’ names in class. One participant referenced the professors in Modern Languages, in particular, due to their actions to help students “find a bigger voice on campus.” Even though alumni networks fall outside the traditional definition of campus personnel, University Staff Member B commented, “The alumni networks…have been reaching back to students that are here now.” There was one university staff member had the perspective that “many academic advisors on this campus who work with individual students” to “give them the opportunity to stay at the Mason…trying to work out a schedule that would fit into a financial plan…working with financial aid…maybe there are scholarships or different kind of awards they can apply for.” In summary, this theme represented university staff members’ perspectives and how they elected to describe campus personnel at Mason. University staff members depicted attributes shared among faculty advisors to student organizations, Mason administration, ODPS staff, and professors. In summary, university staff members described campus personnel as: cooperative, connects students to resources, effective, and understands the needs of students. Although it was not explicitly shared in interviews with university staff members, they may already know the importance of having faculty and staff members who embody these characteristics.
How university staff members described campus resources. This theme represented how university staff members described resources that were available to students. University staff members described programs and courses designed to improve transitions into Mason and through to college completion. Some of the programs identified included the Early Identification Program (EIP) and Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP). Several university staff members discussed courses offered by the Transition Resource Center to help students through transitions at Mason. Participants also referenced two mentoring programs, Aguilas and Mariposas, which serve as a mechanism for students to share information and to become involved in the campus community.

From the description provided by participants, campus resources appeared to serve two purposes. When students first entered Mason, they were in a position to consume information and support, in places like EIP and STEP, and in the transition course University 100. Additionally, as time progressed, students could offer support to other students as mentors and co-teachers of University 100. Mentors provided the information, support, and created a network for the younger students and co-teachers of University 100 help to orient new students and planned activities and programs to engage new students.

Participants chose to discuss some of the programs and courses designed to improve transitions into Mason. University staff members considered EIP as an “essential program” with a “good track record” that focused on first-generation college students and low-income minority students. One participant shared that one benefit of the program
was that students who graduated from EIP enrolled at Mason and that the staff “continue to be a resource” to students. As a result of this kind of support, participants perceived that students stayed connected to the EIP office and to the administrator they had worked with. Graduates of the program were perceived to reach back to incoming freshmen to say, “I have a story similar to yours…and if I can make it, you can make it.”

Another program, STEP, was perceived to have the purpose to “get them as ready as possible so that…they hit the ground running.” This perspective was confirmed by University Staff Members A and C. University Staff Member C commented that students may perceive, “Mason must really be interested in having our students come to their campus.” One participant shared that involvement in the program also “gives them an opportunity to become more involved in the campus community at large.” Similarly, University Staff Member F drew a connection between some of the graduates of the EIP and STEP programs who, in turn, became “willing and capable leaders” upon completion.

Participants referenced some of the benefits students have stemming from involvement with mentoring programs. University Staff Member A commented, “I’m one person—versus Mariposas, there are probably over 50 women” who “are mentoring freshman and sophomores.” This same participant shared the perception that students were able to deliver information to students, whereas, “faculty, we can’t ever meet them…the way a mentor could.” University Staff Member F confirmed this perspective, but also added that students “fill themselves with pride” and want to “turn around [to] see who they can help up.” Further, this same participant shared that “when you find a place
where your needs are met, where you feel that belonging” resulted in students’ feeling their “foundation’s a little sturdier” and that “all of those pieces…contribute [to] a nice sisterhood or brotherhood.” The mentoring programs appeared to foster a sense of community and provide a place where needs were met and where students felt supported in academic endeavors at Mason. One participant mentioned that the University 100-300 courses were beneficial for “bringing…resources to them…knowing the judicial code…the Writing Center… knowing that Career Services is available.” In summary, this theme represented how university staff members described campus resources that were available to students. Participants included descriptions of programs and courses that perceived to help students navigate the transitions at Mason, learn about resources, and help other students.

In summary, university staff members in this study tended to focus on the details of the delivery of campus resources or the collaboration that took place among offices to offer services. For example, one university staff member went into great detail about the outreach process by which the Office of Diversity Programs and Services (ODPS) works with students in poor academic standing. Another university staff member described an example of how Career Services collaborated with members of a Greek fraternity to offer the “Dress for Success” event. Both of these examples were depicted in Chapter IV. It appeared from the conversations with university staff members opted to describe the procedural aspects of such services.

**How university staff members described retention strategies.** This theme represented how university staff members chose to describe retention strategies that were
unseen by students and that generally took place in a behind-the-scenes capacity. The retention strategies included efforts to create more on-campus jobs, implementation of the Mapworks project, reinvigoration of a Retention Committee, and use of data as means to help conceptualize both retention and college completion efforts. Each of these efforts appeared to be in their infant stages. One strategy was established in an effort to create more on-campus jobs and served two purposes: (1) provide information on available on-campus jobs and (2) create more jobs for students. Tied to this effort was the possibility to provide additional financial support to students. Participants appeared to draw the connection between financial resources and students’ productivity and retention at Mason.

Several university staff members referenced the Mapworks project as “a student success initiative” and “an early alert system.” As it was described by the staff members, a survey was sent out to “all freshman and sophomores who live on campus and those students who are second year students who haven’t met sophomore status” in the fall of 2011. Surveys included questions where students self-reported personal experiences at Mason regarding classes, management of time and money, roommates, social outlets, and similar information. This system was in place, according to University Staff Member A, “to get them connected to the places or people that could help them with that particular issue or issues.” This description of Mapworks was confirmed by University Staff Members C and E.

Several participants referenced the Retention Committee “as a group of people who explore what the university could do to impact retention.” As it was described by the
participants, the committee included 30 people from a wide variety of campus offices. Thus, the committee “was very comprehensive in terms of its nature” and “the kinds of issues that were brought to the committee.” When asked what the committee had accomplished, University Staff Member E commented, “We’ve managed to change some things that…really have an impact on the retention of our students and…with Mapworks…that’s going to make another big difference to our community.”

A few university staff members discussed that data are used “to inform our best practices.” An initiative to offer more on-campus jobs for students was depicted as a “relatively new effort.” University Staff Member B stated, “If you’re not worried about…your finances you can be a lot more productive student.” This perspective was confirmed by University Staff Member E who commented, “We need more money…more financial aid or financial assistance…to give scholarships…we don’t have enough money and students leave us because they can go somewhere else and get more money in the way of scholarships.” In summary, this theme presented how university staff members described some of the retention strategies in place at Mason, which were relatively new initiatives (2011), to help retain and graduate students.

**How university staff members described students’ involvement on campus.**

This theme represented how university staff members described students’ involvement on campus. University staff members described students as being involved in campus activities as leaders and described some of the organizations students were involved in. One connection that was drawn by a few participants was that students from these African American and Hispanic backgrounds’ appear to have a desire to help one another
through the postsecondary experience. Participants mentioned that students sought opportunities to draw the attention of the campus community toward social injustices through activism and events. Participants also had the perception that students were members of cultural/ethnic-based organizations to gain information on how to be successful at Mason from someone who has experience in college and to additionally gain a sense of belonging.

University staff members discussed how students were leaders, their involvement in organizations, and described some of the places on campus students could go to assume leadership positions. University staff members described the personal attributes of students, including that students were motivated with “a desire to be great.” University staff members also described the desire of students to help others be successful at Mason. University Staff Member F commented, “a lot if it goes back to ‘I’m here at the end of the tunnel. I’m standing in the light about to graduate; who can I turn around and help?’” Thus, participants’ depicted how students “plan over the summer” and are “making bigger contributions…in the world through volunteerism.” One example shared by a participant described how students assisted in the plans for Hispanic Heritage Month and the “Immigration Monologues.” Participants described how programs like Orientation were designed to incorporate peer-to-peer interactions as much as possible in order to “validate” messages—to make sure that new students could “see themselves on the stage” and to be representative of the diversity of the campus. This mechanism appeared to be a clever way to engage students, and is sustainable because current students far outnumber the staff at Mason. In this type of configuration, students were in a position to affect
many students’ experiences in an authentic, genuine, and meaningful way

University staff members shared that students were members of cultural/ethnic-based organizations. Participants had the perception that students were members of these organizations to gain information on how to be successful at Mason from someone who had experience in college. University Staff Member A commented that there are benefits to “getting the inside scoop from a student who has actually gone through it.” University Staff Member F added, “a lot of students come here looking for acceptance” and that these organizations “really help them with that belonging.”

Finally, university staff members described some of the leadership roles students assumed on campus. Several staff members shared that students are leaders throughout the campus and that “it’s really exciting to see that.” University Staff Member C commented, “If you look at the average African American student on campus, he or she is more active than the typical student.” The same participant shared that the student body president in the previous year and leader of the Admissions team in the current year were African American. University Staff Member A commented, “I have students that will work two to three jobs to stay here.” University Staff Member C commented that the student leadership roles give students “leadership skills and…tools…so they can take these positions, accept these roles, and do very well.” From this comment it is evident that University Staff Member C shared the perspective that students gained certain skills in assuming these campus roles. Participants appeared to perceive the leadership roles assumed by students both as a form of compensation and to gain skills/tools for future endeavors. Participants shared that students may perceive being a leader on campus as an
opportunity to “help…pay…bills” as well as something that will “look great on my resume” and be an opportunity “to improve my skills” to “get that ultimate job when I get out of here.” In summary, this final theme illustrated how university staff members elected to describe student involvement on campus. Participants described students as being involved in campus activities as leaders and described some of the organizations students were involved in.

**Summary of the university staff members’ cultural model.** The university staff members’ cultural model included six themes. These were (1) how university staff members described Mason’s campus environment, (2) how university staff members chose to describe campus offices, (3) how university staff members depicted campus personnel, (4) how university staff members described campus resources, (5) how university staff members described retention strategies, and (6) how university staff members described students’ involvement on campus. Each of these themes were related because they articulated the factors perceived by university staff members as having contributed to African American and Hispanic students’ college completion from Mason.

**Final Findings**

Findings in this study indicate overlap in four areas of the two cultural models. Graduating seniors and university staff members had similar perspectives relating to: (a) how graduating seniors elected to describe Mason’s campus environment and how university staff members described Mason’s campus environment, (b) how graduating seniors described Mason’s campus personnel and how university staff members depicted campus personnel, (c) how graduating seniors elected to describe campus resources and
how university staff members described campus resources, and (d) how graduating seniors chose to be involved on Mason’s campus and how university staff members described students’ involvement on campus. These four areas will be presented in Part A with incorporation of four participants who stood out as exemplars (previously discussed in Chapter III). The second part of this section, Part B, will highlight the two themes evident only in the university staff members’ cultural model which were how university staff members depicted campus offices and how university staff members described retention strategies.

Part A

How graduating seniors elected to describe Mason’s campus environment and how university staff members described Mason’s campus environment. Both models encompass similar perspectives on the description of Mason’s campus environment. Both groups reported that the campus environment was diverse, benefited from its location, offered many events on campus, and was safe.

Graduating Senior B referenced the diversity of the Mason community as “its biggest factor” and was appreciative of the opportunity to meet people from so many different backgrounds. University Staff Member C said, “One reason I’m at Mason is because I feel comfortable. I like the diversity. It’s something that I’m proud of.” As a result of this diversity, staff and students alike appreciated this environment and felt comfortable.

Participants described the advantages of Mason’s location when describing the campus environment. University Staff Member C noted the advantages of Mason’s
location in terms of what it provides to “offer Mason regionally” as far as “opportunities for jobs” and “opportunities for those networking connections.” Career connections were drawn by Graduating Senior B who noted that contacts were established with local businesses and corporations in close proximity to Mason in hopes of eliciting postgraduation opportunities.

University staff members described students as being able to “expand” in more heterogeneous settings in their discussion of the campus environment, such as Patriot Leaders and Resident Advisors (RAs). There was evidence of graduating seniors in this study being Patriot Leaders and RAs; however, the conceptualization of being able to “expand” did not appear to be explicitly tied to the involvement in these heterogeneous programs. Nonetheless, Graduating Senior B shared that one program offered by Mason, Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP), “definitely opened my eyes to…different resources” and that it taught this participant “to take initiative to do these certain things.”

Participants described the events that took place on campus as they depicted the campus environment. Graduating Senior B helped organize events for Hispanic Heritage Month and Graduating Senior F helped design events for Orientation. University Staff Member C said that students are “staying because they enjoy campus…the atmosphere…the activities…the events.” University Staff Member C said, “We had a Greek Step contest and…to see not just African-American students, but White students, Hispanic students in the crowd …made me smile and…it felt good to feel that energy in a positive…way.” University Staff Member F referenced Hispanic Heritage Month as an
opportunity to show “the whole community that we stand united” and to illustrate to freshmen “right from the beginning” that “you’re here, we’re here and you belong here and there’s a place for you here.” These examples provided evidence that both groups appeared to recognize the importance of such events, those that were inclusive, open to all students and staff, provided opportunities for students to feel welcome and connect with peers, and reflected different cultures.

The student spaces available on Mason’s campus were mentioned by both groups in this study. Students enjoyed having spaces to “hang out” and venues where events they planned could take place. Students referenced the Office of Diversity Programs and Services (ODPS) office and as “the home of the multicultural organizations.” Another graduating senior mentioned that connection to the ODPS office – to complete homework, hang out, use the free printing service, and meet with faculty – was what helped the most toward college completion. Even though university staff members felt other venues like the Early Identification Program (EIP) office, Johnson Center (JC), and Student Union Building I (SUB I) were places where students could go to relax and build community, most students in this study referenced the ODPS office as the prime location to conduct such affairs.

University staff members perceived the JC to be a venue where students create a “sense of community.” Students did reference the JC as a place where they offered or participated in events. Graduating seniors also perceived the JC as the place where they could advertise cultural/ethnic-based organizations’ events. One example was provided by a graduating senior of how freshmen would sit at kiosks in the JC to promote events
and that this involvement fostered student engagement. This same participant referenced that current (2011) freshmen were eager to become involved and enjoyed having responsibilities to work at the kiosks in the JC.

**How graduating seniors described Mason’s campus personnel and how university staff members depicted campus personnel.** Both groups of participants described campus personnel in similar ways. Graduating seniors referenced adjunct faculty, Office of Diversity Programs and Services (ODPS) faculty advisors, professors, staff from across campus offices, and teaching assistants (TAs). University staff members described academic advisors, alumni, Mason administration, ODPS faculty advisors, professors, and staff across campus offices as the personnel who may impact student success. From the participants’ perspectives, there appeared to be overlap in three areas which were: ODPS faculty, professors, and staff from across campus offices.

Students felt that the campus personnel cited made the “experience so enriching that you couldn’t help but to stay and continue.” Graduating Senior B described ODPS faculty advisors and staff as “opening” and “very there for you.” In these interactions, this participant felt encouraged and supported. Graduating Senior F found support from professors, staff, and TAs. This participant had the perspective that professors want students to succeed, the staff will help students pursue graduate school, and the TAs will assist with mastery of material from math classes. This participant described interactions with campus personnel thusly: “They’re very open…willing to help. They make sure you are staying on the track…a lot of people here…are willing to help you…push you into that lane of being successful.” University staff members appeared to share a similar
perception about staff across offices and a willingness to help students. University staff members used the words cooperative, connects students to resources, effective, and understands the needs of students. Each of these attributes could describe an action of a staff member to “push you into that lane of being successful” as Graduating Senior F described. One example of how a staff member described connecting students to resources was in the portrayal of referrals that take place in ODPS. University Staff Member F commented,

One thing we do is we resource them out if they need…some may need tutoring in the Learning Services…some may need…more counseling…for other issues that may be going on…so we refer them to CAPS…we…do…referrals to Student Involvement…if they’re interested in getting involved.

University staff members also had the perception that Mason administrators and academic advisors had a positive impact on the lives of their targeted Mason population. However, graduating seniors did not reference Mason administrators in their description of campus personnel. University staff members referenced the accessibility of Mason administrators, in events such as the Presidential Dialogues, as an opportunity to “send really positive messages to the student body.” However, there was no reference made among graduating seniors in this study about these particular meetings hosted by Mason administrators. Similarly, there appeared to be different perspectives relating to academic advisors. One university staff member shared the perception that there “are many, many academic advisors…who work with individual students to…give them the opportunity to stay at Mason.” This was not the perception shared among the graduating seniors. These
students did not feel they were able to develop a relationship with their advisor due to the mass email form of communication and a lack of effort on the part of the advisor “to get to know” them.

The campus personnel who were referenced by students, but were not mentioned by university staff members, were adjunct faculty, alumni networks, and TAs. University staff members did not reference adjunct faculty or TAs in their description of campus personnel, and had limited description of the role of alumni networks for students. Only one university staff member referenced alumni networks; whereas, students appeared to appreciate the alumni who returned to Mason to share about their experiences. The appearance of alumni on panels was perceived as beneficial opportunities for students to interact with these individuals and students sought to remain in contact with these alumni to build broader networks outside the undergraduate experience at Mason. Graduating seniors viewed this interaction positively and appeared to be excited about the prospects of building on this relationship upon graduation for future job and networking opportunities.

**How graduating seniors chose to describe campus resources and how university staff members described campus resources.** Both groups of participants discussed similar campus resources, but in a few instances they viewed them in a slightly different way. For graduating seniors, emphasis was placed on how students felt supported and what basic needs could be met with available campus resources. The campus resources mentioned by graduating seniors included Career Services, Student Involvement, Writing Center, STAR Lab, and the University 100-300 courses.
Graduating Senior F took advantage of Career Services and the Writing Center. This participant described staff in these offices as “helpful” and, more specifically, that ODPS offered programs to “encourage students to take the next steps.” On the other hand, university staff members tended to focus on the function of staff members in terms of their interactions with students or the services provided. Staff members discussed how they work with students and the “outreach” that was provided by the campus offices. University Staff Member C provided an example of collaboration between offices to provide services. This participant shared that efforts are made to make sure students are “getting services delivered” and “to make sure we’re reaching these populations.”

Another area of slightly different perspective was how students viewed campus resources in terms of available leadership opportunities in campus offices. University staff members described student leadership roles in a more global sense. For example, University Staff Member C shared, “If you look at the average African American student on campus, he or she is more active than the typical student.” But the specificity of students’ leadership roles as Mason Ambassadors and Program Board members was not offered by university staff members. Graduating seniors in this study were very involved in leadership roles across campus offices. In this description, students referenced Admissions, Housing and Residence Life, Judicial Affairs, ODPS, OFPS, and Student Involvement as locales that offered leadership opportunities. For example, Graduating Senior F served in many leadership roles in campus offices, including a Mason Ambassador and a Patriot Leader. Graduating Senior F reported that valuable skills were gained from these leadership experiences: “Everything I’ve done so far has given me
something to use in the future.” More specifically, these leadership roles appeared to create a strong affiliation between students and Mason. This was exhibited when Graduating Senior F commented, “The thing that kind of cemented me to this school and made me love the school so much [was]…the experience I had working… here…I was a Patriot Leader.”

Shifting now to discussion of programs that supported students’ transitions into and through to completion at Mason, both university staff members and graduating seniors referenced the same programs (EIP, STEP, and mentoring programs). All three programs were cited for ease of sharing information and learning about available campus resources. More specifically, university staff members discussed how mentoring programs served as a mechanism to share information and develop a sense of belonging within communities. University Staff Member F commented,

One thing that’s amazing about this Latino community that we have here is…the minute…they climb up, the minute that they achieve something for themselves, they fill themselves with pride and the first thing that they do [is] turn around [to] see who they can help up…It’s such an endearing quality…it’s not necessarily a nuanced cultural piece…it just seems to be pervasive in this community.

This perspective was confirmed in the graduating seniors’ portrayal of involvement in mentoring programs.

Another area where a slightly different perception shared on behalf of the university staff members was noted involved the continuity of communication that took place between administrators and graduates of the EIP program, specifically, throughout
the course of their collegiate experiences. This perspective was not confirmed by the graduating seniors. Graduating seniors did not reference the communication that was maintained with any particular administrator from EIP. One caveat is that only one participant in the sample identified herself or himself as being a participant in EIP.

How graduating seniors chose to be involved on Mason’s campus and how university staff members described students’ involvement on campus. Both groups of participants appeared to have similar descriptions of students as being driven, motivated, and involved on campus. Students were involved in the planning for campus events such as Hispanic Heritage Month and Orientation. Graduating seniors in this study reported enjoying planning these events. Hispanic Heritage Month offered a month-long series of events planned by university staff and students, to celebrate Hispanic culture and offered many opportunities to acquaint new students to the university. From the perspectives of graduating seniors and university staff alike there appeared to be many opportunities for students to plan and execute events, and work with incoming freshmen in a “buddy-like” system. Students interviewed in this study cited Hispanic Heritage Month for the plethora of events they attended when they first came to Mason, where they made new friends, and learned more about cultural/ethnic-based organizations such as the Hispanic Student Association (HSA). New students were able to learn about available resources, mentoring programs, and attended more casual events together during these events. Further, one participant said that having Hispanic Heritage Month annually kept this participant interested in the topics and as a result, made this participant want to remain at Mason until graduation. The Hispanic Heritage Month appeared to be a springboard for future
student involvement and engagement.

Another event that students assisted in the planning of was Orientation. Graduating seniors in the study depicted how the Office of Orientation and Family Programs and Services (OFPS) staff would work alongside student Patriot Leaders to design Orientation. Students who were involved in the planning of Orientation as Patriot Leaders enjoyed the opportunity to plan the events with peers over the summer. Students recognized the long hours required to plan Orientation, but also referenced making new friends and developing a strong bond with other Patriot Leaders in that process. Students were responsible for designing activities and skits that new students would observe. The former Patriot Leaders who were interviewed in this study felt that being a Patriot Leader made them want to come back a following year. The same participants shared that they loved working with new students and gained many valuable skills when they were responsible for planning these events. One university staff member in the study conveyed how students wrote and implemented the skits during Orientation as a strategy to validate messages being conveyed to new students.

Two areas where there was not overlap was evidenced by the lack of description on the part of university staff members concerning students’ involvement in common-interest organizations and Greek life, along with the impact of alumni on the experience of Mason students. University staff members discussed campus events that were offered by Greek organizations or how campus offices, such as Career Services, would present information at an ethnic-based Greek fraternity; however, there were several students who elected to participate in the common-interest and Greek organizations. Graduating
seniors also valued the presence of alumni panels, especially alumni of color, who would return to Mason and talk about career paths. Only one university staff member made reference to alumni and the other university staff members did not choose to discuss the role of alumni. Graduating seniors in this study appeared to benefit from exposure to alumni, especially alumni of color.

**Summary of Part A.** This section illuminated the four themes in the two cultural models where similarities were found from the perspectives of graduating seniors and university staff members. Graduating seniors and university staff members had similar perspectives relating to: (a) how graduating seniors chose to describe Mason’s campus environment and how university staff members described Mason’s campus environment, (b) how graduating seniors described Mason’s campus personnel and how university staff members depicted campus personnel, (c) how graduating seniors chose to describe campus resources and how university staff members described campus resources, and (d) how graduating seniors chose to be involved on Mason’s campus and how university staff members described students’ involvement on campus. Part B will further explain the two themes that were only evident in the university staff members’ cultural model.

**Part B**

There were two themes that were only evident in the university staff members’ cultural model. These two themes included (1) how university staff members elected to describe campus offices, and (2) how university staff members described retention strategies. University staff members described three offices that were not referenced by graduating seniors. University staff members also elected to describe retention strategies;
none of the graduating seniors referenced any of those strategies.

**How university staff members chose to describe campus offices.** There were three offices discussed by university staff members that were not mentioned by the graduating seniors included in this study. The university staff members referenced the resources available to students from the Academic Advising, Leadership Education And Development (LEAD), or Learning Services offices. One curious observation was that the graduating seniors reported that interactions with advisors were negative. However, it was unclear from graduating seniors’ descriptions whether the advisors they described were housed in the Office of Academic Advising. With regard to the LEAD Office, one graduating senior mentioned participating in the LeaderShape program. The Learning Services Office was not mentioned by any graduating senior.

**How university staff members described retention strategies.** With reference to retention strategies, university staff members referenced efforts that were relatively new in deployment (2011) or forthcoming. As such, it wasn’t surprising that these strategies were not mentioned by students or some of the university staff, who may be unaware of them. These strategies appeared to occur in a behind-the-scenes type of capacity. Consideration was being given to these strategies in forums including committees, Mason administration, and in cross-office collaboration. Discussion was in the early stages regarding strategies to create more on-campus jobs as a lever to retain students who opt to go to other IHEs because of available scholarships, or whose tuition cost is less.

**Summary of Part B.** This section presented the two themes that were only
evident in the university staff members’ cultural model. University staff members described three offices that were not mentioned by the graduating seniors in this study as entities that may have impacted student success. These offices were Academic Advising, Leadership Education And Development (LEAD), or Learning Services offices. Some university staff members also described relatively new (2011) retention strategies established to support student retention and completion; none of the graduating seniors mentioned these strategies.

Summary

The findings of this study suggest that graduating seniors and university staff members’ perspectives appear to overlap in perceived contributions to high college completion rates in the areas of: (a) how graduating seniors and university staff members described Mason’s campus environment, (b) how graduating seniors and university staff members described Mason’s campus personnel, (c) how graduating seniors and university staff members chose to describe campus resources, and (d) how graduating seniors chose to be involved on Mason’s campus and how university staff members described student involvement. University staff members referenced three campus offices (Academic Advising, Leadership Education And Development, or Learning Services) as well as a variety of retention strategies that were not mentioned by graduation seniors. Two cultural models to reflect participants perceived contributions to high college completion rates among African American and Hispanic students at Mason. Chapter V presents implications, recommendations, and future research.
CHAPTER V

This study explored graduating seniors and university staff members’ perceptions of what George Mason University (Mason) may be doing to support high college completion rates of its African American and Hispanic students. The main goal of this research was to develop two cultural models as an overlay following data analysis about what may have contributed to high college completion rates from the perspectives of participants interviewed in this study. Two research questions focused this study:

1. From the perspective of graduating seniors from African American and Hispanic backgrounds, what is George Mason University (Mason) doing to support students from those ethnic backgrounds toward college completion at Mason?

2. From the perspective of university staff members, what is George Mason University (Mason) doing to support African American and Hispanic students toward college completion at Mason?

To answer these questions, data collection included face-to-face interviews with graduating seniors and university staff members. A close analysis of 14 interviews resulted in the development of two cultural models. This Chapter presents implications, recommendations, and future research.
Implications

The two reports published by The Education Trust provided the foundation for this study. The 2010 Education Trust reports published findings on six-year college completion rates and identified 11 four-year institutions of higher education (IHEs) that had evidence of a closed or reversed graduation rate gap between African American, Hispanic, and White students. At two of these 11 IHEs, George Mason University (Mason) and Towson University, there was no graduation rate gap for African American or Hispanic students and White students between 2006 and 2008. These findings gave rise to exploration of what may have contributed to the high college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students at Mason.

Chapter II highlighted some empirical research on possible factors that may contribute to high college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students. Missing from this research were the perspectives of the targeted population and university staff members familiar with the context of IHEs. Further, a case study at one of the 11 IHEs with evidence of a reversed graduation rate gap that documented the perspectives of students and staff was not evident in research. Analysts at national education advocacy organizations have speculated that programs may affect high college completion rates among African American students at IHEs with evidence of high college completion rates of its African American students (Carey, 2008). An author for the Chronicle of Higher Education asserted that colleges may have raised college completion rates due to focus on likely dropouts, building up advising services, involving diverse voices, and making logistical changes (Ensign, 2010). However, these claims could be
accurate but lack sound methodology or information to understand how such findings were reached. The limitations of previous research presented the need for a qualitative case study of a highly successful IHE with evidence of high six-year college completion rates among African American and Hispanic students. This study presented findings on what may have contributed to the high college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students at a highly successful IHE from the perspective of participants in this study. There are two main goals for the following sections which are: (1) to present how the findings of the current study expanded previous case study research; and (2) to compare previous case study research on Mason with findings from the current study.

**Expanding Previous Case Study Research**

There were few case studies conducted from the 1990s to the present on what may contribute to high college completion rates among African American and Hispanic students. Richardson (1990) asserted that institutions may implement practices that affect student success. Some of these practices included having faculty who are committed to helping students learn, instructional leaders who plan and implement required interventions, and managers who set goals, develop action plans, and allocate resources. Some of Richardson’s claims were confirmed in the current study where there was evidence of both groups of participants describing the accessibility and commitment of campus staff and professors who were described as accessible and receptive to students who reached out to them. In addition, there was evidence in the current study of Mason allocating resources to 250+ student organizations. Students interviewed in this study referenced how this type of financial support was “one of the greatest that they’ve
[Mason] done for the students.” One limitation of Richardson’s study was that institutions included in his sample represented IHEs in which Richardson claimed had good records for graduating African American and Hispanic students; however, college completion rates by race and gender were not required by law to be reported by IHEs at the time when Richardson’s study was published. This current study used six-year college completion data, aggregated by race and gender, and collected annually by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center of Educational Statistics. The findings from the current study confirm and extend the research of Richardson.

As discussed in Chapter II, Glenn (2003) applied a case study method to determine which factors may contribute to high college completion rates among African American males who attended community colleges. Glenn found that mentoring and Summerbridge programs, orientation programs that stress study skills, and student volunteers who are on call the first semester to answer questions may have an effect on African American males’ graduation rates from community colleges. It was interesting that many of the same findings from Glenn’s study were evident in the findings of the current study. Participants in the current study, included male and female participants who self-identified as African American or Hispanic, described similar factors. Participants in this study described the importance of having mentors (and being mentors), information that was learned in orientation programs and the University 100-300 courses, and the role many of the participants in this study played toward new students during the Orientation process. The findings from the current study may suggest that mentoring programs and Orientation programs, as well as peer-to-peer interactions
during the first semester of an academic year for freshmen at four-year public IHEs may also contribute to college completion rates of African American males.

**Comparing Previous Research on Mason with Findings from the Current Study**

Kuh et al. (2005) conducted research on Mason specifically. These researchers claimed that Mason had responsive faculty who use data-informed decision-making in response to state-mandated assessments. Kuh et al.’s (2005) study omitted description on the research methodology employed for data collection, which left room for future exploration of the perspective of students, staff, and other college personnel. The current study sought to document the perspectives of campus personnel and graduating seniors from African American and Hispanic backgrounds. The current study employed purposeful sampling to learn what may have contributed to high college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students. Findings indicated that both groups of participants shared similar perspectives on the responsiveness of faculty and staff. In addition, university staff members interviewed in the current study described how data is used at Mason to inform campus-wide retention and completion efforts. Therefore, the findings from Kuh et al.’s study appear to be confirmed and extended in the current study. The current study found that participants described responsive faculty and staff from the perspectives of both groups of participants, and university staff members interviewed described using data to inform decision-making as it relates to retention and completion efforts.

Whitt (2005) also conducted research on Mason. She found that Mason sponsors more than 200 student clubs and organizations “to involve students of different ages,
ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds in these and other out-of-class activities” (p. 3). These assertions were confirmed in this study where both groups of participants who were interviewed described the wide offering of student clubs and organizations currently available to students. Whitt (2005) noted that the programs and experiences are of “uniformly high quality and [in which] large numbers of students participate” (p. 2), but did not mention why students at Mason chose to participate. The current study found that students chose to participate for a number of reasons which included opportunities for students to organize and participate in events where they would be surrounded by “like-minded individuals,” due to interest, to use time constructively, to be commensurate with long-term career goals, as a mechanism to develop a broader network outside of Mason, and as a way to meet friends. The current study also found that graduating seniors interviewed in the study attributed their successful involvement to: the ease of joining an organization, good timing, interest, “it sounded fun,” and the abundant variety of organizations available on campus.

Whitt (2005) also found that Mason features student services that are centrally located and easy to find, as well as spaces for informal interaction between students and faculty or staff. One university staff member interviewed in this study noted that student services are located in a central location and are a place where students can get a number of different needs met in at once. University staff members also indicated that the Johnson Center offers space for informal interactions among students. However, the graduating seniors in this study emphasized how the Johnson Center is a location that is often visited to attend campus events and where student organizations advertise events.
These additional details offered from the students interviewed in the current study were not included in the findings put forth by Whitt (2005).

In summary, this work confirmed some previous empirical research and extended some of those findings. The current study’s findings contributes the perspectives of graduating seniors and university staff members at an IHE with evidence of success toward college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students that was missing from previous research. These insights demonstrated that two groups of participants agreed in certain areas: (a) how graduating seniors chose to describe Mason’s campus environment and how university staff members described Mason’s campus environment, (b) how graduating seniors described Mason’s campus personnel and how university staff members depicted campus personnel, (c) how graduating seniors chose to describe campus resources and how university staff members described campus resources, and (d) how graduating seniors chose to be involved on Mason’s campus and how university staff members described students’ involvement on campus. The next two sections present recommendations and future research.

**Recommendations**

Seven recommendations to provide knowledge that may help Mason and similar IHEs enhance graduation rates follow. These recommendations include: (1) continue to offer many student involvement activities; (2) continue to support collaboration among campus offices; (3) bring alumni back to Mason as often; (4) continue to offer and encourage students to have experiential learning opportunities; (5) continue to provide students with access to campus personnel; (6) consider focusing attention toward
improving academic advising and outreach to students through professional development; and (7) continue to offer informal spaces for students to interact. These recommendations were developed upon analysis of the two cultural models presented in Chapter IV and how they may relate to future student retention and completion rates.

**Continue to Offer Many Student Involvement Activities**

Research suggests that students benefit from involvement in campus activities (Kuh, 1995). Students elect to participate in academic and nonacademic student organizations for a variety of reasons (Holzweiss et al., 2007; Kodama, 2009). Research by Holzweiss et al. (p. 136) supports the connection between students being engaged with a college community and benefits “such as learning skills, acquiring knowledge, completing their degrees, and an easier path to obtaining employment.” Holzweiss et al. (2007) found that students “become engaged in their campus community” when they “join student organizations that meet their specific interests” (p. 136). Findings from this study confirmed these assertions. Students interviewed in this study participated in both academic and nonacademic organizations to meet specific interests and needs.

Students appreciated the opportunity to have such a variety of student involvement opportunities available on campus. Similarly, students valued the autonomy to join so many organizations, and be surrounded by like-minded individuals in these various entities. Students participated in common-interest and ethnic-based organizations as well as Greek life. There are over 250 recognized student organizations funded by the Office of Student Involvement. Efforts should be made to secure a pipeline of funding to support a wide variety of student organizations. Students also reported that the Office of
Student Involvement was supportive to the development of new student organizations. This unit should continue to foster a culture of acceptance toward the development of new organizations because students referenced this as “one of the best things that Mason did to support students.”

**Continue to Support Collaboration among Offices**

This study found that campus personnel were described as cooperative and effective, connect students to resources, and understood the needs of students. These attributes led to collaboration between offices to design programs that students could benefit from. For example, Career Services staff attended student organizations’ meetings to present information. This type of involvement resulted from collaboration among offices and a commitment on the part of staff to bring resources directly to the students. It was the perception among university staff members that students felt more comfortable receiving information on “their turf.” This type creativity shown on behalf of campus offices to bring services to student organizations and student spaces should continue as a “vehicle for sharing responsibility for student learning” (Kuh et al., 2010, p. 165).

**Bring Alumni Back to Mason Often**

Research by Tjas et al. (1997) indicated that personal interactions for students with alumni who share educational experiences and career paths provide knowledge to students on how “predecessors have confronted challenges, persevered, and achieved rewards for hard work” (p. 104). Tjas et al. found “if students perceive commonalities between themselves and alumni who have achieved success and stability, their expectations, motivation, and aspirations for their own futures may be enhanced” (p.
Further, these researchers reported that “students are highly receptive to information and guidance from adults with whom they shared common backgrounds” (p. 109). Even though these findings were in reference to high school students, a similar connection may be evident for college students. Findings from this study confirmed that students reported being motivated and with a perception that they “could make it too” as a result of interactions with Mason alumni. Students discussed how they hoped to maintain communication with these alumni. Efforts should be made to invite Mason alumni to return to foster networking and motivate students.

**Continue to Offer and Encourage Experiential Learning for Students**

Cantor (1997) found that experiential learning “is a necessary and vital component of formal instruction in colleges and universities” (p.1). Wilkinson (2008) found that internships foster connections between students, universities, and employers. Wilkinson claims “students feel that an internship is the best way to learn the reality of work” (p. 3). Knouse et al. (1999) argued that internship experiences benefit students due to improving time management, communication skills, self-discipline, initiative, and overall concept. These findings were confirmed in this study because graduating seniors placed great emphasis on the practical experiences they gained at Mason. Students referenced experiential learning opportunities, internships, and on-campus jobs because they made them feel prepared for full-time work. Mason should continue to offer these types of experiences for students. Efforts should be supported that enhance the information-sharing between Career Services, New Century College, and other entities on strategies to increase students’ experiential learning opportunities.
Continue to Provide Students with Access to Campus Personnel

Graduating seniors and university staff members in this study reported that campus personnel appeared to be committed to student success, have empathy, and were effective deliverers of information. Students, in turn, felt supported and encouraged to persist to graduation. Efforts should continue to enhance the ability of staff to remain accessible, helpful, and supportive of these student populations. Students appeared to benefit from an open-door policy with faculty, staff, and professors who were receptive to their needs and helped “point them in the right direction.” Additional professional development and training should be provided to campus personnel to enrich positive interpersonal interactions between students and staff so that students continue to feel encouraged by as many campus personnel as possible.

Focus Attention Toward Improving Academic Advising and Outreach to Students

King (1993) conducted research on the advising delivery systems in community colleges. King found that first-generation college students and racial minorities may require “strong support services” to help this population “remain in…institutions and achieve their goals” (p. 21), and that academic advising “is perhaps the most critical of those services” (p. 21). King’s findings were based on a two-year IHE setting; however, academic advising may help with retention and college completion of similar types of students in other settings, such as a four-year IHE. Findings from this study indicated that students who were interviewed were not receptive to the outreach made by advisors.

Academic advisors at Mason should have more opportunities for professional development to improve delivery of services. Students reported that advisors would send
mass emails and this resulted in students’ perception that advisors did not want to get to know them. One recommendation is to encourage advisors to modify current outreach strategies to reflect some of the dispositions of campus personnel depicted in this study. Students described campus personnel as accessible, aware, committed to student success, helpful, invested, knowledgeable, receptive, and supportive. Students appreciated the face time with staff who met with them in an open-door policy format. Perhaps if outreach is modified in this way, students will perceive advisors differently.

**Continue to Offer Informal Spaces for Students to Interact**

The university should continue to offer spaces like the ODPS office and kiosks in the JC. Whitt (2005) found that Mason had spaces on campus where students were able to interact informally with students. This assertion was confirmed in this study. The graduating seniors in this study referenced that the ODPS office was a place to go to complete homework, hang out, use the free printing service, and meet with faculty. Students also appeared to perceive the JC as a venue where they could advertise events and include freshmen. Having these designated spaces on campus appears to be beneficial toward helping students feel comfortable, have basic needs met, and help students to feel as though they are included on a college campus community.

**Future Research**

The present study focused on the perspective of a small group of participants as to what may have contributed to high college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students at Mason. This study was based on the premise that Mason would have continued success in college completion rates of students from these backgrounds.
(Institutional Research & Reporting, 2011). The following paragraphs will outline areas of future research based on the analyses conducted in this study.

Chapter II presented the benefits of earning a bachelor’s degree. There are economic benefits for individuals obtaining a bachelor’s degree found in empirical research (Baum & Payea, 2004; Perna, 2005). Baum and Payea (2004) concluded that individuals who obtain a bachelor’s degree are more likely to receive higher earnings, have greater job satisfaction, have health insurance, volunteer, and donate blood. One implication of these assertions by Baum and Payea would be to reach out to recent Mason graduates from African American and Hispanic backgrounds to see if they perceived to have these benefits in their life upon graduation from Mason. Future research could explore the benefits that were achieved by graduating seniors from Mason. Were recent Mason graduates from African American and Hispanic backgrounds able to achieve a better quality of life? Some benefits of receiving a bachelor’s degree cannot be quantified; however, future research could explore perceived benefits of Mason alumni at specific increments in time upon college completion, such as five, ten, and fifteen-years. Are there differences by race/ethnicity, gender, and at different points in their life?

Chapter II presented one potential benefit of receiving a bachelor’s degree is increased possibility of civic engagement (Perna, 2005). This current study found among graduating seniors interviewed, they appreciated the interaction and relationships that were built with Mason alumni who returned to Mason to appear on career panels. Future research could explore to what extent graduates from African American or Hispanic backgrounds were civically engaged with Mason as volunteers, mentors, or the like. How
many recent Mason graduates returned to Mason to speak with current students? Was there continuity in alumni returning to Mason to further the feeling of a self-fulfilling prophesy of success that was articulated by the participants in this study? Future research could explore what impact Mason alumni from African American and Hispanic backgrounds have on the feeling of self and motivation with current students. Some possible research question could be: To what extent do Mason alumni from African American or Hispanic backgrounds continue to communicate with recent Mason graduates? What type of engagement did recent Mason graduates from these ethnic backgrounds continue to have with Mason? How beneficial are career panel discussions with recent Mason graduates for current students who attend Mason?

The controversy over the benefits of obtaining a bachelor’s degree was also presented in Chapter II. The Pew Research Center study found that recent college graduates experienced difficulty in paying bills, buying a home, and deciding on career pursuit due to student loan repayment. Future research could explore to what extent Mason graduates from African American and Hispanic backgrounds were successful toward repaying student loans and finding employment upon completion. If students were unsuccessful toward finding employment after graduation, what options were pursued by recent Mason graduates? Future research could also focus on the level of preparedness experienced by Mason graduates in job settings and their ability to pay back any existing student loans accrued throughout their tenure at Mason.

Another area of future research could expound upon what role external factors have on students’ college completion rates. Graduating seniors and university staff
members in this study discussed the possible influence of several external factors. Graduating seniors reported external factors such as being first-generation college students, involvement in organizations external to Mason, parental educational attainment, and support received from family. University staff members focused on previous academic preparedness of students, being a first-generation college student, previous cultural capital as it related to understanding the college process and how to be successful in college, the role of family, and spirituality. Future research could explore what impact such external factors have on college retention and completion. For example, are there differences in retention and completion rates among students who identify as being first-generation college students? Findings of the current study indicated that a Summerbridge program, such as the Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP) at Mason, increased one participant’s knowledge of the resources available at Mason. Further exploration is needed on what effect programs, such as STEP, have on students’ college readiness, as well as ability to persist toward completion.

This study found that one participant who participated in the Early Identification Program (EIP) found that this program broadened his/her understanding of Mason and desire to come to Mason. Future research could explore what impact programs like EIP have on participants’ desire to attend Mason. Future research could also explore what impact participation in the EIP program has on students’ motivation to complete a bachelor’s degree at Mason. University staff members perceived that EIP staff remained in contact with program participants, but this perception was not confirmed by graduating seniors in this study. Future research could explore what communication systems are
currently in place between EIP staff and student participants, and where communication may be improved in the future to impact program participants’ retention and completion rates at Mason.

This study focused on the perspectives of first-time, full-time freshmen who entered Mason between 2006 and 2008 and were en route to graduation in 2012. Future research could explore the perspectives of transfer students who attend four-year public IHEs from African American and Hispanic backgrounds and what may contribute to their ability to complete a bachelor’s degree. As discussed in Chapter II, Russell (2009) asserted that the current graduation metric of using the first-time, full-time freshmen do not account for particular student groups such as part-time students, transfer students, and students who choose to stop out of an institution. Future research could explore factors that contribute to college completion among these various student groups not included in the full-time, first-time freshmen cohort that is currently (2012) used to account for six-year college completion rates. Are there similarities and differences among college completers from African American or Hispanic backgrounds who attend a four-year public IHE as first-time, full-time freshmen when compared to transfer students, part-time students, and students who choose to stop out of an institution? As discussed in Chapter II, Mason has an existing articulation agreement in place with Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC). This articulation agreement between Mason and NVCC was established to improve transfer opportunities to two and four-year degrees for students. Future research could explore what may contribute to the college completion rates of NVCC transfer students who enter and graduate from Mason. What implications
may those contributing factors have with regard to college access and retention efforts at Mason?

A future study could explore the relationship between membership in student organizations and college retention and completion. Mason has evidence of over 250 student organizations currently (2012) on campus. Graduating seniors in this study reported being very involved in various aspects of campus life such as involvement in student organizations, Greek life, volunteerism, and mentoring. Future research could explore if there are differences in student retention and completion rates among students who choose to participate in different types of campus activities. Further, future research could also explore students’ perceived benefits of being involved in various types of campus activities. Future research could explore what effect membership in the three cited mentoring programs (Aguilas, AKOMA Circle, and Mariposas) had with regard to African American and Hispanic students’ motivation to complete their bachelor’s degree.

Another area of future research could center on what effect did any of the retention strategies (2011) outlined by the university staff members in this study have on Mason’s student retention and completion rates? Specifically, what were some of the effects of the Mapworks project conducted in fall 2011? To what extent did the Mapworks project affect retention rates of the targeted population? What were some of the effects of the HireMason website? Were students able to access on-campus jobs, and if so, did this contribute to student retention and college completion rates of the targeted population? These ideas could be further explored with additional components that aggregate results by gender, racial/ethnic backgrounds, or first-generation or
socioeconomic status to see if there are differences.

One strategy offered by the analysts at the U.S. Department of Education discussed in Chapter II was for IHEs to set college completion goals. An independent non-profit organization, Complete College America, currently (2011) assists 24 states to establish short and long-term college completion goals. Future research could explore if setting college completion goals in these 24 states resulted in higher college completion rates, especially among African American and Hispanic students. Further, studies could also explore if recent (2010) legislation, such as the Complete College Tennessee Act (CCTA), had any impact on the college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students who attend four-year IHEs in Tennessee or perhaps in forthcoming states who enact similar types of legislation.

The findings of this study give rise to further exploration at one of the other highly successful IHEs named in the Education Trust (2010) reports that have closed the six-year college completion rate gap among African American and Hispanic students when compared to White counterparts (Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b). These IHEs included Georgia State University, Loyola Marymount University, Loyola University of New Orleans, Purchase College in the State University of New York system, Stony Brook University, Towson University, University of California at Riverside, University of Miami, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and University of Tampa. If a similar method described in this study was applied, it would be curious to explore if three were similarities in cultural models developed. As discussed in Chapter III, Flyvberg (2006) and Ruddin (2006) argue that case study research can focus attention on the
context of cases to generalize findings. Future research could explore similarities and differences among the 11 highly successful IHEs named in The Education Trusts reports (Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b) to generalize to what extent there are common institutional practices, policies, and strategies that may impact the college completion rates of the targeted population among highly successful IHEs. Related to this question is the issue of continuity. Have the 11 IHEs named in the Education Trust (2010) reports maintained continued success in the college six-year completion rates of African American and Hispanic students?

Finally, all of the graduating seniors in this study were en route to graduate in four years upon enrollment. Further exploration is needed to see if there are differences in factors that contribute to students’ successful completion in college among graduating seniors who complete college in four-, five-, and six-years. Are there differences in motivation and student involvement activities; and if so, what are some of those factors?

**Limitations**

The boundaries of the current study were presented in Chapter III. However, there are limitations related to methodological issues that may have interfered with the trustworthiness of the current study. One limitation may include self-report bias and the potential for researcher bias. Data analysis may have been affected by personal views and perspectives that may have affected how these data were interpreted. However, this could be viewed as a strength due to the researcher’s knowledge in the area of college access, retention, and completion. These pertinent experiences include 10 years of experience in the field of public education as a former classroom teacher and practitioner with a
Washington-based non-profit organization with a mission to increase the number of traditionally disadvantaged students entering and completing a postsecondary education. These experiences lend credibility to this study.

Another limitation was the impact of the recruitment strategies. One of the three recruitment strategies was to have graduating seniors who participated in the methods pilot recruit additional seniors to participate in the study. The participants from the methods pilot may have recruited participants who are similar in nature to them. Another recruitment strategy was to post flyers around Mason’s Fairfax campus to elicit participation in the study. Graduating seniors who saw the flyer may have been more inclined to see the flyer due to higher level of campus engagement or involvement on campus. The implication of these limitations related to recruitment strategies is that the findings of the current study may not be generalizable to every graduating senior from African American or Hispanic backgrounds at Mason.

Summary

This study discovered four common themes shared among graduating seniors and university staff members about what may have contributed to high college completion rates among African American and Hispanic students at Mason. These themes were: (a) how graduating seniors and university staff members elected to describe Mason’s campus environment, (b) how graduating seniors and university described Mason’s campus personnel, (c) how graduating seniors and university staff members chose to describe campus resources, and (d) how graduating seniors chose to be involved on Mason’s campus and how university staff members described student involvement. The areas
where the two cultural models did not appear to have overlap was in how university staff members depicted campus offices and how university staff members described retention strategies.

Chapter V summarized the conclusions made from the four stages of analysis that were detailed in Chapter IV. Drawing on these and using the conceptual framework from the end of Chapter I, the study’s findings were discussed. Implications and recommendations were made for future research to better inform IHEs’ staffs on what may contribute to high college completion rates of the targeted population.
APPENDIX A. GRADUATING SENIOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Please help me learn more about you completing this short questionnaire. Indicate “Yes” or “No” for questions or provided responses in the space below. Thank you for taking the time to complete this.

1. How do you self-identify? _______________________________________________

2. What year did you graduate from high school? _____________________________

3. What is the name of the high school you attended? _____________________________

4. What is the name of the county in which your high school is located in? If outside of Virginia, please provide the state you attended high school in. __________________________________________________________________________

5. What is your cumulative grade point average (GPA) at Mason? Please select one. 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[ ] 0.00 – 1.00</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] 1.01 – 2.00</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] 2.01 -3.00</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] 3.01 – 4.0</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] 4.01 and higher</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Did you participate in the Early Identification Program (EIP) prior to coming to Mason? [ ]

7. Did you participate in the Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP) program that is offered at Mason? [ ]

8. Did you serve as a mentor in the Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP) offered at Mason? [ ]

9. Did you take any of the University 100-400 courses offered by the Transition Resource Center at Mason? [ ]

10. Do/Did you live in a “Living Learning Community” at Mason? [ ]

11. Do/Did you volunteer for any Mason programs or events? [ ]
12. Do you attend events offered by Student Involvement at Mason?  

13. Do you attend sessions offered by Career Services at Mason?  

14. Do you attend sessions offered by Academic Services at Mason?  

15. Have you been or are you involved in any student organizations offered at Mason?  

16. Have you been or are you presently a student leader of an organization at Mason?  

17. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about yourself? Please use the back if you need more room to write.
APPENDIX B. GRADUATING SENIOR INTERVIEW GUIDE

I. Thank participant for agreeing to interview. Provide overview of interview process, share general information about research goals, and ensure confidentiality.

II. Interview Questions:
1. How would you describe yourself to someone else?

2. What do you like about Mason?

3. What experiences at Mason have been most important to you?

4. What do you think Mason has offered that has helped you graduate?

5. What are you most proud of when you think about what you have accomplished at Mason?

6. What academic services have you found helpful at Mason?

7. What kinds of activities have you participated in outside of the classroom?

8. Why did you choose to participate in those activities?

9. What did you find helpful about participating in activities outside of the classroom?

10. Why do you think African American and Hispanic students are successfully graduating at such high rates from Mason?

11. What specific services have you taken advantage of?

12. Were the services you took advantage of helpful? Why were they helpful?

13. Is there anything else you would like to share related to services or efforts you found helpful?
APPENDIX C. UNIVERSITY STAFF INTERVIEW GUIDE

I. Thank participant for agreeing to interview. Provide overview of interview process, share general information about research goals, and ensure confidentiality.

II. Interview Questions:
1. How long have you been working at Mason?

2. How would you describe your role?

3. What are you most proud of in what you are doing at your position here at Mason?

4. What do you see Mason doing to support student retention and college completion?

5. What do you see Mason doing to support the retention and college completion of African American and Hispanic students?

6. What student services do you know of that have been put in place to support retention and college completion of African American and Hispanic students?

7. How do you see these strategies as helping students from African American and Hispanic backgrounds graduate from Mason?

8. Are there any strategies and efforts that you believe have helped students from African American and Hispanic backgrounds graduate from Mason?

9. Are there other things that are helping African American and Hispanic students to graduate?

10. Is there anything else you would like to share related to student retention services or efforts to help African American and Hispanic students graduate from Mason?
APPENDIX D. FLYER SEEKING PARTICIPATION

Are you a graduating senior who’d like $15 for 1 hour of your time?

A Mason Doctoral Candidate is seeking GRADUATING SENIORS from African American and Hispanic ethnic backgrounds who entered George Mason University as first-time, full-time freshmen for an in-person, face-to-face interview.

Interested? Here are the details.

- The interview will take about an hour and you get $15
- The interview will take place on Mason’s campus at a time that works best for you and your schedule
- You complete a quick questionnaire and share what has helped you graduate from George Mason University
- If you are interested in participating, contact:

  Alisha Scruggs, Ph.D Candidate
  alisha.scruggs@gmail.com  617-290-0278 (cell)

*Your participation is voluntary, your identity will be kept confidential, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.
Subject: Assistance with dissertation study  
From: Alisha Scruggs <ascrugg2@gmu.edu>  
Date: September 12, 2011, 11:00am

Dear Graduating Senior,

Congratulations on your upcoming graduation! I would like to request your permission to participate in a face-to-face interview for my dissertation research. This research is being conducted to gather data on what graduating seniors and university staff believe about George Mason University’s support of high college completion rates of its African American and Hispanic students.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in an in-person, face-to-face interview sometime this fall. You will receive $15 immediately after the interview.

Your participation in an interview is completely optional. Should you agree to participate in an interview, I will work with you to schedule a time this semester that will be convenient for both of us. Prior to beginning the interview I will provide you with an informed consent letter that will detail my research procedures and provide you with resources should you have questions about my study.

If you are interested in assisting with my study please send me an email as soon as possible. I would greatly appreciate your participation in this study. Thank you so much and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Alisha Scruggs  
Ph.D Candidate, College of Education & Human Development, George Mason University  
Personal Email: alisha.scruggs@gmail.com  
Cell: 617-290-0728
APPENDIX F. RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO UNIVERSITY STAFF MEMBERS

Subject: Assistance with dissertation study

From: Alisha Scruggs <ascrugg2@gmu.edu>

Date: September 12, 2011, 11:00am

Dear University staff Member,

I would like to request your permission to participate in a face-to-face interview for my dissertation research. This research is being conducted to gather data on what graduating seniors and university staff believe about George Mason University’s support of high college completion rates of its African American and Hispanic students. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in an in-person, face-to-face interview sometime this fall.

Your participation in an interview is completely optional. Should you agree to participate in an interview, I will work with you to schedule a time this semester that will be convenient for both of us. Prior to beginning the interview I will provide you with an informed consent letter that will detail my research procedures and provide you with resources should you have questions about my study.

If you are interested in assisting with my study please send me an email as soon as possible. I would greatly appreciate your participation in this study. Thank you so much and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Alisha Scruggs
Ph.D Candidate, George Mason University
Cell: (617) 290-0728
APPENDIX G. INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR GRADUATING SENIORS

What do graduating seniors and university staff believe about George Mason University’s support of high completion rates of its African American and Hispanic students?”

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR GRADUATING SENIORS

RESEARCH PROCEDURES
This research is being conducted to explore what might be contributing to higher college completion rates, compared to national averages, among African American and Hispanic students at George Mason University from the perspective of graduating seniors from African American and Hispanic ethnic backgrounds and University staff members at George Mason University. If you agree to participate, you will be invited for a face-to-face, one-on-one, in-person interview that will last approximately 90 minutes and will be audio taped by a student researcher. Participation will be required for this face-to-face, in-person interview for one day. Being audiotaped is a requirement for transcription purposes. The objective of the study is to explore what may be contributing to high college completion rates among African American and Hispanic students at George Mason University from the perspectives of a small, but thoughtful group of participants.

RISKS
There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

BENEFITS
There are no benefits to you than sharing your opinion about what may be contributing to the high college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students at George Mason University.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The data in this study will be confidential. Participants will be audio-taped for the face-to-face, one-on-one, in-person interviews. Data will be collected via face-to-face interviews. Interview notes will not record the name of participants. The student researcher owns a personal tape recording device. This device will be used for the interviews. The tapes will be used for transcription purposes only and will be destroyed once data analysis is completed. One transcriptionist, Gabrielle Scruggs, is being paid to complete the transcription of some of the interviews. Ms. Gabrielle Scruggs will also have access to the SD card of each interview because the individual email will be emailed
electronically and/or mailed as an SD card for transcription use only. No personally identifiable information will be included on the SD card because the names of participants are not asked in the interview. The SD card that will record the interviews and the tape recording device will be stored in a locked box for the duration of the study. No one will have access to this locked box except the student researcher.

**PARTICIPATION**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party. You will be compensated for your participation in the amount of $15. The $15 will be provided at the close of the interview in an envelope for each participant. There is no non-research option for course credit for the students who decide to participate in the study.

**CONTACT**

This research is being conducted Alisha Scruggs from the College of Education & Human Development at George Mason University. She may be reached at 617-290-0728 for questions or to report a research-related problem. The faculty advisor of Ms. Scruggs is Dr. Penelope Earley and can be reached at 703-993-3361. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research. This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

**CONSENT**

The George Mason University Human Subjects Review Board has waived the requirement for a signature on this consent form.
APPENDIX H. INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR UNIVERSITY STAFF

What do graduating seniors and university staff believe about George Mason University’s support of high completion rates of its African American and Hispanic students?”

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR UNIVERSITY STAFF MEMBERS

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted to explore what might be contributing to higher college completion rates, compared to national averages, among African American and Hispanic students at George Mason University from the perspective of graduating seniors from African American and Hispanic ethnic backgrounds and University staff members at George Mason University. If you agree to participate, you will be invited for a face-to-face, one-on-one, in-person interview that will last approximately 90 minutes and will be audio taped by a student researcher. Participation will be required for this face-to-face, in-person interview for one day. Being audiotaped is a requirement for transcription purposes. The objective of the study is to explore what may be contributing to high college completion rates among African American and Hispanic students at George Mason University from the perspectives of a small, but thoughtful group of participants.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

BENEFITS

There are no benefits to you than sharing your opinion about what may be contributing to the high college completion rates of African American and Hispanic students at George Mason University.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential. Participants will be audio-taped for the face-to-face, one-on-one, in-person interviews. Data will be collected via face-to-face interviews. Interview notes will not record the name of participants. The student researcher owns a personal tape recording device. This device will be used for the interviews. The tapes will be used for transcription purposes only and will be destroyed once data analysis is completed. One transcriptionist, Gabrielle Scruggs, is being paid to complete the transcription of some of the interviews. Ms. Gabrielle Scruggs will also have access to the SD card of each interview because the individual email will be emailed electronically and/or mailed as an SD card for transcription use only. No personally identifiable information will be included on the SD card because the names of participants are not asked in the interview. The SD card that will record the interviews
and the tape recording device will be stored in a locked box for the duration of the study. No one will have access to this locked box except the student researcher.

PARTICIPATION
Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

CONTACT
This research is being conducted Alisha Scruggs from the College of Education & Human Development at George Mason University. She may be reached at 617-290-0728 for questions or to report a research-related problem. The faculty advisor of Ms. Scruggs is Dr. Penelope Earley and can be reached at 703-993-3361. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research. This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT
The George Mason University Human Subjects Review Board has waived the requirement for a signature on this consent form.
APPENDIX I. PAYMENT FORM FOR GRADUATING SENIORS

Protocol 7306 (Amendment – August 2011)
Payment for Graduating Senior Participants:

I am aware that I will receive a $15 monetary payment in return for my participation. By dating and signing the enclosed form, I am acknowledging that I have received the $15 monetary payment from the researcher, Alisha Scruggs, in return for my participation.

Date: _________________________________
Signature of participant: ______________________________________________________
Printed name of participant: ____________________________________________________

I have fully explained the purpose and nature of the research project described above as well as any risks and benefits to the participant that may be involved. I have asked if the participant has any questions and have answered them to the best of my ability.

Date: _________________________________________________
Signature of researcher: ________________________________________________
Printed name of researcher: __________________________________________
REFERENCES
REFERENCES


U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences. (2009) Appendix B:


Woosley, S. (2003). How important are the first few weeks in college? The long term
effects of initial college experiences. *College Student Journal, 37*(2), 201-208.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Alisha K. Scruggs has been working in education for over thirteen years. Alisha Scruggs graduated from Brookline High School in Brookline, MA in 1999. She received her Bachelor of Science degree in Political Science from Haverford College in 2003. She began her career in education as a Teach for America teacher in the Atlanta Public Schools where she taught third grade for three years. She received a post-baccalaureate degree in Early Childhood Education from Agnes Scott College in 2006. She received her Master in Social Policy degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 2007. She spent three years with a Washington-based non-profit organization, Reach for College!, where she worked with high school teachers to improve the college readiness skills of secondary students. In 2011, she began her federal career with the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education in the U.S. Department of Education as a Management and Program Analyst. She has served as a member of the College Completion Task Force and Office of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Special Projects Data Team. In 2012, she completed the Emerging Political Leader Fellowship Program with the Leadership for Educational Equity organization and hopes to become a school board member in the future.