To break away or strengthen ties to home: A complex issue for African American college students attending predominantly white institutions

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Abstract
African American students and former students from a predominantly White institution (PWI) were interviewed to understand their perceptions regarding the impact of their families on their academic achievement and persistence. The characteristics of families that students perceived to support and hinder their academic success at college are described along with implications for improving African American college student retention theory and practice.

Research has indicated that strong involvement from families is crucial to children’s educational success (Clark, 1983; Eagle, 1989; Epstein, 1996; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Milne, 1989). However, the importance of families to African American college student academic achievement and persistence is still being debated. Much of this debate is centered on Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Student Departure regarding the process by which students become integrated into the life of the university. Based on Van Gennep’s (1960) research investigating transitions from childhood to adulthood among members of tribal societies, Tinto asserted that successful integration into college required that students separate from their past associations, which included breaking away from their families.

Although Tinto’s (1993) model is among the most widely cited for understanding the student departure process, questions have arisen regarding the applicability of the model to students of color who attend PWIs. Moore and Upcraft (1990) argued that theories of student
development like Tinto’s fail to account for cultural variables such as parental roles and community commitment, which often create different developmental dynamics for minority students. Other researchers have contended that Tinto’s theory places too much emphasis on the need for students to adapt to the college environment rather than focusing on systemic or institutional change that accommodates students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Hurtado, 1997; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1999). Additionally, Tierney (1992) argued that Van Gennep’s transitional model, used by Tinto to explain the need to break away from home, is not applicable to college students of color because the model was intended to describe developmental progression within a culture rather than assimilation from one culture to another. Given that minority student’s cultural backgrounds often differ significantly from the Eurocentric frameworks upon which the norms and values at PWIs are based, Tierney (1992) argued that this mistaken extraction of Van Gennep’s theory was potentially harmful to ethnic minority students because it encouraged separation from supportive relationships.

Criticisms regarding the failure of Tinto’s (1993) theory to accurately describe the experiences of students of color have been supported by a number of studies. In fact, several researchers have concluded that family support was a strong predictor of persistence for students of color who attended PWIs (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Eimers & Pike, 1996; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999; Hendricks, Smith, Caplow, & Donaldson, 1996; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Although these studies did not specify the types of support that were important, other research has explored the support that students of color received from their home communities in more detail. For example, results of qualitative studies investigating the experiences of Latina (Rosas & Hambrick, 2002), Chicano (Gonzalez, 2002), and Chicana (Delgado, 2002) students indicated
that these minority students perceived their families as among their most important assets at college because they provided them with cultural connections, strategies for dealing with oppression, and strong encouragement and inspiration to succeed. While these qualitative studies did not include the perspectives of African American students, the results support other research indicating that Tinto’s (1993) theory does not accurately describe the attrition/persistence decisions of students of color.

However, while prior research has strongly challenged Tinto’s theory regarding the need for minority students to break away from home, there is also evidence suggesting that close relationships to home can hinder minority students’ academic progress at college. Arnold (1993), in a longitudinal study of minority high school valedictorians, and Sanchez, Marder, Berry, and Ross (1992), in a qualitative study of Hispanic college students, found that students perceived their obligations to home as contributing to poor academic achievement and attrition. Additionally, although Rosas and Hamrick’s (2002) results supported the importance of family to Latina student retention, they also noted that all of the successful students in their study chose to attend college out-of-state, even though many of them described serving important head-of-household roles at home. Similarly, Delgado (2002) concluded that although close relationships with family provided strong inspiration to Chicana students, these connections also created “emotional burdens” and additional responsibilities at college (p. 633). Terenzini and associates (1994), in another qualitative study with 132 culturally diverse students at five different types of universities, also found that minority students perceived their parents as having a hard time letting go of them as they transitioned to college, which created additional anxiety about their transitions that was “probably unimaginied by most middle class white students, faculty members, and administrators” (p. 66).
Census research suggests that surface characteristics that are positively correlated with educational attainment, such as family income level (Mortenson, 1993; Ottinger, 1991) and parental education (US Department of Education, 1998), may impact whether families support or hinder African American students at PWIs. Research indicates that first-generation college students have limited access to information about the college experience (Willett, 1989), perceived less support from their families for attending college (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991; Billson & Terry, 1982), and that these difficulties were compounded for students of color (Skinner, 1992). Based on this research, one could hypothesize that African American students who gain the most support from their families are those from upper-income households whose parents have experiences in higher education. This research would also suggest that students from low-income households who have not been to college might be more likely to benefit from breaking away from their families to successfully transition to college. This hypothesis was supported by Arnold (1993) who concluded, “a family without economic stability or values for formal education can impede the academic achievement of even an able, motivated student” (p. 268).

Yet attributing the impact of the family on academic achievement and persistence to family surface characteristics directly conflicts with the results from Gonzalez (2002), who found that Chicano first-generation college students who were from working-class households perceived their families as their most important support at PWIs. This hypothesis also conflicts with the results from Clarke (1983), who, in a qualitative study with low-income Black high school students and their families, found that activity patterns between parents and children were much more important than family income level or level of education in understanding the effects of families on academic achievement. He concluded that researchers who focus on family
surface characteristics to explain educational achievement are “ignoring the essential character of the family environment” (p. 3).

Research that has identified family as highly supportive to students of color at college indicates an unmistakable limitation to Tinto’s (1993) theory in describing the experiences of minority students. However, there is much that remains unknown regarding the influence of the family on African American college student academic achievement and persistence. To begin, research has not explored this question solely from the perspectives of African American college students at PWIs, which may be distinct from the experiences of other students of color. Second, while research has identified the potential for families of students of color to both support and hinder academic success at college, the ways in which this occurs remain unclear. Third, although family income and level of education are positively correlated with academic attainment, research has not identified if these demographic characteristics are important from the students’ perspectives.

The purpose of this study was to understand the ways in which African American students at a PWI perceived their families as impacting their academic achievement and persistence. This included understanding the conditions under which families were perceived as supporting and hindering students’ academic achievement as well as investigating which demographic characteristics emerged as important from the students’ perspectives. The results support the need to modify Tinto’s (1993) theory in a manner that reflects the complex relationships among African American students and their families. Moreover, implications are provided for improving the ways in which high school and college personnel support African American students and their families during transitions to PWIs.
Methods

To understand the influence of families from the students’ perspectives, qualitative methods based on the constant comparative method of data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were used. This method allowed important constructs to emerge from the students’ perspectives. It has been argued that qualitative methods are more appropriate for examining the subtle and fine-grained complexities involved in the study of college student development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) and retention (Tinto, 1993) by allowing researchers an “insiders perspective on a phenomenon that would not have been perceived through quantitative measures” (Walters, 2001, p. 184). Rather than attempting to make generalizations about the influence of all African American students’ families, this study was designed to uncover patterns in students’ perceptions of these relationships in order to generate new hypotheses for future research.

Sample

A total of 99 African Americans from a midsize (under 11,000 undergraduates), predominantly White (less than 7.5% African American), private research institution located in the Northeastern United States volunteered to participate in this study. To increase the chances of gaining diverse perspectives regarding the influence of families, purposeful sampling was used to recruit students from various levels of academic achievement. The sample included 15 students who had left the university prior to graduation (leavers), 65 academically low-achieving students (low achievers), and 19 academically high-achieving students (high achievers).

Initially, students were not screened or subdivided by categories other than their self-identified level of academic achievement in order to allow important constructs to emerge from the perspectives of the students; however, after the first round of interviews, it became necessary
to gather additional demographic information that students’ described as important, which included their families’ level of income and educational attainment. Information regarding family income level was obtained, with permission from the students, from the university’s office of financial aid and reported based on level of financial need. Rather than reporting the actual family income, level of need accounts for economic variables such as size of the family and number of students attending college. Financial need was represented by one of three categories: high need, medium need, or low/no need. Family member’s levels of educational attainment were obtained from student self report. Additional information regarding the participants representing each group of academic achievement level is presented below.

**Leavers.** African American students who had left prior to graduation between 1995-2000 were identified for the leavers group using university student records. Students dismissed due to judicial affairs infractions were not included as it was not the university’s policy to contact judicial withdrawals. From an initial pool of 81 leavers, I was able to contact 15 by phone who agreed to participate in the study. Leaver’s class standing at the time of departure ranged from early in their first semester to midway through their senior year, with the average length of stay being 5.25 semesters. GPAs, collected from student self-reports and confirmed on the University’s student records system, ranged from a 0 to a 3.86. Four leavers said they had transferred and completed their bachelor’s degrees, five said they were enrolled at other institutions at the time of the interview, and six said they had not taken classes since leaving the University. At the time of their departure, 7 leavers were listed as being in high financial need, 5 were listed as medium need, and no leavers were listed as having low/no need. Information regarding family need was not available for three of the leavers.
Low achievers. Low achievers volunteered to participate in this study as part of their participation in a voluntary, six-week academic enrichment program designed to serve low-achieving students. The program defined low achievement as academic probation, suspension, or students who provided documentation from faculty that they had performed below their academic potential. Of the 65 African American participants, there were 14 freshman, 31 sophomores, 11 juniors, and 8 seniors. Grade point averages for low achievers at the time they inquired about the program (spring 1999) ranged from 0 to 2.5 with the average GPA for this group being a 2.17. In addition, 81% of the program’s students were listed as being in high financial need.

High achievers. To diversify the sample to include the perspectives of academically higher-achieving students, flyers were posted around campus soliciting the participation of students who self-identified as “high achieving African American students.” No GPA was specified on the advertisements so that students could self-identify as high achieving. High achievers were also identified through snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), in which participants were asked to recommend other students for the study whom they believed to be high achieving. Nineteen high-achieving students volunteered to participate (2 freshman, 5 sophomores, 6 juniors, and 6 seniors). GPAs for this group ranged from a 2.8 to 3.93 with an average GPA of 3.18. There were 10 high achievers who were listed as being in high financial need, 7 who were categorized as medium need, and 2 who were listed as low/no need.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Straus, 1967). This inductive approach involves constant juggling on the part of the researcher between collecting data and developing working hypotheses. This iterative process continues
until data reaches a point of saturation; that is, when the data become redundant and the researcher learns a decreasing amount relative to the time spent (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998).

Although I preferred to interview the leavers in person, the list of leaver’s addresses indicated that most leavers had moved from the area; therefore, I chose to interview them initially by telephone. The interviews began open ended by asking leavers to describe the events leading up to the time they left the university and/or the circumstances under which they left. Several students commented on the impact of their families on their attrition decisions; however, a few students did not initiate the topic of family from this initial, open-ended question. In these cases, students were asked directly to describe the influence of their families on their college experiences.

After an initial round of coding and data analysis, follow-up interviews were conducted with leavers. During one of the first phone interviews, a leaver mentioned that her busy schedule made it difficult for her to find time to conduct the follow-up interviews by phone and she asked if I could provide her with follow-up questions via email. I then began offering all leavers the option of answering follow-up questions via phone or mail and all of the leavers chose the email alternative. Consistent with the constant comparative method (Glazer & Strauss, 1967), questions in the follow-up interviews were more focused to allow me to follow-up on themes raised in the initial interviews. One example of a follow-up question was, “You mentioned that your family did not help you financially while at college. Do you believe they were unable to help?” Follow-up contacts via email also allowed me to gain demographic information that became relevant from the student perspectives and was not available to me in student records, which included asking about parent and sibling levels of academic attainment.
Data were collected from high achievers and low achievers in small focus groups and individual face-to-face interviews. Similar to the interviews with the leavers, initial interviews began open-ended to allow the participants to shape what was studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Students were asked to begin by describing assets to their college experiences. This included asking them to give specific examples of their experiences in as much detail as possible. Later in the interviews they were also asked to describe any stumbling blocks or things they considered liabilities to their success at college. Although students raised several different themes, influences of families arose at some time from students in every focus group and individual interview. Individual follow-up interviews began more targeted to allow students to expand upon themes generated during the groups. This included asking them to clarify statements they made during the group interviews (e.g. could you give an example of how your family supported you emotionally while at college) or to check with members regarding hypotheses generated during the first round of data analysis (e.g. students seemed to indicate that supportive families tried not to disrupt students while at college. Would you agree with that?).

After an initial round of open coding, in which I identified patterns across the data, I began a process of inter-category integration (Shelly & Sibert, 1992) that allowed me to identify salient differences that emerged among students in the various levels of academic achievement. I was guided in my analysis by Becker and Geer’s (1960) recommendations for determining relative strength and intensity of manifestations. This included counting the number of times a category or theme emerged relative to negative cases (instances that ran counter to the proposition that students shared a particular perspective regarding the impact of family) and how widely the contextual and temporal ranges of the data were distributed. In addition, an extensive audit trail was used to reduce potential biases in data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). This
included detailed documentation of field notes and memos that addressed researcher observations and reflections. I also met weekly with a qualitative research group throughout the process of data collection and analysis. In these peer-debriefing meetings (Mishler, 2000) members monitored each other’s work to point out potential biases and illogical conclusions from the data. I was assisted in the process of data analysis by QUALOG (Shelly & Sibert, 1992), a LOGLISP application designed to aid researchers in managing and organizing qualitative textual data.

Results

Students raised a number of important influences to their college experiences, including their relationships with faculty, advisors, and peers. While insight into each of these factors is important in understanding the experiences of these students, the results of this paper will focus solely on students’ perceptions of their families. Specifically, notable differences arose among the ways in which high achievers described the influence of their families on their academic achievement and persistence when compared to the perspectives shared by low achievers and leavers. High achievers frequently mentioned the emotional, academic, and financial support they received from their families as among their most important assets while at college. Often with smiles on their faces, they would use phrases like “they are my backbone” or “my inspiration” in describing just how important this support was to them. Leavers and low achievers, on the other hand, frequently described lack of support from their families as contributing to their attrition. Qualitative analysis of these diverse perspectives allowed me to identify conditions under which families were perceived as supporting and hindering students’ academic achievement and persistence. In keeping with the inductive nature of this inquiry, I will then link these results to a psychodynamic model that focuses on the intergenerational
transmission of familial role assignments as a way of enhancing the applicability of Tinto’s (1993) theory of breaking away to African American students’ transitions to PWIs.

**Emotional and Academic Support**

High achievers described several ways in which their families lent them emotional support. To begin, a number of high achievers talked about how they were always receiving encouragement while at school in the form of cards, letters, and e-mails. This student explained the importance of this support.

My daddy left me a really nice message the other day. I don’t get to talk to them that often because I am never home. I am always off studying or in class or at work so I am never home. But they always send me e-mails or leave messages to let me know they are thinking of me and miss me and stuff like that. Just knowing that someone is actually behind me and by my side is great.

These contacts inspired them by reinforcing the importance of doing well at college. Whether they had graduate degrees or had not finished high school, parents of high achievers recognized their children’s academic accomplishments as important and were extremely proud of them, often bragging about them to whoever would listen. This created what the students referred to as a “nice” type of pressure to continue to do well in order to make their parents and families proud.

In addition to sending praise and encouragement, families of high achievers were also perceived by high achievers as their most trusted allies and friends when confronted with problems at school. Even from considerable distances, high achievers said that they generally turned to their families first for emotional support when problems arose. This student, whose parents were over 2000 miles away, explained why she preferred to keep things in the family.
It’s a lot easier for me to talk to my parents than to talk to other people so I always talk to my parents. I rarely ever talk to other people. I have this idea that, it’s in my head that, if there’s a problem then I should be able to fix it and if I can’t fix it, then my family should be the next people to help me; and so that’s just the way I get through those situations. To me there is no situation that is so bad that I would need to go and ask for outside help.

High achievers valued emotional support from their families for a number of reasons. For some, it was simply a family norm not to share problems with others outside their family. Other students said they felt as if no one else could understand them as well as their family. Even though these students were academically successful, all of them had experienced difficulty at college at some point. For most of the high achieving students, it was their families who listened to their problems, empathized with them, and encouraged them to stay their course. Examples of this emotional support arose most often in the data when they were asked if they had ever felt like leaving the college and if so, to explain why they chose to stay. One example of this was a female student who felt alienated by her peers when she moved onto an all-White floor. Instead of going to her RA or a college counselor, she sought support first from her mother. The following is the beginning of this student’s account of how important her mother was in emotionally supporting her at college.

She is my backbone, my best friend, my everything. She is my role model. She is one of the strongest women I have ever met. There is nothing that will ever stop her. She has a strong faith and belief in God and she always tells me, “you know what baby, with God for you, nobody can be against you so you go up there and you do what you have to do.” And there has been times when I call and I am
Like last year, when nobody was speaking to us on our floor, she was like, “you know what, you keep on speaking to them and you keep on saying hello. Kill them with kindness and do not back down. You don’t have anything to be ashamed of so you still speak to them. You don’t let them change you; you change them and if not, then oh well but don’t let them harden you. Don’t let that make you say you are not going to speak to them anymore”, she said, “because then you will be doing that for the rest of you life”!

Stories of inspiration and support from families appeared repeatedly in data from high achievers. Some, because of busy schedules and tight budgets, talked with family only on a weekly basis, while others stressed the need to speak to their family members everyday. Regardless of how often they spoke, it was clear that the high achievers in this study considered family among their most important means of emotional support.

Unlike the high achievers, leavers and low achievers rarely discussed their families when describing emotional support they received at college. In fact, many described emotional strain resulting from extenuating family circumstances as contributing to their poor academic achievement or attrition. For example, a few leavers, when asked to describe the events leading up to the time they left the institution, described family tragedies ranging from family members who were ill to those who had been victims of violence. One student said she left school because her brother was killed. Another student said he needed to leave school to take care of his mother after she was shot. In these examples, the students viewed their attrition as necessary to lend emotional support to their families.

However, data from low achievers and leavers also contained less drastic instances in which students perceived their obligations to lend support to their families as contributing to
their attrition or low academic achievement. Many described feeling pressure, either self-imposed or overtly expressed from their families, to go home frequently to tend to head of household duties that they believed no one else in the family was capable of doing in their absences. This included paying bills, disciplining younger siblings, or caring for distant relatives. While aware of the consequences that this continual support of their families had on their academic achievement, lending this support to home was viewed as their most important commitment while at college.

Conversely, perceptions of pressure to fulfill household duties or to lend emotional support at home did not appear in any of the interviews with high achievers. This was not because their families did not experience emotional difficulties. Several high achievers described personal tragedies at home that occurred while they were enrolled. However, rather than encouraging them to come home to lend support, as leavers and low achievers described, the families of high achievers encouraged, or as one student put it, “forced” them to stay in school. There was a value present in the families of high achievers to let nothing interfere with their students’ success at college, regardless of the needs of the family. In fact, several high achievers said that their families often kept problems at home a secret from them because they feared it would compromise their success at college, as this student explained, “Like I never know what’s going on and a lot of times, especially if something bad is going on, they won’t tell me because I am a worrier and they know I will stress if I know.”

In addition to high achievers gaining emotional support from families during trying times, high achievers also described their families as their most important academic counselors. Rather than going to their advisors for advice regarding career guidance and course selection, they consulted with members of their families first. From family, they were encouraged to
follow their hearts and to take chances in trying new things, which often ran counter to the practical advice given to them by faculty. After doing poorly on a test, many would go to faculty for help with content or to make their presence known, but they would go to their families for academic encouragement, usually hearing things like, “we have faith in you” or “all that matters is if you do your best.” High achievers described the academic encouragement they received from their families as among their most important assets at college.

In addition to receiving academic encouragement, some high achievers also described their parents as their most important academic advisors at college. After a student in a focus group finished explaining how her academic counselor had been extremely helpful making sure she budgeted her time well, went to class, and spent proper time studying, one student responded with the following story of why he felt he didn’t need that type of support from a counselor:

My mom, she, [laughs] she was like those counselors except it was over the phone. She would be like, are you doing your work? I remember one time she called at 3 am and I had just walked in from the bar and was like, uh [group laughing]. So she always had me walking up the right road. I don’t know, just having someone who, you know, who believes in you and wants to hear you do good. That definitely helps having that support.

One might assume that it would be those parents who had been to college who would be most likely and able to lend academic and emotional support. After all, they would be able to relate better to college life and value a degree more than those who had never attended. Indeed, high achievers whose parents had college degrees often attributed the examples set by their parents and their familiarity with the college experience as important to their own success. Many
also said that they had been groomed for college by their parents since as far back as they could
remember, often saying that not attending post secondary education was not an option.

However, high achievers who described themselves as first-generation college students
also expressed receiving a tremendous amount of emotional and academic support from their
families. These students described family members who had experienced first-hand the
disadvantages of life without an education and they vowed not to let their children face the same
fate. Often preparing them since elementary school, the expectations were clear that their
children would do better than they did: They would go to college and get a degree no matter
what the costs and they did everything they could to support them while they were enrolled. The
following statement by one high achiever who was a first generation college student summarizes
this parental dedication.

My mother has always told me, “I want you to do everything I didn’t get a chance
to do and I want you to have everything that I didn’t have”. So from little on, she
said, “I didn’t go to college and you are going to college. I had a baby as a
teenager and you are not going to do that. I didn’t get married; you are going to
get married.” Everything she didn’t do, she has instilled it in me. There was no,
“college isn’t for everybody and maybe you won’t go.” No, it was, “you are
going and you have to work your butt off to get there.” I believe that’s why I am
here.

Many high achievers who were first generation college students actually attributed, as a
key ingredient to their success, having the value of education stressed to them their entire lives
and receiving constant praise, support, and encouragement from home. This type of academic
advice and support was also given to them by older siblings and extended family who regretted
taking paths other than going to college. The most dramatic example of this was a student whose older brother, now in prison, was continually lending the student academic encouragement and advice. Rather than viewing his brother’s circumstances as a liability, this student explained how it actually motivated him to do well in school.

The negative influences are not always negative to me; that’s how I see it. For example, my brother is in jail right now and him being in jail is not a negative influence on me because it’s more motivation for me. I mean if I talk to him it’s not so much like “you should feel bad for me”, it’s more “you should not do what I do; you should learn from my mistakes.” So in that sense, the situation, sometimes the negative situation that my relatives have been in has been motivation for me to stay out of those situations, just from watching them transpire.

Without exception, high achievers in this study who described themselves as first-generation college students believed their family circumstances actually contributed to their high achievement. Although their parents could not help with homework and could not assist them in navigating the college environment, they did everything they could to support them. Armed with this emotional and academic support, they were motivated to blaze the college trail for others in their home communities. Not only was it important for them to live up to their families expectations and to make them proud, they also saw it as their mission to set a new example for younger siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews, and neighbors.

Overall, high achievers described the emotional and academic support they received from their families as one of their most important assets at college. Rather than relying on the students to support them, families of high achievers did not let family problems interfere with the
students’ academics. This underscored the families dedication to their students excelling at school and reiterated their commitment to doing everything they could to support this goal. Unlike the leavers and low achievers, who felt guilty for being away or obligated to help at home, high achievers perceived their families as asking nothing of them but to do their best at school.

**Financial Support**

Another important theme that emerged across the data was related to financial support from families. Although the majority of the students in all three groups came from families in high financial need, some important differences among the perceptions of high achievers, low achievers and leavers emerged when describing the financial assistance they received from their families.

High achievers talked extensively about the financial support they received from their families as important to their academic success. This support ranged from helping with tuition to sending small checks for spending money. Regardless of the amount, the financial support was attributed by high achievers as having practical implications on their abilities to excel in school. One student told of her extended family pitching in to buy her a laptop computer because she was experiencing difficulty accessing the public computer labs. Another student said her parents sent her money to travel to a professional conference, which she believed would help her get into graduate school. One important implication of this financial support was that it allowed students to concentrate fully on their academics. This allowed some to take heavier credit loads. It gave others time to participate in student organizations or to work on outside research with faculty. This high achiever described how this support allowed him to concentrate on academics.
All I have to do is be here and enjoy myself and do well. If I ever need help, like I’m not supposed to worry about it. I will work here but if I ever had financial problems, I could call up so and so and they would say don’t worry about it, I will send you money. I’m not going to call them for no reason but it’s just, I mean it feels really good knowing you have people there when you need them.

As this student mentioned, in addition to allowing them to time to concentrate on academic and extra-curricular pursuits, receiving money from home also gave students the feeling that their education was important and valued by their families. Rather than feeling guilty for taking away from scarce family resources, high achievers consistently talked about these sacrifices as motivating them to do well.

This was not the case for the leavers and low achievers when describing the financial impact of attending college on their families. In fact, financial assistance from home arose most often from leavers and low achievers when describing liabilities to their college experiences. Several of the leavers said they felt their parents should have helped more with their college expenses. Although they recognized their parent’s limited financial resources, they believed that even small amounts of financial support would have helped with additional living expenses. For example, this leaver, when asked to describe the impact of her family on her college experience replied, “They didn’t have any impact whatsoever. Like financially, like I will put $100 on your bill or I will send you some money for laundry or whatever else you need. Things like that they didn’t do at all.”

Several leavers and low achievers said that more financial support from home would have assisted them at college by reducing their stress about bills and by providing them more resources for books and incidental expenses. Most important to these students, however, was the
impression they received that their families did not value their academic pursuits. In other words, money for laundry, which was a relatively small expense when compared to tuition and room and board, would have meant more to them in symbolizing the family’s support and willingness to make sacrifices for them than in actually affecting their financial burdens.

Other leavers who received financial assistance from home said they felt guilty or selfish for taking money away from their struggling families. One leaver said he decided to leave school when his aid was reduced even though his mother had offered to draw money from her retirement account to make up the difference. This leaver, when describing why he left college, explained how difficult it was for him to see his parents suffering financially because of his educational aspirations.

It became a burden, especially on my parents. Every month my parents had to pay almost $1000 and at that time my parents weren’t working. Plus, I have 3 other brothers so it was really a hardship so due to the fact of that, I couldn’t watch my parents getting hosed like that. I talked to my parents about it and ended up saying, well, I see where they are coming from. They really enjoyed the school but it was the cost.

Unlike the high achievers, who cited financial sacrifices by their families as motivating them to do well at school, leavers felt a tremendous sense of guilt for the burden they were creating. Faced with parents who were struggling to makes ends meet, many of these students opted to leave college rather than continuing to see their families struggle financially.

Similarly, low achievers also described a sense of guilt for taking away from the family’s financial resources as a reason for their poor academic achievement. However, unlike the leavers, who chose to drop out, many of the low achievers committed themselves to making it
without assistance from their families. This student explained why she refused to accept money from home, even though her mother continually offered to help her whenever she could.

My mom says not to work too much and that I should concentrate more on school but I am the oldest of four and it is just her taking care of us. I don’t want to burden her and my sisters with my stupid bills so I would rather just do it myself.

Doing it herself meant working up to 35 hours a week between work-study and outside jobs. It also involved limiting social activities and extras like cable television and long-distance telephone calls. Although this placed enormous time commitments and stress on these students, many low achievers saw it as a more viable option than accepting money from their struggling families.

Examining data across categories of financial need (no need, low need, or high need) revealed that students’ perceptions of strong financial support from home were not limited to those from high-income families. In fact, several students who were from households listed as being in high financial need felt strong financial support. However, a more distinct pattern emerged when examining students’ perceptions of financial support among categories of academic achievement. All high achievers, regardless of their family income, expressed at some point during their interviews that they felt the financial support they received from their families was an asset to their academic achievement. Perceptions of strong financial support from home appeared much less frequently in data collected from low achievers and leavers.

Discussion

Data from leavers and low achievers indicated that many students perceived their obligations to their families as contributing to their attrition or poor academic performance. Often, the inability to break ties at home was manifested by frequent visits to help out the family,
or to find a social connection that they lacked on campus. Not only did these visits interfere with their ability to complete assignments, but they also hindered them from becoming socially integrated into the campus community. Additionally, many leavers and low achievers perceived little emotional and financial support from their families to stay in college, which created the perception that their education was not valued. These data from leavers and low achievers partially support Tinto’s (1993) theory regarding the value of separating from the home community and indicate ways in which families were perceived by students as hindering academic achievement and persistence.

However, data from this study also indicate that high-achieving African American students perceived their families as among their most important assets at college. This finding supports research indicating the potential for families to become important assets to African American students attending PWIs (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Eimers & Pike, 1996; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999; Hendricks et al., 1996; Hines, 1997; Nora & Cabrera, 1996) and strengthens assertions regarding the limitations of Tinto’s (1993) theory in describing the experiences of students of color (Hurtado, 1997; Moore & Upcraft, 1990; Rendon, Jaloma, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1999). However, in addition to supporting critiques of Tinto’s model, the results of the current study also expand our understanding of the African American experience at PWIs by identifying conditions under which relationships with families support success at college.

While it is difficult to challenge the strong positive correlation among family income level and college degree attainment (Mortenson, 1993), students in this study did not emphasize their families’ surface characteristics, such as income and parental level of education, when describing the support they received from families. These results suggest that other factors, such
as students’ perceptions of their family’s financial sacrifices, are just as important in encouraging and supporting students as the actual amount of money they receive from them. Although some students left college or refused to accept help from home for fear of taking away from scarce family resources, other students in similar financial circumstances perceived their family’s financial sacrifices as motivation to succeed. While there are several models used to explain the effects of economic influences on persistence, such as economic cost/benefit approaches (e.g., St. John, Kirshstein, & Noell, 1991), and models that examine students’ perceptions of affordability/financial aid (e.g., Cabrera, Nora, & Castanada, 1992, 1993), the results of the current study suggest the need to also understand students’ perceptions of their family’s financial sacrifices when assessing the impact of economic influences on African American student retention.

Additionally, both first and second-generation high achievers placed significant emphasis on the educational attainment of their parents when elaborating on the parental support they received. Not surprisingly, high achievers who were second-generation college students said it was helpful to have parents who could assist with homework, finances, and who understood the college process. Studies have indicated that these benefits are important factors in college retention (Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Willett, 1989). What was surprising, however, were the high achieving, first-generation college students in this study who attributed their parents’ lack of college as important to their successes. This is in direct contrast to much of the retention literature, which has indicated that first-generation college students received less support from their families when attending college (Billson & Terry, 1982; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Although their families were not able to give them direct advice about navigating the college environment, first-generation college students attributed much of their success to the
encouragement their families provided to improve their social and economic statuses by succeeding in college. Data from high achievers indicates that parents who did not go to college and who are not in high income brackets can be just as supportive as those parents with college degrees and high incomes.

These results highlight the importance of understanding African American students’ relationships with their parents when examining their transitions to PWIs. Students’ decisions whether to separate or strengthen relationships with their families involved a complex balance between fulfilling their own needs without neglecting the needs of their families. While some students were able to negotiate this transition with the help of their families, others felt hampered by familial obligations, diminished support, and guilt for taking away from scarce financial resources. Although this aspect of transitioning may not be unique to African Americans, the perspectives of students in this study highlight the need to elaborate Tinto’s (1993) model in a way that recognizes the significance of relationships within families to students’ transitions to college.

One valuable framework for conceptualizing this complex process is to examine students’ perspectives regarding transitioning from home to college through the lens of an intergenerational model that focuses on familial role assignments. According to Steirlin (1974), role assignments that become problematic for children during separation stages are manifested in one of three parent/child transactional modes: (a) The binding role, where parents interact with children in ways that keep them locked into the family; (b) the delegating role, when the child moves out of the household to fulfill the parental objectives but remains tied to them by loyalty and guilt; and (c) the expelling mode, where parents reject their children’s attempts at individuation which forces early separation. London (1989) found that this framework was
particularly useful in understanding the experiences of first-generation college students. In his qualitative study, he concluded that some first-generation students experienced “break-away guilt” as they attempted to transition from home to college.

Data from this study supports the notion that family role assignments impact transitions to college for African American students. Some leavers and low achievers described their obligations to lend emotional and financial support to their families and their guilt for taking away from scarce family resources as a significant liability to their college experiences. According to Steirlin (1974), these students were caught in a double bind that is inherent to the role of family delegate. As they struggled to enhance the family image by attending college, they also felt obligated to continue their roles as family providers, supporters, and paternal comforters. For leavers, the tension of fulfilling both obligations became so overwhelming that they opted to return home rather than face expulsion from the family. This tension was also described by low achievers; however, rather than returning home, these students attempted to fulfill their roles as students while maintaining the support they lent to their parents. As a result, low achievers caught in this bind described their families as a liability to their academic achievement.

High achievers, on the other hand, felt strong support from their families to complete their academic degrees. While families of low achievers and leavers relied on students to provide them with emotional and financial support, supportive families strived to let nothing interfere with students’ academic success. Instead of expressing fear or apprehension about losing them, supportive families allowed and encouraged students to change and grow socially and intellectually. Rather than being critical of their educational environment, supportive families attempted to understand students’ educational surroundings in order to provide advice
and direction. These families facilitated students’ transitions to college by allowing them to maintain statuses as caring, contributing members of their families while, at the same time, respecting their autonomy. For African American students whose families provide emotional, academic, and financial support, and who allow and encourage their children to make healthy separations when transitioning to college, it appears important for students to strengthen these relationships to succeed at PWIs.

Implications

Readers should use caution when interpreting the significance of these results. This was a small, single-institutional sample in which students from each level of academic achievement were not equally represented. It is important to note that success or failure at college is influenced by numerous factors not addressed in this study, including prior academic preparation, involvement with peers, and relationships with faculty (Astin, 1996). However, the distinct pattern that emerged from the perspectives of the students in this study regarding the impact of families on academic achievement and retention has implications for improving practice and future research. The significance that students placed on their families indicates that modifications should be considered when applying Tinto’s (1993) model of student persistence to African Americans attending PWIs. Although Tinto’s model recognizes the family as important in shaping students’ pre-college goals, it should be expanded to note the saliency of parental emotional and academic support once students arrive at college and the complex, interconnected pattern that exists among African American students and their families. In addition, investigating students’ perceptions of their family’s financial sacrifices can enhance models seeking to explain the role of economic influences on African American student persistence.
These results also suggest the potential for high school teachers, counselors, and administrators to assist in preparing African American students and their families for their transitions to PWIs. High School personnel can assist students in developing strategies to both ask for and accept help from home when needed in ways that coincide with the norms and culture of their families. In addition, counselors and teachers can be instrumental in helping students identify the complex, unique challenges they may face when attempting to integrate into their college environments without losing their connections to home. The results also indicate that students who perceived their parents as making reasonable financial sacrifices to help them attend college gained motivation for succeeding. Helping parents understand the significance of their financial assistance, even assistance that requires minute financial sacrifices from families, may provide a wealth of motivation to students without making them feel guilty for taking away from scarce family resources. Most importantly, teachers and counselors can be instrumental in preparing students and families for the emotional losses they may experience as the students transition to college.

These results also have implications for college faculty, staff, and administrators at PWIs who are interested in supporting and retaining their African American students. Implementing support programs designed to include and collaborate with families and other important members of their home communities, including freshman orientation programs that emphasize connecting college support staff with families, will allow academic advisors and counselors to serve as vital links between their homes and the universities. In addition, data from this study suggests that parents who did not attend college can be incredibly supportive; however, they may struggle in providing the practical advice students need to navigate college systems. Colleges can assist in these transitions by connecting African American students and their parents with academic
counselors and advisors who are knowledgeable about these systems and who are sensitive to their experiences.

Finally, because many African American students who attend PWIs are from low-income households in urban areas, transportation is often difficult for families who wish to visit. Just as many recruitment programs have chartered transportation for recruitment visits, institutions committed to retaining African American students could also make transportation available to families for visits throughout the academic year. Transportation would allow family members to learn about students’ college experiences first-hand and enhance the ways in which they can support students while at school.

More research is needed to understand the impact of students’ perceptions of their families’ financial sacrifices to their academic achievement and persistence. In addition, future studies should investigate the ways in which colleges collaborate with support people from the students’ home communities. While the current study provided useful information on the students’ perceptions of families, little is known regarding the experiences of these family members. Studies designed to understand the perspectives of students’ families will enhance our abilities to effectively work with families to support African American students.
References


