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Institutional Fit and Persistence Among Traditional and Non-Traditional African American Men in Community Colleges

William M. Johnson, Sr.
Bowie State University

ABSTRACT

This study examined differences in perceptions of the collegiate environment between traditional and non-traditional African American male community college students, using secondary data from the Community College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CCSEQ). The analytic sample ($N = 156$) was drawn from a national dataset of respondents across eight institutions. A non-parametric Mann–Whitney U test assessed group differences on eight environment items, while an independent-samples t -test compared standardized scale means. Results indicated a significant difference on one item: traditional students reported a higher willingness to reenroll if given the chance to start over compared to their non-traditional peers. Scale-level analyses confirmed that traditional students perceived the overall environment more favorably than non-traditional students. Findings highlight two key contributions: first, age operates as a moderating dimension of persistence for African American men, shaping institutional satisfaction and reenrollment intent; second, non-traditional students' positive peer and faculty interactions do not translate into broader institutional fit. These insights refine persistence theory and underscore the need for equity strategies responsive to age-related heterogeneity within African American male community college populations.

Keywords: African American males, community college, persistence, retention, student perceptions, student success,

Across the United States, community colleges serve as critical access points to higher education, enrolling nearly half of all undergraduate students and providing pathways to transfer, workforce development, and lifelong learning (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Despite this central role, student persistence and degree completion remain pressing concerns. National data indicate that fewer than 40% of community college entrants complete a credential within six years, with outcomes particularly dire for men of color (Shapiro et al., 2017). For African American men, community colleges represent both opportunity and risk: they account for a substantial proportion of enrollment, yet they exhibit disproportionately low persistence and completion rates, reflecting broader structural inequities in higher education (Harper, 2012).

The persistence challenge among African American male community college students has been framed within broader discourses on student engagement, belonging, and institutional responsiveness. Wood and Ireland (2014) found that only 11.5% of African American men depart after their first year, but nearly half leave by the third year, and over 80% leave by the sixth year without attaining a credential. These statistics illustrate not only the scope of the problem but also the urgency of developing contextually relevant explanations. While traditional theories of student departure emphasize academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993), subsequent scholarship has highlighted that African American men face unique barriers, including racial stereotyping, limited representation in faculty and staff, and environments that fail to foster belonging (Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012). These institutional barriers are further compounded by socioeconomic constraints, employment pressures, and family obligations, particularly for older learners who pursue education alongside multiple responsibilities (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kasworm, 2010).

Extant scholarship provides important insights but also reveals clear limitations. Much of the research on African American men in higher education has been conducted in the context of four-year institutions, leaving the community college sector underexplored despite its centrality for this population (Wood & Harris, 2017). Studies that do focus on community colleges often treat African American male students as a homogenous group, neglecting the heterogeneity introduced by age, life stage, and external commitments. This oversight is significant, given evidence that traditional-aged students, who typically transition directly from high school, experience different patterns of integration and belonging than non-traditional students, who balance education with employment and caregiving responsibilities (Adelman, 2003; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Moreover, while research has documented the importance of student–faculty interactions and peer support for African American male success, less is known about whether these micro-level dynamics translate into broader perceptions of institutional fit for non-traditional learners (Kim & Sax, 2009; Wood & Ireland, 2014).

The present study addresses these gaps by examining differences in perceptions of the collegiate environment between traditional and non-traditional

African American male students enrolled in community colleges, drawing on secondary data from the Community College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CCSEQ). This approach contributes novel evidence by explicitly foregrounding age as a moderating factor in African American male persistence and by interrogating the relationship between interpersonal support and institutional satisfaction. The study thus extends existing theories of involvement, effort, persistence, and belonging by demonstrating that these frameworks must be adapted to capture the layered realities of African American men across the life course.

In the first section of this research, we develop the theoretical foundation, situating the study within classic and contemporary frameworks of involvement, effort, persistence, and belonging. The methodology then outlines the use of secondary quantitative data analysis of CCSEQ responses from African American male students across eight community colleges. The results section presents statistical findings on differences between traditional and non-traditional students' perceptions of the collegiate environment. The discussion interprets these findings through two key contributions to knowledge. The article concludes by reflecting on implications for practice, limitations, and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundation for this study is grounded in longstanding models of student engagement and persistence, which provide essential lenses for understanding the differential experiences of African American men in community colleges. Building on Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement and Pace's (1985) framework of quality of effort, the analysis situates student success as a function of the energy invested in academic and social activities and the developmental returns of such investments. These perspectives are complemented by Tinto's (1993) model of student departure and subsequent belonging scholarship, which emphasize integration into the academic and social fabric of institutions as central to persistence (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). Yet, while these frameworks have been widely applied, research rarely disaggregates African American male experiences by age, overlooking the structural and developmental differences between traditional and non-traditional students.

Student involvement and the quality of effort framework

A central theoretical lens for understanding student success in postsecondary education is Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, which emphasizes the quantity and quality of physical and psychological energy students devote to the academic experience. According to this framework, involvement is not simply a matter of enrollment but of active participation in academic and social systems, with persistence contingent upon students' investment of time and effort.

For African American men in community colleges, the construct of involvement has been shown to be mediated by structural inequities, racialized climates, and the availability of culturally responsive support, rendering the relationship between effort and outcomes more complex than in the general student population (Harper, 2012). Complementary to Astin's work, Pace's (1985) theory of quality of effort highlights that it is not only the amount of energy invested but also the nature of the activities engaged in that shape educational gains. Activities such as interacting with faculty, participating in collaborative learning, and utilizing campus resources yield higher returns on student development than mere presence on campus.

This dual theoretical foundation provides a powerful lens for analyzing differential outcomes among traditional and non-traditional students. Younger students may experience fewer barriers to investing effort, as their life stage allows for deeper immersion in academic and social opportunities (Adelman, 2003). Conversely, non-traditional students—who are more likely to manage employment, family obligations, or community roles—face structural constraints that limit both the amount and quality of effort they can invest (Kasworm, 2010). Recent systematic reviews caution that non-traditional students are often inconsistently defined across higher education research, obscuring age-related differences in engagement and persistence and underscoring the importance of clear operationalization in studies examining student success (Brozina, Johri, & Chew, 2024). Empirical studies of adult learners further indicate that persistence among older students is shaped by a complex interplay of academic engagement and external role demands, suggesting that traditional engagement models require refinement when applied to non-traditional populations (Lee, 2025). Yet, as research on adult learners has shown, the effort they do expend is often more intentional and strategically focused on academic goals, even if institutional environments are not designed to accommodate these patterns (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The intersection of involvement theory and quality of effort, therefore, allows for a nuanced interpretation of the current study's finding that non-traditional African American male students perceived less favorable institutional environments despite acknowledging positive peer and faculty interactions.

Within the context of community colleges, applying these frameworks advances theoretical understanding by highlighting how age moderates the relationship between involvement, effort, and persistence for African American men. While traditional-aged students' higher willingness to reenroll aligns with Astin's predictions about integration and energy investment, the finding that older students positively evaluate interpersonal support but still register lower institutional satisfaction challenges linear assumptions that engagement inevitably translates into persistence. This suggests that structural compatibility—flexible scheduling, recognition of adult roles, and inclusive policies—must be integrated into theories of involvement and effort if they are to adequately account for African American men's experiences across the life course (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Thus, the present study both reaffirms the relevance of these classic frameworks

and pushes them toward greater sensitivity to intersectionality and heterogeneity in postsecondary populations.

Persistence, belonging, and the community college context

In addition to involvement and effort, theories of persistence and belonging provide an indispensable foundation for interpreting the differential perceptions of traditional and non-traditional African American male students. Tinto's (1993) model of student departure emphasizes that persistence is shaped by academic and social integration, with students more likely to remain enrolled when they perceive alignment between personal goals and institutional cultures. Building on this, subsequent scholarship has underscored that sense of belonging—defined as students' feelings of mattering and fit within the campus community—is a powerful predictor of persistence, especially for non-Caucasian students (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). Recent national analyses of community college students demonstrate that sense of belonging varies substantially across intersecting race and gender identities, with African American men exhibiting distinct patterns of belonging that are shaped by both institutional characteristics and individual background factors (Fong et al., 2025). Research demonstrates that African American male students often confront barriers to belonging in community colleges due to racial stereotypes, limited representation, and structural exclusion, which undermine their persistence despite high levels of aspiration (Harper, 2012; Wood & Ireland, 2014). For traditional-aged African American men, belonging is often negotiated through peer networks, student organizations, and faculty connections, aligning with institutional expectations for integration (Strayhorn, 2009). Non-traditional students, however, encounter barriers to participating in such avenues of belonging due to time constraints, caregiving responsibilities, and the developmental mismatch between their life stage and the youth-oriented culture of campus life (Kasworm, 2010).

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative secondary data analysis to examine differences in perceptions of the community college environment between traditional and non-traditional African American male students. The dataset was drawn from the CCSEQ, which was administered by the Center for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) at the University of Memphis, Tennessee. The CCSEQ, a widely utilized instrument in postsecondary research, captures student engagement and perceptions of institutional environments, thereby aligning closely with theoretical frameworks of involvement and effort (Astin, 1984; Pace, 1985).

Sample

Data were collected from eight community college institutions, yielding a total of 1,948 respondents. Of these, 156 students self-identified as both African American and male and were retained for analysis. Respondents who did not meet these criteria were excluded. The analytic sample was divided into two groups based on age. Traditional-aged students were defined as those between 18 and 22 years old (n = 101), while non-traditional students were defined as those 23 years of age or older (n = 51).

Table 1
List of independent and dependent variables

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables
Traditional African American Male Students	Perceptions of the College Environment
Non-traditional African American Male Students	

Variables

The independent variable was student age group, dichotomized into traditional and non-traditional categories. All students in the analytic sample self-identified as African American and male, ensuring that race and gender were held constant. The dependent variable was students’ perceptions of the community college environment, operationalized as a multi-item construct drawn from eight items of the CCSEQ. Five of these items were measured on a four-point scale, while three employed a three-point scale. To ensure comparability across items, responses were standardized into z scores (M = 0, SD = 1) and subsequently converted into T scores (M = 50, SD = 10). Internal consistency of the scale was confirmed, with a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha = .77$, indicating acceptable reliability for group comparisons. The operationalization of variables reflects Astin’s (1984) conceptualization of student involvement and Pace’s (1985) theory of quality of effort, both of which emphasize the centrality of student perceptions and engagement in predicting academic persistence.

Data analysis

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. First, a series of Mann–Whitney U tests was conducted to compare traditional and non-traditional students on each of the eight individual CCSEQ items. The non-parametric test was selected due to the ordinal nature of the response categories and the absence of assumptions regarding equal intervals between response options. Second, to assess whether group differences emerged at the scale level, an independent-samples t-test was

performed on the composite of the standardized items. This parametric approach permitted evaluation of mean differences across groups on the overall perception of the college environment. Effect sizes were computed to assess the magnitude of differences, and reliability was further established through internal consistency measures. Together, these complementary statistical procedures provided a robust assessment of whether African American male students’ perceptions of the collegiate environment differed by age group.

Table 2
Categorization of Respondents Analyzed in this study (N = 156)

Respondents	n	% of respondents
Total Respondents	1948	100
African American Male Respondents	156	0.08
Traditional African American Males	101	0.05
Non-traditional African American Males	51	0.02
Non-African American Male Respondents	1792	91

RESULTS

Item-Level Findings

Significant differences emerged on one item: “If you could start over again, would you attend this college?” Traditional students reported a higher median willingness to re-enroll (Mdn = 62.4) compared to non-traditional students (Mdn = 44.6), $U = 1522.00$, $z = -4.66$, $p < .01$, $g = 0.86$. This finding suggests that younger African American males perceive their institutional experiences as more affirming, which may reflect developmental positioning within college life. Traditional-aged students often enter directly from secondary education and may be less encumbered by competing familial or occupational roles, increasing their alignment with campus culture (Wood & Ireland, 2014). In contrast, non-traditional students’ lower willingness to re-enroll underscores the tension between institutional structures and the realities of adult responsibilities such as work and caregiving, which can dilute perceptions of belonging (Tinto, 1993).

No statistically significant differences were detected on the other seven items, although the direction of results was consistent: traditional students tended to report slightly more favorable perceptions overall. Interestingly, non-traditional students scored marginally higher on two items—perceptions of peers as “friendly and supportive” and instructors as “approachable and helpful”—though with negligible effect sizes ($g = -0.09$ and $g = -0.06$). This nuance complicates simplistic deficit framings of older students. Rather, it indicates that when engagement occurs, non-traditional students may evaluate interpersonal dynamics positively, though these isolated perceptions do not compensate for broader institutional misalignment (Kasworm, 2010).

Scale-Level Findings

Analysis of the standardized scale means reinforced these item-level results. Traditional students reported a significantly higher mean perception of the college environment ($M = 50.5$, $SD = 6.4$) than their non-traditional peers ($M = 48.2$, $SD = 5.9$), $t(152) = 2.10$, $p = .035$, $g = 0.37$ (see Table 3). Although the effect size was small, the finding demonstrates a consistent gap in perceptions between the two groups. Importantly, the scale mean for traditional African American male students did not differ from the national CCSEQ normative mean ($M = 50$, $SD = 10$), whereas non-traditional students' mean was slightly lower. This suggests that younger African American males experience the community college environment comparably to the broader student population, while older African American males perceive a less supportive environment.

Table 3

Effect Size Summary for Differences in Perceptions of the Collegiate Environment Between Traditional and Non-Traditional African American Male Students

Outcome / Item	Statistical Test	Effect Size (g)	Magnitude Interpretation
“If you could start over again, would you attend this college?”	Mann–Whitney U	0.86	Large
Perception that students are friendly and supportive	Mann–Whitney U	–0.09	Negligible
Perception that instructors are approachable and helpful	Mann–Whitney U	–0.06	Negligible
Overall collegiate environment scale (8-item composite)	Independent-samples <i>t</i> test	0.37	Small to moderate

Taken together, these results highlight both the resilience and vulnerability of African American male students across age groups. The greater willingness of traditional students to reenroll suggests higher institutional satisfaction, resonating with research emphasizing the importance of early integration into academic and social life (Astin, 1984). By contrast, non-traditional students' comparatively lower evaluations underscore the burdens of navigating higher education alongside work, family, and community obligations (Polson, 2003). These findings reinforce the argument that persistence among African American males cannot be understood solely through individual motivation but must be situated in structural inequities that shape how students experience campus environments (Harper, 2012).

Moreover, the pattern of non-significant but directionally consistent findings suggests that while age is not determinative, it intersects with race and gender to produce distinct experiences of support and belonging. Scholars have emphasized that African American male students often face campus climates marked by racial stereotyping and limited institutional responsiveness (Strayhorn, 2012). For non-traditional students, these dynamics may be compounded by developmental mismatches with campus programming designed for younger cohorts, further eroding perceptions of fit.

Finally, the findings expand on literature documenting African American male persistence by foregrounding the age dimension as a key moderating factor. While much prior research has focused on institutional retention strategies at four-year institutions, this study contributes novel evidence from two-year colleges. The differential perceptions observed here suggest that equity initiatives must account for heterogeneity within the African American male student population, tailoring supports for older students whose persistence is jeopardized not by lack of ability or effort, but by institutional environments that inadequately accommodate their lived realities.

DISCUSSION

This study examined differences in perceptions of the collegiate environment between traditional and non-traditional African American male students enrolled in community colleges, drawing on a national dataset from the Community College Student Experiences Questionnaire. The analyses revealed that traditional students reported significantly greater willingness to reenroll and more favorable overall evaluations of the campus environment, whereas non-traditional students, despite rating peers and faculty as supportive, expressed lower global satisfaction. These findings advance scholarship by making two principal contributions to knowledge. First, they foreground age as a moderating dimension in African American male persistence, demonstrating that younger and older students experience and interpret collegiate environments differently in ways not accounted for in extant models of student engagement and belonging. Second, they reveal a critical decoupling between micro-level interpersonal support and macro-level institutional fit for non-traditional African American men, showing that positive peer and faculty interactions may not translate into broader satisfaction or reenrollment intent when institutional structures remain misaligned with students' life-course responsibilities. Together, these contributions extend the literature on African American male student success, refine theoretical understandings of persistence, and offer a foundation for rethinking equity interventions in the community college sector. Recent post-pandemic research confirms that engagement benchmarks such as academic challenge, student effort, and student-faculty interaction remain strong predictors of retention for adult learners in community college environments, underscoring the continued relevance of

engagement frameworks for understanding persistence among non-traditional students (Spitzig & Renner, 2025).

Centering age as a moderating lens in African American male community college persistence

Research on African American men in higher education has emphasized engagement, campus climate, and belonging as core drivers of persistence, yet most studies treat this population as analytically homogeneous and rarely differentiate by age within the community college sector (Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2009; Wood & Ireland, 2014). Contemporary analyses also highlight that students' experiences of belonging vary across intersecting identities—including race, ethnicity, gender, and age—which shapes how engagement, support, and institutional climate translate into persistence outcomes in community colleges (Fong et al., 2025). Adult student scholarship demonstrates that role strain from employment and family responsibilities alters engagement patterns and institutional fit, suggesting that age-linked life circumstances systematically shape collegiate perceptions and behaviors (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Kasworm, 2010). Persistence models that foreground belonging and early integration show robust associations with reenrollment decisions, but the mechanisms have been validated predominantly among traditionally aged students at four-year institutions, with limited evidence specific to older African American men in two-year contexts (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2009). Community college studies of African American men underscore the salience of faculty–student engagement and supportive climates, but typically do not isolate age-stratified differences within this group, leaving an important gap in targeted retention design (Harper, 2012; Wood & Ireland, 2014). Consequently, the field lacks fine-grained evidence on whether age moderates the link between perceptions of the college environment and persistence among African American men in community colleges (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Kasworm, 2010).

This study extends the literature by empirically demonstrating that traditional African American male community college students report significantly more favorable global evaluations of the collegiate environment and a higher willingness to reenroll than their non-traditional peers, foregrounding age as a consequential moderator within this population (Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2009; Wood & Ireland, 2014). These results refine engagement-based theories by indicating that age-linked role demands and developmental position interact with race and gender to produce distinct perceptions of institutional fit, thereby nuancing general persistence models that were derived primarily from younger, four-year samples (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). By situating African American men within an age-stratified analysis, the findings reconceptualize ‘belonging’ as contingent on life-course context, suggesting that comparable levels of motivation may yield different

perceived affordances when time scarcity and caregiving intensify, which helps explain attenuated reenrollment intent among older students despite their continued engagement (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Kasworm, 2010; Strayhorn, 2009). The contribution, therefore, is a theoretically grounded specification of heterogeneity within African American male community college experiences, offering evidence that equity strategies must be age-responsive to be effective for this population (Harper, 2012; Wood & Ireland, 2014; Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Decoupling micro-level interpersonal support from macro-level institutional fit for non-traditional African American men

The literature consistently links student–faculty interaction and peer support to beneficial academic and affective outcomes, including higher engagement, stronger belonging, and improved persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kim & Sax, 2009). For African American men, studies highlight that meaningful contact with supportive educators and peers can buffer negative racialized experiences and foster success within community colleges (Harper, 2012; Wood & Ireland, 2014). Adult student research, however, cautions that even when interpersonal interactions are positive, structural misalignment in scheduling, services, and cultural assumptions can erode overall institutional fit for older learners who juggle complex roles (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Kasworm, 2010). Despite these strands, few empirical accounts directly document a divergence wherein non-traditional students positively evaluate micro-level interpersonal dynamics yet still register lower global satisfaction with the institutional environment, particularly among African American men in two-year settings (Harper, 2012; Kasworm, 2010; Wood & Ireland, 2014).

This study identifies precisely such a decoupling: non-traditional African American men rated peers and instructors as slightly more supportive while simultaneously evaluating the overall college environment less favorably than traditional peers, indicating that dyadic support is insufficient to compensate for macro-structural frictions in institutional design (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Kasworm, 2010; Kim & Sax, 2009). The finding advances theory by distinguishing levels of environment appraisal, showing that positive interpersonal encounters can coexist with diminished global fit when temporal, bureaucratic, or programmatic constraints limit the usability of institutional resources for students with extensive off-campus obligations (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In doing so, the study challenges implicit assumptions in engagement frameworks that interpersonal support uniformly translates into heightened institutional satisfaction and persistence, proposing instead a conditional model in which structural compatibility moderates the translation of relational goodwill into reenrollment intent for older African American men (Harper, 2012; Kasworm, 2010; Wood & Ireland, 2014). Practically, the contribution redirects equity interventions beyond relationship-

building alone toward reengineering institutional temporality, service delivery, and policy flexibility to close the gap between supportive interactions and perceived environmental fit (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Wood & Ireland, 2014).

Implications for practice

Practical Interventions. The findings of this study underscore the importance of designing equity-oriented interventions that explicitly acknowledge heterogeneity within African American male community college populations. While traditional-aged students reported more favorable perceptions of the collegiate environment and greater willingness to reenroll, non-traditional students expressed lower global satisfaction despite reporting positive interactions with peers and faculty. This divergence suggests that persistence is not solely contingent on interpersonal engagement but is also shaped by the degree to which institutional structures align with students' broader life circumstances. For community college leadership, this indicates that retention strategies should move beyond generalized engagement initiatives and incorporate age-responsive institutional policies. For younger African American men, fostering early academic and social integration remains critical, as belonging and engagement during the initial stages of enrollment are closely associated with persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). For non-traditional students, however, the findings point to the need for structural accommodations—such as flexible scheduling, expanded evening or weekend course offerings, and coordinated student services—that reduce the disjuncture between institutional expectations and responsibilities related to employment, caregiving, and community involvement.

Research Implications. The results also carry important implications for future research on African American male persistence in community colleges. At the level of faculty training and advising systems, the findings suggest that support should be conceptualized as multidimensional. Although culturally responsive pedagogy and inclusive instructional practices remain central to fostering engagement and trust among African American male students (Wood & Ireland, 2014), the present study indicates that such relational supports may be insufficient when institutional structures remain misaligned with students' lived realities. Advising models that proactively monitor progress and intervene before students encounter academic or logistical crises may be particularly effective for non-traditional African American men managing multiple roles (Earl, 1988). From a scholarly perspective, the findings highlight the importance of disaggregating African American male student populations by age and life stage, rather than treating them as analytically homogeneous. Future research should further examine how age conditions the effectiveness of engagement, advising, and instructional strategies, and how institutional practices interact with students' developmental positioning and external obligations. Taken together, these

implications suggest that advancing equity in community colleges requires integrative approaches that link practice, policy, and research to more accurately reflect the complex realities shaping African American male persistence across the life course.

Limitations and future directions

Several methodological limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. The dataset was restricted to community colleges that voluntarily administered the CCSEQ between 2010 and 2013, raising concerns of selection bias and limiting the extent to which results can be generalized to other institutional contexts or more recent cohorts. In addition, the analytic sample was composed only of students who remained enrolled at the time of survey administration. Consequently, the perceptions of students who withdrew, transferred, or temporarily stopped out—often the most vulnerable to attrition—were not captured, potentially biasing the findings toward more positively engaged respondents.

Although the CCSEQ is a validated instrument for assessing engagement and perceptions, only one dimension of the Quality of Effort scales was analyzed in this study. As such, the broader constellation of effort and involvement constructs central to Astin's (1984) and Pace's (1985) frameworks could not be fully examined. Moreover, the absence of key contextual variables, such as socioeconomic background, academic preparedness, and family responsibilities, restricted the ability to disentangle how age intersects with other dimensions of inequality to shape African American men's perceptions of the community college environment. Finally, reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for recall bias and social desirability effects, both of which may attenuate the validity of the responses.

Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal and mixed-methods designs that capture the experiences of students across enrollment trajectories, including those who leave or transfer. Expanding analyses to incorporate additional Quality of Effort scales and contextual factors would permit a more holistic examination of the mechanisms shaping persistence. Qualitative approaches could further illuminate the nuanced ways that age, race, and gender intersect in the lived experiences of African American men in community colleges. Such extensions would enrich theoretical models of student involvement and belonging while providing practitioners with a more comprehensive evidence base to design equity-oriented interventions.

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Author bios

William Johnson, Ed.D. is an Assistant Professor of Education Studies and Leadership at Bowie State University, Maryland, USA. His major research interests lie in student engagement, graduate student success, institutional finance and higher education research. Email: wjohnson1@bowiestate.edu
