Pathways to Success for African American Males:
A Single Institution Examination
Using Guiffrida's Cultural Advancement of Tinto's Theory

Celina M. Sima
Patricia S. Inman
University of Illinois at Chicago

Purpose

This study examines the pathways to success for African American male students who have moved through the academic and social systems at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and, as of spring 2009, were approaching degree completion in a timely manner (4 to 6 years). The study was designed so that the responses of the student participants would be helpful in informing the campus about the institutional, social and personal facilitators of, and obstacles to, success for these students, and so that these findings would suggest policy and program recommendations that may benefit future students.

Background

At UIC, the entering freshman class in 1990 was 50% male; by fall 2007, the entering class was 45% male. For African American freshmen, 32% of the entering class students were males in 1990, and 25% were males in 2007.   During this 18-year span, UIC has engaged in many efforts to improve the access, retention and graduation rates of all students. Along with these demographic shifts, the UIC six-year graduation rates have risen from 36% for the 1987 freshmen cohort to 54% for the fall 2003 cohort. While the graduation rate for African American students also improved during this period (23% in 1987 and 40% for the 2003 cohort), it is troubling that it still lags the overall rate by 14%.

Study Framework

We have learned much from research based on models of college departure. Tinto's model (1993) led to an understanding of student persistence that incorporated the characteristics and abilities of the student with the role of the institution. That is, persistence is not strictly a matter of student pre-enrollment background, ability and intention factors. The interaction of the student within the institution has also been found to play a role in student persistence/departure decisions. Tinto specifically detailed the role of institutional academic and social integration as key factors in persistence.

Volumes of research validating or refining Tinto's model of student departure have led to a better understanding about why students leave college (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tiernery, 1999; Guiffrida, 2006). In addition, Braxton (2000) has offered alternatives to the applicability of the Tinto model to the variety of students who

participate in higher education. From this research, we have learned that the "engaged" student is more likely to stay, but much less research has been focused on the investigation of the factors that improve student retention.

For this project, we have also turned to important studies that have revealed the strategies and paths of high achieving African American students generally, and African American male students in particular (e.g., Harper and Quaye, 2007; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hyek, 2004; Cuyjet, 1997). These studies suggest that it is important to understand cultural nuances in applying the Tinto model to student retention studies.

In response to criticism about the cultural limitations of Tinto's model, Douglas Guiffrida, in 2006, proposed a modified model that incorporated the psychological and cross-cultural factors that are important for application to minority students. Guiffrida's proposed modified model provided the framework for this study. Specifically, Guiffrida's model provided nine variable domains that informed the development of the study survey, interview, coding and analysis. The domains included Cultural Norms and Values; Family Background; Skills and Abilities; Prior Schooling; Motivational Orientation, Goals and Intentions; External Commitments; Academic Systems (Academic Performance and Faculty/Staff Interactions); University Social Systems (Extracurricular Activities and Peer Group Interactions); and Home Social Systems (Family and Friends).

Methods and Data Analysis

In this case study, we defined success as "advanced undergraduates who entered UIC as a freshman (not transfer students) and were making timely progress toward degree completion." Because we wished to obtain as complete a picture as possible of the African American male undergraduates who persisted to advanced standing, our sample included all African American male students who fell within the defined parameters of student success for participation in the study.

Three methods of data collection were employed:

➢ Student pre-enrollment and enrollment information were drawn from the student database to outline the characteristics of the students.

➢ A survey of academic and co-curricular student experiences was administered as a way to gather general student engagement characteristics and perceptions of the campus environment.

➢ Individual student interviews were conducted to provide an in-depth understanding of the personal facilitators and obstacles experienced, and the individual strategies used, as the students successfully negotiated campus academic and social systems and processes.

While the survey and interview were informed by Guiffrida's model, it is important to note that the design of the survey included opportunity for novel interviewee responses, and all of the interview questions were open-ended.

Description of Study Participants

The target group for the study included students who entered UIC as freshmen and were approaching graduation in a timely manner (within 4, 5, or 6 years of entry). In the spring term 2009, there were 160 African American male undergraduates enrolled at senior level standing. Of this total, 114 entered UIC as transfer students. The remaining 46 seniors entered UIC as freshmen. Forty-three of the 46 (all but 3) entered in the fall of 2003 or later. This figure (43) included one student from the Fall 2006 entering class. This student had entered from high school with 38 placement credits (at sophomore standing). Given the distinct outlier status of this student, he was omitted from the study targeted sample. Thus, the group of 42 seniors was the target sample for the study.

All 42 students who met the study criteria were recruited to participate. Of that group, we received survey responses from 20 students and we interviewed 17 of the 20 survey respondents. The table below outlines the cohort distribution of the respondents as well as the status of other students from each of the freshman cohorts.

Entry Cohorts	Fall 2003	Fall 2004	Fall 2005	Total
Initial Freshman by cohort year	64	63	78	205
Spring 2009 Senior Standing	4	18	20	42
Still enrolled (not senior standing)	0	1	13	14
Graduated	22	16	0	38
Pathways Survey Participation	2	8	10	20
Pathways Interview Participation	1	7	9	17

The total targeted sample represented is 42 students; twenty students who participated in the Pathways survey, and 22 students who did not participate. The average ACT composite for *Pathways* participants was 22.4, and for non-participants; 21.9. The average GPA of the participants at the end of fall 2008 term was 2.76; for non-participants, it was 2.63. Using a simple t-test for comparison of group means, we found that there was no difference between the two groups (participants and non-participants) on composite ACT (pre-enrollment academic readiness) or cumulative GPA (current academic standing).

Survey and Interview Recruitment Procedures

The study target population was made up of the 42 African American male undergraduate students who were at senior standing during the spring 2009 term and began their studies at UIC as freshmen in the fall of 2003 or later. An initial letter of invitation and a survey were mailed to the students. The letter provided a brief description of the study and the nature of participation – specifically that participation in the study was a two-part process that included completion of the survey and a one-hour interview. A participation stipend of $50 was offered for students who completed both

the survey and the interview. E-mail notices were sent to the students encouraging them to participate. Approximately two weeks later, a second mailing (letter and survey) was sent to students who had not responded to the first mailing. Three additional e-mail notices were sent to non-responders subsequent to the second mailing. Approximately three weeks after the first mailing, we began to schedule interviews. Interviews were scheduled as surveys were received. A total of 20 surveys were received by the final submission date. Seventeen students responded to the request for an interview. Several attempts were made to schedule the final three interviews to no avail.

The analyses of survey responses include the twenty students who returned surveys. The interview analysis includes the seventeen interview participants. In some instances, interview responses are tied to survey responses. Obviously, these analyses are limited to the seventeen students who participated in both the survey and interview components.

Survey and Interview Instruments

Guiffrida's model, (drawn from Tinto) provided the framework for the development of the survey instrument and the interview questions. Specifically, Guiffrida's model provided nine variable domains that guided the development of the study survey and interview. Appendix A is a representation of Guiffrida's recommendations to Tinto's model. Note that the recommended variable domains are represented in bold print.

For the survey, we used items, and modified items, from three established student engagement surveys; the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ), and the College Senior Survey (CSS). We also developed new items when specific variables were not represented in earlier surveys. For the interview, we developed items that would give participants the greatest opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences with regard to each domain. We also created open-ended questions to encourage completely novel responses.

The Survey and Student Responses

The survey instrument is a four-page pencil and paper survey which students completed prior to the interview. The survey gathered information on student behaviors, attitudes and views, and served the dual purpose of providing information about the students, and developing a backdrop for the interview with each student.

The survey was divided into five sections targeting specific variables to develop a profile of each student. Each set of responses contributed to an overall understanding of influences, facilitators and challenges for each student. The variables associated with each section of the survey are listed as follows:

Student Background (Pre-Entry Attributes): Parental education; readiness for college; financing college; living arrangements while in college

Drive and Motivation (Goals/Commitments): Student self assessment of skills, confidence and drive; role of outside factors in motivation for learning; key factors influencing success

Time Allocation (Experiences While at College): Allocation of time among various scheduling demands – such as preparing for class, studying, relaxing, volunteering, working, etc.

Gains and Satisfaction (Connections/Outcomes): Self-report of their gains on a range of skills and academic factors; relationships with students, faculty and staff; and overall satisfaction with UIC

Challenges and Supports: A list of the top three challenges and the top three supports during college.

Due to the small size of this targeted sample, statistical analysis on the responses is not appropriate; however, it is useful to note some common themes, and instances in which the responses were evenly distributed. General findings from the surveys are listed as follows:

Student Background
- 55% of the students came from households with college-educated parents; 25% of the parents had attended college, but did not complete a degree; and 20% of the group reported that their parent(s) had no exposure to college.
- All but one student reported a primary reliance on a combination of financial aid and loans to finance college.
- 40% of the students had no experience with the UIC residence halls; while 50% lived in campus housing at least 2 years.

Drive and Motivation
- Students rated themselves highest on: drive to achieve; intellectual self confidence; and cooperativeness;
- followed by academic ability and leadership.
- They rated themselves lowest on math ability and spirituality.
- The students reported that they are primarily motivated: 1) in order to challenge themselves; and 2) by subjects that interest them.
- Getting good grades for the sake of good grades or simply getting good grades to get a better job are less powerful motivators for these students.

Time Allocation
- On most of the 13 items, the students reported a modest allocation of time to any one activity – suggesting a fairly even distribution of time across the various activities.
- Students reported the greatest amount of time overall was spent relaxing and preparing for class/studying.
- In some instances, such as off campus employment, (2 students reported working off campus more than 30 hours each week), and care of family (2 students) skewed an overall negligible time allocation; the impact of the external commitments was evident, however, they were outliers in the overall picture.

Satisfaction and Gains
- Students rated faculty as supportive, and rated staff as somewhat less helpful.
- They rated their relationships with other UIC students as most positive.

- They generally felt positive about their gains in academic, critical thinking and social skills.
- The area of least gain was math ability followed by time management.
- When asked about their overall satisfaction with their educational experience at UIC, 60% indicated that it was good or excellent; 40% rated it as fair; no student rated it as poor.
- When rating their overall satisfaction with UIC, ratings fell slightly with 10% indicating that they were very dissatisfied.

The Interview and Student Responses

Individual interviews were conducted with each student participant. Each interview was tape recorded with the student's permission. During the interviews, one investigator asked questions, while the other took notes and asked follow-up questions. Each interview focused on 11 questions that guided the students' responses regarding the personal facilitators of, and challenges to, their success. At the end of the interview we asked the students to tell us what advice they would give to an entering African American male freshmen about how to succeed at UIC. We also asked what advice they would give to UIC to help students succeed.

While the open-ended interview questions provided an opportunity for students to tell us the story of their successful transition into and through academic and social experiences at UIC, we used the nine variable domains of Guiffrida's proposed model as the framework for coding the interview responses. The responses to the open-ended questions yielded a tenth variable domain; Student Support Systems. This domain will be defined and described later in this section.

In the following review of interview responses pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the study participants.

Student Pre-Entry Attributes

Student pre-entry attributes include the four variables that describe the students as they arrive on campus: the student's preference for individual versus collectivist (group) study, their family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling.

Cultural Norms – Individualist/Collectivist

In a study by Thompson and Fretz (1991), they predicted that high levels of collectivism would predict successful academic and social integration of successful African American students. Instead, their study findings revealed that the students had positive attitudes toward more competitive learning situations and individualist learning environments.

For our study, the investigation of cultural norms and values was focused on whether individualism or communalism (collectivism) would be more characteristic of successful African American male students at UIC. In the interview we asked students, "As a UIC student, would you describe yourself as someone who mainly works individually, or someone who works with a study partner or study groups?"

Of the 17 respondents, 16 told us that when they came to UIC they preferred to study individually rather than in partners or groups. Eight students indicated that they still prefer to work individually rather than in groups, and they shared their reasons for this preference. Reasons included:

- a lack of productivity when working in study sessions with a group;
- the distractions of group study; a lack of study time for individuals who know the material and had to spend more time in the group teaching instead of learning;
- inexperience with the benefit of consulting others; shyness and feelings of vulnerability;
- the challenging logistics involved in getting a study group together when many students commute;
- poor quality of the product when working with others;
- a preference for working alone out of habit;
- more confidence in their own ability than in the abilities of the group; and
- a lack of study partners of his ethnicity within his discipline.

The following are representative responses from the student interviews:

Ervan: I work individually. There are two schools of thought. Some people feel like it would be great to work in groups a lot of times. I found that especially on campus…if you really put the time in yourself to work on and go over the problems, questions will arise; you'll start to figure it out. My experience with group study sessions, if I just join a group; the one who knows the most about the subject will just get hammered down with questions. If he decides to help them catch up, he won't have time to study for himself if he needs help. That happened to me a couple of times. I'm not going to say that I dislike study groups, but it can be difficult in terms of how far you are, or where you are at.

Kendrick: I'm just pretty individualistic I guess….For some classes you really need the study groups, something more like math classes and things like that; architecture, mainly when we have group projects. I just try to stay more to myself to try and get work done. When I am in a large crowd it gets distracting. Like in our studio class some people just play music out loud, socialize, frequent breaks, it's just kind of distracting. So uh, that's why I just had to get my own place.

Ten of the students, nine of whom began their college careers as individualists, indicated that they engaged in study groups later in their academic careers, and mentioned the benefits of academic group work. Reasons included:

- preparation for group work in the post-graduate professional career setting;
- getting help in understanding something;
- assistance with class notes;
- moral support; and
- developing friendships through study.

Marcus: …..I really like to tackle my work and do things on my own, on my own terms just for convenience sake, but this last semester, with all these group projects and everything its kind of unavoidable. I would say it's like a benefit to work with a partner because you need to get used to being in that environment and working with others. So like the last couple semesters I had a couple group projects. That's really helped me go out and talk to people and get to form groups on your own. Do all these things and learn to be successful working with somebody. And if you don't understand something you can always ask for help. .. Like if I sometimes don't understand something. When I first originally came here I would ask my brother or something or I would just sit there and just

try and tough through it. But now if I don't understand something I can ask some of my classmates that I've been taking the classes with. That helps out a lot.

Brandon: I have a really good friend; she has been in all my math classes since the get go. I met her here. I'm a year older than her. I met her in Calc I or Calc II. We've been in all the same classes... We'll copy each other's notes and she'll explain it to me, and if she misses, I'll explain it to her. We're both learning. And then she's been…we both feed off of each other. I dropped a class that she was in, and she was very upset, but I told her, "you can make it through"…she's doing well. She's not in one of my classes, and I'm doing well. Even though we're not in the same class together -- so she's been helpful in telling me that, "you can do it," this is easy for math majors if you've gotten this far. We're going to finish.

Some students consciously chose when they would work individually, and when they would work in a group. One student moved from working in study groups to working individually. By senior year, about half of these successful students indicated that they preferred to work individually, and the other half indicated that there were times when each mode of study was appropriate. Ultimately, no student indicated that communal study was preferred.

Jamar: You know what…I have done most of my time; I've operated most of the time, individually. But the last semester I did a class, it was pretty demanding, and I did a lot of group studying during that class. It definitely helped….

By senior year, about half of the students indicated that they preferred to work individually, and the other half indicated that there were times when each mode of study was appropriate. Ultimately, no student indicated that communal study was preferred.

Family Background

Some aspects of family background at the university were covered in the earlier discussion of the survey results, but within the interview, eight students commented on their pre-college family support. For all of these students, it was clear that their parents were invested in their education. Another student told us about the positive influence his parents had in helping him to be prepared for a diverse social environment. Six of the students discussed the significant positive influence that their mother's had on their academic success, whether it was support when they did well, encouragement in the face of challenge, or the expression of confidence in their ability. The following is an example of their comments:

Carl: Well let me see, I went to a very good high school and my family always pushed me to do well academically. As far as family goes, my mom and my grandmother….have always been a big support behind my back. They've always been, "you can do it" you know, they've always been the type, that they want the best things for you. They always have your back and want the best things for you; they always do what they can to help you, academically, etc….One thing, growing up, my mom always pushed me…pushed for harder challenges.

Two students discussed the support received from a brother. For example:

Marcus: Family; well my brother actually went through UIC and he graduated a couple years ago. So he kind of prepared me for the business core classes, because he got a

degree in marketing and management. I am going for accounting in the same College of Business so he had prepared me for what I was going to do.

Skills and Abilities, Prior Schooling and the Transition to College

When the students responded to the survey question asking them to rate themselves on a number of traits in comparison with the average person their age, they rated themselves the lowest on mathematical ability. Within the interviews, when the students were asked about their prior schooling, preparation for college level work and their transition to UIC, nine of the students told us that their transition was relatively smooth. However, eight of the students indicated that they were not adequately prepared, and as a result, the transition was difficult.
The students who experienced a smooth transition emphasized the importance of high school support. It is important to note that one of the interview questions directly asked students to comment on their academic transition in math, writing, science and computing.

The following two student responses are characteristic of those students who experienced a relatively smooth transition:

Carl:. …And one thing, from my background, going to high school and taking accelerated programs and classes all throughout my academic years, you learn how to multi-task very well. Some people can multi-task, work full-time, go to school full time. During the day they have to squeeze time out for their own personal leisure. They can do all three, or do multiple things; be part of organizations and still go to school. Some students can't because they are not able to multi-task. That's an important trait you have to master. In your adult life you have to learn how to balance work/career your family and the unexpected things you come across.

Otis: …. Going right in to UIC I knew I had the preparation to excel, but I knew I had to work a little bit harder, because it was a different level of education. I never said I could come in and ace every class. I knew that wasn't going to happen. I knew I had to work hard, but I would have the basic tools to get me through the classes.

Of the eight students who told us that their transition to UIC was difficult, seven mentioned that math was a challenge, and one mentioned chemistry; and science in general.

Brandon: ….I went to a majority Black high school. The education there at the time when I got out of high school I thought was great. Until I came to UIC and realized that I didn't understand the fundamentals in order to succeed in some of the classes that I needed to succeed in. … which led to two semesters of not doing so well. And because of that, I tried my hardest to tell the [high] school that they should fix that, but of course, I'm only just one student. But it was very hard to transition from high school to college -- because of that….also because of the different dynamic…UIC is very diverse, so going from an all Black high school to everybody else, it was very hard, and very challenging to adjust to.

Goals/Commitments Motivational Orientation

When students enter the university, along with the pre-entry attributes discussed in the previous section, they also bring a motivational orientation, goals, and external commitments that influence college adjustment, commitment, and success.

Motivational Orientation

For this study, the examination of motivational orientation was drawn from self-determination theory (SDT). Guiffrida (2006) explained that according to SDT (Deci and Ryan, 1991, and Reeve, Deci and Ryan, 2004), people are motivated to learn by one of two motivational orientations: (a*) intrinsic motivation* (learning because one finds the content interesting; the material is closely aligned with interests or values; it satisfies the need to be effective in interactions with the environment, or it satisfies the need to establish close, secure relationships with others; or (b) *extrinsic motivation*, or learning as a means to an end (i.e., grades, praise, pay). SDT theory posits that the most meaningful and successful learning occurs when students are motivated intrinsically.

In a study of 100 first generation Latino students by Dennis, Phinney and Chuataco (2005), personal motivations, and the motivation to work toward a fulfilling career were found to be predictors of college adjustment, and slight predictors of college commitment, when they controlled for certain variables like high school GPA. Contrary to their hypothesis, the extrinsic motivation of family expectation did not prove to be a predictor.

Of the 17 interview respondents, 16 students commented on their motivational orientation. Fourteen of the 16 described themselves as intrinsically motivated, having strong personal drive or career goals. The three following comments are good representations of many of the student responses:

> *Carl: I just value education. No matter what I'm doing. I have to get this done. I have to get this paper done. I have a test coming up. It's an overall value of education. You automatically prioritize things. I can't hang out tonight; maybe I can hang out later in the week. I mean I'm not an angel. I got excessive from time to time. It's difficult though; going into college there should be so much structure for freshman….and so when you get that freedom right away, some people can make that transition and become responsible early-on.*

> *Otis: I have a drive like no other. I am very passionate. Very driven. I think that's always been a part of me. I think my drive did not really awake until high school when I recognized that college was my only opportunity to make something of my self. There was nothing in my neighborhood. The social aspects of gangs and drugs. Not having an education but still trying to make a living was not a life that I wanted to live. Was not a life I wanted to partake in. ..I think that was my drive to really get the education. Educate myself and persevere.*

> *Brandon: My own sense of drive, I didn't want to be a statistic. I didn't want to come here and be another African American who didn't finish or just…I don't like to quit. I don't like to let things defeat me. I know my GPA is not where I want it to be. I'm not going to just stop, and say let me not graduate and stay here; time is money. I have to keep it moving, regardless. There will always be a way.*

Finally, two students provided descriptions that were a strong indication that they are extrinsically motivated. Their responses reveal their lack of connection to the campus community or to a larger academic or professional goal.

> *Andre: [When I graduate,] I'm going to celebrate. It's not like that; walking across the stage and all of that. That can wait. I just want the diploma.*

Franklin: When I'm not that interested in something it's just so much harder for me to really put forth the effort. So I just did school to, you know, to do school I guess…. My dad wanted me to be a lawyer or a doctor. I majored in philosophy thinking that that would be my major to get into law school. I wanted to make him happy, but not really thinking what I wanted to do. So I never really like tried to do what I wanted to do. I never even thought that way. I was just like, I'm going to go to class; work hard; then come back and hang out with my friends.

It is important to note that many of the students overcame obstacles as they attempted to maintain their motivation, and many students spoke of individuals who inspired them in the face of challenges to success.

External Commitments

We asked students to tell us about how their external commitments affected their academics. Twelve of the respondents commented on their external commitments. Ten of the twelve held off campus jobs that were a challenge to academic success. On and off campus jobs are included in the extracurricular activities and external commitments category that will be discussed later in this report.

Other comments regarding external commitments included volunteer work, religious activities, entrepreneurial ventures, and family obligations (children or ill parents). Two students mentioned the lack of time for girlfriends. The following are representative student responses:

Isaac: Sophomore year I was working and I was volunteering at the VA hospital. Then after a while I realized that I was spending way too much time out there and maybe I need more time to study. So I made a rule… study, then I volunteer. Then I realized I need more time off. I can't volunteer this much because I have like, too many credit hours.

Marcus: Yeah, on the weekends I would go and work at a retirement facility in the kitchen, or whatever. It was a challenge because I would have to find time to do my work and everything, and with off campus commitments, I have like church and a few other things, like groups and meetings we like to do. Those were more like pressed for time. If I do those then I won't have time to study or I would have to like squeeze in studying.

George: I'm a budding entrepreneur. I'm on my fourth or fifth entrepreneur venture. Based on entrepreneur books, entrepreneurs usually have about seven ventures that fail before they hit big. I'm right on time. <laughs> Working, watching TV, social commitments, doing my own research on different topics that I want to learn about -- that I might not be learning in school, family.

Quenton: ok…off campus commitments. I have a five year old daughter. That's an off campus commitment. That's a big commitment.

David: My nephew who is seven. I try to spend as much time as possible as him. I think he may have seen his dad a couple times in his lifetime. I try to be there as much as possible to kind of balance that. I can't replace his father, but I can do the best I can.

Of all of the descriptions, only Jamar described his external commitments as having a substantive influence on his motivation.

Jamar: But my second year I was trying to get personal business things going on. And I had started a business, and going through that process, it hurt my grades -- but at the time I was thinking, I'm going to be super successful with my business so it doesn't even matter. You know as soon as this business gets off the ground, I'll take a little hiatus from school and I'll come back whenever I feel like it, whenever I get down spending my millions. So...you know I wasn't all that concerned about school at the time and my grades reflected it.

Experiences While at College

After considering pre-entry attributes, motivational orientation, goals, and external commitments, we turn our attention to the experiences students have while they are attending college. Four major variable domains help us to sort out the experiences, and include formal and informal academic systems related to academic performance and interactions with faculty and staff; student support systems (campus level support that augments the student's academic success); formal and informal university social systems including extracurricular activities and peer group interactions; and the home social systems of family and friends.

Academic Performance

While we know the actual academic performance of the students who participated in the study, the interviews provided an opportunity for us to learn about students' perceptions of their academic performance. We asked students to tell us about their academic adjustment to UIC. We also asked them to specifically describe their adjustment in math, writing, science and computing. The students' descriptions of their performance fell into two broad categories; those students who generally found academics at UIC challenging, and those who did not.

Earlier, we presented student responses regarding broad transition issues that focused on the influence of high school on academic preparation and social transition. In this section, students describe their transition experiences after they arrived at UIC. Of our 17 respondents, 7 did not find the transition to UIC, or their ability to perform while at UIC, particularly challenging. One student told us that while he was always a good student, he never found a major that interested him enough to put forth effort. Two of the students talked about the similarities and differences between their high school and university academic performance. They also expressed a bit of disappointment that the experience at UIC was not more different from high school.

David: Math….I took a couple of courses, when I first started, where it was very different from high school; where I had the same teachers there with me every day. No TA, nobody else. I had the time for one-on-ones. I had 12 people in my Calc [calculus] class in high school, versus having a lecture hall full of students. It was also kind of a wake up call …I realized even though they weren't requiring me to be in class, I had to be in class on my account. So that was a big wakeup call, because that didn't quite happen at first. "Oh I don't have to be in class today." I kind of took that and ran with that for a little while. The writing …I grew dramatically, from having Professor S as my first English teacher, to working in the Writing Center now. Seeing other people's writing, and revising mine like there is no tomorrow, I didn't do that too often in high school. Now that I do take the time, I actually revise a paper about three times before I turn it in. That's something that did not happen in high school. You did it the week of, and that's it.

Three students made a point of talking about the relationship between good academic preparation in high school and their academic success at UIC. They also appreciated the challenge of the courses in their major. Jamar told us that he owed his smooth transition and good academic performance to being "blessed with above average intelligence."

> *Carl: I went to a very good high school and my family always pushed me to do well academically. Taking accelerated classes throughout middle, all throughout all my childhood academic years. This was big help here at UIC, so when you take your first two years, your Gen Ed, it's like a repeat of what you did in high school. Then you get to your core level classes, your distribution class, or in teaching, your methods courses. That's when it finally clamps down and gets a little tougher and exciting; a lot exciting.*

> *Perry: Oh yeah, well coming out an accounting major, it requires a certain amount of perseverance and persistence to get through that major, to pass the courses. One thing is that taking those courses has helped me to get through some of the easier courses that I have taken….and also they put an emphasis on studying, and made it a priority while I've been here.*

Ten of the 17 respondents described considerable challenges in their transition or in academic performance at UIC. While three students told us that challenging programs and courses were motivating, overall the students' descriptions of the challenges were varied:

- One student described his education at UIC as more challenging in general in comparison with what his friends were saying about the experiences they were having at other institutions;
- another student explained that in freshman year his mom was in poor health, and that as his mom's health improved, his grades improved;
- two students talked about being on probation, one explaining that after 3 semesters on probation, he decided that he needed to make some changes if he was going to succeed, the other stating that he did well in classes when he was interested in the class, and that he learned that smaller classes helped his interest level;
- one student took classes elsewhere to improve his grades in particularly challenging classes, and he talked about the challenge in being the only Black male in his UIC classes;
- one student talked about the importance of the proper sequencing of courses, and in a similar comment, another student discussed the importance of the entrance exams in assisting him in making a smooth transition;
- one student told us that he thought his Chicago Public School (CPS) education had not prepared him, particularly in math, and that as an English major he should have been better advised about his options in fulfilling the math requirements;
- one student explained that, as a Nigerian, he came to UIC with a language barrier that affected his performance when he first arrived. He overcame the challenges with the help of The Writing Center, friends, and in consultation with faculty.

The following responses are representative of this group:

Ervan: When I first took the entrance exam I didn't realize how important the entrance exam was to your starting classes and your career. I took five years [to complete my degree]. I could have taken four if I would have thought about it then. .. But I'm kinda glad that I took the path I did. I didn't fail any course. It took me five years because I started off a step behind.

Hasan: I should have focused on math [in high school]. You know I didn't think the transition was going to be so difficult when I got here. But if I really buckled down and focused on my math in high school, I would have been alright when I got here --but it took a while; I had to take them over.

Hasan: I had one difficult transition, my freshman year, and that was Shakespeare. So …at my school, it wasn't really an emphasis on the Complete Works. … You come from a school and you're not familiar with the Complete Works that a lot of these professors have assumed you've read. If you don't have those under your belt when you get here, its another language to you.

Many students mentioned that they received assistance from the UIC Writing Center to enhance their academic performance. The Writing Center and other support units will be discussed further in the section entitled Student Support Systems.

Faculty/Staff Interactions

The survey revealed that the students rated faculty and administrative personnel as generally supportive of their success at UIC. They rated teaching assistants as helpful, but less so than faculty or staff. Of the 20 students surveyed, 11 students indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that a faculty member had been important in their success. Thirteen students indicated that an administrator had been important in their success.

The review of the interview responses reveals that of the 17 interviews, 10 of the students spoke only of positive and supportive relationships with faculty; the other seven providing a more balanced description of some faculty who were supportive, and others who were not. One student discussed an experience in which he believed he was the victim of racism on the part of the faculty member. Representative positive responses indicated that their professors are skilled teachers who engaged students in learning by creating a friendly, engaging, interesting, motivating and open learning environment.

Nelson: I took a philosophy class; he [the professor] brought you in, and gave all these different ideas of how to look at things. It was very interesting. He didn't teach it straight out of the book -- here are the ideas, here are my interpretations of it, and here is how it's used in real life. It was a friendly open environment. You could ask questions if you wanted to. If you didn't, it was ok. ….Most of the professors I had, I would consider above average….they wouldn't just focus on the black and white. They give you what they did in their research, or whatever, but they still had it tied into the book or the readings. .. They were more than willing to give you the insight, but not to just feed you their opinion.

George: Dr. S. really helped. She made sure I stayed on track. She helped to guide me mentally, finding what I really want to do….just really searching within myself, and mustering the extra whatever to study….to go above and beyond, in terms of research

and things like that. Just going to class, I don't feel like I was taught enough. Taking that extra step, she was very instrumental in that way.

Ervan: When I started taking more sophomore and junior courses over in the Chemical Engineering building we had a smaller classroom setting. There are only two classrooms in the building. One is used for everything. There is one giant classroom on the second floor. All the teachers' offices are around that classroom. We see all of our professors every day. We're right next to their office, so when I was taking classes in the lecture center for Chemistry 112 or for Physics, or a giant lecture course, the professors teach you there. Then after class, they say "come to my office if you have any questions." It's always way over somewhere else. I know for me, I didn't feel like going way over there to an office. If I had a question I'd ask right after class, as opposed to trying to go find him. In the Chemical Engineering building you couldn't help but see them. If you had a question they are right there. So it made it a lot easier….and the faculty in the Chemical Engineering building are really helpful. They are a mix of professors. Some are more helpful than others. From what I've learned, there are a few main Chemical Engineering professors. One of them is a brilliant guy. He is not as good at teaching you what he knows, but he knows a lot. Sometimes he is so mathematically attuned he says stuff and it just goes over your head….but he's a good guy. I have another professor; he can teach you little bit better. You ask him a question and he can tell you the answer in more simplified terms. This other professor, he's really old. He's brilliant but his teaching style is different. He doesn't bring notes. He teaches straight from what he remembers doing. He has to teach on a regular set schedule. He knows all the chapters. They are all really nice guys they are helpful and supportive.

The representative comments of the students who provided a more balanced view made some of the same positive comments. The following students added positive comments about professors who understand the student's perspective, and provide supportive challenges. These students also discussed the negative effects of professors who were too research focused, not prepared as teachers, were disorganized, or made disparaging remarks about students who are struggling academically.

Quenton: I've had some professors, I'm not going to say many, that could actually understand [the student perspective]. But we've also had professors who are strictly by the book. I prefer the professors who can kind of understand college life, and commitments outside of college that you have to do. For example, for Nutrition I was actually failing the class, and the professor and I had a talk. And he said, I bet you ten dollars that you can improve your grade. I ended up coming out with an A just because he bet me. I guess, in a way, I kind of needed motivation. I was in his office and the TA's office all the time. They were actually very supportive…. same for my anatomy class, and my math classes; Prof. J.'s classes. As far as other classes in my actual major, you have some professors who are very vague and just tell you about their research. I don't know if they do this for college, but for high school, you have to go and get a teaching certification, but in college, as long as you have a Ph.D. you can just teach. I'm not sure if that's the case, but if so, they need to change that rule; it's ridiculous. I mean,…I'm an organized person….[and one of my professors], he's like the most unorganized person I've ever met.

Students' negative comments about faculty centered on the effects of a professor's lack of preparation to teach, carelessness in grading practices, and racist behavior.

Nelson: I had a Spanish teacher who was Chinese; spoke Chinese, and she taught Spanish; but she didn't know English. When you asked her to say a word, we had to figure out what it was in English so she can say it. We were guessing a lot. It was more of

a challenge to do all these things. I just need someone who can come in and teach me. You get to the point where you just say, can I just go home and read the book, because you're just making it so much harder.

Lawrence: I'm not one of those students who come at the end of the semester and say, I think I really did bad in that class, and ends up with an A. I'm always the opposite. I think…oh yeah, I did great, then check my grades, and I'm like, wow a C, that's not what I expected. Pretty much every semester that I've been here I've had to speak with professors regarding a grade I received, and more often than not, they don't have a lot of backing as to why I received this grade. Because a lot of the times, I'll actually be in the class with another person that I know personally, or I'll get the same grade, or higher grades than them throughout the class, and somehow end up with a grade different then they did. Luckily, I had that as a basis. So when I do go in to talk to these professors, which I didn't do as much as a freshman, because I was new, and I'm sure it would have changed my GPA greatly if I had because I didn't know what to do, and I didn't have the confidence or strength to handle it. Since then I've been getting a lot of grade changes just on the basis that the professor goes back and says, oh I made a mistake.

Brandon: The situation was that one of the teachers…I was the only Black person in the class….and while in the class, the teacher asked a question, and I would raise my hand. The teacher would look at me and go to someone else who wasn't raising their hand. I approached the teacher, and he said "oh, I didn't see your hand," and gave me a general excuse. I was like ok, whatever. But it didn't occur to me until I got my paper back, and I got an F, and I didn't understand why I got an F. I took it to the department, and they read it and said, this is not an F. From then on, they talked to the teacher, and I don't think he works here anymore. They were able to help me change my grade in the class from an F to a B…but it was just that…people say everyone experiences racism, you just don't see it. And I personally don't see it because I don't like to think that way.

When asked about their relationship with teaching assistants (TA's), 9 students were generally positive, but eight were either ambivalent or shared negative teaching and learning relationships or experiences with their TA's. Three students expressed concerns about English language barriers that hindered their learning opportunities. One student believed that a TA was exhibiting racist behavior.

David: You tend to have more one-on-one time with the TAs. That's where I only had a few small classes, where I was actually able to have the one-on-one time with a professor. But the TAs always seemed more approachable; maybe because they got to know my name a little better than the professor did.

Carl: Some TA's are very supportive. They give you their email address and their personal email address. Some TA's, if you've got concerns, and you can't reach them via e-mail, you can call them on their cell phones -- some of them, they're willing to help you. As you're willing to help them as well... If you're willing to work with them they'll work with you. Um, especially a TA I had when I took a foreign language core. Every TA I had for Spanish was always readily available and had a good ear for listening to what was on your mind regarding taking the course. Like the challenges, things you have trouble understanding or things that don't really work for you. I mean, TA's for the most part, are good too.

Brandon: The faculty and professors would teach a certain way and I wouldn't understand. We would tell the TA's, this is what she went over in class, and the TA would say there is a much easier way to do it, and she'll show us. That's how they were more helpful than the teachers because they would show us an easier way….and even a smarter way than the teachers were showing us….which made my life a lot better when it

was time to take the test. …. Across any of the courses, math, science, history, whatever class I was in, I made sure if there was TA there, I was going to talk to that TA. They did help. That's what I don't like about UIC, the higher you go, there are no TA's. Then you're on your own, and you don't know what to do. You go to the learning center and there are people to tell you the same things in different ways. It's harder as you go higher. There's no one to sit and talk to about it.

George: TA's sometimes just don't want to help. They act like you're supposed to know everything -- especially in the science department. They act like they don't have the time for you because they know everything and you should know it. I never got any help from a TA.

Quenton: I think the majority…ok I'm just going to come out and say the word racist. You have some TA's, and not only because I'm Black, and I purposefully did this. Me and another student get the same grades. We did the same lab report. I just paraphrased portions different, but the exact same thing. He got a 35 on it, and I got a 15. We have the exact same data, just different ways of paraphrasing. He couldn't understand it. I couldn't understand it. The professor couldn't understand it. Why take so many points off? I would go to her; she was very snotty. I asked her about it. She actually blew up in my face about it. … It was General Chemistry II. Don't get me wrong; you have some good TA's. My math TA was fine. Maybe it's just science TA's.

Nelson: Some of the TA's are horrible. I had a math TA for pre-Calc.[Calculus]; he didn't know English at all. He couldn't tell us the answers because he didn't know how to pronounce them. Half of the class didn't care anymore. The other half were trying to think of ways we could get him kicked out. It's hard to learn math when you go to the TA and he can't explain it to you at all. It's kind of like, if I have questions, who is going to answer the questions….because you can't go to the professor.

Finally, when asked about the relationships with administrative staff, most students referred to experiences with various forms of academic advising roles. Of the 11 students who commented on administrative staff, only 5 shared positive interactions. The six students who did not comment received advising from faculty within their colleges.

Marcus: Staff, like my counselors [in the College of Business Administration], and all of them; they have been very encouraging and forthcoming. They have suggested classes. Like after I found out about the Writing Center.

Nelson: You talk to them (academic advisors) and it's just a nodding head. They don't give you feedback that you don't already know. It's like you're going to hear confirmation of yourself. I don't know what advising they really do. But they just kind of agree with you. I'm sure if I just went in there and told them that I was dropping out they would say that's a great idea. I mean they didn't ask anything at all but print out the Degree Audit Reporting System (DARS) report.

Brandon: At the front saying that my DARS report says I shouldn't go to medical school. You should do this instead. Why not talk about what I want to do. And then…that's why students don't go to advising and that's why they get lost. Especially African American students, because they're offended, because advisors tell them that; then at the same time they are here for five, six years, and the school is still getting their money and they are stuck in debt. They didn't do what they wanted to do and they switched majors and they don't like what they're doing. My personal drive was to…I always envisioned that when I graduated I would look at advisors and say I made it and you told me I couldn't make it. You know. That's my personal drive. Someone who personally told me I couldn't

do it. To like, I did it, this is my degree, and I did this by myself, regardless of what you told me I couldn't do.

Lawrence: I have had quite a few issues with the UIC advising. As far as telling me to take classes that I had no need to take. Telling me to take the same class again. Even though it was on my DARS report. Or telling me to take a class that already had a requirement fulfilled. It's really frustrating, because at the end of the day, it's a waste of my time. I mean, thankfully, I'm in a situation where I am a scholarship athlete and student...so it's not as much a financial factor as much as it is a time and effort factor that it's going into something that's totally unnecessary and basically no good. They have done that multiple times. I just don't view them as very helpful.
....[Regarding probationary advising] I actually saw four advisors that year for probationary meetings; they were required. And out of four, there was one that was actually helpful, not only that she provided great insight as to why I should do better but pretty much she said something that I would basically never forget, as far as a college career goes. She saw my GPA, and she heard me talking, and I was very articulate. My demeanor spoke to something that was much greater than my GPA showed, and she basically guaranteed me that the following semester this wouldn't be the case again and that I would be on the deans list. And I was like, oh yeah, that's great. I'm sure I would go from a 1.6 to the deans list. But lo and behold, the next semester, I came back. I had decided to go a different path, because I had started out as pre-med, and then I had a lot of issues with the science department that I'll get to next, and I decided to pursue law. So I changed my major from biology to a double major in political science and communications. So I came back…and I am a pretty strong writer, which is kind of why I was almost an English major coming in….and I came back, and I got a 3.78, and I was on the deans list. And I'll always remember that. It was almost like…I'm trying to think. It was like prophecy. She was kind of like this will happen if you believe it will happen and I thought that was really cool and no one else ever did that. They just pretty much looked at you said, oh, wow you're doing pretty bad….and I know I'm doing bad, or I wouldn't be here. That was not constructive at all…. I know they have to deal with students on a very large scale, but if you're going to bother taking on the title of advisor, you need to actively engage within advising on a good level.

Student Support Systems

While not included in the Guiffrida/Tinto model, the Student Support Systems variable domain was added because all students discussed the influence of various formal and informal campus level supports that influenced their success.   All 17 of students who were interviewed indicated that some form of campus level student support influenced their success at UIC. In almost all cases that support was considered a positive influence. Twelve of the students mentioned the influence of financial aid, and of those, 11 indicated that financial aid was an important positive factor in their success. Four of the students emphasized the point by stating that the financial aid they received was critical to their being able to attend the university. Only one student indicated that financial aid would have been helpful, but due to his family's financial profile, he was not eligible.

Nine of the students mentioned the influence of the African American Academic Network (AAAN). Three of the students were positive about the support of the AAAN staff. Four indicated that while they were aware of the support, they did not use this campus level support office. Two students expressed concerns about the AAAN.

Five students talked about the value of their positive residence life experience. Representative responses are as follows:

Isaac: When I came freshman year, I pretty much learned a lot through my resident advisor (RA). My RA was amazing. I have to give it to him. As freshmen, the whole floor went to dinner every night. So I pretty much went to the cafeteria every night. I think it helps a lot. I work for campus housing right now. I am a peer mentor. I tell students to study all the time. I talk to freshmen.

Kendrick: Just because I stayed in the dorms, it was pretty much a whole little community already. I tried staying in the dorms every weekend. I live on the north side, so every weekend I could go and just see the family, but I just stayed after a while. So I just stayed with my roommate and other friends. We would try to go downtown. Most of them lived in the suburbs so we would go to the suburbs. Come up with things to do -- fishing, things like that.

Three students mentioned the support of the orientation program and two mentioned the support of the staff of the Student Development Services office. One student had a good representative response:

Jamar: ….the orientation program was good. When they let you know that you have these advisors here. They let you know the resources that are available. And so I was able to connect with those resources, as I knew that they were available. You know, I made it a point to ask the questions, and get the issues that I had addressed. And luckily for me, everybody who I had questions for, had answers.

Three students mentioned the Writing Center as a source of support, while one student mentioned the role of the library as a place to concentrate on studies:

Ervan: When I was home, I lived with my uncle. I moved from my mom and my sister's place, but my uncle wouldn't be home until late because he'd be at work. It was me and the TV -- and we have regular TV, so there wasn't much on during the day. I found myself watching programs I didn't even like….anything to keep me from doing work. That's why I thought coming to UIC library would help. I figured I can just focus. Also you don't want to spend your time in school all day. Even when I would have my friends, you can study too. We would sit and chat together. It was better than hanging out, where I wouldn't study at all.

It is important to note that, while this is not a support, within the comments about financial aid, four students mentioned the challenges presented by the expense associated with required book purchases. The students also expressed concern about books and other materials that were never used for the course.

Extracurricular Activities and External Commitments

Fourteen of the students commented on extracurricular activities and external commitments experienced while in college, but it is important to mention that, in general, this group of students did not participate in multiple extracurricular activities. Generally, on-campus endeavors supported academic success, and off campus-activities posed more challenges -- particularly in relation to off-campus jobs.

Eleven of the students mentioned that, at some point, they held an on or off campus job.

Quenton: As far as the job at Fedex, my academics had gone down hill….probably because of lack of sleep…two to three hours a night, for six days straight. I don't think that's healthy at all.

Marcus: Well for the on campus job. I didn't want to take out too many student loans and everything. So I picked up an on campus job actually. At one point I was working two jobs and going to school full time. It was hard trying to focus. My on campus job, now that I'm towards the end, it's actually quite beneficial. I can go to work and leave from there and then go. It was sort of a challenge when I was working both those jobs.

David: Working in The Writing Center and having a break in between classes. Just to be able to go to work and get some extra money. I have a non-campus job too. The big difference is, the time it takes to do that one versus being in The Writing Center and working in between classes, I am already here, the time would have been used here, might as well use it working. More on campus jobs would help. Unfortunately with the way things are right now that could be a big challenge.

University Social Systems/ Peer Groups Interactions

When asked to rate the quality of relationships with faculty, teaching assistants, faculty, and staff, the survey results revealed that the students rated their relationships with their peers as most positive. The positive comments regarding peers were found in the interview responses as well, but overall, their comments fell into four categories: positive, negative, and two categories of responses in which student claimed they "never connected" with their peers, or "it depended on the friends."

Responses representative of those students who found that their relationship with other students was positive are as follows:

Franklin: My sophomore year I lived in the dorms on the East side. I had a single, and I remember my first time being by myself -- that transition from my freshman year, when I had a roommate in the dorms. That transition to being in the single was pretty tough for me. I got kind of depressed. I remember, I was in the library one day, and I tried to do some homework. I broke down and started crying. I called my dad. I told him…I'm alone; I'm lost. It was really traumatizing. He drove to see me to talk and to cheer me up, and he said, if you feel like you want to come home because it's too tough, you can. I was like, no, I don't want to come home. I remember thinking to myself; I wasn't alone, because my friends were in the same dorm building and stuff like that. It was just that going to a room, a single, was kind of hard. That made me think that I had to adapt to it by spending more time with my friends. I would study with them, and spend less time in my room by myself. I didn't tell my friends that I had a nervous breakdown. I just went to them for more social stuff. I chose how my dad helped me out. My family, my friends helped me out by being there and I just took it upon myself to go to them.

David: One thing that isn't big on the campus, by being a big commuter school, there isn't much of an influence among friends. Once you get here, you're here, that's it, and once you're gone you don't really talk too much. But when I met [names a student friend] there was a big difference. We hung out outside of school. Me and her, and other friends, we'd get together and study. Yeah, this is what was missing before. So, some way, try and create that community among UIC students, I think it's needed. It's not strong enough here.

Nelson: Like I said, they [student friends] really help to get your through those tougher times when you really need some kind of support. Um, even when there is no weight on you, it just makes things easier. Knowing that, you know, that I was going to go to class

and come back and hang out with friends, even just for that day. As long as I knew that there was someone there I could hang out with from time to time, it makes it a lot better. Because you know they are going through the same things you are, even if it is with different majors or classes, whatever.

Brandon: Out of classroom, freshman year, I got involved...I lived on campus all five years. I got involved with the residence halls because I did want to make sure that I wasn't just hanging out with the African Americans on campus. I wanted to make sure I got a diverse group of friends. I feel like if you have a diverse group of friends, there can be different things to talk about; different things to do; different social backgrounds. So I got involved in the residence hall association.

Lawrence: The majority of my closer friends are members of my gymnastics team; a few of which I live with now. They have all been very supportive. Pretty much from the beginning, both scholastically and athletically, they all do well in school as well. We all like to do well together. We would always have the running joke that we have the highest GPA of the men on the team. We just like to come off as the ones that do try and have something to show for it. It's just something at this point in your life that you should be doing the best that you can, and you should be proud of that. My friends have been a big part of that; they have pushed me to do better; and I have pushed them. We always make sure that we are on top of our studies, and on top of our training. It's a collective effort to be the best possible.

Otis: I think….a lot of freshman, particularly that come to UIC; they're not connected to the university. I would say the majority of UIC students are commuter students, and they have no sense of connection. They come to class during the day, and then they leave, they might grab a bite to eat, but that's it. There is no connection. We call them U-Pass students or Parking Lot students. That was a word we used for them during orientation. There is no sense of connection. No interest in what's going on campus. No interest in speakers. No interest in organizations; just no connections. And I think your success rate automatically drops if you have no connection. You know, compared to other campuses which are resident halls oriented. People have a sense of community. People want to stay down there; they want to be involved in their campus. So I think that was my added bonus, I think that's the reason why I was able to be successful here at UIC. Just having that bond with UIC….First year was very huge. It was kind of awkward. I went to a predominantly Black high school; predominantly Black elementary school. So it was a big adjustment…. It wasn't as if I was oblivious to talking to a White person, or a White woman, or an Asian, or an Arab. I always had initial contacts here and there, but UIC allowed me to really challenge that interaction and really step out of my comfort zone and talk about theories, topics and issues. One of the things I really admired was finding a common denominator between…even if it was like basketball. Something we could talk about….Most of the friendships that I built were from study groups. And it's so funny because I would see a whole class who didn't know each other at the beginning of the semester; two, three hundred students, and at the end of the semester they all come together and build lasting relationships because, you know, when you're up one to two o'clock in the morning, studying, you probably have side conversations. You're talking. You have conversations about life. I think that's the beauty of UIC. You have this interaction of people of different races…different…we're all in the same boat. We're all trying to get through this class. We lean on each other for support. That's how I describe myself.

The three students who said that they "never connected" with other students were commuters. The two students who believed that peers could be either a positive or negative influence, depending on the student, were commuters. One of the students replied as follows:

Ervan: I was thinking about what I said about friends as a challenge. You really have to pick your friends; who you hang out with. Some are more focused on studying and getting work done, but there are other people who want to have a social life outside of class as well. The ones who want to have a social life outside of school, they tend to not focus as much, and depending on the group, you don't want to feel left out, but you want to do the same things they do. And if the group doesn't do homework a lot, then you'll end up not doing homework. I try to hang out with people who are in the library studying all the time. I think it depends on how you pick your friends. It can be a great help if you have friends who really motivate you to learn. Because right now in chemical engineering, there are students who want to get their GPA's up before they leave, so now they are trying to study. There are people in our group, and we tell them, hey, where are you going? You're going home? You should stay, and try and get some work done. Stuff like that can really inspire someone and pull someone over. Even if they don't want to that type of encouragement….At the same time, it's a double edged sword, because if you have someone who is not interested in studying, they can encourage you to not study; it all depends on who you hang out with.

The lone student who thought that peers were a negative influence, was a commuter.

When the responses were further examined within the four peer relationship categories, it became obvious that most the students who considered peer relationships as positive also mentioned that they lived in the residence halls. In fact, 9 of those 11 students lived in the residence halls for at least one year; 6 of the students lived in the residence halls for at least 3 years. One student spent one year living off campus, but within walking distance of the campus, and only one student was a commuter all four years.

The apparent relationship between positive perception of peers and experience in residence halls prompted us to take another look at the relationship between the survey items that asked the interviewees to rate the quality of relationships with various groups and resident status. We discovered the following:

Students who never lived in the residence halls:
Relationships with students (1 to 6, 6 is good)   **3.7**
Relationships with administrators (1 to 6, 6 is good) **2.9**
Relationships with faculty (1 to 6, 6 is good)   **3.9**

Students who lived in the residence halls (1 year or more):
Relationships with students (1 to 6, 6 is good)   **5.6**
Relationships with administrators (1 to 6, 6 is good) **5.0**
Relationships with faculty (1 to 6, 6 is good)   **4.7**

It is interesting to note that students with some experience in the residence halls perceive that their relationships with students, administrators, and faculty were generally better than their non-resident peers. This phenomenon should be investigated further. In addition to the relationship between positive perception of peers and experience in residence halls, it is important to note a few other themes related to the influence of peers. Throughout the responses about peers, students consistently referred to themselves, and other students, as either "connected" or "not connected" to other students or to others on campus. A number of students indicated that friends pushed, or

motivated, each other academically. A number of students also discussed the value of the diversity of students at UIC for their personal growth.

Home Social Systems: Family and Friends

Earlier in this report, in the pre-college entry attributes section, the influence of family and friends from home was considered. As a final variable to consider during the college experience, we examine the influence of family and friends once again.

Of the 17 respondents, 14 discussed the positive influences of their parents on their academic success exclusively. In other words, their parents had no negative influence. The positive influences identified included encouragement, emotional support, financial support, serving as a role model, having expectations for academic success, providing advice about college, shielding from home responsibilities, and help with basic needs like food care packages, or a ride to the campus when they missed the train. Representative responses are as follows:

> *Brandon: My family was very helpful. They helped me every semester. Every semester I finished. There were times I did do not so well and they always told me that, as long as I was determined to finish, I would finish.*
>
> *Hasan: Number one [support is] family, I'll be the first to graduate in my immediate family, from a post secondary institution, so, just encouragement, support, words of wisdom, advice, feedback on certain things that are actually taking place, involvement. Making sure my grades are up to par if I'm not doing too well, and things like that. I just have a great support system from my parents.*
>
> *Isaac: Like last week, Saturday, I was just sitting in my room….My mom called, and I told her I was hungry, and she said, don't worry I'll bring you food. So she actually bought me food….it's like a 45 minute drive.*
>
> *Carl: My mother as far as college goes, would always try to do things for me; she would always try to do anything she can for me so I wouldn't have certain worries. Like my mom still, if I come home, she still washes my clothes. Or if she goes grocery shopping, she still buys things that I like to eat and drink. Little things like that. If I was living on campus or if I lived in my own apartment I would have to worry about doing little things like that, chores around the house, paying bills and things like that. Bills I take care of myself. I have my own cell phone payment and my own car payment. I always pay my own bills. She'll do little things to help me out.*
>
> *Otis: In a sense, I had to decide, should I stay living at home or make the transition of living on campus? So then I finally moved on campus, a lot of my family, (not to say problems), but issues were eliminated. Because my mother, she worked real well with me, she was like you know what?…any little thing that happens in the family, I'm not going to call Otis because I know you have things you have to worry about on campus, so I can call you time to time to check in. Which was great, because you know, it helped me focus on classes, and on my college career, and also stay connected to my family. … My mother recognized that I was dealing with, I would come home and then I got to deal with this. She recognized that and she worked with me during that transition.*
>
> *Jamar: My dad, he's a teacher….I can talk to him whenever I need to about whatever. He's definitely one of my biggest role models and examples. He went back to school when he was thirty. I was like 8 or 9…years old at the time. He got his degree…he was done after five or six years. Been teaching since; and got his masters. He has been there*

as an example, and we have good conversations….Growing up my daddy was the closest thing to a working professional I had in my circle --in my immediate vision….and he didn't start teaching 'til I was 14 or 15 years old.

Five of the 17 students mentioned the influence of their brothers. In three cases, their brothers helped them with college advice. In one case, the student's younger brother was "his Zen," and in one case, the student felt he needed to succeed to be a role model for his younger brothers.

Brandon: Whenever I need to get away from this place, I would go home. The minute I would go home, I would forget about everything I had to do. Someone is in the house, enjoying themselves and having a good time, or my brother, who I've gotten close with since I came to college; we'd just relax, and enjoy each others company. He's in high school and I'm in college. We don't have time to hang out. He was like my Zen. I needed that, to [re]connect on Sunday night or Monday morning, and hit it again….And I do that once a month or twice…once a month usually. Of course it's a lot less now because its time for me to get older and you know and heal my self. Every now and then, I'm going to go home.

Marcus: My brother, he made sure I knew the material he gave me suggestions like if this is class is hard, you need to make sure you go to this class every day, or whatever, whether you feel that you know the material or not. They might like, allude to a certain point, and that might be on the test. Just having a person that went through, my brother was sort of like my mentor….like he went through it and he gave me tips on how to be successful at UIC and how to do well in classes.

One student talked about challenges that family posed, and that this situation motivated him to "want to do more."

David: I'm just saying what they have not done. I actually wrote about this in the paper. When I talked about my family, as far as, selling drugs, going to jail, and not actually achieving much outside of high school….and just knowing that I wanted to go above and beyond that. I want to see the world and go past the four corners of Adams and Kostner…. and maybe take a trip to Italy one day….or Paris -- just go above and beyond. They don't quite grasp that concept, its more, lets kick it at home, watch TV, drink, smoke, and um, we have that constant battle. But I hear, you know, you're kind of boring, because you don't want to do the things we want to do. And I'm like, no I just want to do more than what you want to do.

One student discussed the challenges of child rearing.

Jamar: I'm sure you can imagine….going to school and taking care of a toddler. When you get done with school, it requires so much attention. I could never really get started with school work 'til after the kids go to bed. Half the time I'm taking care of one child and half of the other time I'm taking care of two kids….and the one, the mother works in the evenings. So I get the kids to bed. By the time that's done its like 9:30 or 10. I've got my own evening things to do. That is difficult I guess.

Friends from home seemed to have almost no influence on the participants. Only two students discussed a minimal role of friends from home.

Conclusions and Implications

The African American male students who generously shared their experiences through their survey and interview responses were aware that they would not be the main beneficiaries of this research. They all expressed an interest in informing UIC, and more important, in improving the "pathway" for future African American male students. Whether administrator, faculty, staff, parent, sibling or peer, those involved in the academic lives of the African American males in this study interacted with these students at various points along the pathway to their success. Some interactions facilitated their progress, and others presented obstacles. The study findings reveal that there are numerous factors that influenced the success of each student. Each actor in the life of a future student may find the recommendations of this report useful, but we would propose that a broader awareness of the full complement of factors that contribute to the path to success may improve the effectiveness of each individual actor. While each actor performs a unique and important role, the awareness of the network of support may improve the advice and support that the students need to succeed. To that end, it may be useful to gather key actors representing each factor together on an annual or semi-annual basis to discuss the role and function of each, to plan support activities and communication, and to learn about gaps and redundancies.

For each major actor, we have developed a list of recommendations. While it was a challenging task, we have attempted to list the recommendations, in priority order, based on the interview responses of the students. There is no environment in which it would be easy to address every recommendation immediately. The current fiscal environment presents even greater challenges. At the same time, the priority listing helps us to begin our efforts with the recommendations students have told us are most important for their success, and to make sure that we are not cutting the supports that are most critical. It also helps us to stage, or phase, our response over some reasonable timeframe. In addition, there may be recommendations that have less to do with additional resources than a change in the way we do what we do.

The recommendations are presented with four audiences in mind: UIC leadership and staff; UIC faculty; UIC students, particularly African American male students; and the parents of the students. Each set of conclusions and recommendations are informed in two ways; through the themes drawn from the survey and interview responses of the students, and through the responses from three direct questions asked of students at the end of each interview: If you were to give advice to an African American male freshmen about how to succeed at UIC, what would you say?; If you were to give advice to UIC about what could be done differently to help UIC students to succeed, what would you say?; and What should UIC be sure not to change? The responses drawn directly from the answers to these questions are listed in italics.

Advice to UIC Leadership and UIC Staff

- Address the Critical Need for Financial Aid
- Improve College and Campus Level Advising
- Ensure that Departments Continue to do a Good Job Advising their Students (distinguished from college or campus based advising)
- *Help undeclared students find a major sooner, (by sophomore year), because the best advising is in the departments.*

- Consider What May be Learned about the Benefits of Residence Life
- *Students indicated that living in the residence halls is a great experience; be mindful of helpful linkages between academic life and residence hall life.*
- Create a Better Transition, Particularly for Students from CPS
- Maintain and Further Develop Academic Support Offered through the UIC Writing Center, the Math Learning Center, and the Library
- Hold Faculty More Accountable for the Improvement of Teaching and Student Learning
- Provide Teaching Assistant (TA) Training and Development that Supports Effective Learning for All Students
- Create Opportunities for Freshmen to Talk to Each Other
- Be Mindful of Campus and College Level Policy that May Undermine Student Learning
- Market UIC's Strengths to Students
- Identify Ways to Inspire Students to Succeed
- Find Ways to Reach Out to Students Experiencing Depression

Advice to UIC Faculty

- Don't Underestimate the Inspirational Importance of Your Encouragement
- Use Every Opportunity to Engage Students in Academics
- Hire TA's Who Support Effective Learning for All Students and Provide Training that Develops their Ability to Teach Effectively
- Use Group Projects and Study Groups to Help Students Build Academic and Social Linkages on Campus
- Appeal to Students' Intrinsic Motivation for Learning
- Recognize that Students Approach Course Content from Varied Perspectives
- Be Prepared and Organized to Teach Each Class
- Be Careful in Your Grading Practices
- Be Attentive to the Cost of Required Books
- Take Advantage of Opportunities to Learn Lessons from the Great Instructors [several were named]

Advice to UIC Students

Of the three questions, the first, pertaining to advice to a new freshman, generated the most response and reflection from the students. Most were adamant and passionate about the strategies to succeed. Some of their responses were true to their own strategies for success, and other comments were more a recommendation from the "if I could do it all over, I would have done these things" perspective. The list below delineates distinct themes that emerged within their responses.

- Be Confident
- Financial Aid is Critical
- Establish a Relationship with Instructors to Gain Needed Assistance and Guidance.
- Importance of Academic Advising
- Find Like-Minded Study Partners
- Maintain Academic Focus
- Find Opportunities to Build Your Math and Writing Skills

- Manage Your Time Make Use of Support Systems
- Get Involved on Campus (with Some Warnings)

Advice about social engagement was offered as a double-edged sword. While students offered that engaging in campus co-curricular and social life is important in becoming fully immersed in UIC life, they also indicated that it is important to distinguish between beneficial social life and that which can hurt chances for success. Thus, this advice came with both recommendations and warnings. In summary, students seemed to be saying, get involved with the campus social life in moderation, particularly your first semester of freshman year.

Advice to Parents

- Be Attentive to Financial Aid Deadlines
- Don't Underestimate Moral Support from Family
- Academic Support Can Come in a Variety of Ways
- Understand that Campus Life Plays a Role in Academic Success
- Sometimes a Successful Student Just Needed a Home Cooked Meal

Policy and Program Implementation

During the past year, as we have presented our findings to various audiences, we were asked repeatedly, about the implementation of the policy and program recommendations included in our research report to the campus. Consequently, we asked for a meeting with three critical policy actors on the campus where the study was conducted. These individuals are considered the most directly responsible for implementing relevant programs, policies and campus initiatives from an academic or student affairs perspective. The titles of the three individuals are: Special Assistant to the Provost for Diversity; Associate Vice-Provost for Academic Enrollment Services; and Assistant Dean of Students.

We truly did not know what we would learn from this meeting, because we, as the research team, did not have a role in which we would be engaged in the implementation of campus programs or policies resulting from our report. We began the meeting by informing these policy actors of the broader interest in program and policy implementation, and we asked them to comment about any actions resulting from our research findings and recommendations. After hearing their initial responses, we then asked follow-up questions about activities, policies and programs that were particularly important to the student study participants in an effort to stimulate thought and discussion of any items that had not yet emerged. The responses of these key policy actors fell into four categories, and were quite informative. In the review of their responses, we will refer to these policy actors as PA's. The four categories are: Developing New Programs/Initiatives/Actions, Reinforcing Existing Policies or Programs, Identifying Future Implementation Challenges, and Establishing a Positive African American Male Student Narrative, and they are reviewed as follows:

Developing New Programs/Initiatives/Actions

The PA's identified a number of programs, initiatives, and actions that were informed by the student voices presented in the study findings. They are as follows:

Letting Students Know that We Believe They Can Succeed

· All of the PA's agreed that one of the most important ideas that these successful student study participants conveyed was how important it was that someone believed in them – and that in each case, this gave the student the sense that he could be successful at the university. It was obvious that regardless of who provided the encouragement, this simple act of support was critical and key to their success as a student.
· Consequently, as the PA's have had talks or meetings with faculty or staff throughout the year, including the Black Male Leadership Group on campus, they have used this information, and quotes from the students, to emphasize and reinforce the importance of this encouragement to the students, regardless of the campus venue.

Informing Faculty of the Importance of their Role in Encouraging Students

· When asked if faculty recognize their role in student success, the PA's indicated that in their discussions with the Deans and faculty groups regarding various initiatives, and particularly about the research findings, the various group members said "our department needs to meet with these researchers so we can understand what we can do."
· Sometimes students and faculty are not lined up to connect, but our campus initiatives, programs, and discussions about African American male (AAM) success create an opportunity for campus community members with disparate interests to come together into a synergistic place. This study, and conversations on the topic, in some ways, gives "permission" for faculty to engage with AAM students, because the importance of the interaction is recognized.
· It is important to note that the study cites that it is not necessarily an African American someone, but it is someone in the campus community who reaches out to a student and makes a difference. The PA's shared two examples of faculty members who took it upon themselves to focus on AAM student retention, one in economics, and one in chemistry; neither of whom is African American.

Linking Students to Their Disciplines Early

· All PA's agreed that there was a clear message in the Pathways report that students should be linked to their major and disciplines as early as possible. Students felt that they were better advised by departments (rather than college level advising) and that they were more engaged in their studies. Thus, as the PA's participate and direct academic and administrative planning and implementation throughout the year, they have encouraged activities and programs that get students engaged in their majors or disciplines early and intentionally.

Developing Special Interest Group Housing for African American Male Students

- One of the PA's indicated that the findings of the Pathways study, supported by other campus initiatives targeting African American Males, are factors in the development of a model for an African American Male special interest floor in Campus Housing.

Reinforcing Existing Policies or Programs (particularly recent initiatives)

It is important to point out that the study participants were seniors, and in the period between their freshmen and senior year, a number of program and policy initiatives were implemented from which Pathways study participants did not benefit. The findings of this study helped to reinforce that some of the initiatives are on the right track for the future success of students.

Improving Academic Advising

- The study recommendations about the need for informed, positive, encouraging advising have been discussed in meetings with groups dealing with policy and practice concerned with degree completion progress. However, the campus was looking at this issue already, so while the research findings didn't lead to initiatives, they did help to shore-up the work in progress. The PA's thought that it was important that the Pathways study added the voice of students to the advising conversation that was already on-going.

Providing Counseling Support for Students

- A Counseling Center extern has been developing a group for AAM students in the Counseling Center to deal with depression. The Pathways discussion of student depression issues supports his work. This is an important contribution because the idea that AAM students would suffer from depression is a particularly sensitive issue, and is typically considered a White issue. The study confirms that it is an issue that the campus should address.

Identifying Future Implementation Challenges

The PA's shared that some of the recommendations of the study pose clear challenges for future programs, policies, and actions:

Financial Aid

- All of the PA's agreed that financial aid is the challenge for the foreseeable future; how will the campus meet the needs with shrinking budgets? During the past year, $7 million was added to the budget to address students of need. Without these dollars in the future, the campus will have a huge challenge. We will have to be smarter about the use of resources, and students are going to have to be more aware of issues of financial literacy. Students will need to improve their 'smartness' about attending college and balancing finances. For example, Summer College is so important to a good academic foundation, but some students think they need to work over the summer to earn money before college. However, a weak foundation might keep them from graduating in a timely manner. Students need to understand the implications and tradeoffs, and what their investments are worth in the long run. Consequently, the campus must think about how Summer College is marketed; how it can help students and their parents make sense of college financing.

Encouragement of Faculty

· In an earlier section we discussed the importance of faculty encouragement of AAM students. The PA's expressed that one of the challenges for the future is the mechanism for communicating this message to faculty. The findings of the Pathways study will be shared with the campus in February, where the important role of the simple caring actions of faculty and staff will be emphasized. We must continue to find mechanisms for this type of communication.

Establishing a Positive African American Male Student Narrative

The PA's revealed that one of the most important contributions of the study is that it humanizes the AAM students. One PA stated that too often the AAM retention issue is "pathologized." He continued, "This study said these guys are just students, and they just want to be students."

The Pathways study also showed the diversity among AAM students on campus – that the identity of the AAM students is very wide and deep. The students have different histories, and as a result have different needs. At the same time, the study revealed that the issues of AAM students in navigating the university are similar to other students, but with the added baggage of AAM identity. It revealed the students' struggle to understand whether the baggage is with us as a campus, or with them. Consequently, at times, this makes the navigation more complicated.

The PA comments in this last section regarding the past predominant campus narrative regarding AAM students are consistent with the findings of Harper and Nichols (2008). They state that within the student retention literature, Black male experiences are often portrayed as troubled, oppressed and hopeless, and in the many studies focusing on student deficits, all Black males are assumed to be the same. In closing, one of the PA's stated that the fact that the Pathways study was about the experience of successful students illustrated that African American male student retention doesn't require something special of the campus, we just need to do what we should do for students -- monitor, intervene, advise, and encourage.

Implications for Further Research

The study participants identified a number of student support experiences while attending college that have facilitated their academic success. Specifically, they described the assistance they received from academic support facilities that included the campus learning centers focused on writing, math and science. These centers provided learning support for students when they needed additional academic assistance in those subject matter areas on a "drop-in" or "by appointment" bases.

Pathways study participants also mentioned the support they received from campus offices designed to provide campus orientation, academic advising and tutoring support for African American students in particular. While some students did not turn to these offices for support, others participated in individualized academic advising and tutoring that aided them in making course choices, course sequencing choices, or helped them to build writing or math skills. In some cases this support was found in a particular staff person who took a personal interest in their academic success.

Other important elements of a student support system for the study participants included residence life experience, new student orientation, the campus library, and financial aid. The residence life and new student orientation experiences helped students to make connections to other like-minded students; students who had similar majors, had the same level of focus on academics, or had similar social interests. One commuter student found the campus library the place where he could concentrate on his studies. For a majority of the students, financial aid was an important factor in their success, and in some cases, a critical factor in university attendance in general. Note that while financial aid was always identified as an important factor for these students, their perceptions of the assistance of the financial aid office received mixed reviews. In the student's descriptions of the support it was clear that, in most cases, these campus services facilitated the development of a more meaningful and/or effective academic connection that resulted in retention to their senior year. These types of student support systems and their relationship to student retention have been studied in the past.

Braxton and McClendon (2001) and Braxton and Mundy (2001) offered specific recommendations for the improvement of institutional practice that included many of the systems of student support mentioned by the Pathways student participants. In one article, Braxton and McClendon (2001) presented 20 recommendations drawn from "empirically grounded forces" that influence social integration and retention. The recommendations were placed in eight domains of institutional practice which included academic advising, student orientation programs, and residential life. Braxton and Mundy (2001) classified 47 recommendations drawn from prior research. The classifications were made according to Tinto's three principles of effective retention: enduring commitment to the students served by the institution; institutional commitment to the education of all students; and the principle that effective retention programs focus on the integration of all students into the social and academic communities of a college or university (Tinto, 1993, p.146). Institutional recommendations included specific program and policy proposals regarding freshmen orientation, residence life, financial aid, academic and student affairs support services, academic advising, tutoring, and the assessment of at-risk students to determine appropriate interventions (Bean and Eaton, 2001; Kuh ,1996); Braxton and McClendon, 2001; Nora, 2000).

A number of studies on use of campus support services demonstrate the relationship with student persistence. In a review of the research on student services and retention, Hutto (2000) cited the relevant factors including campus residence (Astin, 1993; Pascarella, Hohr, Nora, Zusman, Inman & Desler, 1993; and Inman & Pascarella, 1998); financial aid (Astin, 1993; 1975); and orientation programs (Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1975; 1993). In another study, Mallinckrodt and Sedlacek (2009) found that, for African American students, use of the campus library was a significant predictor of retention.

This body of research highlights the importance of campus student support services. However, none of the recommended changes to Tinto's model, to date, have acknowledged the importance of campus support services in building effective academic connections. The findings from this study suggest a new variable domain, 'student support systems' should be added to Guiffrida's (2005) iteration of the Tinto model. The proposed model is presented in Appendix B. The addition of the student support services domain augments the models with a fuller range of considerations in the effort to understand student retention.

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Appendix A: Guiffrida's Recommendations To Tinto's Model

Pre-Entry Attributes	Goals/Commitments/ **Motivational Orientation**	Experiences While at College	Connections	Goals/Commitments/ **Motivational Orientation**	Outcomes

Cultural Norms /Values

Individualist /Collectivist

Family Background

Skills and Abilities

Prior Schooling

Motivational Orientation

Extrinsic/ Intrinsic

Intentions

Goal and Institutional Commitments

External Commitments

Academic Systems

Formal

Academic Performance

Faculty/Staff Interactions

Informal

University Social Systems

Formal

Extracurricular Activities

Peer Group Interactions

Informal

Home Social Systems

Formal

Family

Friends

Informal

Academic Connection

Social Connection

Motivational Orientation

Extrinsic/ Intrinsic

Intentions

Goal and Institutional Commitments

External Commitments

Departure Decision

Pre-Entry Attributes | Goals/Commitments/ **Motivational Orientation** | Experiences While at College | Connections | Goals/Commitments/ **Motivational Orientation** | Outcomes

Academic Systems

Sima & Inman Recommended Changes in Blue ©
Guiffrida Recommendations to Tinto in Bold

Appendix B

Formal

Cultural Norms /Values

Individualist /Collectivist

Academic Performance

Faculty/Staff Interactions

Informal

Motivational Orientation

Extrinsic/ Intrinsic

Academic Connection

Student Support Systems

• **Learning Centers (e.g., Writing, Math..)**
• **Campus [Support Services] Advising**
• **Library**
• **Residence Life**
• **Orientation**
• **Financial Aid**

Motivational Orientation

Extrinsic/ Intrinsic

Family Background

Intentions

Departure Decision

Intentions

University Social Systems

Formal

Extracurr. Activities Incld. on-campus job

Peer Group Interactions

Informal

Skills and Abilities

Goal and Institutional Commitments

Social Connection

Goal and Institutional Commitments

External Commitments Incl. off-campus job

Home Social Systems

Formal

Family

Friends

Informal

Prior Schooling

External Commitments

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