

AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT EXPERIENCES: A NETWORKING GROUP IN  
HIGH SCHOOL

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Dorii Michelle Gbolo, who won her fight with breast cancer, may her soul forever be present.

## **Abstract**

The achievement gap between ethnic minorities and majority students is currently a significant problem. This study seeks to explore one school's attempt to improve experiences and academic outcomes for African American students through implementation of the African American (AFAM) networking group facilitated by school administrators. The participants in this study consisted of 30 students from 9th through 12th grade. Fifty percent of the students were male and the other 50% were female. According to the school data, all of the students were African American with the exception of one male participant who was Asian. This study explored students' pre-AFAM and post-AFAM levels of disciplinary referrals, GPA, and school attendance as well as students' qualitative experience in the AFAM support group. Quantitative findings in the school data did not result in significant differences in the pre-AFAM and post-AFAM academic outcomes, but five core ideas emerged from the qualitative data that suggest that AFAM supports students in a way that may affect their ability to cope in their school environment and create a strong sense of belonging for African Americans.

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## **Introduction**

The education achievement gap between ethnic minority and majority students is currently a serious issue in the United States. The achievement gap is the widening gap between the academic achievement levels that separate low income and ethnic minority students from majority students (Haycock, 2001; Lee, 2004). Between the 1970s and 1980s the achievement gap narrowed between ethnic minority and majority students and then widened in the late 1990s, specifically in core courses, resulting in reading and math levels below average by the end of high school for ethnic minority students (Haycock, 2001; Lee, 2004). In addition to the decline in academic achievement, rates of high school completion among ethnic minority students dropped, and these rates become even lower for college admission and completion (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Lee, 2002). The purpose of the present study is to examine the African American Student Network (AFAM) initiated by a charter school to ameliorate the achievement gap by engaging high school students and aiding in the transition to college.

### **The Educational Achievement Gap**

Many theories suggest that a variety of factors may contribute to the widening achievement gap between ethnic minority and majority students, including impoverishment, parental education level, teacher quality, lack of early exposure to math and reading outside of school, low expectations, and cultural differences (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting 2008; Haycock, 2001; Hunter & Bartee, 2003; Lee, 2002, 2004). These factors do not contribute to the achievement gap in isolation; the

factors that affect academic outcomes are diverse and cannot be attributed to a single cause (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Giroux & Schmidt, 2004).

Haycock (2001) suggested that there are several ways to ameliorate the achievement gap for ethnic minority students; namely, consistent standards and learning expectations for all students, rigorous school curriculum, and increased access to high level course selections in order to prepare for higher education (Haycock, 2001).

Additionally, investment in academic enrichment programs that offer additional support outside of the typical school hours provide opportunities to further academic achievement in core courses (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Haycock, 2001). Lastly, professional development and teacher preparedness including ongoing training and opportunities can result in educators who are competent in core content areas. Yet, teachers in high poverty areas often lack preparedness and teaching certifications to ensure that they are qualified teachers (Haycock, 2001; Lee, 2004).

Hunter and Bartee (2003) suggested narrowing the achievement gap should go beyond standardized test scores because standardized tests are flawed and therefore should not be the sole determinant of meeting academic standards. Utilizing standardized tests to set the standard of achievement is problematic due to the historical context of standardized tests which have been used as a sorting mechanism to benefit and provide additional resources to White and privileged students. Standardized tests were introduced in the United States during the “Intelligence Testing Movement” in the early 1900s, as a way to measure children’s level of intellect (Franklin, 2007). Intelligence tests were originally administered to White children and later administered to ethnic minority

children as a mechanism to compare groups to each other. These tests were found to be culturally biased and unable to take into account the environmental factors of children tested and the different ideologies that various cultures may possess (Franklin, 2007). An additional limitation of standardized tests is an inability to take into account the effects of factors such as school environment and social class, which impact achievement (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Hunter & Bartee, 2003; Lee, 2002). Giroux and Schmidt (2004) stressed that “if such assessments are to be useful, they need to be engaged as part of a broader agenda for equity and understood within a notion of schooling that rejects learning simply as a the mastery of discrete skills and precise bodies of information” (p. 223).

### **No Child Left Behind**

The early gains in eliminating the achievement gap between the 1970s and the 1980s are argued to be associated with desegregation of schools, which resulted in an allocation of resources to African American students and improved school conditions (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Hunter & Bartee, 2003; Lee, 2002). Currently, schools with large populations of ethnic minority students have limited financial resources to spend on education in comparison to schools with large majority populations (Lee, 2004). The current legislation No Child Left Behind (NCLB) examines standardized test scores at schools in the United States. NCLB was grounded in four tenets to facilitate the academic success of schools: (a) accountability of the school to improve academic achievement; (b) granting states autonomy to distribute financial resources as they see fit to schools; (c) investment in research based on best practices to improve teacher quality; and (d) early

development of students in reading and math (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004). If a school's scores do not meet the standards, the school is considered failing and faces the consequences imposed by the state in which the school is located (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Hunter & Bartee, 2003).

This legislation is based on the school's ability to ensure that its students meet national standards, it does not take into account the social experiences and perceptions of students that affect academic outcomes. In addition, NCLB only provides additional resources to schools that meet academic standards. As a result schools that do not meet academic standards are not incentivized for the process of improving academic outcomes (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Hunter & Bartee, 2003). Failing schools' lack of access to resources perpetuates the widening of the achievement gap, inhibiting the allocation of resources to schools that need them the most (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Hunter & Bartee, 2003).

The shortcomings of NCLB may be particularly adverse for African Americans. Lee's (2002) study examined the achievement of African American youth as it pertains to their achievement in school. The study found that high-achieving African American students experienced stereotype threat within the school environment and faced isolation from their peers when they outperformed their counterparts. Stereotype threat occurs when ethnic minority students "face the threat of confirming or being judged by a negative or societal stereotype, a suspicion, about their group's intellectual ability and competence" (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797). Fear of isolation, confirming negative stereotypes, and rejection experienced by ethnic minority students negatively affects the

learning environment and can lower students' academic motivations (Ford et al., 2008; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, and Master (2006) and Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, and Brzustoski (2009) described these experiences as psychological threats, resulting in negative performance at all levels that prohibit a student's ability to perform optimally.

### **African America Student Experiences**

The psychological threats experienced by African American students result in lower academic success, increased stress, and greater emotional harm (Cohen et al., 2006; Cohen et al., 2009; Ford et al., 2008; Nadal, 2011; Wang, Leu, & Shoda, 2011). To counteract these experiences, Cohen et al. (2006) implemented a "self-affirmation intervention" (p. 1307) with the intended outcome of improving students' academic ability through ranking a series of value statements. The intervention was conducted during the school day as a regular part of class and students were put in two conditions: the affirmation condition or the control condition. The researchers found that African American students in the affirmation condition had higher grades in the term that the intervention took place (Cohen et al., 2006). A follow-up study examined the long-term effects of the intervention over a 2-year period and found higher grade point averages for African American students who experienced the self-affirming intervention in core courses (Cohen et al., 2009). The effects of this intervention are attributed to several factors including decreased psychological stress and a positive environment (Cohen et al., 2006).

Ethnic minority students experience racial discrimination in many forms throughout their education, including interactions with administrators, educators, and peers. The type of discrimination that ethnic minorities experience on an everyday basis is known as racial microaggressions which are subtle and often times go without notice (Allen, 2010; Nadal, 2011; Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2007; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). Sue et al. (2007) described racial microaggressions as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group—microaggressions are often unconsciously delivered in the form of subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures, and tones” (p. 273). Solórzano et al. (2000) described microaggressions as subtle and covert, indicating that they “take various forms, including both verbal and nonverbal assumptions about lowered expectations” (p. 65). In academic environments, ethnic minority students’ experiences with racial microaggressions can lead to negative academic outcomes, emotional distress, and a sense of isolation in a predominantly White environment (Solórzano et al., 2000; Wang et al., 2011).

Microaggressions experienced by ethnic minorities have a variety of consequences: psychological and physical stress, lack of a sense of belonging, stereotyping, and, lowered self-confidence, performance, and productivity (Sue et al., 2009). Henfield’s (2011) study on African American students’ experience in predominantly White schools explored the types of racial microaggressions these students experienced. Through a series of interviews, three themes were identified: superiority of

White cultural values and communication style; perceived deviance/criminality of Black students; and a universal Black experience (Henfield 2011).

### **Creating Spaces of Support**

Sue et al. (2009) suggested that teachers who develop cultural competence can assist in the facilitation of better ethnic relations between students, and that this is imperative for coping with microaggressions because the significant detrimental experiences typically happen between “those who hold the power and those who are most disempowered” (p.183). The authors suggested four areas of training to enhance teachers’ ability to deal with racially charged conversations: racial sensitivity training, cultural privilege and self-awareness training, experiential cultural facilitation development, and training in group dynamics to facilitate meaningful dialogue (Sue et al., 2009). Henfield (2011) suggested that administrators take a role in the creation of spaces within the school environment to assist students in coping with microaggressions, and asserted that through these interactions, school administrators will understand the challenges ethnic minority students face and be able to support students in more culturally competent ways (Allen, 2010; Henfield 2011; Sue et al., 2009).

Educators who create welcoming spaces can help ethnic minority students with racial microaggressions. These spaces act as “counter-spaces” described by Solórzano et al. (2000). Counter spaces offer positive, supportive, culturally sensitive and affirming environments for students that allow them to share experiences (Solórzano et al., 2000). Evidence-based models of counter spaces are emerging to support ethnic minority students in education. One such model is the African American student network

(AFAM), an informal support group for African American students created at a predominantly White postsecondary institution. The intervention focuses on providing support for African Americans students to assist in countering microaggressions that students face in the classroom and within postsecondary environments (Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008).

The African American Student Network (AFAM) originated at a large public university in the Midwest to provide a support network for African American students (Grier-Reed, 2010; Grier-Reed, 2013; Grier-Reed, Ehlert, & Dade, 2011; Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008). AFAM was created as a retention effort for African American students to assist students in coping with the academic and social stressors faced on campus. AFAM's coordination is facilitated by African American faculty members and African American graduate students within the institution. AFAM meetings are held once a week throughout the academic year with African American students who have self-selected to participate. Through the distribution of flyers, social media, cultural centers on campus, and word of mouth, African American students learn about the AFAM meetings (Grier-Reed et al., 2008).

AFAM is facilitated in an open forum led by the faculty members, graduate students and senior student participants. A typical meeting starts out with check-ins that consist of participants going around the room with introductions and reflecting on how their week has been (Grier-Reed, 2010; Grier-Reed, 2013; Grier-Reed, Ehlert, & Dade, 2011; Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008). During the meetings students are encouraged through open-ended questions from the facilitators to discuss a range of

topics such as current events, politics, personal encounters on campus, and other campus related subjects as it pertains to the interests of the students.

The community that is created as a result of AFAM provides support and a body of collective knowledge for African American students. During AFAM meetings students can bring to discussion a variety of topics that are important and reflective of their experience as a student. The peer-to-peer nature of the AFAM group allows African American students to cultivate relationships that serve as an additional level of support at a predominantly White institution (PWI) (Grier-Reed et al., 2008). As a result the campus climate and sense of belonging is fostered from the supportive nature of the program and facilitation of programs by students and administration that reflect the racial identity of the students (Solórzano et al., 2000).

Student success resides in interventions and support networks that supplement student engagement outside of the classroom. In a pilot study of AFAM, researchers conducted individual interviews with participants. The findings revealed seven themes in student interviews: safe space, connectedness, validation, resilience, intellectual stimulation, empowerment, and a home base (Grier-Reed et al., 2008). Overall the themes that emerged from this study support the notion that AFAM offers a supportive environment for African American students and provides a meaningful space for dialogue and interactions that support African American students in higher education.

The space AFAM created for a student is a sacred affirming space that supports students' sense of belonging at a predominantly White institution (PWI) (Grier-Reed, 2010). These spaces assist with countering microaggressions students experience and

provide healthy interactions with instructional support from individuals that possess knowledge and understanding of the struggles of African American students. Given, the longevity of AFAM starting in 2005, it is evident that this is a sought out student space that has been sustained through continued student engagement and faculty support. The psychosocial stressors and experiences with stereotype threat imposed by microaggressions can be addressed through informal student interventions that intentionally aim to create spaces that allow students to engage meaningfully and comfortably express frustrations and distress experienced on campus (Grier-Reed, 2013).

A second study on AFAM examined two groups of African American undergraduate students: Those who participated in AFAM and African American undergraduate students who did not participate in AFAM attending the same institution (Grier-Reed et al., 2011). The study found that AFAM students were retained at a higher level than their peers after the first year. When 4-year retention was examined the study found that AFAM students were retained and graduated at a higher level than the students who were not involved in AFAM. The study also compared these two groups on ACT scores and first-term grade point average and found no major difference between the groups on these two variables (Grier-Reed et al., 2011). The results suggest that the intervention had an effect on retention and graduation rates of the students who participated in AFAM; however, one would need a true experiment including random assignment to clearly infer causation. In the Grier-Reed et al. (2011) study, participants self-selected in AFAM and non-AFAM groups. Still, the results are encouraging and

imply that AFAM may help to foster the academic success of African American students at this institution.

AFAM outcome studies have examined the effects of creating participatory community space or “counter-spaces” described by Solórzano et al. (2000) specifically for African American students. The result is the formation of a campus-based student support network for African American students in order to increase retention through countering social and academic stressors experienced at a PWI (Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Grier-Reed, 2010; Grier-Reed et al., 2011; Grier-Reed, 2013). The network not only created a space for meaningful dialogue outside of the classroom but a space inclusive of the African American student experience.

The success of the university AFAM intervention provides promise for the application of the AFAM model in other academic environments where African Americans students struggle. For example, my study took place at a charter school, where the school administration was introduced to the university-level African American network during a conference. The African American Family Liaison at the school developed a version of this program for charter school students. The charter school AFAM program was first implemented fall 2011, and school administrators were interested in evaluating whether there might be measurable behavioral and academic changes associated with the students who participate. As a result, the current study examined whether student engagement the in AFAM model at the high school level supported the academic outcomes of students. In addition, I explored the students’ experience in AFAM through their own voices.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

This study took place at a charter school located in an urban city in the Midwest. The charter school had an enrollment of 727 students grades K-12 during the 2011-2012 academic year. The charter school is authorized by a local private university in the same city and has been in operation for 17 years. According to the school's annual 2011-2012 report, 30% of the students are not proficient in the English language, 38% of the students are male, and 48% of the students are female; 14% of the students' genders are not reported. The racial demographics of the school consist of 49% Asian/Pacific Islander, 20% African American, 19% Hispanic, 10% White, and 0.7 % American Indian students. Only one race is reported for each student in the school, and no racial/ethnic data were reported for 1.3% of students. Related to socioeconomic status, 83% of the school population receives free or reduced lunch (Lange, 2012).

The participants in this study consisted of 30 students ranging from 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Fifty percent of the students were male and the other 50% were female. According to the school data, all of the students were African American with the exception of one male participant who was Asian.

### **Procedures**

The African American Student network (AFAM) was initiated by the school to support and create a stronger sense of belonging for African American students. AFAM provided a space for African American students in 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade to discuss their experiences as part of an underrepresented population within the school, address

concerns, and build community. African American students were invited to join AFAM by the school's parent liaison and referrals were also made by the school's administrative staff. AFAM met once a week for 45 minutes during the school day outside of class. A total of four AFAM groups were formed that consisted of 10 students each. Two groups were facilitated each semester, and these groups only lasted for one semester. Groups were divided by gender, and the meetings were facilitated by two African American administrators within the school.

### **Observations**

My research used a mixed methods design and was conducted with the approval of the participating Charter School and the Institutional Review Board at the University of Minnesota. I initially observed AFAM in order to understand how the group operated and to introduce my research to the participants. During the observations students were given the parent/guardian letter with an informed consent form and a self-addressed stamped envelope; students were instructed to give these documents to their parent/guardian. Parents were instructed to sign and return the form in order to exclude their child from participating. Students were also given an assent form requesting their participation. All participants assented to participation, and all parents provided consent.

### **Focus Groups**

I conducted focus groups with the participants during their regularly scheduled AFAM meeting times. A total of four focus groups were conducted at the school: 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade boys; 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade girls; 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade boys; 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade girls. Each focus group was video recorded and audio recorded with a digital voice

recorder. The duration of the recorded focus groups was 30 minutes each. The data were saved on University of Minnesota secured drives.

During the first 10 minutes of the focus groups I reviewed the consent and assent forms, provided participants with an overview of the purpose of the study, and I asked if participants had any questions. Lastly, I reviewed ground rules that I established with the participants. The ground rules were as follows:

- There are no right or wrong answers
- Share your point of view even if it's different
- I am recording so I don't miss any comments
- No names will be in any reports that I produce
- All comments are confidential
- Please follow up with what someone said with agree or disagree
- I'm here to listen and make sure everyone has a chance to share their opinion
- If you are talking a lot I may ask others to share and if you are not talking I may ask you for your opinion.

In order to get the conversation started I asked students to tell me their names and to share what they wanted to be when they grew up in order to break the ice. After all the students answered, I asked the following questions over a 30 minute period:

- Tell me about your experience in the African American networking group?
- What are the meetings like for you?

- Describe some of the topics discussed at the meeting.
- Describe your role in the African American networking group?
- Describe interactions with the other members in the group?
- Why do you continue to attend?
- Do you think the African American networking group is important?
- Walk me through a typical meeting...
- What do you or don't you like about the meetings?
- Can you walk me through an example of when you all talked about something important to you?
- Describe the changes you would like to see at the meetings...

### **School Records**

Lastly, I worked with the school to collect records of each participant's grade point average, school attendance, and disciplinary referrals. Data were collected at two points—prior to AFAM participation and after AFAM participation. I worked directly with the school administration (who served as the keeper of the records) to collect all data for the 30 participants of AFAM. Data were stored on a secured network at the University of Minnesota, and names were removed.

## **Results**

### **Qualitative Analysis**

The qualitative analysis was guided by the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) method (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). In CQR a team is used to come to consensus and auditors assist in providing feedback and auditing results. Data are coded

into domains or topic areas and then into core ideas that capture what was said in each domain. A cross analysis is conducted that compares the domains and core ideas across the data. In 2005 the authors of CQR revised the method (Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, Hess, & Ladany, 2005). The analysis I used is based on the updated recommended approach. The table below outlines the CQR recommendations and the steps that I utilized in my research.

Figure 1 *Application of Consensual Qualitative Research*

<i>CQR Recommendations</i>	<i>AFAM Analysis</i>
Involve multiple researchers; establish openness within the group; report reactions; discuss biases; and consult an expert if needed.	Worked on a team with faculty advisor; brought in two outside auditors.
Literature informs interview protocol; include 8-10 open ended questions per hour; and follow up and probe as needed. Record interviews and record reactions.	Literature informed protocols. There were 11 open ended questions; follow up questions and probes were utilized as needed. Interviews were audio and video recorded and transcribed.
Develop domains from transcription. This can be done by one person and reviewed by a team. Develop core ideas as a team.	I developed domains independently. These were reviewed by my faculty advisor. We then met together to construct core ideas.
Apply frequency labels to data; refer to original data to interpret, revise, and get feedback. Include internal or external auditors to check domains and core ideas.	Frequency labels were not applied to the data as I conducted focus groups not individual interviews. Cross-analysis was completed by faculty advisor. Auditing was conducted by 2 external reviewers: One with expertise in student development and the AFAM intervention at the college level, and one who facilitated AFAM at the charter school. The original transcripts were provided along with the domains and core ideas.

<p>Visually depict the findings. Use core ideas to show results. Present results to research participants.</p>	<p>The five core ideas were presented to AFAM students and facilitators for testimonial validity. The core ideas aligned with the student experiences and no changes or revisions were necessary.</p>
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The five core ideas identified in students' experience of AFAM were as follow:

1. The meetings provided the participants with a safe environment within the school where they could talk about what was on their minds without scrutiny or judgment with peers whom they trusted and respected.
2. AFAM provided a space where students could engage in meaningful dialogue, develop interpersonal skills, create a sense of community with their peers, and share and receive guidance from peers and the facilitator.
3. In contrast to other spaces at school, AFAM was a positive, empowering outlet where students felt heard and a sense of ownership and freedom to express conflicted ideas about school and authority figures, to resolve conflicts, to deal with anger, and to explore difficult topics within the confines of the school.
4. AFAM gave students the opportunity to explore and develop many facets of identity, including their academic identity, racial/cultural identity, gender schemas/identity, values, and dreams for the future.
5. Students viewed AFAM as a social group rather than a therapy group; students wanted more spaces like AFAM in school and valued the sense of safety within the single-gender experience (although they were curious about peers of the other gender).

## Quantitative Analysis

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was included to investigate differences between pre and post-level disciplinary referrals, absences, and grade point average (GPA). Data were analyzed using Wilks' lambda statistic. Partial  $\eta^2$  calculations were used to determine effect sizes. The standard type I error rate of  $\alpha = 0.05$  was used to test for significance in the MANOVA. Results revealed no significant difference between pre and post levels of disciplinary referral, attendance, or GPA,  $F(3, 15) = .857, p = .484, \eta^2 = .146$ . See Table 1 for an overview of mean differences. It is interesting to note that although there were no statistically significant differences, the direction of change in terms of GPA, absences and discipline referrals were in expected directions as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Summary of Mean Scores on Pre and Post-test Measures*

AFAM	Pretest Mean ( <i>SD</i> ) ( <i>n</i> =18)	Posttest Mean ( <i>SD</i> ) ( <i>n</i> =18)	Difference
Disciplinary referrals	1.28 (2.82)	0.56 (1.04)	-0.72
Absences	4.06 (3.71)	3.83 (3.60)	-0.23
Cumulative GPA	2.10 (0.53)	2.22 (0.80)	+0.12

## Discussion

The qualitative aspect of this study supports the creation of “counter-spaces” described by Solórzano et al. (2000) as an affirming space to assist in countering racial microaggressions for African American students within their school. As a result of the qualitative analysis, five core ideas were identified from the students’ participation in AFAM: a safe environment within the school where students could express themselves freely; a community of support that was receptive to the student voice; a forum to explore

difficult topics; the opportunity to explore and develop many facets of identity; and a sacred space for students to meaningfully interact with their peers. These findings are parallel with the Grier-Reed et al. (2008) study, where seven similar themes emerged from university students' experiences in AFAM.

The quantitative analysis of the student data collected in the current study did not find statistically significant differences between pre-level and post-level disciplinary referrals, absences, and grade point averages (GPAs) for students who participated in AFAM. One possible explanation for this difference may lie in how the program was delivered in the high school setting versus the college setting. The high school AFAM groups were held once a week for 45 minutes. However, during each term a new group of students were invited to participate, and high school students were only allowed to participate in the group for one term. In the university AFAM program, meetings were held for 60 minutes once a week and students were not limited in how much they could attend. The outcomes of the high school AFAM may have been affected by these limitations on participation. It is possible that one term is not an adequate amount of time to significantly affect academic indicators although students were able to build meaningful relationships with their peers and school administrators through their experience in the time provided. In support of this idea, the focus group feedback consistently included students' desire to have more time in group as recommendation for changing the program.

Although the results for academic outcomes were not statistically significant, the data trended in the directions that were intended. Findings indicated that disciplinary

referrals and student absences slightly decreased, while student GPAs slightly increased. Similar trends were identified in the Grier-Reed et al. (2011) study which found that the percentages of undergraduate retention and graduation rates of AFAM participants were higher than those of African Americans who did not participate in the group. This study suggests that AFAM can assist in creating welcoming environments in educational settings that can lead to positive academic outcomes such as retention and graduation. In line with this idea, the high school AFAM study implies that intervention methods of this type can promote engagement of students that nurtures their ability for success in an academic setting, where this program may have had more of an effect on the students if more opportunity was offered for repeated involvement in AFAM rather than being limited to only one term in a student's high school career.

### **Limitations**

Results should be interpreted with caution in light of the limitations of this study. For example, the study's design would have been enhanced by incorporating a comparison group. Including a comparison group in this study would have provided a comparative baseline for academic performance between participants and African American non-participants in order to investigate the impact of the AFAM intervention.

Attrition of the participants in the study is also a limitation. The study began with 30 participants, but only 18 of the participants were included in the quantitative analysis. The 40% attrition rate of students was primarily due to incomplete school records, which were a reflection of students moving from one school to another. The partial data excluded participants that were crucial to the pre and post design of the study. Due to

attrition and the small sample size to begin with, the power of this study is low, thus limiting the capacity to detect meaningful differences in the data.

Lastly, generalizability was limited in this study through the design of AFAM. The students engaged in AFAM through self-selection based on the school administrator's promotion of the program period. The self-selection bias consequently limits the findings of the study as representative of the experiences of African American students in general at the school where it was conducted.

### **Recommendations**

Exploration of an implementation or replication of this study over a longer period of time that resembles the Grier-Reed et al. (2008) study might reveal the longer-term effects of the intervention. The AFAM model implemented at the charter school was limited to 45 minutes once a week for 1 term during the academic year. Students expressed the desire for more time in AFAM. A suggested method would be to follow the original AFAM model by Grier-Reed et al. (2008) of student engagement over multiple terms with a consistent meeting format and allowing students to attend meetings as they desired. In the original AFAM model the program design involved engagement of students throughout the academic year, and the returning of students over a 4-year period, which allowed the opportunity for a longitudinal study. The original program also met weekly for 60 minutes. Less time for participation in the high school program may result in diminishing returns in terms of academic achievement, which further underscores the need for allowing these students to participate for more than one academic term.

In addition, inclusion of a comparison group as part of the analysis would strengthen the research. Lastly, the data collection should encompass complete data of the students and a plan for partial data should be in place in order to alleviate the dropout rate of the study. Future study would also benefit from examining other marginalized student populations and how the AFAM model may impact their academic experiences.

## **Conclusion**

As a civic duty to provide equitable, accessible, and equal education, the United States has a responsibility to its citizens to provide quality education that enables citizens to reach their full potential. As Chief Justice Warren in 1954 stated in the *Brown v. Board of Education* U.S. Supreme court case that fought for equal education in a racially segregated U.S., “In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunities of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right that must be made available on equal terms” (Warren, 2008). Providing quality education for all will require significant investment of resources nationally. This includes “new approaches to understanding demographics, diversity and accountability” (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002, p. 434). Programs such as AFAM that aid in understanding the student experience and enabling students to develop coping mechanisms may be one way to improve the academic experience and achievement of African American students, particularly in predominantly White environments. Academic achievement is imperative to success as a productive citizen in American society. The inability to achieve academically limits opportunities

and can have negative implications for the individual and society by further perpetuating the gaps in meeting the need for a diverse skilled workforce.

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