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Self-Determination and Goal Aspirations: African American and Latino Males' Perceptions of Their Persistence in Community College Basic and Transfer-Level Writing Courses

María de Lourdes Villarreal^a and Hugo A. García^b

^aWriting Program, Modern Languages, University of La Verne, La Verne, California, USA; ^bDepartment of Educational Psychology & Higher Education, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

ABSTRACT

This Grounded Theory study utilized Self-determination Theory to analyze the interview results of 18 community college African American and Latino males. The goal was to learn what helped participants to succeed and persist in developmental and transfer-level writing courses despite the obstacles that they faced. Three major themes emerged: (a) Male students of color continued to take and complete English courses because they were determined to achieve their academic goals; (b) they sought assistance and guidance from their English professors, from the writing lab attached to the basic skills course and from the writing tutoring staff; and (c) when they felt overwhelmed and considered dropping their English classes, their determination to achieve their goals and the assistance they received from faculty and other writing staff ultimately kept them from doing so. Therefore, first, community colleges should encourage students' ability to be autonomous. Second, they can help students develop a sense of relatedness by providing a better sense of belonging. Third, institutions should develop strong faculty networks within the college to increase student motivation and self-determination by providing mentoring opportunities. Finally, institutions should consider utilizing faculty and other institutional agents to help students by providing information regarding various student support services that may help address issues students may be encountering.

African American and Latino male academic achievement and persistence in higher education are well below desirable levels (Davis, 2003; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Kozol, 2005; Ornelas & Solórzano, 2004). Many male students of color are not graduating from high school, and our K–12 educational system is failing to adequately prepare those who do graduate to participate and be successful—academically and socially—at the postsecondary level (Davis, 2003; Melguizo, 2007; Toldson, 2008). The majority of male students of color who do enroll in postsecondary institutions matriculate at 2-year community colleges rather than 4-year postsecondary institutions (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Bush & Bush, 2010; Garza, 2006; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2015), 57% of all Hispanic and 52% of all Black students in higher education are enrolled at community colleges. However, the percentage of certificate or degree completers (fall 2005 cohort) at all 2-year degree institutions has been lower for African American and Hispanic students at public community colleges (12% and 16% respectively) compared to White students (23%) (Aud et al., 2011). African American and Latino males are also less likely than their White and Asian peers to take advanced placement (AP) courses or have a college preparation curriculum. This results in many male students of color who do begin at

community colleges being placed in remedial/developmental courses (Brown & Niemi, 2007; Melguizo, 2007). While 28% of entering freshmen enroll in a developmental class (mathematics, 22%; writing, 14%; and reading, 11%), the percentage of students enrolled in developmental writing courses in community colleges is greater (23%) compared to other institutions (7% to 17%) (Parsad & Lewis, 2003).

Developmental education encompasses basic skills courses in reading, writing, and mathematics. Also, student services, such as advising, tutoring, and financial aid, are designed to give incoming students with “weak academic skills the opportunity to strengthen those skills enough to prepare them for college-level coursework” (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010, p. 255). However, the debate over the effectiveness of developmental education has resulted in one camp arguing that developmental education programs are effective in preparing students (Crews & Aragon, 2004; Goudas & Boylan, 2012; Moss & Yeaton, 2006). The other side points to a number of flaws in the studies that call the findings into question (Bailey, Jaggars, & Scott-Clayton, 2013). Trends in community college developmental programs show that 2-year institutions not only offer more remedial courses (Parsad & Lewis, 2003) and course levels (Parsad & Lewis, 2003; Shultz, 2000; Zhang, 2000), but they also enroll more students who spend more time on remediation (Parsad & Lewis, 2003; Zhang, 2000). Approximately three quarters of all students complete remediation successfully. However, completion rates have been lower at community colleges (Lewis & Farris, 1996), and they have varied dramatically by institution (Zhang, 2000).

Other concerns are the overrepresentation and lower retention rates of students of color in developmental courses. Although the majority of students in remedial courses are non-Hispanic, White, African American and Latino/a students are overrepresented in community college remedial programs in comparison to their participation in higher education (McCabe, 2000; Saxon & Boylan, 1999). Sengupta and Jepsen (2006) stressed that Latinos are more likely than other racial/ethnic groups to be enrolled in remedial courses. McCabe (2000) not only found that minority students were overrepresented in remedial courses, but also found that multiple deficiencies (e.g., enrolled in a remedial writing as well as a math class) were associated with a lower grade point average (GPA) and that a greater proportion of seriously deficient students were minorities. Despite the need to take developmental courses, students who postpone taking remedial writing courses are more likely to be non-White students (Crews & Aragon, 2004). Bettinger and Long (2005) and Boylan, Bliss, and Bonham (1993) also reported that White and Asian students are more likely to be retained in developmental education courses than African American and Latino students. This is troubling as studies indicate that an increase in remediation also increases dropout rates (Hoyt, 1999) and lowers the probability of obtaining a baccalaureate degree (Parsad & Lewis, 2003).

There are various studies that specifically examine African American and Latino males throughout the education pipeline (Brown, Dancy, & Davis, 2012; Davis, 2008; Ferguson, 2001; Harper & Harris, 2012; Harper, Williams, Pérez, & Morgan, 2012; Harris & Wood, 2013; Mason, 1998; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). African American and Latino males are more likely to leave the community college than other groups (Wood, 2012; Wood & Turner, 2010). In addition, academic success for African American and Latino male students can be difficult to achieve due to the various barriers they encounter in their schools, communities, and homes (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Kunjufu, 2005). Some of the barriers include limited resources in the classroom, high crime rates in neighboring areas (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Gandara, 2002; Kozol, 2005), and unstable families (Kunjufu, 2005). These barriers hinder graduation rates of African American and Latino males. For example, the graduation rates for African American and Latino males are below desirable levels, and this is a result of students failing to meet the minimum requirements for high school graduation. These findings are consistent with previous research that suggested that African Americans and Latinos—particularly males—from underprivileged communities are obtaining less-than-desirable levels of education relative to their White counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Kozol, 2005). This, ultimately, results in an underrepresentation of African American and Latino males in higher education—particularly at 4-year colleges and universities (Behnke, Piercy, & Diversi, 2004;

Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999)—and the overrepresentation of African American and Latino males in the penitentiary system (Noguera, 2003; Tatum, 2005; Wald & Losen, 2003). For those who do embark on a postsecondary path, they are most likely to begin at the community college and be required to enroll in developmental education.

Much research on developmental education has been conducted. However, it has been mostly quantitative and has examined all three areas (reading, writing, and mathematics) of developmental education (Parsad & Lewis, 2003; Zhang, 2000). Less focus has been on developmental writing courses (Crews & Aragon, 2004, 2007; Perin, 2013) and male students of color in particular. Given African American and Latino males' overrepresentation in developmental courses and the ramifications that their lack of academic success and persistence and degree completion have, this qualitative study, through a Self-determination Theory (SDT) lens, aimed to fill the gap by examining the point of entry of such students at community colleges. Specifically, developmental writing courses and the perspectives of African American and Latino males who are successful and persist were the focus of the study. To that end, the research questions that guided this study are the following: (a) Why do African American and Latino males take English classes in college? (b) What causes African American and Latino males to think about dropping their English classes in college? (c) What helps African American and Latino males the most to continue and complete taking their English classes in college?

Literature review

A robust body of literature examines developmental education and traditional variables (e.g., completion rates, GPA, and retention and/or persistence comparing developmental course completers to noncompleters and/or to students not needing basic skills work) (Bettinger & Long, 2005; Crews & Aragon, 2004, 2007; Parsad & Lewis, 2003). Most of the quantitative studies, however, do not disaggregate the findings by race/ethnicity and gender. Students' voices are missing as are the experiences of those who are successful. Also, studies of developmental writing, specifically, that examine outcomes for African American and Latino males enrolled in community colleges are lacking.

Quantitative studies on developmental education

Developmental education course completion, pass rates, and retention and persistence outcomes have varied widely at community colleges in comparison to other types of institutions. While previous National Center for Education Statistics surveys (NCES) have reported pass rates at public 2-year and high-minority-enrollment institutions (Lewis & Farris, 1996; Mansfield, Farris, & Black, 1991), the most current Parsad and Lewis (2003) survey is silent. What is known is that almost 75% of all students complete remedial courses successfully (Lewis & Farris, 1996; Zhang, 2000). However, at high-minority-enrollment institutions, the proportion of students who have completed remediation has been less than at institutions with low minority enrollment (Lewis & Farris, 1996). Pass rates, as well, have varied greatly among institutions (27% to 100%) (Lewis & Farris, 1996). McCabe's (2000) national study of 25 community colleges reported a much lower pass rate (43%). A higher percentage of students passed their remedial writing courses at low-minority-enrollment institutions than at high-enrollment ones (Lewis & Farris, 1996; Mansfield, Farris, & Black, 1991). Southard and Clay's (2004) study of a Florida community college found that students who began in developmental courses completed the college level writing course at higher rates, withdrew less often, and did not need to retake the course as many times as students who did not begin their education in a developmental writing course. Boylan and Saxon's (1998) Texas study found that 55% of students who had successfully passed their remedial English/writing course later successfully passed the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) writing test. These studies, however, do not shed light on African American and Latino male students.

Retention and persistence rates have also been examined. First-year retention rates have varied dramatically (10% to 98%) across community colleges; only slightly more than half of the students in remedial courses have been retained the second year (Zhang, 2000). A study of Texas community colleges revealed the importance of successful course completion. Boylan and Saxon (1998) found that “passing *any* of the developmental courses in which a student [was] placed [was] associated with retention” (p. 11). Students who were successful were three-to-six times more likely to be retained for one year in comparison to those who were not successful. Boylan, Bonham, and Bliss’ (1994) national study of a developmental education data set (1989 to 1992) revealed that 74% of remedial students persisted for at least one year. Bettinger and Long (2005) found that “the positive effects of remediation are likely to be larger among students who complete their remedial courses” (p. 25). McCormick and McCormick’s (1986) examination of 4-year college developmental education writers found that successful completers were more likely to persist and graduate than students who failed the course. However, little is known about how African American and Latino male students fare in developmental writing courses.

Another measure of success has been students’ GPA. Batzer (1997) found that students who had completed remedial courses later obtained higher GPAs in college-level English courses than those who had not. Crews and Aragon (2004), too, reported that developmental writers who did not postpone doing remediation had higher grades than students who opted not to take the course. Results were similar at a 4-year institution where Ragland (1997) found that developmental writers outperformed college-ready writers receiving higher grades and were less likely to fail, even though developmental writers had lower American College Testing (ACT) composite scores. Using a regression discontinuity research design, Moss and Yeaton’s (2006) study of the effectiveness of an English program at a large multicampus community college district found that the most positive effect was for the least-well-prepared students with the lowest pretest scores. McCormick and McCormick (1986) found that students who answered “yes” to the statement, “I need help in expressing my ideas in writing,” earned significantly higher grades and had more credit hours than students who had answered “no” to the question or had left it blank.

Scholars have also compared the passing rates among different academically prepared groups of students. Illich, Hagan, and McCallister (2004) examined the passing rates of three groups of students: college level course takers who did not need remediation, remedial course takers who successfully completed remediation and were concurrently enrolled in college level courses, and college level course takers who had not passed at least one of the remedial courses. The researchers found that the nonremedial college-level course takers, and the successful remedial course takers had similar passing rates (70% to 79%); only 40% of the students who had not completed remediation were successful. The latter group also had lower pass rates irrespective of the college-level course they had taken. Crews and Aragon (2007) compared developmental writing course takers to those needing remediation but choosing not to. They found that initially developmental course takers had a higher percentage of credit hour completion than those opting out of remedial courses.

Bettinger and Long (2005), however, have asserted that “simply comparing remedial students with nonremedial students [has been] an unsatisfactory way to establish the true effects of remediation” (p. 23). Instead of comparing completion rates of developmental education students to college-ready students, scholars have compared students with similar levels of academic preparedness and examined other student characteristics, such as age, race, and high school preparation. Bettinger and Long (2005) longitudinal 5-year study of Ohio Board of Regents data set followed approximately 13,000 students. The researchers compared students with “similar backgrounds and levels of academic preparedness at colleges with different placement policies” (p. 23). They found that “age, race, and high school preparation [were] all significant predictors of completing remediation” (p. 22). Students who successfully completed remediation were younger, more likely to be White or Asian than Black or Hispanic, and had had better high school preparation. Crews and Aragon (2004), however, found no statistical significance in regard to age, ethnicity, or high school preparation. They did find that students who postponed taking a remedial writing course were more likely to be non-White students. Boylan et al.’s

(1993) comparison study of colleges and universities found that the greatest gap in retention was associated with race at community colleges. White students (30%) were more likely to be retained than students of color (African Americans 10% and Hispanics 22%) (McCabe, 2000).

Qualitative studies on developmental education

Fewer in number, qualitative studies have provided data on what helps students persist in developmental courses, which is missing in quantitative studies. Carranza's (2006) interviews with students from seven 4-year colleges in Pennsylvania revealed personal goal commitment as the major factor in their success. Capps' (2010) study of adult student learners at one community college found that students cited their own agency for persisting, while Villarreal (2012) found that community college students credited their desire to achieve their goals. A second major theme in the Villarreal study revealed that community college students credited their developmental writing professors and other writing staff and tutors for helping them succeed and persist in their writing courses. An earlier study by Valeri-Gold, Kears, Deming, Errico, and Callahan's (2001) also reported the importance of developmental education professors.

The challenge for higher education institutions, especially 2-year colleges, is to move under-prepared students successfully through the pipeline. Studies of developmental education programs have been primarily quantitative, have not examined developmental writing courses specifically, and have not focused on African American and Latino male student outcomes. These gaps in the literature support the need for a study that would examine community college African American and Latino male students and their perceptions of their developmental and transfer-level writing courses. Such a study would shed light on how these courses affect their success and persistence.

Theoretical framework

There are numerous theoretical frameworks and conceptual models developed to elucidate why college students persist or withdraw from college. The large corpus of work on this subject has been dominated by theories developed to explain what characteristics and attitudes help students stay committed and enrolled once in college (Bean, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, 1989). Because these theories were developed using 4-year institutions with traditional, college-going-age students, Self-determination Theory was utilized as a lens to guide this study in order to get a better understanding of why some community college students persist and do not withdraw (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2008). Although extensively employed in compulsory educational settings, an emerging number of researchers are using SDT to examine motivation within higher education (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, & Abel, 2013). Vansteenkiste, Lens, and Deci (2006) noted that there is a growing body of literature examining how practitioners and scholars in higher education can utilize SDT. SDT is not specific to any institutional or sector type, which contrasts much of the theories used in higher education to explain persistence. Thus, SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2008) can provide a lens from which to understand the complex academic world community college students straddle.

Self-determination Theory consists of a three-pronged concept (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) that explains the psychological needs of individuals. This concept, when fulfilled, can lead to optimal learning and is well suited for understanding the collegiate experience of students. Competence refers to an individual feeling effective in his or her environment. For instance, for students in college who perform well in a given course (i.e., receiving an A in mathematics or English), the positive outcome (receiving a high grade) provides a level of feeling of competency in their academic endeavor. Autonomy assumes that an individual's actions and decisions are based on his or her interests and self-guidance in the decision-making process (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy is important for college students in that much of the compulsory education they experience prior to college is controlled through a prescribed curriculum. However, in a postsecondary environment, college students have the autonomy to select a major and, to a certain extent, courses. Relatedness is the individual's sense of belonging and the caring for one's self and others. In

a college setting, one may see relatedness displayed by caring faculty and staff who provide supportive advice and encouragement. Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation is central to the concept of SDT. Extrinsic motivation refers “to the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71). Integrated regulation is the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation, which happens when one’s values and needs are in congruence with identified regulations (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73). Intrinsic motivation is doing or participating in an activity for the mere satisfaction of doing it (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71).

As such, SDT can be utilized in community colleges because it provides a better understanding of how motivation plays a role in the enrollment, decision-making, norms, attitudes, and college navigating behaviors of students. SDT is a macrotheory of human motivation that illuminates the influences of autonomous and controlled motivation. Research utilizing SDT suggests higher levels of self-determination lead to an increase in academic persistence (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991); academic motivation (Cokley, 2003); and school satisfaction (Vallerand, Pelletier, Blais, & Brière, 1993). A recent quantitative study examined how motivation influences academic outcomes of students enrolled at 4-year and 2-year colleges and found that students who were intrinsically motivated to enroll in college were more likely to persist and have higher GPAs (Guiffrida et al., 2013). Utilizing a qualitative approach, the motivation of African American and Latino males at community colleges who overcame the challenges of first embarking in developmental writing was examined.

Methodology

Grounded Theory was employed as the research method for this qualitative study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) while SDT was utilized as a lens to explain the findings. Grounded Theory allows researchers to gain “insight about the phenomenon, not empirical generalization from a sample to a population” (Patton, 2002, p. 40). In this case, the insight came from the interview responses of African American and Latino male students and their motives for enrolling and persisting in community college developmental and transfer-level writing courses. SDT enables the understanding of students’ lived experiences. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), the researcher arrives at theory through “data, systematically gathered and analyzed” (p. 12). That is, the researcher discovers themes that emerge from the qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through the use of discriminate sampling, the researcher “chooses the sites, persons, and documents that will maximize opportunities for comparative analysis” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 211). By expanding the sample size at different stages in the study, the researcher is able to achieve theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998) have observed that utilizing more than one type of sampling procedure may be called for at different times in a study in order to select participants that contribute to the evolving theory.

For this study, several sampling procedures were utilized. This was congruent with what Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested during open sampling because “no concepts yet have proven theoretical relevance” (p. 206). Thus, adherence to a predetermined sampling procedure is not required. In this study, expanding the sample size from English 28 (developmental course) and English 101 (transfer-level course) to include students enrolled in the English 28 lab and English 103, the critical thinking course one level above the 101 course (see the Appendix), provided a broader perspective of students’ experiences. This expansion also allowed for closer examination of variation and relationships among the concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). By expanding the sample to include students enrolled in the writing lab and critical thinking courses, researchers could examine the entire course trajectory of students who began in developmental English courses and the full-range and breath of their writing experiences.

Data analysis

All the tape-recorded interview data were manually transcribed employing Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) three-step approach of *generating categories* (open coding); developing and linking categories

with subcategories (axial coding); and *integrating and refining* (selective coding) to arrive at the themes. Personally transcribing the data allowed for the opportunity to confirm initial categories identified during the open coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of the face-to-face interviews and to discern new ones before proceeding to axial and selective coding. Once all interview responses had been transcribed, the data were reviewed multiple times checking for accuracy. Several matrices were developed to display the data as themes emerged and were coded. Once data and themes were developed, SDT was used to provide an understanding of students' lived experience.

Community college site

The California community college selected is one of nine in the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD), the largest in the United States (LACCD, 2013b). The college has a predominately African American student body (68.8%) and a smaller, yet growing, Latino/a student body (26.4%) (LACCD, 2011). According to the LACCD Research Statistics, Service Area Population Demographics (LACCD, 2013a) gathered from 2000 Census data, 32.5% of the LACCD campus district's population lives in poverty, higher than the state (14.2%) and the national (24.4%) average. Institutional Review Board approval was secured to conduct the study.

Writing courses

Students were recruited from English 28 (and its laboratory), English 101, and English 103. English 28 (Intermediate Reading & Composition) is one of two basic skills courses; it is one level below English 101 (College Reading & Composition), which is the traditional transfer-level writing course. English 103 (Composition and Critical Thinking) is also a transferable course, one level above English 101. The units for English 28 were nondegree applicable.

Participating teachers and students

Eight of 13 English faculty members granted access to their classes to recruit students. Five did not participate, two of whom taught on-line courses and were not part of this study. Communication with the faculty members was via e-mails to arrange dates and times convenient to conduct the classroom visits. Visits were made to 13 classrooms to recruit students: seven visits to English 28 classes, four visits to English 101 classes, and two visits to English 103 classrooms. Visits were made to the English 28 lab as well.

Recruited, identified, and interviewed were 18 African American and Latino male students who met the following requirements of the study: belonged to the demographic population that the study proposed to examine, were 18 years or older, had successfully completed at least one developmental writing course, and were enrolled in a subsequent writing course at the time the study was conducted in the fall semester. Students self-identified their race/ethnicity from a short survey distributed during the recruitment phase of the study. According to the LACCD Office of Research and Institutional Research Effectiveness, website (LACCD, 2013a), the African American male population was 28.6%, whereas the Latino male student population was 29.5%. To achieve theoretical saturation, an attempt was made to have a sample that was race balanced and included male students from each of the writing class levels and the lab being examined (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Subsequently, nine African American and nine Latino males were selected. Eight of the students were in English 28, the basic skills writing course; seven were enrolled in English 101, the transfer-level writing course one level above English 28; and three students were in English 103, the transfer-level course one level above English 101. For purposes of confidentiality, students were given the choice of selecting a fictitious name. Each of the 18 students was interviewed once for approximately half an hour at the community college. The interviews were tape recorded. Each participant received a \$10 gift card for his participation.

Results

African American and Latino male students shared common motives for persisting in their developmental-to-transfer-level writing courses, even when overcoming obstacles in the classroom. To frame the understanding of the students' motives for enrollment and persistence in the writing courses, Self-determination Theory was utilized. Research Question 1 asked students why they took English courses in college. The major theme that emerged from Question 1 related to students' own drive (or their integrated regulation style) to accomplish their academic goals to graduate, transfer, and/or obtain a career despite the fact that the courses that students took were required (or controlled). Research Question 2 asked students to identify situations that might have caused them to consider dropping their English courses. The major theme that emerged from Question 2 was that students thought about dropping their English courses when they felt overwhelmed. When institutional agents do not provide relatedness to meet students' needs, this may lead to a lack of autonomy and competence, which negatively impacts students' ability to continue and complete their English courses. Research Question 3 asked students to share why they continued and completed English courses. While students identify their goals as the reason why continued and completed English courses, they also spoke of the assistance they received from their English professors and student support services such as tutoring. The latter is consistent with SDT and students' need for relatedness. Although there was no prominent theme that emerged related to students' intrinsic desire for learning, there were indications that students' academic and career goals may serve as a vehicle by which students began to experience the pleasure of learning to write.

Question 1: Why do African American and Latino males take English courses?

Self-determined to achieve academic goals

Male students spoke of working hard, being strong-willed, and/or not wanting to quit because they wanted to achieve their goals; thus, they continued to take English classes. Most students (7) had goals to transfer to a 4-year college or university/obtain a bachelor's degree (one African American; five Latinos), while one African American wanted at least an associate's degree. A couple (two African Americans) desired to complete courses in the major and/or graduate from a community college. A few (one African American; four Latinos) were interested in obtaining a career. One African American stated that he was taking English courses to graduate. Three African American males gave nonacademic reasons for taking English courses.

Alberto, a Latino, explained, "I continue to complete my IGETC [Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum] ed plan in order for me to transfer to a 4-year university. I keep pushing harder; I want to succeed and get those classes out of the way because I want to transfer. That's like the goal I have." George, an African American, stressed, "I have a goal, I want to finish, and I want to do it in a certain amount of time. So I put in my mind that I was going to finish no matter what, and I was going to take all the English classes that I need to get there." He emphasized, "The bigger goal is to receive my AA [associate of arts], transfer to a UC [University of California], get my bachelor's in psychology, and then, move on for my PhD" From an SDT framework, these student responses demonstrate that students have internalized the behaviors (integrated regulations) because they are congruent with their desires to accomplish their own goals.

Although students spoke of their internal drive to accomplish their goals, they were cognizant that the courses were a requirement (controlled). On the one hand, Andrew, a Latino, stated, "The reason is [for taking writing courses] because I want to advance and to transfer to a Cal State or a UC so in order to do that those are some of the requirements." On the other hand, while Sal's (African American) first response was to highlight the importance of writing, he subsequently acknowledged that he was required to take the writing classes and tentatively concluded that writing would help him in his career. He observed, "Writing is important and you do it no matter what field you go into," adding, "I'm just taking them because it's a requirement to take." He stressed, "My ultimate goal is to

become a physical therapist so I guess that will help me be able to write down plans or any kind of documentation that I have to do to become more proficient or professional.” Students described taking writing classes because they were a “requirement.” From a SDT framework, this demonstrates that students have chosen to meet the requirements in order to fulfill their goals.

Question 2: What causes African American and Latino male students to think about dropping their English classes in college?

Feeling overwhelmed

Being self-determined is why students took English classes. What situations, then, would have caused students to consider dropping their writing classes? According to SDT, students feel a loss of autonomy when the activities that they engage in are not compatible with their goals. When students feel that they do not have a choice, environments are not supportive of their goals, and/or situations are not within their control or compatible with their goals, they find it challenging to learn. Students in this study found it difficult to persist when they were confronted with situations out of their control.

The major theme that emerged as to why African American and Latino males thought about dropping their English courses was because they felt overwhelmed at not doing well academically and/or not being able to keep up with the classes. Eddie, a Latino who wanted to become a psychologist, stated, “We might mess up in a test or in an essay, and we might feel like dropping.” D.J., an African American who aspired to obtain an AA degree, also felt the pressure of not doing well, “I got a bad grade on my test and I just felt like I did my best.” Students felt the pressure of not doing well academically.

Other students, however, attributed the challenge of not being able to keep up with the classes to forces outside of their control: lack of resources and school-work conflicts. Andrew, a Latino planning “to transfer to a Cal State or a UC,” spoke of not having a computer at home to do his English class assignments. He complained, “We got to be on the Internet a lot instead of like typical using textbook, so that’s an issue sometimes. At home, I can’t use the Internet cause I don’t have a computer” Because he did not own a computer, he did not appreciate that his professor did not provide alternatives to using the Internet. According to SDT, students learn best when given choices. Not having another option caused Andrew to think about dropping his English course. While Andrew could not afford to buy a computer, Jerome, an African American, who saw “school was a way to change [his] life, change [his] job status from physical labor to mental labor” could not afford to pay for his classes. Even though Jerome felt that he was doing well in his classes (within his control), “It was the financial aid office” that was the issue. He stated, “I couldn’t afford to be in the classes” (outside of his control). Jimmy, a Latino computer technician who wanted to become a computer engineer, felt that “[a] lot of [his] work [job] actually took a lot of [his] time of doing [his] homework.” He needed to work to pay for his education, but that interfered with his being able to do his homework. From our participants’ experiences, when their autonomy was abated, they were hindered from continuing their education.

Question 3: What helps African American and Latino male students the most to continue taking writing courses?

Seeking guidance and assistance

While students continued to highlight their own desire or drive to accomplish their goals, when asked what had helped them the most to complete and continue taking courses, another major theme emerged that centered on the role that faculty and other writing staff and tutors played. Male students reported that seeking guidance and assistance from their English professors, the English 28 laboratory, and tutoring in writing helped them the most to complete and continue taking writing classes.

Hercules, a Latino aspiring to be a police officer, asked his professor for help because he felt it was safe to do so. He asserted, “Just by asking questions to my teacher. Cause my teacher always asks. If I don’t get nothing, I’m gonna ask him cause I don’t want to go back home or even to the library try to

do my homework on my own without even getting it.” His teacher provided a supportive environment, which from an SDT framework is more conducive to learning and persisting. Hercules felt he could continue with his English course because he communicated with his professor to obtain the expertise that his professor could provide, thus fulfilling Hercules’ need for relatedness. John, an African American whose major was business management, also appreciated faculty who were willing to help him, those who provided a supporting learning environment (autonomous versus controlling). He described, “What has helped me the most is having a flexible teacher, understanding, and actually tries to work with me on the work.” He did not appreciate what one of his professors told him, “I gave you the work; you’re supposed to do the work; you didn’t do the work, so don’t expect my help.” John did not respond well to the controlling language, “you’re supposed to do the work.” Such language, according to SDT, is not conducive to better learning. Instead, John acknowledged that receiving help from his writing professor helped him to stay in the class.

While some students reported that their professors helped them to succeed, Alberto, another Latino, credited staff who worked at the English 28 Writing Lab and to other tutoring writing services not connected to the class. Noting the supportive environment that the Writing Lab and tutoring services provide, he stated, “One of things that ... has helped me the most would be the Writing Lab” and “the program ... on the computer.” He added, “They help you review what is going on in class so when you get to class the next day ...; you’re like more familiar or it registers in your head so you already have it in there.” Alberto echoed the sentiments of other students, the need to connect (relatedness) to others. He needed a safe environment in which to do so. He continued, “And also, tutors if you have any questions, they could give you examples of how you could structure something, or they’ll just push harder. Of course, you know, they want to see you succeed.” Alberto’s need to connect (or relate) with other people, staff in this case, was fulfilled in a positive, nurturing environment where he felt that others (the staff) wanted him to do well. From an SDT lens, optimal learning can take place in such a supportive environment. Overall, student responses indicated that they appreciated forming relationships with others, specifically with their English professors and/or writing lab staff and tutors.

Beginning to experience the enjoyment of writing

A theme that did not emerge as central, but was salient, nonetheless, was students learning to write for enjoyment, for the pleasure of learning new things or broadening their knowledge (intrinsic motivation). A few male students described their experience with writing in ways that approximate enjoyment. For example George, an African American male, observed, “I’ve begun to see the difference in my writing and, the scale of words, as far as my vocabulary, has been enriched, by reading for leisure.” George developed a level of competency that promoted an intrinsic motivation to read, even in his spare time. He then attributed the changes he had begun to notice and his persistence to one of his professors (relatedness), affirming, “So definitely persistence was brought to me through a professor putting out the challenge ... to become better.” Hercules, a Latino, expressed a similar sentiment affirming that “as a police officer; you’re gonna to do a lot of report writing,” adding, “Your vocabulary has to be like above and beyond; it has to be superb, and ... a lot of people that I have spoken to especially police officers say, try to take classes in English, so now I have the mindset, that I want to learn English.” He emphasized his desire to improve: “I wanna to like learn from everything from the smallest detail to the biggest detail, and I think that English is the most important thing, like probably of any field cause you have to know how to communicate with people.” Hercules described the importance of becoming a better communicator (developing competency to do a good job as a police officer). He was initially extrinsically motivated to develop the writing competency for a career path; however, the motivation transitioned from extrinsic to intrinsic due to his personal desire to improve his writing. From an SDT framework, it could be said that these students feel that they are in a supportive environment, one conducive to discovering their intrinsic motivation to learn for the pure enjoyment of it.

Limitations

There are various limitations to this study. First, the data come from a single institution in an urban setting in Southern California. Thus, the results may not be applicable to suburban or rural campuses and other regions. Second, only one aspect of developmental education, writing, was examined. Results could differ in other disciplines. Third, the researchers only examined the experiences of male students of color—specifically, African American and Latino. Their experiences may not be representative of other students' experiences at the community college. Finally, these students' experiences are within the 2-year sector, which may not apply to 4-year campuses.

Discussion

Quantitative studies on retention and persistence have shown that students who successfully complete their developmental courses are more likely to persist and to graduate (Boylan & Saxon, 1998; McCormick & McCormick, 1986). However, higher rates of retention have been reported for White students than for African American and Hispanic students in community college developmental education courses (Bettinger & Long, 2005; Boylan et al., 1993; McCabe, 2000). The results of this qualitative study indicate that aspects of Self-determination Theory can account for the success and persistence of African American and Latino male students who began in developmental writing courses and whose voices have been absent from the literature.

First, the majority of the students identified their own academic and career goals as motivation for continuing to take English classes. This study's findings mirror other qualitative studies that found that students were highly motivated by their academic and career goals (Carranza, 2006; Griffin, 2006; Villarreal, 2012). The findings also add to the literature in that African American and Latino male students cited the importance of their goals even when they felt overwhelmed and considered dropping their English courses.

Second, students credited the assistance of English faculty and writing staff and tutors for helping them to complete and persist in their writing classes. Much of the transformation—regarding the students' view on the purpose of their enrollment in these writing classes—was based on their extrinsic motivation. A more intrinsic motivation was derived from their interactions with English faculty members. Writing faculty members who inculcated a love of learning were instrumental for the students in viewing college as a transformational experience. Students believed that although they were required to take developmental courses, they had the support of English faculty and writing support services to develop an academic competence to be successful in college and future career choices. Consistent with SDT, relatedness in the form of their interactions and socializations with discipline specific institutional agents (i.e., faculty and staff within the English department and writing tutors campus wide) is needed in order to develop competence in this academic environment. Students clearly indicated that their interactions and support from writing faculty, staff, and tutors were instrumental in helping them be successful and persist in their writing classes. This study's findings support prior research that faculty play an important role in motivating students to continue their education and overcome barriers to persistence. There are various theories (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, 1989) and empirical studies that discuss the importance of student and faculty interactions (Anaya & Cole, 2001; Hagedorn, Maxwell, Rodriguez, Hocevar, & Fillpot, 2000; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Thompson, 2001; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). The findings of this study are also similar to qualitative studies of developmental education students who credited their professors for their persistence (Valeri-Gold et al., 2001; Villarreal, 2012). The participants in this study discussed the importance of seeking guidance and support from English instructors and writing staff and tutors who helped them succeed academically by providing the additional support they needed to persist. From an SDT lens, the support African American and Latino male students received from faculty provided relatedness and competency, which nurtured the development of academic confidence that resulted in greater autonomy and increased motivation.

Institutional and state-level policy implications

There are several policy implications as a result of the study. First, community colleges should encourage students to learn how to navigate the collegiate environment and facilitate this process to enhance the ability for students to be autonomous. SDT and the results of this study indicated that autonomy is critical for students' motivations. African American and Latino male students were highly autonomous in choosing their goals, motivating them to persist in developmental writing courses, even when they felt overwhelmed and considered dropping their courses. Through writing assignments, English faculty can help students explore goal-setting strategies and problem-solving when students feel like dropping their courses. Also, English faculty can intentionally select readings focused on overcoming obstacles. Campus-wide, community colleges can offer various services from different departments that provide a guide as to what students should consider majoring in based on their postcollege goals. That can include exploring different majors that may be aligned with a particular profession or career path. Second, community colleges can help students develop a sense of relatedness. Students in this study indicated that they knew college faculty and staff were sending a message that they are there to help. English faculty can play a greater role in encouraging and challenging students to do better and achieve their highest potential. Through student surveys/focus groups, community colleges, in collaboration with the English department, can examine the reasons why African American and Latino male students consider dropping out of developmental writing classes and identify ways to help them to persist while ensuring that students set goals early on. Writing faculty in partnership with other institutional agents can help African American and Latino male students by providing information regarding various support services that may help them address issues they may be encountering. Community colleges can and should strive to ensure that developmental writing faculty is providing an academically nurturing environment that gives students the space to develop a self-determining mindset to overcome barriers they may encounter in being successful and persisting in English courses. Third, while intrinsic motivation was not found, some levels of competency, autonomy, and relatedness, which provided various levels of extrinsic motivation, were observed. When students increase their levels of competency, autonomy, and relatedness, these may lead to a discovery of love of learning. According to SDT, being intrinsically motivated leads to optimal learning. Writing faculty should encourage students to develop a love of learning.

Future research

Future research should examine how community colleges have been able to increase the intrinsic motivation of students enrolled in developmental writing courses. Community colleges can serve as extrinsic motivators; however, little is known of the role community colleges play in developing and amplifying students' intrinsic motivation. Second, future research on female students of color can shed light on how they may differ from their male counterparts regarding their intrinsic and/or extrinsic motivation and their persistence in developmental education. Female students of color are outperforming their male counterparts, and understanding how their motivation, as compared to males, for their persistence may shed some light as to why the educational gap between the genders persist.

Conclusions

Embarking and navigating the academic environment, whether a 2-year or 4-year institution, is challenging for many African American and Latino male students. These challenges are accentuated by students' lack of academic preparation to begin at college-level writing courses. A two-pronged approach can increase the success and persistence rates of students who begin in developmental writing courses: helping African American and Latino male students to set their

goals early on and providing nurturing teaching/student support services. The community college rhetoric of obtaining a better career provides an extrinsic motivation that undermines the intrinsic desire of wanting to be autonomous and developing intrinsic motivation, which from an SDT lens, leads to optimal learning. Community colleges are emulating proprietary institutions in consistently sending the message of “come here to get a job” instead of “come here and become enlightened”. The former cultivates extrinsic motivation while the latter promotes intrinsic motivation. Vansteenkiste, Lens, and Deci (2006) stated, “Different learning contexts do place different emphasis on intrinsic versus extrinsic goals” (p. 23). Even if students come in to the community college with intrinsic motivation, the college may be promoting the extrinsic rewards—in this case, getting a job. Based on our findings, community colleges that serve a large percentage of African American and Latino male students should empower and encourage developmental writing faculty to support their students and provide a strong tutoring service component to support their students.

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APPENDIX

Participants' English courses

English 28

In this course students plan, draft, revise, and edit compositions of increasing sophistication and complexity. All writing is based on readings that challenge the student's thinking and provide an intellectual background for writing assignments. The course also advances skills in paragraph structure, sentence variety, thesis development, organization, coherence, and language conventions as well as prepares them for English 101.

English 101

English 101 teaches freshman-level college composition and reading. Students are provided with practice in college-level compositions and engage in critical analysis of readings at higher education level. The class focus is organization and composition of longer expository essays (500–1000 words), with one or more including researched secondary sources and MLA documentation.

English 103

This course is designed to expand critical thinking, reading, and writing abilities that students developed in English 101. Students will learn to compose effective prose in essays and other written assignments, writing a minimum of 8,000 words. Students will read, analyze, evaluate, discuss and write about assigned essays and longer works, both fiction and nonfiction. Skills in locating, interpreting, and organizing pertinent information to be used in research papers will be emphasized in the course.

Source: <https://ecd.laccd.edu/>