An Examination of the Perceived Needs and Satisfaction of African American Male Initiative Learning Community Participants at a Southeastern University

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National data indicate minority males are graduating from college at significantly lower rates than Caucasian males and females. To increase matriculation and graduation rates of African American males enrolled at its institutions, the University System of Georgia (USG) implemented the African American Male Initiative (AAMI) Program. As part of this program, a southeastern university created the African American Male Initiative Learning Community (AAMI-LC) as a strategy to retain African American males through the critical first year of college. The purpose of this action research study was to systematically investigate the success of this program. In particular, this research highlights variables relating to satisfaction levels and perceived needs of students participating in the AAMI-LC.

With the downturn of the economy and high unemployment rates, obtaining a college degree continues to be advantageous in gaining stable employment. While having a bachelor's degree does not readily guarantee financial stability, individuals graduating from college are more likely to attain employment in comparison to those possessing only a high school diploma (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2012; Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011; Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). According to the Pew Research Center (2011a) report, on average, college graduates earn approximately $1,420,000 over the course of a forty-year career, which represents $650,000 more than someone with a high school diploma. Unfortunately, African American males significantly lag behind other groups in the attainment of college degrees. Thus, their potential lifetime earnings are likely to be substantially lower than if they received a college degree (Carnevale, Strohl, & Melton, 2011).

Although overall college enrollment has increased for African American males, graduation rates are still significantly lower than those of African American females and Caucasian males and females (Brooks, Jones, & Burt, 2012; Toldson & Lewis, 2012; Harper & Davis, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2011b, Cuyjet, 1997). Educational attainment data on individuals age 25 years and older indicate that 17.7% of African American males graduated from college with a bachelor's degree or higher. This rate is markedly lower in comparison to their White male, White female and Black female peers who graduated from college at 30.8%, 29.9%, and 21.4%, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Given the previously mentioned information on career earnings for degree holders, these data suggest lower lifetime income potential for many African American males.

In line with the national trends on graduation rates for Black males, enrollment and degree attainment are of significant concern for African American males in the state of Georgia. University System of Georgia (USG, 2003) data illustrate that USG institutions are enrolling African American males at a strikingly lower rate in comparison with African American females, at a ratio of 1:2. This data is consistent with studies showing that African American males are graduating at a lower rate than women (Harper, 2012; Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008; Rovai, Gallien, & Wighting, 2005; Schwartz & Washington, 2002). The USG's Task Force on Enhancing Access for African American Males report shows that the six-year baccalaureate graduation rates for the fall 1996 cohort of first-time, full-time freshmen were 47.8% for Caucasian females; 41.6% for Caucasian males; 34.5% for African American females; 21.3% for African American males; 38.8% for Hispanic females; 41.5% for Hispanic males; 58.9% for Asian females; and 48.4% for Asian males. For students entering college in fall 1997 and graduating no later than fiscal year 2003, graduation rates for men increased from 21.3% to 28.95%, compared to an increase from 34.5% to 41.03% for African American women (USG, 2012a). Arising from the initial study conducted by the USG task force, the African American Male Initiative (AAMI) was instituted in fall 2002 with the goal of addressing achievement concerns among Black males students (USG, 2012a; USG, 2003; Duhart & Fournillier, 2010).

Greater Georgia University (pseudonym), a four-year comprehensive, residential institution, is one of 26 USG institutions offering retention programs for African American males. The AAMI program was initiated in 2002 with the establishment of Black Men With Initiative (BMWI). Approximately two years later, in 2004, the first African American Male Initiative Learning Community (AAMI-LC) was established to reach more students. In 2009, Black Men Encouraging Success Today (BEST), a local community organization founded by local physicians, lawyers, university faculty, business and community leaders, and other stakeholders, established a student chapter on campus to increase the likelihood that even more African American males would be retained through graduation.

Specifically, the purpose of the AAMI-LC is to increase the likelihood that African American males are retained during their first year of college. This is accomplished through a learning community designed to provide students with access to support services (e.g., peer mentoring, educational and social programming, tutoring, academic advising, networking with community and business leaders, and academic coaching provided by the program coordinator) and an environment of emotional support. Implementation of the learning community has continued during each academic year from 2004–2012, except for a one-year hiatus in 2009-2010 (J. O. Jenkins, personal communication, October 31, 2011).

Study Purpose

The goal of this study is to report on the impact of the AAMI-LC program on Black male success. In particular, the authors employed an action research (AR) approach. According to Kember and Gow (1992), action research can improve the quality of student learning in higher education when it is used to promote change in curricula, teaching strategies, institutional practices, and the attitudes of staff. "Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about how their particular school operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn" (Mills, 2011, p. 5).

The purpose of this action research study (ARS) was to examine perceived needs and satisfaction levels of African American male freshmen participating in the AAMI-LC. Perceptions of need and satisfaction levels were examined among students participating only in the learning community, as compared with those participating in both AAMI-LC and the Summer Enhancement Program (SEP) . Investigating students' perceived needs and satisfaction is essential for developing initiatives that enhance retention, progression, and graduation (RPG)[2] rates for African American males (Rowser, 1997). Understanding student perceptions of their needs and satisfaction levels is vital in assessing the effectiveness of the AAMI-LC at this institution. Administrators, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders are in a position to make better decisions affecting students when they have a good understanding of what students want and expect from their college experiences (Cole, Kennedy, & Ben-Avie, 2009; Smith & Wertlieb, 2005; Daddona & Cooper, 2002). Information derived from this study can be used to further develop strategies to increase RPG rates among African American male students. To contextualize this study within the larger body of literature on African American males, the next section discusses literature relevant to this topic.

Related Literature Review

Retention of African American Males

Retention in higher education has been studied extensively for over 40 years (Tinto, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Astin, 1999; Thayer, 2000; Salinitri, 2005). Vincent Tinto's (1987, 1997, 2006) research on student persistence vs. attrition as a result of incorporation in social and academic environments has made a valuable contribution towards understanding factors that affect student success in college (Reason, 2009).

Colleges and universities have an obligation to implement programs and policies that take into account the diverse and individual needs of their student populations. As institutions formulate and institute regulations and policies to increase RPG rates, it is critical to give consideration to issues that affect individual student subpopulations (e.g., Black males) (Kinzie et al., 2008). The achievement gap between educational attainment for African Americans males and rest of the student body suggests that issues affecting RPG for these students are different

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[2] The practical definition of *retention, progression, and graduation (RPG)* used at this institution is the steady continuation of enrollment of full-time, first-time degree-seeking students who enrolled in a given fall term and who remain enrolled for the second fall (retention), third fall (progression), and fourth fall (progression) and then graduate (graduation) (S. Lingrell, personal communication, February 6, 2013).

than for other groups. Costello et al. (2011), Palmer, Davis, and Hilton (2009), Salinitri (2005), Strayhorn (2008), Rovai et al. (2005), and Schwartz and Washington (2002) articulate factors that negatively influence African American males' transition from high school to college, including such factors as: limited educational attainment by parents, limited parental support, unsupportive institutional cultures, undeveloped study habits, limited financial resources, Eurocentric curricula and pedagogy, and stereotypical perceptions of African American males.

With respect to the last factor, Strayhorn (2008) explained that negative perceptions of African American men propagate negative stereotypes among peers and educators. Often in education, African American males are considered uneducable, lazy, dangerous, dysfunctional, and "at risk." Such perceptions can have deleterious effects on these men, leading to self-fulfilling prophecies and self-threatening behaviors. When faculty or students, in academic environments, communicate these stereotypes, African American males can become dissatisfied with college and leave due to alienation and feeling ostracized. Therefore, it is prudent for colleges and universities to identify and examine potential gaps between student expectations and reality if they want to retain students (Darlaston-Jones, Pike, Cohen, Young, Haunold, & Drew, 2003).

Meeuwisse, Severiens, and Born (2010) maintained that previous "research has shown that ethnic minority students generally feel less at home, or 'like fish out of water' in their educational program compared to their fellow students from the dominant culture" (pp. 531-532). African American males, like other students need a nurturing and supportive educational environment if they are to succeed in college (Brooks et al., 2012; Costello et al., 2011; Young, Johnson, Hawthorne, & Pugh, 2011; Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2008; Booker, 2007; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Cuyjet, 1997; Rowser, 1997). In particular, a supportive environment must employ culturally relevant approaches to meeting the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. For example, Rovai et al. (2005) discussed the importance of understanding cultural differences, classroom communication, and learning styles of African American students. Rovai asserted that to retain African American students, universities must understand the obstacles they face in higher education and commit to a variety of educational practices that alleviate challenges and foster academic excellence. LaVant, Anderson, and Tiggs (1997) supported the belief that African American men can be successful in college if they are provided with well-conceived and formal support systems promoting achievement. Similar to Rovai et al. (2005), LaVant et al. (1997) suggested that African American males can be retained if college campuses are responsive in efforts to provide a warm, supportive, and nurturing environment that permits students to establish immediate connections with university personnel.

Learning Communities and African American Students

One method for facilitating nurturing relationships between students and university personnel is through learning communities (LCs). In fact, the scholarly literature is replete with evidence that LCs are effective in increasing retention and positive educational outcomes for freshmen (Rocconi, 2011; Kinzie et al., 2008; Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Tinto, 1997). LCs are purposefully structured learning environments where students engage in a common curriculum via a cohort model. Rocconi (2011) stated that an LC is the "intentional structuring of students' time, credit, and learning experiences to build community and foster more explicit connections among students, faculty, and disciplines and is closely correlated to a variety of advantageous

educational outcomes" (p. 179). Various rationales have been explored regarding the effectiveness of LCS in leading to enhanced student outcomes (Beaulieu & Williams, 2013; Shapiro, 2013; Jehangir, 2008; Cabrera et al., 2002; Tinto, 1997). According to Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya (2010), LCs provide a structured environment that meets the psychosocial and interpersonal needs of students.

Yancy et al. (2008) studied the effectiveness of a freshman LC and student engagement at a private, historically Black university. Results demonstrated that this LC positively impacted academic progress for marginally weak and marginally strong students by increasing their engagement and satisfaction in college. Findings from this study are echoed in the scholarly literature, indicating that as a whole, LCs serve as a strong mechanism to support Black student achievement and success in college (Firmin, M. W., Warner, Firmin, R. L., Johnson, & Firebaugh, 2013; Zell, 2011; Commander & Ward, 2009; Engstrom, 2008; Taylor, 2007).

Graduating from college is considered advantageous in increasing an individual's chances of economic success (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2012; Carnevale, Rose, et al., 2011; Pew Research Center, 2011a; Pew Research Center, 2011b; Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). Research indicates that more women than men graduate. However, while African American male enrollment has increased, these students are still graduating from college at much lower rates than their female counterparts (Toldson & Lewis, 2012; Harper & Davis, 2012; USG, 2012a; Costello et al., 2011). Learning communities have emerged as one strategy to increase success rates by providing students with a supportive learning environment (Costello et al., 2011; Rocconi, 2011; Young, et al., 2011; Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Kinzie et al., 2008; Booker, 2007; Rovai et al., 2005; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Zhao & Kuh, 2004; LaVant et al., 1997). This ARS adds to the research literature by reporting on the effectiveness of the AAMI-LC and offering data that may be beneficial in increasing RPG rates for African American males in other institutional contexts. The next section describes the methodology employed in this research.

Methodology

Data from this ARS was collected from participants in the AAMI-LC at Greater Georgia University. The institution consists of six colleges and two schools offering various degree programs on the undergraduate and graduate levels in the sciences, social sciences, humanities, arts, education, and business; as well as an honors and an early admissions program, which is one of only 15 residential college-early entrance programs in the United States (USG, 2012b).

The following research questions guided this inquiry: *(1) To what degree are African American males participating in the AAMI-LC satisfied with the services provided? (2) How effective was the AAMI Program in meeting the perceived needs of AAMI-LC participants?* and *(3) What improvements may be needed to help the AAMI Program be more effective in retaining African American male students?* Quantitative and qualitative data were collected to assess perceived needs and satisfaction levels of AAMI-LC only participants (AAMI-LC) and Summer Enhancement Program (SEP) and AAMI-LC participants (SEP+AAMI-LC). Data were collected from participants via a survey and interviews. What follows is a description of the program.

About the AAMI-LC and SEP

The SEP was implemented by the AAMI program during summer 2011 to improve the chances that first-time, full-time degree-seeking African American male students admitted for the upcoming fall term would be successful. The SEP was funded by a grant from the USG and Greater Georgia University. This three-week program introduced incoming freshmen to the realities of the college experience. An interest letter and brochure describing the program was mailed to incoming African American male freshmen. Twenty-two pre-freshmen students voluntarily signed up to participate in the SEP on a first come, first serve basis.

SEP participants lived in one of the residence halls on campus and received benefits as enrolled students. Meals were provided by the program, and served by the food services department on campus. Access to recreational facilities was given to participants as well. Participants attended introductory courses in math and English taught by faculty members. While each course was taught as it would be during any given semester, participants did not earn any college credit at the conclusion of the program. Students spent at least one hour in mandatory study hall sessions on Monday through Thursday of each week. Three upper-level undergraduates and a graduate student were hired to work with pre-freshmen during this program. A math tutor was also hired by the AAMI program to work with students during study hall. Faculty, staff, administrative personnel, business and community leaders as well as the president of the University spoke to students on a variety of topics.

At the end of the program, a special awards ceremony was held for the students. This ceremony was attended by the president of Greater Georgia University. The SEP was implemented for only one summer because Greater Georgia University began offering a summer transition program the following summer, which accommodates a greater number of students and allows them to receive course credit for participation.

Participants

Overall enrollment for Fall Semester 2011 at Greater Georgia University was 11,646. Undergraduate enrollment was 10,029. African American males comprised 10.9% (n=1,095) of undergraduate students, compared to African American females, 18.7% (n=1,879); and Caucasian males and females consisted of 22.3% (n=2,235) and 33.7% (n=3,377), respectively.

Study participants were African American freshman males enrolled in their first semester of college participating voluntarily in the AAMI-LC during the 2011-2012 academic year. A total of 22 students participated in the AAMI-LC. Nine pre-freshmen participating in the SEP decided not to participate in the AAMI-LC during the fall, which left 13 original participants of SEP also participating in AAMI-LC. Nine new students were selected on first come, first serve basis to fill slots vacated by the nine students who decided not to participate. Of these, 18 participants were informed about the study during the last class session of the freshmen orientation course-designated for AAMI-LC students. Two participants were informed about the study via email. By the end of the recruitment phase, a total of 19 students (n = 11 SEP+AAMI-LC; n = 8 AAMI-LC) volunteered to complete the survey.

Instrumentation

A Likert scale questionnaire consisting of 23 items, and an area for additional comments, was designed by the principal investigator (see Table 1). The *Demographics* section contained an item to determine if participants were in the AAMI-LC group or the SEP+AAMI-LC group. The second item in this section inquired about students' motivation for participating in the learning community. The second section, *Satisfaction, Expectations, and Perceived Needs*, which was based on a 5-point Likert scale with *1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly Agree*, contained 19 items (1-19). Item 18 was designed to assess satisfaction of participants in the SEP+AAMI-LC group. Remaining survey items were designed to collect qualitative data about student experiences in the program and their likelihood of recommending it to others. There was no validity or reliability data gathered for this survey as each survey item was analyzed individually rather than as a construct.

Table 1
AAMI Satisfaction and Perceived Needs Survey [make additional footnote here]

Section	Survey Item	Choices	
Demographics	Q1 – I participated in:	a)	Participation AAMI-LC only
		b)	Participation in SEP+AAMI-LC
	Q2 – Decision to participate in AAMI-LC	a)	Personal
		b)	Parents or Guardians
		c)	Don't know
Satisfaction, Expectations, and Perceived Needs[a]	Q1 – AAMI program offers needed support in/outside of class.		
	Q2 – Satisfied with support received through AAMI-LC.		
	Q3 – AAMI coordinator is helpful in referring to other services (e.g., tutoring, financial aid, career services) on campus.		
	Q4 – Comfortable approaching AAMI coordinator.		
	Q5 – AAMI coordinator responds in a timely manner.		
	Q6 – AAMI coordinator understands needs and provides helpful assistance.		
	Q7 – Satisfied with courses taken in AAMI-LC.		
	Q8 – Satisfied with professors teaching courses		

this semester (Fall 2011).

Q9 – Satisfied with structure of AAMI-LC.

Q10 – AAMI-LC helped me to be more focused in academics.

Q11 – Satisfied with individual help.

Q12 – More engaged in college life because of support received in AAMI-LC.

Q13 – Satisfied with help received from AAMI coordinator in selecting courses for next semester (Spring 2012).

Q14 – Used services recommended by AAMI-LC staff.

Q15 – Satisfied with peer mentor.

Q16 – AAMI-LC is beneficial in helping me enjoy college experience.

Q17 – Participating in AAMI-LC motivated me to succeed in college.

Q18[b] – Participating in AAMI-LC and SEP was helpful.

Q19 – The AAMI-LC has met my expectations. Explain how or how it has not.

Q20[c] – Omitted by mistake in numbering

Comments   Q21 – If you could recommend improvements to AAMI-LC, what would change? Why?

Q22 – Would you recommend the program to other African American males? Explain why or why not?

    a) Yes
    b) No

Additional Comments[d]

Note. The survey was designed by the principal investigator.
[a]Items in this section required responses based on 5-point Likert scale (*5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Neutral, 2=Disagree, and 1=Strongly Disagree*). [b]Item 18 was answered only by participants of SEP+AAMI-LC. [c]Item 20 was omitted in the numbering of survey items. Survey instrument consisted of 23 items, including items in *Demographics* section. [d]Additional Comments section was included to collect more qualitative data from participants who wanted to report more information about experiences in AAMI-LC or college in general.

To collect data from participants, the principal investigator attended the last class meeting of the First-Year Experience course for the AAMI-LC. The investigator explained the purpose of ARS, answered questions about the study, requested that students participate in the study, and distributed consent forms and surveys to program participants. The investigator left the classroom during the administration of the questionnaire. Participants placed their completed surveys in a manila envelope collected by the class instructor. Data for each individual survey item was analyzed using descriptive statistics. In addition, t-tests were used to examine mean score differences between the AAMI-LC Only and the SEP+AAMI-LC groups.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted to provide a more holistic understanding of student experiences. Examples of questions asked during interviews include: 1. *Why did you decide to participate in the AAMI Learning Community?* 2. *What expectations did you have about participating in the AAMI Learning Community before arriving on campus?* and 3. *What expectations have you developed about the AAMI Learning Community since you started in school this fall semester?* (See Appendix A.) Three participants were selected at random from each subgroup to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted prior to the end of Fall Semester 2011.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted over a period of four school days. According to Turner (2010), "The researcher remains in the driver's seat with this [general interview guide approach], but flexibility takes precedence based on perceived prompts from the participants" (pp. 755-756). While interviewees primarily answered the same questions, interviews were informally structured. Friendly expression was employed to build rapport with participants; this approach enabled participants to be more conversational. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. A code was assigned to each interviewee to protect identities and maintain confidentiality. The standardized open-ended and general interview guide approaches were used to structured interviews (Turner, 2010). Emergent themes were identified and are presented in the results section.

Results

Nineteen of the 22 (86%) students participating in AAMI-LC completed the 23-item survey, with 58% in the SEP+AAMI-LC group (n=11) and 42% in AAMI-LC (n=8). Question 2 of the Demographics section, "*Whose decision was it for you to participate in the AAMI-LC?*" provided insight on students' decision process in selecting AAMI-LC as their first year experience program. A large contingent of respondents, 47%, noted that their parents decided on their participation in the program. Students chose to participate on their own 26% of the time; 11% did not know how they were selected; and 5% did not respond to the item. Another 11% indicated both they and their parents decided on their participation. This was not a choice on the survey; however, two respondents selected both "(a)" (personal decision) and "(b)" (parents or guardians), thus indicating a shared decision.

Mean scores were calculated for each item, as well as the mode and range, for SEP+AAMI-LC and AAMI-LC participants, as shown in Table 2. Mean scores for most items were 4 to 5, *Strongly Agree* or *Agree*. Modal ratings were similar. Results seemingly support students' satisfaction with AAMI-LC in meeting their perceived needs. For example, 79% of

participants agreed that AAMI offers support inside and outside of the classroom for academic success. Eighty-four percent were satisfied with support received through AAMI-LC; 63% were satisfied with its structure while 37% were neutral about the structure of the AAMI-LC.

Overall findings demonstrated participants tended to be satisfied with the support they received from the learning community program. For example, in Item 10, 63% of respondents felt AAMI-LC was helpful in assisting them to be more focused on their studies while 21% said it was not; and 16% were neutral.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for SEP+AAMI-LC and AAMI-LC Participants (responses ranging from 1, strongly agree, to 5, strongly disagree)

Survey Item	SEP+AAMI-LC Mean	AAMI-LC Mean	SEP+AAMI-LC Mode	AAMI-LC Mode	SEP+AAMI-LC Range	AAMI-LC Range
Q1	4.36	4	5	3	2	2
Q2	4.45	4.34	5	5	2	2
Q3	4.27	4.63	5	5	2	2
Q4	4.73	4.38	5	5	1	3
Q5	4.82	4.5	5	5	1	3
Q6	4.73	4.63	5	5	2	1
Q7	4.09	3.75	5	5	3	4
Q8	4.18	4.63	5	5	3	2
Q9	4.09	4.13	5	5	2	2
Q10	4.18	3.25	5	2	3	3
Q11	4	4.13	4	5	3	2
Q12	3.73	3.5	4	5	4	4
Q13	4	4.13	4	5	3	3
Q14	3.91	3.5	5	5	3	4
Q15	4.36	3.75	5	5	2	4
Q16	4.27	3.38	4	5	2	4
Q17	4.18	3.5	4	5	3	1
Q18	4.09	-	5	-	3	-
Q19	4.09	4.25	5	-	3	-

Note. Item 18 was answered by participants in SEP+AAMI-LC only. Item 19 was a two-part question. Participants provided a rating and an explanation about how AAMI-LC had or had not met their expectations (see Table 3 for comments). Only half of AAMI-LC participants responded to this question. Mean, mode, and range for AAMI-LC Only based on responses of four out of eight participants in this subgroup. Q1 – Support in/out of class; Q2 – AAMI-LC Support; Q3 – Helpful Coordinator; Q4 – Comfort approaching coordinator; Q5 – Program Coordinator responds timely manner; Q6 – Program Coordinator understands needs/provides assistance; Q7 – Satisfied w/courses; Q8 – Satisfied w/professors; Q9 – Satisfied w/structure; Q10 – Focus on Academics; Q11 – Satisfied with Individual Help; Q12 – Engaged in College Life; Q13 – Help Selecting Courses; Q14 – Use of Recommended Services; Q15 – Satisfied with Mentor; Q16 – AAMI beneficial in Enjoyment of College Experience; Q17 – Motivation to Succeed; Q18 – Participation in SEP+AAMI; Q19 – AAMI-LC Met Expectations.

Table 3

Comments from AAMI Satisfaction and Perceived Needs Survey

Survey Item	SEP+AAMI-LC	AAMI-LC
Q19	Before joining AAMI-LC, I had preconceived ideas of a group of black and ambitious men working together. AAMI is exactly that.	I don't like being in class with the same people all of the time.
	No comment. [This is the actual comment.]	It help[ed] me make a network of peers, making it easier to pass classes.
	I expected to learn a lot about college.	Dr. Jenkins was a great help.
	Let me know what college was like.	Provided me with peers that I can relate to and helpful people when needed.
	Not saying I had no expectations, but I didn't know what to expect.	I have a set group to study with and relate to.
	It is a good program, however as a group we rarely was a "learning community" helping being in groups.	
	The learning community helped me keep in contact with classmates when it came to due dates.	
	It was more to my expectations because of how they helped.	
	I like how the AAMI program selects the best teachers for us, and I also like how the AAMI has first pick on classes.	
	It was everything I thought it would be; a pathway for meeting new people and getting ready for college.	
Q21	Give the participants the majority of the sovereignty to choose their classes, or at least share the responsibility and power of the selection of courses.	Let us choose our schedule.

No comment. [This is the actual comment.]

No, [because it is] the right level of college life.

Nothing really.

No changes.

More flexibility of the schedule through a consensus.

A housing unit for AAMI Learning Community.

Study groups

I would say the learning community should have more fun over the summertime and fall.

The summer program was kind of boring but it helped a little.

N/A [This is the actual comment.]

I would introduce the idea of taking field trips so it won't get boring.

Q22   Yes, AAMI-LC was an opportunity to create relationships, learn management skills. I believe that every freshman should be equipped with these qualities.

Yes, they are very helpful.

Yes, no comment. [This is the actual comment.]

Yes, [because] a lot of black males are shy and rarely ask for help so this program can make resources known.

Yes, it will help make you a college man.

Yes, it is a great program.

Yes, [because it is a] great way to meet people to study with and stay focused.

Yes, it helps you get acquainted with new students with a variety of goals.

Yes, it has a possibility of being beneficial.

Yes, it fosters an environment, which provides academic, social, and personal growth.

Yes, it [is] a good program that will create a fellowship with classmates.

Yes, it was exactly what I needed to keep focus.

Yes, the program allows African Americans to be social with them when it comes to academics.

Yes.

	Yes, I think that it is beneficial and can't hurt you in any way.	
	Yes, because it is a great learning experience.	
Additional Comments	When selecting courses for students, consider their majors so that students do not have to take unnecessary classes.	I made friends with different goals from smoking to making straight A's.
	N/A [This is the actual comment.]	When I finish college successfully, I think it will be because of the great start I had being a part of AAMI.

Note. Item 19 was a two-part question. Participants provided a rating on how well they believe AAMI-LC met their expectations; then they were asked to explain how AAMI-LC had or had not met their expectations. The ratings were analyzed separately (see Table 2).

Comparing ratings of SEP+AAMI-LC and AAMI-LC, two significant differences were found. T-tests (two-sample assuming unequal variances) for items 10 and 15 showed statistically significant differences between SEP+AAMI-LC and AAMI-LC students. Item 10 (focus on academics) indicated SEP+AAMI-LC students thought the program helped them focus more on academics to a greater extent than those participating in AAMI-LC alone, $t(13) = 1.72$, $p < .001$, $d = 0$, 95% CI [0.65, 1.07]. Similarly, for item 15 (satisfaction with peer mentor), SEP+AAMI-LC students were more satisfied than participants in AAMI-LC, $t(9) = 0.87$, $p < .001$, $d = 0$, 95% CI [0.54, 1.53].

Survey comments for items 19, 21, and 22 were consistent with overall ratings and suggested satisfaction with AAMI-LC (see Table 3). Responses to item 19 imply AAMI-LC met participants' expectations because they were able to develop peer relationships with other students with similar goals. They also reported gaining a better understanding of college life. Recommendations for change (Item 21) included allowing students to have input in course options for the LC, and organizing more social activities outside of class. Even comments regarding suggested revisions were quite positive for both groups. For instance, one participant wrote: "AAMI-LC was an opportunity to create relationships, learn management skills. I believe that every freshman should be equipped with these qualities." Another participant stated, "A lot of Black males are shy and rarely ask for help so this program can make resources known." In all, 84% of the respondents noted that they would recommend AAMI-LC to other African American males. To provide further context to students' experiences in the program, the next section presents data from the interviews.

Interviews and Participants' Comments

Interviews with participants were semi-structured in nature, with questions utilizing a standardized protocol. In general, students were asked about their experiences in the program. The following themes originated from interviews and survey comments: *Relationships, Transition, Program Structure, Campus Engagement, Support, Motivation,* and *Success.* As indicated in Table 4, subcategories were created for broader themes to further clarify data. For

instance, subcategories under the *Relationships* category include: *Peer Relationships, Relationships with Faculty/Staff,* and *Relationship with AAMI program staff.*

Interview responses are consistent with data from survey items and comments. Developing peer relationships that fostered a climate of positive competition was a major theme. For brevity, we focus the remaining portion of this section on this theme and comments regarding the program structure. Students commented frequently about how AAMI-LC helped facilitate their transition from high school to college. Attending classes together encouraged camaraderie among students. Healthy competition in the LC motivated students to do their best in classes. One participant said,

> *Um, well I think it's made me want to work harder because, I mean, everybody else, you know, you, it's like you want to compete like as a guy, you want to compete with everybody else, so like when it comes to grades, I'm… I try to be competitive about the grades I get so like, if somebody else is like, "Ah yeah, man, what'd you get, what'd you get?" I'm like, "Well," and they tell me; I'm like [thinking], "Dang, man. Maybe I need to work harder so I can…." You know, I'm trying to be smart…. I know I just need to work harder. So, you know, it's like a little bit of competition. It's helpful 'cause it just makes you want to be better.*

Another stated,

> *Um, well, being in the group with the other guys, it gave me somebody, not to compete with, but to compare to, to see how they study and how you study, to see if you can learn from them, or what you need to do, or how they got this grade and how you got this grade, so it's just like a comparison, which really helped me understand what I need to do to do better or what I need to change.*

In all, these comments illustrate that relationships fostered in the AAMI-LC create an environment where students engaged in friendly competition on academic matters. This served to facilitate their study habits, focus on school, and motivation, which in turn led to their academic success.

Table 4
Themes Deriving from Comments and Interviews

Category	Thematic category	Comments
Relationships		
	Peers	The learning community helped me keep in contact with classmates when it came to [assignment] due dates. (S)
	Faculty Interactions	It's made it easier. Like, I mean, it's always like the teachers that are there for the learning community, like they

		are always trying to help, you know… (I)
	AAMI Staff	Because when I meet with you [program coordinator], I just feel like I can talk to you. It's been good. (I)
Transition		
	High School to College	It's been a lot smoother with transition. Uh, a lot of other kids struggle with making friends, and that was a big thing; and they like feeling like home. (I)
Program Structure		
	Class Schedules	More flexibility of the schedule through a consensus. (S)
	Extracurricular Activities	I would say the learning community should have more fun over the summertime and fall. (S)
	Required LC Courses	I don't like being in class with the same people all of the time. (S)
	Study Groups	[Add] Study Groups (S)
	Housing	A housing unit for AAMI Learning Community. (S)
Support		
	Peer Mentoring	Yeah, the mentoring…He [peer mentor] keeps up, yeah, he really keeps up with me…Like he makes sure we're doing what we're supposed to… (I)
		Me, personally, I only met my mentor once, and that was the day I met him. So, I do not even know his name, but he sends out a text once every couple of weeks or so, so that really wasn't helpful at all. (I)
	Campus Resources	A lot of black males are shy and rarely ask for help so this program can make resources known. (S)
	AAMI Staff	It's meeting my needs, personally, because of the whole support system, and I know if I had a problem I could

		come talk to you [program coordinator], and then we did the review thing on the computer, you guys talked to us about that, and then that gave us a chance to establish a basis of where we're going, and um, I guess, how you guys perceive how we're doing in school... (I)
Campus Engagement		
	Involvement	It (AAMI-LC) really has not influenced me to become more engaged on campus. (I)
Motivation		
	Focus	It was exactly what I needed to keep focus. (S)
		It kind of helped me stay on track a little bit more. Be able to focus maybe. (I)
		Um, it's made me want to get better because I see people in class, and if I sit there and I don't have like what I'm supposed to have for class, and I see like that everyone else in class that has it, and they're on the same level with me, it makes me feel like I should've done something. (I)
Success	Personal	When I finish college successfully, I think it will be because of the great start I had being a part of AAMI. (S)
	Program	It is a great program. (S)

Note. (S) = Comments from the survey; (I) = Comments from interviews.

Students also provided insightful comments on the programmatic structure. As noted, the survey data illustrated that participants felt supported by AAMI-LC, but would like more input into class selection and more extracurricular activities. The interviews illustrated that participants thought more inclusion in registration might guarantee enrollment into courses they believe are more appropriate for their majors. Participants expected more extracurricular activities as a way to maintain balance between academics, campus engagement, and social interaction.

SEP+AAMI-LC participants recommended more changes than students participating in AAMI-LC alone. Their recommendations focused primarily on greater student input into scheduling classes, as well as revisions to SEP. Of the services provided through AAMI-LC, assistance with registration and individual meetings with the AAMI program coordinator were most helpful; peer mentoring was least helpful. Scheduling conflicts, inability to "connect" with the campus and its affiliates (e.g., faculty, students), and feelings of obligation were reasons given for ineffectiveness of mentoring.

Discussion

The results of this ARS indicate that participants in SEP+AAMI-LC and AAMI-LC were satisfied with the services provided by the AAMI program. In general, AAMI was viewed as supportive and effective in meeting perceived needs. This led to high ratings of satisfaction with the program. Positive relationships with other LC participants, faculty, and AAMI staff were factors affecting student satisfaction. Participants believed AAMI-LC was essential in keeping them motivated and focused on their academics. Interviews supported these findings as well. This finding is in line with prior research that has shown supportive relationships are instrumental in African American males' success in college (Brooks et al., 2012; Costello et al., 2011; Young, Johnson, Hawthorne, & Pugh, 2011; Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2008; Yancy et al., 2008; Booker, 2007; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Cuyjet, 1997; Rowser, 1997).

In terms of differences between the SEP+AAMI-LC and AAMI-LC student groups, results for Items 10 (focus on academics) and 15 (peer mentoring) showed significant differences in satisfaction levels. Satisfaction levels of SEP+AAMI-LC were higher on these items. Possibly, SEP participants' satisfaction scores may be higher because these students had an opportunity to interact with AAMI program staff three weeks prior to the start of the fall semester, allowing them to bond with each other and AAMI staff.

Limitations

The small sample size of this ARS might limit the applicability of this study's findings. However, the helpfulness of learning communities for student satisfaction is clear. Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh (1985) note there is no single rule that is used to determine sample size; however, they explain that researchers need to use the largest sample possible. Yet with action research the sample size is typically limited because action researchers study their own practices and the behavior of participants within that practice. Historically, researchers expect their findings to apply to various settings and contexts based on the behavior of the sample population, but this interpretation of generalizability is not applicable to action research such as this study (Mills, 2011). However, there are data available from prior implementations of AAMI-LCs that show the overall effectiveness of this strategy at Greater Georgia University when compared to African American freshman males who were not enrolled in AAMI-LCs.

Additional evidence of the effectiveness of AAMI-LC's at Greater Georgia University comes from data gathered on previous years' cohorts. The one-year (fall to fall) retention rate for AAMI-LC participants enrolling in fall 2007 was 7.4% higher (88.5% versus 88.1%) than for other African American males not participating in AAMI-LC. For fall 2008, the retention rate for the AAMI-LC compared to non-participants was significantly higher as well, 95% compared to 79.4%. Due to administrative changes, there was no AAMI-LC implemented during 2009 – 2010

academic year. Again, data obtained for the fall 2010 and fall 2011 cohorts reveal similar results. The retention rate for the AAMI-LC fall 2010 cohort was 85.7% compared to 78.3% for other African American male non-participants; and for the fall 2011 group, the retention rate in comparison to other African American male non-participants was 77.3% versus 66.0% respectively.

A related challenge to generalizability of action research is the question of personal bias and possible undue influence on the participants Mills (2011). The principal investigator therefore took special care to conduct the ARS in an orderly and disciplined manner. Participation was voluntary and confidential, and the informed consent assured the participants there was no penalty for non-participation or withdrawal.

Implications for Practice and Conclusion

According to the University System of Georgia and the Technical College System of Georgia's Higher Education Completion Plan (2012), college completion is crucial to the future of Georgia and the nation as a whole. Improved college graduation rates in the state generate economic stability, diversity, and civic responsibility among citizens. Increasing RPG rates for African American male students at Greater Georgia University is the main focus of the AAMI program. The AAMI-LC is one strategy being used to attain this goal. This initiative provides support and resources needed to help African American males have a successful transition from high school to college due to various issues that at times impede their ability to graduate from college (Harper, 2012; Harper & Davis, 2012; Palmer et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2008; Rovai, 2005).

Findings from this study indicate LCs can be effective in satisfying perceived needs and expectations of students. Results from this research have allowed the principal investigator to advocate more effectively for students by collaborating and partnering with Student Services, First-Year Programs, and academic colleges. Establishing partnerships creates a network of support for students and encourages academic, personal/social, and vocational success.

African American males are affected by numerous issues that influence their RPG rates. Although continued research is needed to better understand how colleges can leverage learning communities to support the success of African American male students, our results are encouraging. Many academically successful students have participated in the AAMI-LC at Greater Georgia University, and the graduation rate for African American males there has increased from a low of 22% to more than 30% when recent RPG results are compared.

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Appendix A

African American Male Initiative (AAMI) Learning Community Interview Questions

1.   Why did you decide to participate in the AAMI Learning Community?

2.   What expectations did you have about participating in the AAMI Learning Community before arriving on campus?

3.   What expectations have you developed about the AAMI Learning Community since you started in school this fall semester?

4.   What has your experience been like as a participant in the AAMI Learning Community?

5.   How has participating in the AAMI Learning Community impacted your college experience?

6.   How has participating in the AAMI Learning Community influenced you academically?

7.   How has participating in the AAMI Learning Community influenced your ability to become more engaged on campus?

8.   Do you believe the AAMI Learning Community is meeting your expectations? Please explain your answer in detail whether yes or no.

9.   Do you believe the AAMI Learning Community is meeting your needs? Please explain your answer in detail whether yes or no.

10.   If you could change anything about the AAMI Learning Community, what would you change?

11.   Which services provided by the AAMI-LC do you feel have been most helpful (e.g., Mentoring, tutoring services, assistance with registration, one-on-one meetings with AAMI Program Coordinator, etc.)?

12.   Which services provided by the AAMI-LC do you feel have been least helpful (e.g., Mentoring, tutoring services, assistance with registration, one-on-one meetings with AAMI Program Coordinator, etc.)?

13.   What services did you expect to receive that we are not providing?

14.   In what ways can the AAMI-LC better meet your needs and expectations as a first-year student?

15.   If you could change anything about the AAMI-LC, what would you change? Please explain your answer in detail.

16.   Is there any additional information you would like to provide about your experience as a participant in the AAMI-LC?