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Comparison of the Stress Levels and GPA of African American College Students at  
Historically Black and Predominantly White Institutions

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Psychology  
East Tennessee State University

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In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of the Master of Arts in Psychology

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by  
Yashica Woods  
December, 2005

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Wallace Dixon, Ph.D., Chair  
Chris Dula, Ph.D.  
James Bitter, Ed.D.

Keywords: African American College Students, Stress, Social Support

## ABSTRACT

### Comparison of the Stress Levels and GPA of African American College Students at Historically Black and Predominantly White Institutions

by  
Yashica Woods

Stress levels of African American college students attending Historically Black and Predominantly White Institutions were compared. The GPAs of the students were correlated with their stress levels. Racism and social support were explored as factors contributing to stress. Results indicated that African American students attending the Predominantly White institution had higher stress than African American students attending the Historically Black institution and White students attending the Predominantly White institution. The results also indicated that GPA and stress were negatively correlated; as stress levels decreased, GPA increased. A negative correlation was found to be significant with social support and stress; as stress increased, social support decreased. Racism was not found to be a significant factor of stress.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this manuscript to the two most important people in my life, my beautiful children, Iverson and Isra'il. You were my motivation throughout this whole process. Whenever I wanted to give up, I looked at your loving faces and knew that all the hard work was well worth it.

**MOMMY LOVES YOU SO MUCH!**

Mommy: Thank you for always being there for me when I needed advice and someone to tell me that everything is going to be alright. Thank you for all of your sacrifices and love. I love you.

Dadda: Thank you for your enthusiastic support. Your belief in me helped me to stay focused. You taught me to never give up and thank you for never giving up on me. I love you.

To my sister and best friend, Dee: Whenever I'm stressed out and feeling down, I can always count on you to make me laugh. Thank you and I love you.

To my big sister, Nicole: Thank you for always being there for me. I love you

To all of my nieces and nephews: I love all of you. I can see each of you going on to do wonderful things and making our family proud. Keya, thank you for all of your help.

Last but not least, Julien: Thank you for always having my back. You supported me through this whole process and never let a day go by without telling me that I made you proud. You have taught me so much and your intelligence never ceases to amaze me. I love you for that.

And to all of my African American brothers and sisters: Our ancestors fought for our right to get an education. Let's use these opportunities that are now afforded to us to make a change. Prove that their struggle was not done in vain.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Fran and Robin kept me sane while working on this manuscript. They were such a big contribution to this project. Thank you for your patience and support. I learned so much from you. Thank you for sharing your time and knowledge with me. Furthermore, thank you for being my friends.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, college enrollment of minorities has increased 122% with college enrollment of African Americans rising 56% from the years 1980-81 to 2000-01 (American Council on Education, 2003). According to the United States Department of Labor (2004), 58.3% of African American high school graduates are likely to enroll in college. Before the US Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, Historically Black Institutions or HBIs, granted over 90% of African American college graduates their degrees (Kim, 2002). These institutions were created to give African Americans a chance at a quality education that they were not allowed to get at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) due to segregation (Kim). Most HBIs were founded after the Civil War with the aid of the Morrill Act of 1890, but the nation's first black college, Cheyney University (formerly the Philadelphia's Institute for Colored Youth), opened in 1837 (Paige, 1999). These institutions were once the only options for African Americans to get a college education (United Negro College Fund, 2004), but now African Americans have the option of choosing any college to which they can be admitted.

Although many African Americans are now choosing to attend PWIs, HBIs still play an important role in the African American community. The goal of HBIs is primarily to educate African Americans, many of whom are disadvantaged and would not have been able to attend college otherwise due to difficult academic and/or financial situations (Bennett & Yu, 2003; Paige, 1999). The academic requirements to enter HBIs are often lower than at PWIs and due to this lenient admission policy, the average SAT scores of African Americans at HBIs are lower than at PWIs (Kim, 2002). HBIs not only enroll disadvantaged students but also have disadvantages of their own. HBIs have academic facilities unequal to those of PWIs, such as

lower quality libraries and computer labs (Bohr, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995; Kim). Despite these disadvantages, the grade point averages (GPAs) of African American students attending colleges, are higher at HBIs than at PWIs (Cokley, 2000; Hutchinson, 2000).

The graduation rate of African Americans at HBIs is higher than that at PWIs (Bennett & Yu, 2003) too. HBIs graduate 75% more African American students than PWIs and produce over half of all African American professionals (United Negro College Fund, 2004). According to the American Council on Education (2003), more than 20% of all bachelor degrees came from HBIs in 2000-01. Nine of the top 10 colleges that produce the majority of African Americans who continue in education and receive their Ph.D.'s are HBIs and 7 of the top 8 producers of African American bachelor's degrees are HBIs (United Negro College Fund). At PWIs, however, 66.3% of African Americans fail to graduate (Gloria, Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999).

The success rate of HBIs has been attributed to the nurturing and comforting environment HBIs hold toward African American students (Baldwin, Duncan, & Bell, 1987; Gloria et al., 1999; Hutchinson, 2000). African American students are the majority rather than the minority on these campuses which can foster a sense of belonging and comfort in numbers (Paige, 1999). Therefore, African American students may feel less comfortable and experience more stress at PWIs than at HBIs.

Any major life event or change can cause a certain amount of stress (Pengilly, 1997), and adjusting to a college environment can be extremely stressful (Grayson, 1989; McGrath, Gutierrez, & Valadez, 2000). There is the pressure of moving away from home, meeting new people, and meeting academic requirements. African American students at PWIs experience the additional stressor of being a visible minority on campus (Wallace & Bell, 1999). At PWIs,

numerous researchers have found a lack of a social network and racism to be common stressors for African American students, making it more difficult to adjust to college life (Allen, 1991; Allen & Haniff, 1991; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Edmunds, 1984; Solórzano, 2000; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003).

Racism is defined as a system of dominance over, and the oppression of, a group, based on race, with members of that group being perceived as inferior by members of the dominant group, and where the dominant group uses its privilege to exclude the non-dominant group from power, status, or resources (Harrell, 2000). Encountering racism can result in stress (Harrell, 2000) which in turn leads to maladaptive psychological and physical responses (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). Swim et al. (2003) found that perceived racism against African American college students at PWIs was common. Chavous, Harris, Rivas, Helaire, and Green (2004), in their study of African American students on predominantly White campuses, found that 48% felt it was *very likely* an African American would be mistreated on campus by members of another race, and another 32% felt it was *fairly likely*. Harrell characterized three types of racism-related stress that might be experienced by African American college students: racism-related life events, vicarious racism experiences, and daily racism microstressors.

Racism-related life events are events that are significant and may have lasting effects. The individual encountering these events and his or her environment influence how often these events occur. These events can occur in various settings and areas such as educational, financial, and social. Examples of this type of racism would be harassment by the police and rejection of loans due to race (Harrell, 2000). Swim et al. (2003) found that actions toward African American college students that were *probably* or *definitely* racist occurred about every other week on average, with more ambiguous incidents that *may* or *may not* have been racist occurring

about once a week. Racist remarks were among the most frequent type of incidents reported by Swim et al. These consisted of culturally and individually insensitive remarks and rude behavior. Chavous et al. (2004) found that verbally racist remarks were the most common form of harassment with 59% of the participants having been verbally insulted, mostly once or twice. Only 11% of African American participants had *never* heard racist remarks, 41% *occasionally* heard racist remarks, 28% *often* heard them, and 20% *frequently* heard them.

A second source of racism related stress, according to Harrell (2000), is vicarious racism that includes experiences not directed toward the individual but that are nonetheless observed and have a negative impact. These experiences may cause emotional reactions such as sadness and anger as well as anxiety, feelings of vulnerability, and a sense of being unsafe. Out of the African American participants in the study by Chavous et al. (2004), a third had *never* heard of mistreatment of other African Americans while two thirds knew of *some*. Indirect harassment that the students experienced or heard about affected their sense of security, with 57% fearing for their safety on campus and 10% worrying often or frequently about it.

The third source of racism related stress, according to Harrell (2000), includes daily racism microstressors, which are experiences that remind a person of his or her racial status in society. These consist of being ignored, overlooked, followed, or stared at (Harrell; Swim et al., 2003). Swim et al. found that being stared at was the most common type of racist incident in social settings for African American college students attending PWIs. It should be noted that this study was done in a predominantly White setting where presumably many students and faculty had never had much contact with African Americans. Microstressor racist events can be forgotten by the end of the day or recalled later in life depending on the severity of the incident

(Swim et al.). These incidents can cause an individual to feel disrespected or dehumanized. A build up of these incidents contribute to a person's overall level of stress (Harrell).

In the case of college environments, racism is more subtle in academic settings than in social settings (Solórzano, 2000). The negative incidents and race-related hassles that African American students face can lead to acculturative stress, which leads to them being uncomfortable around White students and faculty. An African American student with little acculturative stress would more likely be comfortable around White people and therefore be better able to adjust to and succeed at a PWI (Thompson, Anderson, & Bakeman, 2000). African American students at HBIs would be less likely to experience racism because they are in the majority. Racism is therefore a stressor that may typically be seen at PWIs but rarely at HBIs.

Nevertheless, the issue of skin color can be an issue on HBI campuses. During slavery, lighter skinned slaves were treated better by Whites and some Blacks than darker skinned slaves. This caused a dividing line between Black people of lighter and darker color (Greene, 1990). This line, although less pronounced, still exists somewhat today, with some darker skinned people of color often showing resentment and jealousy towards lighter skinned people of color and lighter skinned people of color looking down on and feeling superior to darker skinned people of color (Greene).

The emotional, psychological, and physical responses to racism related stress can be detrimental to the success of African American students. To succeed, African American students must find ways to cope with racism-related stressors on predominantly White campuses. Research has shown social support to be a moderator of stress (Anderson, 1991; Carveth & Gottlieb, 1979; Cobb, 1976; Harrell, 2000; McGrath et al., 2000; Pengilly, 1997; Sek, 1991). Social support comes in the form of relationships that allow an individual to believe that he or

she is cared for, valued, accepted, and included in a communication network that allows him or her to share, express, and get assistance with his or her problems and feelings (Cobb; McGrath et al.; Sek,). Social support can be seen in terms of perception, actual availability, and quality of the support (Demakis & McAdams, 1994; McGrath et al.).

The stress buffering hypothesis states that the higher the levels of social support available to an individual, the less stressful negative events will be for him or her (McGrath et al., 2000; Sek, 1991). Sek also states that a crucial part of obtaining social support is the accessibility of a support network from which to obtain support. Social support can come in the form of intragroup, intergroup, and institutional or environmental support (Harrell, 2000). At PWIs, the level of social support for African Americans can be limited.

Intragroup support involves others and services that are within or related to the individuals own ethnic or racial group (Harrell, 2000). Individuals have been known to bond with others who are perceived to be similar to them in values and beliefs (Brookins, Anyabwile, & Nacoste, 1996). Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, and Thomas (1999) found that African American students at PWIs often felt alone, isolated, and underrepresented due to the lack of other African Americans. Many students stated that they were always searching for other African American students. These results were similar to those reported by Dorsey and Jackson (1995), who found that the African American college students felt the need to find other African Americans to interact with socially, cultural activities to attend to, and African American faculty to serve as role models. Social support networks for African Americans are more readily available at HBIs, with higher proportions of African American students, staff, friends, and people from surrounding Black communities (Davis, 1991). Schwitzer et al. (1999) found that White faculty were perceived as being unfamiliar with African Americans. In the study by Dorsey and Jackson

(1995), 57% of African American students acknowledged their mentors as people of color. At PWIs, there are fewer Black professors and faculty to serve as mentors or role models, while HBIs provide a wide range of Afrocentric support (Davis).

At PWIs, finding other African Americans as a support system may be difficult for students. This may cause African American students to turn to members outside of their cultural group or form an intergroup support system (Harrell, 2000). At PWIs, the support system that African American students rely on may mostly consist of White students and professors (Davis, 1991). African American students at both HBIs and PWIs, however, felt that they do not receive enough support outside of their ethnic group, especially with regard to faculty (Chavous, Rivas, Green, & Helaire, 2002; Chism & Satcher, 1998; Schwitzer et al., 1999). Race, therefore, seems to be an important factor for African American college students' social support systems regardless of the type of institution they attend. When African American students are coming from predominantly White environments upon entering college, their adjustment and use of intergroup support may be easier than African American college students coming from communities that are not predominantly White (Chavous et al.; Hutchinson, 2000; Wallace & Bell, 1999). The transition may be more difficult for the many African American students who grew up in communities where they were in the majority (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993) and may have never had friendships with White people, much less incorporated them into a support system (Chavous et al., 2002; Wallace & Bell, 1999).

African American students may not approach White faculty and students for help not only because they do not feel they know how, but also because they do not know how they will be viewed or reacted to (Chavous et al., 2002; Schwitzer et al., 1999; Solórzano, 2000). Not reaching out to faculty for help is a common occurrence at both PWIs and HBIs by African



American students. According to Chism and Satcher (1998), White faculty at HBI's were seen as less approachable and concerned about African American students' well-being than African American faculty. In the study done by Edmunds (1984), African American students rated their perception of faculty, administrators, and staff at their PWI as being generally unsupportive. African American students are often wary of approaching faculty or students for assistance because they do not want to be seen as needing help due to their skin color (Schwitzer et al.). Unfortunately, this reluctance to ask for help could be detrimental to their academic success, thus creating additional stress.

African American students have the extra burden of dealing with racism and discrimination within the academic setting. These extra stressors can include insensitive attitudes from faculty and staff, low academic expectation from professors, and unfair grading and advising (Edmunds, 1984). Students at HBIs felt that their academic performance was evaluated more positively (Cokley, 1998). To deal with these problems and make the adjustment for minorities easier, PWIs have set up support systems within the institution (Harrell, 2000). These support systems consist of minority activities and clubs that function to make sure that minorities have a chance to interact and support each other (Davis, 1991). Although Dorsey and Jackson (1995) found that cultural activities are needed by African American students on predominantly White campuses, Outcalt and Skewes-Cox (2002) found that on Black campuses, fewer students attended cultural social support activities than on predominantly White campuses. This is likely because the need for these services is diminished because the students are always surrounded by other African Americans. Davis supported this conclusion, stating that African American students on black campuses are not forced to deal with the stress of being the minority

on campus. He further found that historically Black campuses are already designed to foster the support that African American students need to be academically and socially healthy.

Social support has been found to be very important in helping individuals deal with stress and adjust to different environments (Schwitzer et al., 1999). When students feel that they do not have access to support within their cultural group, they may turn to intergroup support. When African American students try to fit into the dominant group, they may acculturate or take on qualities or views of the dominant culture (Thompson et al., 2000). During this process, they may lose their African self consciousness which is the knowledge that African Americans have of themselves and their culture (Baldwin et al., 1987). African self consciousness serves to explain the behavior and thinking of African Americans from “their own cultural perspective” (p.28). This consciousness is said to be “central to normal and healthy Black personality functioning” (Baldwin et al., p.28). African American values including spirituality, collectivism, and emotional expressiveness, are often not shared by the dominant White culture, (Anderson, 1991). As might be expected, the natural culture specific personality and behavioral qualities of African Americans is more acceptable at HBIs than PWIs (Baldwin et al.; Fordham, 1988). To fit into what those at a PWI perceive as acceptable, students may change their behavior to be less African centered. This changing of behavior also serves to alienate them less from the majority. In the study by Chavous et al. (2004), 34% of African American students on predominantly White campuses admitted to changing their behavior so that they would not get harassed.

Although some students may engage themselves in the new dominant culture, others will refuse to or be unable to, leading them to become withdrawn and possibly to drop out (Wallace & Bell, 1999). Indeed, alienation was found to contribute to African American student attrition at PWIs (Suen, 1983). This isolation may be one cause of the high drop out rate of African

American students from PWIs. On Black campuses, students will be less likely to feel that their behavior needs to change because Afrocentric views are encouraged in this environment.

Students who are able to identify with people of different cultures will experience less acculturative stress (Martinez, Huang, Johnson, & Edwards, 1989; Thompson et al., 2000). How well Black students are able to identify with White students and their culture depends on their own background and personality (Wallace & Bell).

Family is an important value to African Americans (Anderson, 1991). A lack of family support may be more detrimental to well being than having unsupportive friends (Adler, 2003). Families provide emotional and financial support for African American students, whether at Black or White institutions (Grayson, 1989; Jackson & Swan, 1991; Swim et al., 2003). Having support from family not only eases the stressful transition to college but increases the African American students' persistence to achieve. Cabrera et al. (1999) found that encouragement was a better predictor of persistence of college students than actual academic performance.

Social support, however, may not be a coping resource sought by some African American students. Jackson and Swan (1991) found that African American students on Black campuses usually solved their own problems and on White campuses they turned to their family and institutions. However, Schwitzer et al. (1999) found different results, with African American students generally not seeking out support on White campuses. This lack of seeking out support could be attributed to the fact that African American students do not feel that a supportive network is available. Students who have social networks that they perceive to be beneficial are likely to use these networks (Dwyer & Cummings, 2001). Although African American students at PWIs may have a smaller group of friends than African American students at HBIs, peer groups at PWIs were found to be closer knit than at HBIs (Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004). Thus,

the quality of social support at PWIs may be a more important factor than the quantity of supportive resources available.

Although African American students at HBIs may not have the stressors of racism and a lack of social support, they still experience stress from other sources. At HBIs, a significant source of stress experienced by African American students is financial. In a study done by Launier (1997), findings showed that finances were the most common stressor at HBIs. According to Freeman and Thomas (2002), financial aid is one of the biggest issues that African American students consider when choosing a college. Kim (2002) found that at HBIs the percentage of African American undergraduates receiving financial aid is higher than at PWIs. Without financial aid, many African American college students would not be able to attend college due to the fact that many African American families are not able to afford higher education for their children (Freeman & Thomas, 2002). HBIs have been found to be more cost effective and, therefore, appeal more to prospective African American college students from low income families who can not afford to attend a more expensive PWI (Freeman & Thomas).

#### *Summary*

HBIs have been found to be academically and socially beneficial to African American students (Bennett & Xu, 2003; Cokley, 1998; United Negro College Fund, 2004). HBIs are noted for being sensitive to African American needs due to their efforts to provide environments that give students a sense of community, belonging, and encouragement (Bohr et al., 1995). At PWIs, African American students may experience more stress due to racism and a lack of social support. Prolonged stress brings about physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes. Physical changes may include such things as becoming tired easily or experiencing headaches. Emotional changes due to stress may include anxiety or depression. Cognitive effects may

consist of poor attention, concentration, problem solving, or abstract thinking. Behavioral changes may include withdrawal, emotional outbursts, or lack of sleep (Vlisides, Eddy, & Mozie, 1994). Any of these symptoms can have a significant negative effect on the academic performance of students.

Indeed previous research has shown that the GPAs of African American college students are higher at HBIs than PWIs (Cokley, 2000; Hutchinson, 2000). At the same time, African American students at HBIs enter with lower SAT scores than African American students at PWIs (Kim, 2002). Davis (1994) further found that African American males at HBIs had higher GPAs but lower SAT scores than those at PWIs. At the same time, the GPAs of African American students have also been found to be lower at PWIs than HBIs (Cokley; Davis; Hutchinson).

It has been consistently found that African American students at PWIs have the additional stressors of racism and low social support that African American students at HBIs may not experience (Allen, 1991; Allen & Haniff, 1991; Cabrera, et al., 1999; Chavous et al., 2004; Edmunds, 1984; Solórzano, 2000; Swim et al., 2003). The lower GPAs of Blacks at PWIs could be the product of higher stress that African American students likely feel at PWIs. Thus, the focus of this study was to quantify the stress levels felt by African American students at both HBIs and PWIs and to delineate the types of stress most commonly experienced, and to compare the differences.

### *Hypotheses*

The first hypothesis of this study was that the stress level of African American college students at PWIs would be significantly higher than African American students at HBIs. The rationale was that because African American college students at PWIs have the extra stressors of multiple types of racism and lack the social support networks that African American students may experience at HBIs, they would experience more stress.

The second hypothesis of this study was that White students at PWIs would experience less stress than African American students at PWIs. White students may have an easier time adjusting to college life and have a better social support system at a college where they are members of the dominant culture.

The third hypothesis of this study was that racism would be a significant source of stress for African American students at PWIs but not at HBIs. African American students are an obvious minority on PWI campuses and have the stressor of dealing with the dominant White culture, which may not always accept or know how to accept their being a different race, whereas this would not be the case at HBIs.

The fourth hypothesis of this study was that a lack of social support would be a significant source of stress for African American students at PWIs but would not be a factor at HBIs. At PWIs, African American students are consistently in the midst of, and adjusting to, the dominant White culture. This can be a new experience for some African American students and it may be hard for them to find a social support system that they perceive as beneficial or with which they are comfortable. At HBIs on the other hand, many opportunities to engage social support should be available for African American students, and there should be less of a need to actively seek out such support as significant race-based acculturation is not called for.

The fifth hypothesis of this study was that the higher the students' stress level, the lower their GPA would be. Stress can be detrimental to a person's psychological, emotional, and physical well-being, which can in turn affect their academic performance.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHOD

#### *Participants*

The participants in this study were undergraduates from a PWI and a HBI in the southeastern United States. Some participants were recruited through email with a hyperlink to an online survey and some were recruited by approaching them and asking for their participation. Students participated through an online administrative system where they completed individual surveys online. The participants included 279 (60.5 %) African American students from the HBI, 58 (12.6%) African American students from the PWI, 86 (18.7%) White students from the PWI, and 38 (8.3%) students that fit in other categories whose data were, therefore, not used.

#### *Measures*

The measures used in this study were a demographic questionnaire, Index of Race Related Stress-Brief Version (IRRS-B) (Utsey, 1999), and the Stress Scale for African American College Students (SSACS) (Hutchinson, 2000). The demographic questionnaire asked about a variety of factors, including college class, sex, GPA, and perceived social support. The SSACS was used to measure African American college students current stress level. The IRRS measured African American stress caused by racism-related events.

The SSACS (Hutchinson, 2000) is a revised version of the Life Experiences Survey (LES) (Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978), which was modified to better fit African American college students on PWI campuses. This survey contains 29 questions and is based on a 5 point Likert scale with 1 being “Almost Never True” and 5 being “Almost Always True.” For the purposes of this study, lower scores indicated higher levels of stress. The SSACS has a Cronbach alpha reliability of .81. The SSACS has been factor analyzed and three factors were identified



that involve environmental stress, stress related to faculty and financial support, and assimilation stress. It should be noted that the “faculty and financial support” factor was simply termed “support” by Hutchinson (2000). The environmental factor includes questions that indicate how students feel regarding their college environment. This includes perceived social support on campus from friends and college programs. The faculty and financial support factor includes questions on whether faculty are perceived by the students to be supportive and how much a student’s financial situation causes stress. The assimilation factor indicates how much students feel that they have to change their personality to fit into their college environment and feel accepted.

The IRRS-B is a shortened version of the IRRS (Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996). It measures African Americans stress related to racism. It has 22 questions that are answered on a scale of 0-4 pertaining to the frequency of an event occurring and what kind of effect it had on the test taker. A high score indicates higher stress related to racism.

Before taking the survey online, participants read an online consent form and had the option of declining to participate.

#### *Procedure*

The surveys were administered through an online, Internet accessible participant pool management system. The survey process took between 15 and 30 minutes. Survey data could not be traced to the participant. After consenting, participants completed a demographic questionnaire and the SSACS. African American students at both the PWI and the HBI took the IRRS-B. As the IRRS-B pertained specifically to African American students, White students submitted their answers after completing the demographic questionnaire and SSACS only.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

The participants included 279 (60.5 %) African American students from the HBI, 58 (12.6%) African American students from the PWI, 86 (18.7%) White students from the PWI, and 38 (8.3%) students who fit into other categories. Their data were therefore not used for this study. Thus, the data from 423 participants were analyzed for this study.

The first hypothesis of the study was that African American students from a PWI would experience more stress than African American students at an HBI. The second hypothesis of the study was that White students at the PWI would experience less stress than African American students at the PWI. To determine if there was a significant difference between the three groups a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) of SSACS was conducted. The results showed that there was a significant difference in the mean scores of stress among students at the HBI and the PWI,  $F(2, 411) = 19.39, p < .001$ . Further analysis with the LSD test suggest that significant differences existed between African American students at the PWI ( $M = 92.83, SD = 10.87$ ), and African American students at the HBI ( $M = 96.27, SD = 9.45$ ),  $p = .018$ . African American students at the PWI were found to have higher stress levels than African American students at the HBI. Significant differences also existed between African American students at the PWI ( $M = 92.83, SD = 10.87$ ), and White students at the PWI ( $M = 102.42$ ),  $p < .001$ . This indicates that African American students at the PWI were found to have higher stress than White students at the PWI. Finally, there was also a significant difference between African Americans students at the HBI ( $M = 96.27, SD = 9.45$ ), and White students at the PWI ( $M = 92.83, SD = 10.87$ ),  $p < .001$ . This indicates that African American students appear to have higher stress than White students regardless of their academic environment. Thus, both hypotheses were supported. Refer

to Table 1 for means and standard deviations for stress scores. Refer to Table 2 for ANOVA between subjects effects. Refer to Table 3 for LSD post-hoc analysis results.

Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviations for Stress*

---

Race and School	Mean	Std. Deviation
African Americans at PWI	92.83	10.87
African Americans at HBI	96.27	9.45
White at PWI	102.42	9.25

---

Table 2

*Between-subjects Effects for Stress*

---

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Race and School	2	1786.57	19.39	.000
Error	411	92.14		

---

Table 3

*Mean Difference, Standard Error, and Significance for Stress*

---

Race and School	Race and School	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.
African American at PWI	African American at HBI	-3.44*	1.45	.018
	White at PWI	9.59*	1.69	.000
African American at HBI	African American at PWI	3.44*	1.45	.018
	White at PWI	-6.15*	1.19	.000

---

\* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

The third hypothesis was that racism would be a significant predictor of stress for African American students at the PWI but not for African American students at the HBI. To test this hypothesis, a Pearson product moment correlation was used. A significant correlation was not found between overall stress and racism-related stress of African American students at the HBI, ( $r = -.111, p = .057$ ). A significant correlation was also not found between overall stress and racism-related stress of African American students at the PWI, ( $r = -.064, p = .654$ ). To determine if there were significant differences between the mean scores for race related stress of the two groups, an independent t-test was used to compare IRRS-B scores. Significant differences were not found,  $t(323) = -.350, p = .726$ . African American students at the PWI did not indicate having more stress related to racism than African American students at the HBI. Thus, the hypothesis was not supported.

The fourth hypothesis of this study was that a lack of social support would be a significant predictor of stress for African American students at the PWI but not at the HBI. To test this hypothesis, a Spearman rank correlation coefficient was used. A significant correlation was found between level of social support and stress for African American students at the PWI ( $r_s = .470, p = .001$ ). Refer to Table 4 for correlation results between social support and stress for African American students at the PWI. A significant correlation was also found between social support and stress for African American students at the HBI ( $r_s = .319, p < .001$ ). Refer to Table 5 for correlation results between level of support and stress for African American students at the HBI. These results indicate that social support was a significant predictor of stress for African American students at both the PWI and HBI. African American students at the PWI reported lower social support ( $M = 3.79$ ) than African American students at the HBI ( $M = 4.15$ ). Refer to Table 6 for means and standard deviations for level of support of African American students at

the HBI and PWI. An independent t test was then used to determine if there was a significant difference in the level of social support for African American students at the HBI and PWI. Significant differences were found between the students,  $t(326) = -2.16, p = .031$  where African American students at the PWI reported less social support than students at the HBI.

Table 4

*Spearman Rho for Level of Support and Stress for African American Students at the PWI*

		Level of Support	Stress
Level of Support	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.470**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.001
	N	53	51

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 5

*Spearman Rho for Level of Support and Stress for African American Students at the HBI*

		Level of Support	Stress
Level of Support	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.319**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	294	294

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 6

*Means and Standard Deviations for Level of Support*

Race and School	Mean	Std. Deviation
African Americans at PWI	3.79	1.166
African Americans at HBI	4.15	1.09

The final hypothesis of this study was that as stress level increases, GPA would decrease. This hypothesis was tested using a Pearson product moment correlation. The correlation between GPA and stress was significant ( $r = .162, p = .001$ ). The results indicate that

the higher the students' stress level, the lower their GPA; as high scores on the SSACS indicate lower stress, the correlation was positive in direction. Thus, the hypothesis was supported.

The GPA's of students were also analyzed. An ANOVA was used to determine if there were significant differences between African American students at the HBI, African American students at the PWI, and White students at the PWI. The results showed there was a significant difference in the mean scores of GPA's among students at the PWI and the HBI,  $F(2,386) = 16.86, p < .001$ . LSD post-hoc analyses indicated that there were significant differences between African American students at the PWI ( $M = 2.86, SD = .46$ ), and White students at the PWI ( $M = 3.28, SD = .53$ ),  $p < .001$ . There were also significant differences between African American students at the HBI ( $M = 2.93, SD = .46$ ), and White students at the PWI ( $M = 3.28, SD = .53$ ),  $p < .001$ . There were no significant differences between African American students at the PWI and the HBI, ( $p = .34$ ). Refer to Table 7 for means and standard deviations for GPA. Refer to Table 8 for ANOVA results for GPA. Refer to Table 9 for LSD results for GPA.

Table 7

*Means and Standard Deviations for GPA*

---

Race and School	Mean	Std. Deviation
African Americans at PWI	2.06	.47
African Americans at HBI	2.93	.46
White at PWI	3.27	.53

---

Table 8

*Between-subjects Effects for GPA*

---

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Race and School	2	3.77	16.86	.000
Error	386	.224		

---

Table 9

*Mean Difference, Standard Error, and Significance for GPA*

---

Race and School	Race and School	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.
African American at PWI	African American at HBI	-.07	.08	.336
	White at PWI	-.42*	.09	.000
African American at HBI	African American at PWI	.07	.08	.336
	White at PWI	-.34*	.06	.000

---

\*The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

Results from the present investigation provide support for the hypothesis that African American students at the PWI would experience more stress than African American students at the HBI and more than White students at the PWI. It was not found, however, that African American students at PWIs experience more stress related to racism than African American students at HBIs. Although the African American students at the HBIs are the majority on campus, they still have the stressor of being a minority in general and experiencing discrimination in society. Therefore, stress from race-related outside experiences may be also brought into their academic life.

On the other hand, it may suggest that African American students in predominantly White settings are not being treated significantly differently from students in predominantly Black settings. It may be that extra stressors African American students at PWIs are experiencing do not come so much from racial discrimination issues directly as much as from feeling isolated and uncomfortable in their surroundings. This could be an indicator that society is now more accepting of racial differences. It may also support the conclusions of Solórzano (2000), who found racism to be more subtle in academic than social settings.

African American students at the PWI indicated higher stress with regard to the factors of environment and social support, than White students at the PWI and African American students at the HBI. This is likely because African American students at a PWI are an obvious minority on campus and have relatively smaller support networks of other African American students to whom they can relate and on whom they can depend. However, African American students at the HBI also had significantly higher stress related to their college environment, where they are



the majority, than White students at the PWI. This suggests that African Americans in general may live with high levels of stress, compared with Whites, regardless of their academic setting. This notion is further supported by the fact that African Americans have higher blood pressure than Whites generally, and stress is known to be a risk factor for increased blood pressure (American Heart Association, 2005; National Institute of Health, 2005).

### *Limitations*

Several limitations to this study need to be acknowledged. The first and most salient to all such research, is that the data are based on self-report. Thus, while it is common practice, the data are likely to be somewhat skewed toward more positive poles. In terms of GPA, obtaining official student records was beyond the means of this study. However, it is not unreasonable to assume that such data more or less accurately reflects reality. Nonetheless, future research should obtain actual student record data if at all possible.

The small sample size of the African American population at the PWI compared to the African Americans at the HBI and White students at the PWI was a limitation of the study. A bigger sample would give more room for variance and perhaps different results.

Another limitation of the study was the regional locations of the schools. They were both located in the southeast United States. Different regional areas may present different results on measures of racism and social support. Areas where the African American population is higher outside of PWIs and nonetheless lower in the PWIs, may bring about different results. Also, only two schools were used, and while the results should be generalized to some degree, responses may have been affected by particular characteristics of the universities and/or the student populations. Indeed, it is impossible to know if the differences in overall GPA at the two schools is due to the HBI being a tougher school than the PWI, the White students at the PWI

performing better in general, or as mentioned above, there was some differential tendency towards accuracy of self-reported GPA.

Finally, the measurement of social support was also a limitation of the study. Social support was measured based on one question where the participants rated their satisfaction with their social support. A broader measure of social support may produce significantly different results.

### *Future Research*

The stressors that African Americans live with appear to be affecting their performance academically. The GPAs of African American students at the HBI and PWI were both lower than White students at the PWI. Experienced stress was inversely correlated with GPA; therefore, these findings were not surprising given that African American students had more stress than White students. Further research should be conducted to uncover other factors that might be predictors of the low GPAs and high attrition rate of African American students at PWIs. As African American students are increasingly enrolling in PWIs, their low graduation rate at these PWIs (e.g., Bennett & Yu, 2003; Gloria et al., 1999; United Negro College Fund, 2004) is becoming a vital issue because while these African Americans students are academically qualified to attend these universities, they are not performing at the same level as their White counterparts or African American counterparts at HBIs. Therefore, many African American students who have the potential to obtain degrees are leaving PWIs empty handed. Without these degrees, African Americans are less likely to obtain higher paying jobs in society and may continue to fall into the lower income brackets.

Parting from the findings of previous research (e.g., Cokley, 2000; Hutchinson, 2000), African American students in the current study did not have significantly higher GPAs at the

HBI compared to the PWI. This is difficult to interpret in light of past research. It may be that the HBI was a generally tougher school than the PWI, or that African American students at the HBI did not perform as well as White students at the PWI. It would be helpful to evaluate performance at a school with a more balanced racial composition to tease out this difference.

It would also be beneficial to evaluate the stress levels of White students who attend HBIs. On such a campus, White students are the minority, which is a very different situation from what many of them are likely used to. Although some may be from predominantly African American neighborhoods or have mostly African American friends, in US society White students are part of the majority culture in terms of many others' biased expectations. It may be that they experience higher stress levels than White students at PWIs and African American students at HBIs, possibly similar to that of African American students at PWIs. In this situation, a survey regarding race and discrimination for White students would need to be found or developed.

### *Conclusion*

As more African Americans are embracing the opportunity to now get the education that they were once denied, research on African American education is becoming increasingly important. More research will hopefully be done on African Americans in all ranges of academic settings, not just the college level. While the academic deficits for African American students do not start once they reach college, they often end there with students dropping out or failing. While the intelligence and potential of African American students are not inferior to White students, their grades in school, on average, are lower. The question is why and once the importance of this question is realized, it can begin to be answered and addressed.

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APPENDIX A  
Demographic Questionnaire

Directions: Please answer the following questions about yourself.

1. Gender:  
Male  
Female
  
2. Race:  
Caucasian (White)  
African American (Black)  
Other (*Please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Marital status:  
Single  
Married  
Divorced  
Widowed  
Separated
  
4. Are you currently attending a:  
Predominantly White University  
Predominantly African-American University
  
5. Academic Classification:  
Freshman  
Sophomore  
Junior  
Senior
  
6. Grade point average \_\_\_\_\_
  
7. Are you currently employed?  
Yes  
No  
If no, go to question 10
  
8. What is your current income?  
\$0-\$4,999  
\$5,000-\$9,999  
\$10,000-\$14,999

- \$15,000-\$19,999
- \$20,000 or above
- 9. How many hours a week do you work?
  - 0-10
  - 11-20
  - 21-30
  - 31-40
  - 41 or more
- 10. Are you solely responsible for financing your college education?
  - Yes
  - No
- 11. Are you partially responsible for financing your college education?
  - Yes
  - No
- 12. What percent of your college education is financed by loans, scholarships, or grants?
  - 0%-20%
  - 21%-40%
  - 41%-60%
  - 61%-80%
  - 81%-100%
- 13. How often do you worry about finances?
  - Never
  - Occasionally
  - Always
- 14. Are you involved in a significant relationship?
  - Yes
  - No
  - If no, go to question 17
- 15. Is your significant other currently employed or a full-time student?
  - Yes, employed
  - Yes, full-time student
  - Neither
  - Both
- 16. How much money does your partner make/receive per year?
  - \$0-\$9,999
  - \$10,000-\$14,999
  - \$15,000-\$19,999
  - \$20,000 or above
  - Don't know

17. What kind of building do you reside in while you are attending school?  
Dorm  
Sorority/Fraternity house  
Other on-campus housing (*Please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_  
Off-campus house with family  
Off-campus house alone  
Off-campus house with roommates
18. How seriously do you perceive conflicts with your roommates to be?  
Not serious  
Slightly serious  
Moderately serious  
Very serious  
Extremely serious
19. Are you a first-generation college student?  
Yes  
No
20. How much does your religion/faith/spirituality help you cope with stress?  
Not at all  
Slightly  
Somewhat  
Moderately  
Very much
21. What type of high school did you attend?  
Predominantly Caucasian (White)  
Predominantly African-American (Black)  
Equally mixed racially
22. What was your grade point average during high school?  
1.99 or below  
2.00-2.49  
2.50-2.99  
3.00-3.49  
3.50-4.00
23. In high school, you spent most of your time with:  
African-American (Black) students  
Caucasian (White) students  
Students of other races  
Equally mixed races
24. While in college, you spent most of your time with:

African-American (Black) students  
Caucasian (White) students  
Students of other races  
Equally mixed races

25. You \_\_\_\_\_ interact with African-American faculty outside of class time.  
Never  
Occasionally  
Frequently

26. You \_\_\_\_\_ interact with Caucasian faculty outside of class time.  
Never  
Occasionally  
Frequently

27. When problems arise, you first discuss them with:  
Family members  
Friends  
A significant other  
Faculty member  
You do not discuss them

28. How comfortable do you feel discussing problems with faculty or administrators at your college?  
Not at all  
Slightly  
Somewhat  
Moderately  
Very much

29. In general, how satisfied are you with your college?  
Not at all  
Slightly  
Somewhat  
Moderately  
Very much

30. How often do you experience problems related to your race?  
Never  
Rarely  
Sometimes  
Often  
Always

31. How often are you discriminated against because of your race?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

32. What is the racial makeup of the neighborhood in which you grew up?

- 100% Caucasian (White)
- Predominantly Caucasian (White)
- 100% African-American (Black)
- Predominantly African-American (Black)
- Racially balanced

33. How satisfied are you with the level of support you have?

- Not at all
- Slightly
- Somewhat
- Moderately
- Very much

Use the following directory to answer the next 9 questions. List all that apply.

- No one
- Family
- Significant other
- Friend
- Roommate
- Coworkers
- Professor/teacher/instructor
- Other (*Please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_

34. When you feel that you have been mistreated in some situation, who do you turn to for help with that problem? \_\_\_\_\_

35. When you have problems at school and/or work, who do you turn to for help with those problems? \_\_\_\_\_

36. When you have problems involving your parents, who do you turn to for help with those problems? \_\_\_\_\_

37. When you have problems involving your children, who do you turn to for help with those problems? \_\_\_\_\_

38. When you have problems with your significant other, who do you turn to for help with those problems? \_\_\_\_\_

39. When you have problems with your friends or roommates, who do you turn to for help with those problems? \_\_\_\_\_
40. When you have financial problems, who do you turn to for help with those problems? \_\_\_\_\_



APPENDIX B  
Stress Scale for American College Students (SSACS)

Read each statement carefully. Select the letter which best describes you.

- A Almost Never True
- B Seldom True
- C True About Half the Time
- D True Most of the Time
- E Almost Always True

1. I feel very comfortable on my college campus.
2. My professors have acted in a way that makes me feel that they are untrustworthy.
3. There are not many people like me on my campus.
4. I feel that I am able to cope with the environment on my college campus.
5. On one or more occasions, people have treated me in a way that was prejudice.
6. I have close friends and acquaintances that help me out.
7. I feel that my family is very supportive while I am in college.
8. I feel that my finances are sufficient while I am in college.
9. There are various groups on my campus that share my interests and beliefs.
10. On one or more occasions, I have been presented with assignments that I did not have the background to do.
11. My college has programs and systems in place that help me function in college.
12. I have been experiencing a lot of stress since being in college.
13. Since being in college, my financial resources cause me to feel a lot of stress.
14. I engage in interactions with people of other races on my college campus.
15. I feel that I must do well in my classes because of my race.
16. I am concerned about the impression that I make on my classmates.
17. I am concerned about the impression that I make on my professors
18. I feel that my professors are supportive.
19. I feel academically qualified to attend my college.
20. I feel as though my professors understand me.
21. I feel that my college helped me to do my best academically.
22. My professors are interested in my achievements.
23. I am satisfied with my opportunities for romantic relationships at my college.
24. There are plenty of opportunities for friendships at my college.
25. I feel pressure to talk and/or write a certain way at my college.
26. I am satisfied with my college environment.
27. I feel comfortable with my opportunities to interact with people of my own race.
28. I feel that faculty members are not concerned with whether I succeed.
29. Things are so bad at my college that I have considered leaving.

APPENDIX C  
Index of Race-Related Stress-Brief Version (IRRS-B)

Directions: Read each statement carefully. Select the response with best describes you.

- A This event never happened to me.
  - B This event happened, but did not bother me.
  - C This event happened & I was slightly upset.
  - D This event happened & I was upset.
  - E This event happened & I was extremely upset.
- 
1. You notice that crimes committed by White people tend to be romanticized, whereas the same crime committed by a Black person is portrayed as savagery, and the Black person who committed it, as an animal.
  2. Sales people/clerks did not say thank you or show other forms of courtesy and respect (e.g., put your things in a bag) when you shopped at some White/non-Black owned businesses.
  3. You notice that when Black people are killed by the police, the media informs the public of the victims' criminal record or negative information in their background, suggesting they got what they deserved.
  4. You have been threatened with physical violence by an individual or group of White/non-Blacks.
  5. You have observed that White kids who commit violent crimes are portrayed as "boys being boys," while Black kids who commit similar crimes are wild animals.
  6. You seldom hear or read anything positive about Black people on radio, TV, in newspapers, or history books.
  7. While shopping at a store the sales clerk assumed that you couldn't afford certain items (e.g., you were directed toward the items on sale).
  8. You were the victim of a crime and the police treated you as if you should just accept it as part of being Black.
  9. You were treated with less respect and courtesy than Whites and other non-Blacks while in a store, restaurant, or other business establishment.
  10. You were passed over for an important project although you were more qualified and competent than the White/non-Black person given the task.
  11. Whites/non-Blacks have stared at you as if you didn't belong in the same place with them; whether it was a restaurant, theater, or other place of business.
  12. You have observed the police treat White/non-Blacks with more respect and dignity than they do Blacks.
  13. You have been subjected to racist jokes by Whites/non-Blacks in positions of authority and you did not protest for fear they might have held it against you.
  14. While shopping at a store, or when attempting to make a purchase, you were ignored as if you were not a serious customer or didn't have any money.
  15. You have observed situations where other Blacks were treated harshly or unfairly by Whites/non-Blacks due to their race.
  16. You have heard reports of White people/non-Blacks who have committed crimes, and in an effort to cover up their deeds falsely reported that a Black man was responsible for the crime.

17. You notice that the media plays up those that cast Blacks in negative ways (child abusers, rapists, muggers, etc.), usually accompanied by a large picture of a Black person looking angry or disturbed.
18. You have heard racist remarks or comments about Black people spoken with impunity by White public officials or other influential people.
19. You have been given more work, or the most undesirable jobs at your place of employment while the White/non-Black of equal or less seniority and credentials is given less work, and more desirable tasks.
20. You have heard or seen other Black people express a desire to be White or to have White physical characteristics because they disliked being Black or thought it was ugly.
21. White people of other non-Blacks have treated you as if you were unintelligent and needed things explained to you slowly or numerous times.
22. You were refused an apartment or other housing; you suspect it was because you're Black.

## VITA

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### **Education**

East Tennessee State University (ETSU). 2003 to present. Graduation: 12/05.

Degree: Master of Arts, Major: Psychology. GPA = 3.48

Thesis: *Comparison of the Stress Levels and GPA of African American College Students at Historically Black Institutions and Predominantly White Institutions*. Defended, Fall 2005.

North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. 1999 to 2003.

Degree: Bachelor of Arts, Major: Psychology, GPA = 3.8, Summa Cum Laude

### **Honors, Awards, and Memberships**

Chancellor's Scholarship (1999-2003)

Tom Joyner Scholarship (2002 – 2003)

Graduate Assistantship (2003-2005)

National Dean's List – NC A&T SU (1999-2003)

Golden Key International Honor Society (2001 - present)

Collegiate All American – NC A&T SU (2000-2003)

NC A&T Honor Student (1999-2003)

Member of Psi Chi (2001-present)

Member of NC A&T Psychology Club (2001-2003)

Member of ETSU Psychology Club (2005)

Member of ETSU Graduate Student Association of Psychology (2004-2005)

### **Research Experience**

Thesis: *Comparison of the Stress Levels and GPA of African American College Students at Historically Black Institutions and Predominantly White Institutions*.

Project Management: organized small group of undergraduate research assistants and supervised their experiences in literature review and summarization, project methodology design, online data collection, data analysis, and presentation preparation.

Graduate Research Associate for the Applied Psychology Laboratory of ETSU. Director: Dr. Chris S. Dula.

Graduate Research Assistant, ETSU, Johnson City, TN (8/03-5/04)

Responsibilities included: observing and assisting in speech and temperament study in 21 month old infants, running control room video taping studies, preparing and organizing

control and study room, monitoring undergraduates during studies, attending weekly meetings to discuss relevant research and progress of project

### **Clinical Experience**

Steppenstone Youth Treatment Center. 2005.

Responsibilities included: monitoring adolescent sexual offenders during treatment; participation in administration of group therapy sessions; participation in treatment groups; in-room observation of family and individual therapy sessions; chart review; and writing private therapy notes.

Supervisor: Tony Cox, 423-257-6054

### **Work Experience**

Graduate Teaching Assistant, ETSU, Johnson City, TN (8/05-present)

Responsibilities included: Assisting Dr. Otto Zinser in class as needed; assisting students inside and outside of class with schoolwork; grading assignments (e.g., homework, quizzes, and tests); executive aide support, proctoring exams and lecturing classes\

Supervisor: Dr. Otto Zinser, 423-439-6657, zinsero@etsu.edu

Graduate Research Assistant, ETSU, Johnson City, TN (8/04-4/05)

Responsibilities included: executive aide support, preparing notebooks for Ph.D program implementation

Supervisor: Dr. Peggy Cantrell, 423-439-6660, cantrell@etsu.edu

Student Assistant, ETSU, Johnson City, TN (7/04-8/04)

Responsibilities included: monitoring and caring for infants, assisting infants in age appropriate activities, consulting with parents about children's progress and activities

Graduate Research Assistant, ETSU, Johnson City, TN (8/03-5/04)

Responsibilities included: observing and assisting in speech and temperament study in 21 month old infants, running control room video taping studies, preparing and organizing control and study room, monitoring undergraduates during studies, attending weekly meetings to discuss relevant research and progress of project

Supervisor: Dr. Wallace Dixon, 423-439-6656, dixonw@etsu.edu

Office Assistant, NC A&T SU, Greensboro, NC (8/99-4/03)

Responsibilities included: providing executive aide support for Mrs. Rose Alexander and other professors as needed; setting, reorganizing and maintaining alphabetical and chronological filing systems, assisting counselors as needed, assisting students as needed with registering for classes

Supervisor: Mrs. Rose Alexander, 336-324-7855, rosema@ncat.edu

### **Computer Skills**

Typing speed of 60 wpm, Proficient in Microsoft Word, Excel, Access, and PowerPoint; SPSS, General Internet Use

## **References**

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Other references available upon request