

YOU CAN'T TELL IT, LET ME TELL IT: MAKING SENSE OF BELONGING BY
EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS
AT A PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTION

by

MONIQUE K. PRICE

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Oakland University
Rochester, Michigan

Doctoral Advisory Committee:

Julia B. Smith, Ed.D., Chair
Jana Nidiffer, Ed.D., Co-chair
V. Thandi Sulé, Ph.D.
Robert Martin, Ph.D.

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This dissertation is dedicated in loving memory to my Grandparents, Ruth and Hubert Price, Sr., and my Daddy, Hubert Price, Jr. Although they are no longer physically here with me, I felt their support, encouragement, and presence throughout my doctoral journey. Additionally, I dedicate this dissertation to “The Boy” and “The Sugars”, I pray I have been an inspiration to you. You make my heart sing. Finally, to the students who entrusted me with their stories, I pray I have done well by you, I thank you for allowing me to share your experiences and amplify your voices. You are seen, you are heard, you are worthy.

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MoNique K. Price

ABSTRACT

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MONIQUE K. PRICE

Adviser: Julia B. Smith, Ed.D. and Jana Nidiffer, Ed.D.

African American students make up approximately 13.1% of all students enrolled in postsecondary institutions across the United States (Hanson, 2023). African American students overwhelming, approximately 68%, attend public institutions. Further, approximately, 72% of African American students are enrolled at 4-year institutions. African American students enrolled at these institutions face challenges that their peers who are not African American do not such as feelings of isolation, microaggressions, and less-than-welcoming campus climates. These factors often prevent African American students from fostering a sense of belonging to and on their campuses. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the theory of Double Consciousness as theoretical frameworks, this study sought to evaluate the sense of belonging of third-year undergraduate students enrolled at a Predominately White Institution (PWI). Further, my dissertation sought to uncover the effect, if any, student engagement had on developing sense of belonging for the study participants.

This study aimed to examine African American students' engagement in extracurricular activities that may foster their sense of belonging in PWI. Data was collected via a pre-interview survey, followed by seven 1-hour semi-structured interviews with 31 respondents.

This study identified four themes: Campus Climate, Student Engagement, Belonging, and Why Am I Still Here. The findings showed that race had a significant impact on the participants' sense of belonging and the activities they were able to engage in on campus. Despite the challenges they faced, the participants showed resilience and motivation to persist. The study concludes with implications for higher education professionals and recommendations for future studies.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Benefit of Higher Education

Horace Mann, a 19th-century education reformer and public education advocate, contended that education, “beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery” (Mann, 1848, as cited in Education and Social Inequity, n.d.). Many decades later, education is still viewed as the “great equalizer.” Allen et al. (2018) stated, “...the pursuit of a college education is influenced by the anticipated returns on investment, including wealth accumulation, better employment prospects, improved lifestyle and well-being, and enhanced civic engagement” (p. 43). In essence, pursuing a college education and obtaining a college degree benefits those who have access to its myriad benefits. Those benefits include but are not limited to: higher incomes, greater job satisfaction, and, non-economic benefits such as healthier eating habits and regularly participating in civic activities such as voting (Perna, 2005).

The concept of education as an equalizer has been particularly true in the African American community, where education has been viewed as a means to upward mobility. In fact, it can be traced back to the 1800s when two prominent figures of the African American community, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B DuBois, debated what type of education would pull the “Negro” from the lower rungs of society. The debate between Washington and DuBois, as described by Johnson and Watson (2004), was a “philosophical rivalry” (p. 65). Washington and DuBois would be “on the same side

fighting for the same purpose progress and uplifting of the Black race” (Johnson & Watson, 2004, 65). However, the means to achieve that goal was quite another matter.

Their philosophical rivalry was well-publicized and both men “garnered ample attention from many segments of the American intelligence” (Johnson & Watson, 2004, p. 65). The root of their differences in approach may have been their education.

Washington had been educated at Hampton Institute, whose educational focus (at least at that time) had been vocational. DuBois, on the other hand, had been educated in the liberal arts at Harvard College; later becoming the first African American to earn a PhD from the college. Washington believed that if Blacks were going to be successful, they needed to be vocationally trained. However, DuBois espoused that “the only way that African Americans could advance was through the leadership of the upper class, thus the term talented tenth was adopted” (Johnson & Watson, 2004. p. 69). Simply put, DuBois asserted that the best and brightest, the doctors and lawyers, for example, would uplift the rest of the Black race by providing intellectual leadership and direction (Johnson & Watson, 2004). DuBois said of the matter: “I believed in the higher education of a Talented Tenth who through their knowledge of modern culture could guide the American Negro into a higher civilization. I knew that without this the Negro would have to accept white leadership...” (Johnson and Watson, 2004. p. 69). Washington and DuBois’ differences in belief in some ways remain a question unanswered. Perhaps there is no right or wrong answer to their debate. One fancied a more hands-on approach the other a more intellectual methodology. This discussion that began in the late 1800s could still be had today and neither side would be wrong. However, both believed that *education* was key.

How students are educated while under the care of higher education professionals may vary from campus to campus. However, many researchers agree that education goes far beyond what students learn from lectures, labs, and textbooks (c.f., Kuh, 2008, Patton, et al, 2011). What students learn while enrolled in college is certainly at least partly taught in the lecture hall and in the textbooks they read. However, the literature suggests, and I contend, that learning also occurs in the offices of the staff members with whom students interact, in the residence halls, in the dining facilities, and in the organizations to which they belong.

Student engagement, persistence, and retention are broadly researched topics in higher education. Recently researchers have begun to discuss more extensively students' sense of belonging, the feeling of being welcomed, valued, and respected, as a critical component of fostering positive college experiences for, in particular, students of color (c.f., Allen 1992, Strayhorn 2012). To better understand the possible interconnectedness between student engagement, sense of belonging, and persistence for African American students enrolled at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). Therefore, I created this dissertation to explore the experiences of African American students enrolled at a PWI. I sought to uncover if those experiences included engagement in activities outside of the classroom (involvement) and if those activities assisted in the development of their sense of belonging and contributed to their persistence.

Statement of the Problem

According to the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES), there were 19.8 million students enrolled at degree-granting postsecondary institutions in 2017 (Snyder, de Brey & Dillow, 2019). This same report indicated that between 1976 and 2017 there

was a significant increase in the number of Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander and Black students enrolled at these institutions. For example, the report stated, “the percentage of Black students increased from 10 percent in 1976 to 14 percent in 2017, but the 2017 percentage reflects a decrease since 2011, when Black students made up 15 percent of all enrolled U.S.” (p. 209). According to the same NCES report, White students constituted 56 percent of all undergraduate students enrolled in 2017, which was a sizeable decrease from 84 percent indicated in the 1976 report. Conversely, the percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander students rose from just 2 percent to 7 percent during the same period. Strikingly, the largest increase was in the percentage of Hispanic students enrolled in postsecondary institutions between the fall of 1976 and the fall of 2017. During this period Hispanic student enrollment increased from 4 percent to 19 percent of all students in enrolled in these institution types.

A closer examination of the national data regarding higher education provides an overview of the challenges higher education professionals face in admitting, retaining, and graduating today’s college students. For example, Museus and Quaye (2009), citing the previous work of Berkner et al., (2002) and Tinto (1993), affirmed that “Over half of all students who enter higher education will fail to complete a bachelor’s degree within six years” (p. 67). Further analysis of the research indicated that the graduation rates of African American students enrolled at PWIs were even more disheartening. This point was validated by Davis et al. (2004), who asserted that “In predominantly white institutions, 70% of black students do not complete baccalaureate education ...” (p. 421). The most recent study conducted by the National Center of Education Statistics (2019) found that in 2011 Black students enrolled at 4-year institutions graduated at a rate of

approximately 40 percent. These daunting statistics present unique challenges for higher education practitioners. For example, how we do address that sixty percent of Black students enrolled in postsecondary education are the most vulnerable to incompleteness?

Theoretical Framework

Involvement

For this dissertation, the idea of “involvement” means students’ involvement in activities or organizations rather inside or outside of the classroom that cultivate their connection to the greater campus community. That connection to the college/university, in theory, creates a sense of belonging. Alexander Astin first described what he called student involvement in 1984 as “a construct that should not be either mysterious or esoteric” (p. 518). He contended that student involvement was the time students spend shaping their academic experience. Further, he argued that the student who was extremely involved in their academic experience spent significant time with their studies as well as actively participating in student organizations and interacting with their social group(s) and faculty. On the other hand, he posited that students who were less or not involved in their academic experience neglectful of their studies, did not participate in student organizations, and had little to no contact with peers and/or members of the faculty (p. 518).

In his 1984 work, Astin inferred his belief that involvement was an “active” and “behavioral” expression (p. 519). He believed it was more about what the student does rather than how the student feels or thinks about their college involvement. This theory of involvement consisted of five propositions:

1. Involvement refers to investing in “highly generalized (the student experience) or highly specific (preparing for a chemistry examination)” objects (p. 519).
2. Despite the object involvement is different for each student and the same student demonstrates varying levels of involvement in various objects at differing times in their development. Involvement can be evaluated both quantitatively and qualitatively. For example, a student’s academic performance can be measured quantitatively by examining how many hours they spent weekly studying for a test.
3. The quantity and quality of any educational program precisely influences the degree of student learning and individual growth.
4. Policy and practice are proven effective based on their ability to intensify student involvement.

He concluded that the last two hypotheses were key to designing effective educational programs. Further, he urged that more research be conducted to test these theories.

While Astin’s (1984) theories tended to focus on involvement in academics, work on this theory extended the scope beyond the classroom. George Kuh (1993) sought to answer these questions: “(a) What did students learn from their experiences outside the classroom? (b) In what ways have they changed since starting college? and (c) Do the outcomes considered by students to be important differ by type of institution attended and student background characteristics?” (p. 277). He had hoped to uncover the influence out-of-classroom experiences had on student outcomes, in particular, those considered by students to be of most importance. In this study, he used the voices of the students to

unearth the answers to these questions. In short, he asked them to reflect on their academic journeys to reveal what activities students were participating in when not in class and how those activities aided positive academic outcomes.

Kuh (1993) derived four conclusions regarding student learning and personal development. He reasoned that participation in activities outside of the classroom contributed significantly to student learning and personal development. However, he noted that little attention had been paid to this important factor even though students found their experiences outside of the classroom meaningful and contributed a great deal of their academic success to those experiences (p. 300). Second, he determined that acquiring knowledge seemed to be primarily linked to activities within the classroom i.e., assignments, tests, etc. The third conclusion of the study concerned background characteristics. Interestingly, he noted that although background characteristics such as age and ethnicity were important, they did not seem to be related to student learning and personal development outcomes. Lastly regarding institutional type Kuh (1993) found that larger institutions did not necessarily hold an advantage when it relates to student learning and personal development. In general, Kuh focused more on the end goal of getting, a college degree, than the characteristics of a student's college experience. This difference in concerns can be particularly important for African American students, which is discussed further in the chapter when addressing Critical Race Theory.

Persistence

In my study, the idea of “persistence” means the students' ability to remain enrolled at the institution through graduation. The students in my study had persisted, at the time of the interview, through their third year at the university. The collaborative

work of Vincent Tinto and John Cullen (1973) established a theoretical model of attrition and persistence. Two years later, in 1975, Tinto integrated Arnold Van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage theory, which in turn had incorporated Emile Durkheim's (1953) theories of suicide and departure to develop his theory/model. Durkheim asserted, in part, that suicide was rooted in one's inability to integrate into their community. Spady (1970) then was the first sociologist to relate Durkheim's theories of suicide to the experience of dropping out. The development of Tinto's theory was built on these connections.

Tinto's (1975) theory focused on four-year college students and suggested that those students came to campus with certain hopes and goals. Tinto postulated that student outcomes such as graduation were influenced by the student's ability to integrate into the campus community. For example, a student's ability to foster a relationship with a faculty member, according to Tinto, could influence the student's persistence. In general, his theory argued that there were many factors to consider when examining students' persistence; of those factors, he suggested that examining the correlation between the student's race and their persistence should be further examined.

Vincent Tinto's extensive studies exploring student retention will establish the foundation for my pre-dissertation view that student persistence is directly impacted by what Tinto first described in his 1975 model as "academic and social integration." Tinto, in short, measured a student's academic integration by how well they performed academically (test scores, GPA, etc.) and measured social integration by their involvement in activities outside of the classroom (student organizations, learning communities, interacting with peer groups).

Sense of Belonging

In this dissertation study, a person's sense of belonging means feeling welcomed, respected, supported, and valued by the campus community. This idea was articulated in the middle of the last century by Abraham Maslow (1943). Maslow (1970) argued that after the "physiological" and "safety" needs were met the needs of "belongingness and love" would surface and become the "center" (p. 43). He contended that one would become acutely aware of their lack of a social circle, family, peers, etc. Further, one would long for relationships with people and would make every effort to create them. Maslow argued that one would feel considerable isolation and rejection during the periods when belongingness and love needs are unmet (p. 43).

Maslow (1970) noted that there was little research on belongingness even though the concept was a universal concept popularized in popular culture such as plays. He provided the following as an example: "we know in a general way the destructive effects on children of moving too often...; of being without roots, or of despising one's roots..." (p. 43). Yet, he noted, society tended to downplay the significance of one's neighborhood, one's family, one's social circle, etc. Maslow argued that humans retained "our deeply animal tendency to herd, to flock, to belong" (p. 44). It is the need to belong, he argued, that if it is to endure any effective society must satisfy.

Researchers have dissected, reevaluated, and built upon Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory since its inception in 1943 in an effort to apply his concept of belongingness to students' persistence and to evaluate if there is any correlation between persistence and sense of belonging. The topic of sense of belonging has been examined by researchers such as Hurtado and Carter (1997), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) to name a few.

In recent years Terrell Strayhorn has emerged as a leading scholar on sense of belonging. Strayhorn has written extensively on the matter and its impact on the experiences of college students and in particular those of African American students. His published work includes a large collection of journal articles and a 2012 book entitled *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students*. Strayhorn framed sense of belonging “as a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). His definition specifically relates to college students' perceptions of feeling supported by, connected to, and valued by the campus community. Five pages later, he illustrated another definition, stating that sense of belonging “refers to the students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class” (p. 8). Feeling welcomed, valued and/or respected is assessed and internalized by the student and in turn often elicits affective reactions or behaviors.

Strayhorn (2012) accurately noted that there is some discussion, and even some disagreement, on the appropriate definition of sense of belonging. He asserted that it “is one term with many meanings” (p. 8). For example, Thomas et al. (2014) defined sense of belonging as “... the extent to which a student perceives himself/herself to be a welcomed, valued, and respected member of the school community” (p. 557). Sense of belonging can be considered a give-and-take relationship (Strayhorn, 2012). Members of this type of relationship benefit mutually. Strayhorn (2012) described this process as the “I am we and we are each” experience (p. 3). Each member of the group (i.e. campus

community) believes that he/she matters to other members of the group and that their needs will be met by committing to one another.

Strayhorn (2012) pointed out that this type of relationship occurs under ideal circumstances. Perceived racial inequity and hostilities are often indicators of an unwelcoming campus climate and are frequently the causes of African American students leaving their college campuses. Additionally, African American students more frequently rate the climate on their campuses lower than their White cohorts. A positive climate, according to Thomas et al. (2014): is “evidenced by the academic, social and financial support provided to the students who are attending” (p. 558). Citing a 2005 study conducted by Jacoby and Garland, Strayhorn (2012) asserted that “students who do not have a sense of belonging complain that their college experience is like ‘stopping by the mall’ to get what they need on the way to somewhere else” (p. 2). In an earlier article, Strayhorn (2008) concluded that the campus climate plays an important role in “sustaining sense of belonging on campus” (p. 507). The overall college experience can be improved by participation in “out-of-class” organizations, according to Thomas et al. (2014). Additionally, their work concluded that there is a direct correlation between on-campus involvement and a sense of belonging which will be further discussed later in this paper.

In his review of the literature, Strayhorn (2012) provided what he describes as seven core elements of sense of belonging:

1. Sense of belonging is a basic human need.
2. Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior.

3. Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance.
4. Sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering.
5. Social identities intersect and affect college students' sense of belonging.
6. Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes.
7. Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change. (pp. 18-23)

He implied that these are essentially the fundamental building blocks of sense of belonging. However, he did not explicitly indicate if the seven core elements must be achieved in concert with one another or separately for sense of belonging to be achieved.

Researchers have concluded that the existence of sense of belonging increases interest and commitment to daily activities (c.f., Weiss, 1973, Strayhorn 2012).

Conversely, the lack of sense of belonging lessens the interest and commitment to those same pursuits i.e. studying, attending class, etc. (c.f., Deci & Ryan, 2000, Strayhorn 2012). Strayhorn (2012) argued that a student's development can be impaired in the absence of sense of belonging (p. 9). In sum, to succeed students must feel welcomed, valued, respected, and supported.

Critical Race Theory

Examining the experience of African American students in the context of a Predominately White Institution is best done with a theoretical lens that acknowledges racism and places the experience of African Americans at the center of the analysis.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is such a lens.

The first tenet of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is that racism in America is normalized. That is to say that racism is so ingrained in the lives of Americans that is

often unrecognizable and thus difficult to eliminate. This type of “normal” racism includes less overt displays of prejudice like microaggressions i.e., expecting the Black student in class to represent all Black students in classroom discussions. Viewing racism, in all of its forms and manifestations, through the lens of CRT allows the observer to see the inequities and social injustices that surround them despite the diversity policies and practices promoted by their institutions. (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009)

Rejecting the notions of “We do not see color” or “colorblindness” is the second tenant of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Colorblindness allows for the false impression that racial equality exists in institutions and only tackles the most overt type of injustice. Citing a 2007 article by Harper and Patton, Harper et al. (2009) stated that colorblindness: “creates a lens through which the existence of race can be denied and the privileges of Whiteness can be maintained without personal accountability” (p. 391). In short, colorblindness allows one to look away from racism as a social construct and ignore the ways in which being White perpetuates privilege and maintains the power structure of the majority group.

CRT allows the voices and the “lived experiences” of people of color to be heard. The voices are recognized, legitimized, and appreciated when viewed through the lens of Critical Race Theory. This is the third tenant of Critical Race Theory. According to Patton, Harper, and Wooden (2009): “CRT uses counternarratives as a way to highlight discrimination, offer racially different interpretations of policy, and challenge the universality of assumptions made about people of color” (p. 391). Critical Race Theorists, by substantiating these voices, can contextualize racism and then go about eradicating it.

The fourth tenant of CRT accepts the concept of interest-convergence. That is to say that the racial progress of African Americans is deemed acceptable by Whites when it furthers their own self-interests. Authors in their use of CRT contend that the chief benefactors of the legislative actions taken to procure civil rights were Whites, and civil rights legislation and other “efforts to eradicate racism have produced minimal results due to the insufficient convergence of interests by both white elites and African Americans” (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009, p. 391). Thus, racism endures and remains normal.

The tendency to create revisionist history, according to Harper, Patton, and Wooden (2009), is another tenet of Critical Race Theory. Revisionist history, to put it plainly, amends events of the past with ones that are more appealing to Whites. For example, prominently displaying the Confederate Flag in public squares as a symbol of southern heritage/pride while ignoring the discomfort it may cause to a population of Americans who see it as a reminder of their enslaved ancestors. CRT suggests that “American history be closely scrutinized and reinterpreted as opposed to being accepted as face value and truth” (p. 391-392). It compels truth-seekers to view history critically, differently, and less superficially even if it makes some people uncomfortable.

CRT depends on what Harper et al. (2009) call “Racial Realists” (p. 392). Racial Realists not only accept racism as an idea created and accepted by society but that racism is also the way and means by which the benefits of the racist power structure are allocated. Racial realism approaches racism as eternal while continuing to establish ways to advance the cause of those who have been excluded and traditionally left out.

Lastly, three central philosophies dwell within the majority ethos that must be repeatedly confronted: “blindness to race will eliminate racism; racism is a matter of individuals, not systems;” and, “one can fight racism without paying attention to sexism, homophobia ... and other forms of oppression or injustice” (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009, 392). These central philosophies are the foundation for the criticism of meritocracy made by Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT maintains that meritocracy upholds White supremacy and that in doing so minority voices are left unheard.

Student Engagement and Critical Race Theory

Why do some students of color find numerous activities on their campus designed to get them more involved unappealing? CRT would seek to answer this question by first acknowledging that previous research has been conducted without considering race, in a sense applying colorblindness. As surveys lack the ability to fully describe the interactions of students in and out of their classrooms, seeking to hear the voices of students could illuminate the answer to why many of them are not interested in becoming involved (Patton, Harper, & Harris, 2015, p. 209)

Another way the tenet of colorblindness relates to student engagement has to do with high-impact practices. More precisely, it concerns the issue of who decides what a high-impact practice is for students of color. According to Patton et al. (2015): While many researchers have repeatedly posed similar questions about how students spend their time, less attention has been devoted to exploring their engagement in a different set of experiences that may have a higher impact on their learning, sense of belonging, persistence, and rates of degree completion (p. 209). However, the authors contended that other experiences like being called a racial slur are both educational and a

high-impact experience as they compel students of color to face the often-harsh actualities of racism. Patton, Harper, and Harris (2015) argued that these types of experiences have more profound impacts on students of color than participating in a high-impact practice like having an internship (p. 210).

Lastly, CRT asks who decides what type of engagement is deemed “educationally purposeful” (Patton et al., 2015, p. 210). Patton et al. (2015) shined a light on the fact that a great number of the most cited student engagement researchers are/were White, and they have established the long-standing requisite educationally purposeful activities for college students. The authors argued that these “researchers are unlikely familiar with particular activities and practices in which minoritized students are engaged that bolster their sense of belonging and keep them (and their same-race peers) engaged and retained” (Patton, et al., 2015, p. 210). They took umbrage with student surveys for their inability to fully capture the voices of African American students. Further, they argued that surveys fail to effectively assess “peer pedagogies.” Peer pedagogies, as defined by Patton et al., are opportunities for students of color to teach their peers about the racial climates of their campuses, share their experiences, and the skills they have acquired to persist. Further, they contended that the obligation to teach Whites of their Blackness often inhibits African American students from being engaged in prescribed high-impact activities on their college campuses.

One of the tenets of CRT is storytelling. This study sought to tell the stories of the African American students who participated in it. These voices are often unheard and unappreciated in higher education and it is critical for a better understanding of their lived experiences to amplify them. Additionally, CRT was used to further understand what, if

any, activities the study participants felt added value to their college experiences and in turn fostered their sense of belonging on campus.

Double Consciousness

The theory of Double Consciousness has been written about, reevaluated, and analyzed since W.E.B DuBois first wrote about it in, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). He wrote:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world--a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 3)

From this passage the term Double Consciousness sprang forth. DuBois described the two identities African Americans perceive themselves as possessing. These two identities often clash with one another. Cuyjet et al. (2011) explained it as “the psychosocial complexity of Blacks living in the United States ... where one exists in two worlds (a Black world and White world)” (p. 219). The term has roots within psychology and transcendental literature. Affirming DuBois’ concept of “two-ness,” Schaefer (2008) described Burke’s argument that, “In the psychological literature, the idea of double

consciousness, made popular by several cases of split personality highlighted in Harper's magazine, made clear that the two selves were not only distinct but fundamentally opposed to each other" (p. 412). As Whites do not see themselves racially, even if aware of the privilege of their whiteness, they do not carry the burden of double consciousness.

Through the lenses of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Double Consciousness I used what is known about student engagement, student persistence, and sense of belonging writ large to inform and examine my research question: What has been your experience as an African American student at a Midwestern Predominately White Institution (PWI)?

Research Focus

The theories of Astin (1984), Tinto (1973, 1975, 1993), and Kuh (1991, 1995, 2008) provided a sound foundation for student engagement and persistence. Maslow (1943, 1970) laid the groundwork for what is now more commonly known as sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2012) has, in recent years, worked to more accurately define what sense of belonging means for and to students of color. However, what remains to be known is how does the African American college student reconcile their "two-ness" in spaces not created for or by them enthusiastically participate in activities touted at ensuring their persistence and how does the African American college student in these same spaces, which are often less than welcoming to students of color, establish a sense of belonging? I have used Critical Race Theory and Double Consciousness to examine my questions:

- In what ways does student engagement and sense of belonging shape the experiences of African American students at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs)?
- What influences does student engagement and sense of belonging have on those students' retention and persistence?

Using these lenses will allow me to challenge current theories on student engagement as they most often do not consider race or racism. Additionally, Double Consciousness will allow me to explore how African American students move in and out of spaces, college campuses, in their two-ness, and how this may affect their sense of belonging.

My dissertation research examined the ways and means, if any, by which African American students engage in meaningful activities outside of the classroom, on Predominantly White campuses, that foster sense of belonging; and, the connectedness between sense of belonging and their persistence.

Significance

Why is student engagement in general, but particularly the engagement of African American students, so important? African American student engagement is important because the research indicates that without it, this group of students is less likely to persist to graduation—this is especially true at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). This assertion is illustrated by Davis et al. (2004) in “A Fly in the Buttermilk,” who argued that “In predominantly white institutions, 70% of black students do not complete baccalaureate education compared to 20% of those from historically black institutions” (p. 421). Further, they indicated that the research demonstrates PWIs are not particularly hospitable to students of color, which may affect those students' persistence through

graduation (p. 421). Based on these findings, African American students milling about the campuses of PWIs must be actively engaged in out-of-classroom activities in a concerted effort to succeed academically and socially on these campuses.

There is a great deal of research available on student engagement, a wealth of information regarding student success outcomes for students who participate in out-of-classroom activities, and an abundance of research on these factors as they pertain to African American students. However, there have been few studies focused on sense of belonging for African American students at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). Further, there is no single definition of sense of belonging. Therefore, this investigation will seek to more narrowly define sense of belonging; focus solely on African American students at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs); and, more clearly demonstrate that sense of belonging and student engagement are deeply connected and are particularly significant to enhancing the lived experiences of African American students enrolled at PWIs.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This dissertation examined the ways in which African American students engage in activities inside and outside of the classroom at a Predominately White Institution (PWI). I hope to reveal how these activities foster sense of belonging and the relationship between a sense of belonging and persistence.

Foundational Research on Student Engagement

For my research, I will use the definition of student engagement as: “participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes” Harper and Quaye (2009, p. 2-3). Considered the preeminent scholars on the topic, Astin’s and Kuh’s research established that student engagement can positively influence student outcomes. Researchers such as Alexander Astin (1984) and George D. Kuh (1993, 1995, 2005) have written extensively on student engagement.

In his 1984 work, Astin stated his belief that involvement was an “active” and “behavioral” expression (p. 519). He believed it was more about what the student does versus how the student feels or thinks about their college involvement. Growing frustration with those in the academy, administrators and faculty alike, to focus solely on the “input” (policies and programs) and the “output” (grade point averages, test scores, etc.) of student achievement prompted Astin (1984) to develop a model of student

involvement. He contended that an instrument was needed to attempt to clarify how educational programs affected student achievement (pp. 519-520).

Student involvement can be displayed itself in many forms i.e. immersion in studies and interaction with faculty and staff (Astin, 1984). In more detail, Astin (1984) outlined these activities in the following categories: “place of residence, honors programs, academic involvement, student-faculty interaction, athletic involvement, involvement in Student Government” (pp. 524-526). He concluded that student outcomes such as higher grade point averages and student development were positively affected by the student’s level of involvement in any or all of the aforementioned categories.

To further examine student involvement Astin (1984) suggested future research on the following subjects: “different forms of involvement, quality versus quantity, involvement and developmental outcomes, the role of peer groups, and attribution and locus control” (p. 527-528). Of these, involvement and developmental outcomes are of particular interest as Astin (1984) hypothesized that individual student characteristics such as race should be examined to determine if involvement and in what forms produced similar outcomes for different student groups/sub-groups (p. 527).

Kuh

In a study that began in 1989, George Kuh (1993) hoped to uncover the influence out-of-classroom experiences had on student outcomes, in particular, those considered by students to be of most import. In the study he used the voices of the 149 students, he interviewed, to answer the aforementioned questions. Using their voices, he asked them to reflect upon their academic journeys to reveal what activities students were

participating in when not in class and how those activities aided positive academic outcomes.

Kuh (1993) drew four conclusions regarding student learning and personal development. He reasoned that participation in activities outside of the classroom contributed significantly to student learning and personal development. Although students had found their experiences outside of the classroom meaningful and had contributed a great deal of their academic success to those experiences, Kuh (1993), noted that not much attention had been this important factor (p. 300).

Second, Kuh (1993), determined that acquiring knowledge seemed to be primarily linked to activities within the classroom i.e., assignments, tests, etc. However, he noted that the opportunity to “test” what is learned inside the classroom occurred outside of the classroom (p. 301).

The third conclusion of Kuh’s study was regarding background characteristics. He asserted that “It is reassuring to know that the benefits associated with attending college reported by “new majority students” (i.e., students of color and those who are over the age of 23, attend college part-time, live off campus, have families, or work more than 20 hours a week...did not differ from those of traditional age and white students” (1993, p. 301).’ The sole dissimilarity of this conclusion was concerning gender. He stated that due to the nature of college campuses, female students felt less empowered than their male counterparts and therefore were less encouraged to apply what they had learned in the classroom to their everyday interactions.

In the conclusion of his study, Kuh (1993), called on researchers to further examine the potential outcomes out-of-classroom experiences may have on student

learning and personal development (p. 301). Intriguingly, other studies contradict his claim that what he called the “new majority” i.e. students of color experience similar advantages from out-of-classroom endeavors as their white counterparts.

Kuh followed up the study published in 1993 in 1995. The purpose of this study was to find the answers to two pressing research questions, in short, what (activities, occasions, and people) did students credit with their development? And, do these kinds of activities outside of the classroom have different consequences when institutional type and student characteristics are taken into consideration (p. 125)?

Kuh (1995) outlined four conclusions in his follow-up study concerning the association between student learning and personal development and activities outside of the classroom. He first concluded that many types of activities outside of the classroom have the ability to shape the academic growth and individual development of students. He noted that “most participants in this study viewed their life outside the classroom as the “real world” laboratory” (p. 145). Additionally, he stated that the activities that required continued attempts to accomplish and required interaction from diverse groups of people i.e., faculty and peers were among the most profound experiences for students. Kuh was careful to note, however, that some activities outside of the classroom were “more frequently associated with changes in some areas and not others” (p. 146). For example, peers were categorized as the most influential factor in the areas of Humanitarianism, Interpersonal Competence, and Cognitive Complexity, particularly when the age of the student and living arrangements were taken into consideration. However, some peer-related activities such as watching television excessively and drinking were not precursors related to transformations.

In 2008, Kuh outlined what he deemed “High-Impact Educational Practices” (HIPs). He crafted these practices in response to a question, he says, he had been asked repeatedly: “what is one thing we can do to enhance student engagement and increase student success?” (p. 21). He purported that students should be allowed to take part in two HIPs. Further, he stated that one HIP should be within the student’s first year and one later in the student’s academic career in their major. A brief description of the recommended HIPs: first-year seminars; common intellectual experiences; learning communities; writing-intensive courses; collaborative assignments and projects; undergraduate research; diversity/global learning; service learning, community-based learning; internships; and, capstone courses and projects, are provided in paragraphs to follow.

First-year seminars are nearly commonplace on college campuses at present. These seminars, according to Kuh, allow small groups of students to work with faculty and staff regularly. High-quality first-year seminars that stress critical thinking, are writing-intensive, and encourage students to work collaboratively among other activities that aid in student development.

Kuh (2008) was an advocate for what is now widely known as general education programs/courses or what he called Common Intellectual Experiences. He theorized that students who participated in these types of experiences - by offering comprehensive subject matter - were afforded a variety of curricular and extra-curricular experiences. Learning communities, according to Kuh, are those spaces in which students are allowed to ponder the “big questions outside of the classroom.”. Learning communities encourage

groups of students to work closely with faculty on two or more courses that are commonly linked by subject area or readings related to a specific topic.

Kuh (2008) recommended writing-intensive courses as a High-Impact Practices (HIPs). Many colleges and universities now include writing-intensive courses in their general education programs. Writing-intensive courses, according to Kuh (2008), require students to repeatedly create and revise written works to present them to different audiences across curriculums.

Collaborative Assignments or Projects i.e., working in groups or teams is thought to improve problem-solving skills by aligning students with students from backgrounds different from their own. Working collaboratively is thought to accomplish this goal by requiring students to empathetically listen to the other members of their group (Kuh, 2008). Undergraduate Research, also one of the High-Impact Practices (HIPs), allows undergraduate students to become involved in academic research and investigation early in their college career. According to Kuh (2008): “The goal is to involve students with actively contested questions, empirical observation, cutting-edge technologies, and the sense of excitement that comes from working to answer important questions.”. Students in all subjects across campuses are encouraged to participate in this HIPs. Many colleges across the United States now include Diversity/Global Learning, which are HIPs, in their general education programs. Diversity/Global Learning courses often explore cultures outside of the United States and social justice issues regarding race, gender, and ethnicity within the US context (Kuh, 2008).

Service learning or community-based learning, as described by Kuh (2008), are those in which students work in partnership with the community. An example of this type

of experience is a student group working with a non-profit like the American Red Cross on a local blood drive. The anticipated outcome of this HIPs is to afford students the opportunity to put into practice what they have learned in the classroom (Kuh, 2008). It is putting the notion of “paying it forward” into action. Allowing students to work in their desired career field under the supervision of a faculty member more commonly known as an internship is another of Kuh’s (2008) High-Impact Practices (HIPs). The primary benefit of this type of learning experience is that students are given the opportunity to learn directly from ~~industry~~ professionals in fields outside of education (Kuh, 2008).

Lastly, Capstone Courses and Projects are defined by Kuh (2008) as those types of projects, usually in the student’s senior year, “that integrates and applies what they’ve learned.”. The resulting project might take shape in the form of an exhibition or performance or final paper or in a collection of written documents.

The research of both Astin and Kuh has been examined and re-examined by researchers such as Harper (2007, 2009); Museus and Quaye (2009); and Patton, Bridges and Flowers (2011). These researchers expanded and modified the models of engagement they presented in their seminal studies. Contemporary research, in particular, has placed a significant emphasis on students of color.

Most of the literature available on African American student engagement found that this student group often experiences feelings of isolation, marginalization, and exclusion on Predominately White Institutions (Patton et al., 2011, p. 114). These experiences are simultaneously occurring while these students are attempting to acclimate themselves to their new academic and social surroundings. It is imperative that African

American students find a support system or systems to rely on to assist them along the way.

Based on the literature, understanding that the work of Astin (1984) and Kuh (1991, 1993, 1995) are the foundation for the overarching concept of student engagement, I examined the most widely discussed types of student engagement activities with a specific emphasis on those activities most participated in by African American students at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). I have categorized the activities by the following types: fraternities and sororities, specifically Black Greek Letter Organizations; student organizations; peer-to-peer interaction(s); and, faculty-student relationships.

Types of Engagement

Black Greek Letter Organizations

Historically for African American undergraduate students, joining a sorority or fraternity, many of which are specifically Black Greek Letter Organization, has been the most popular out-of-classroom activity (Harper, 2007). These organizations are most often the first means by which students of color see an opportunity to become involved on campus (Patton et al., 2011). According to Patton et al. (2011), “Black students often seek support and networks such as the Black student union, Black Culture centers, or Black Greek Letter Organizations” (p. 115). Similarly, Harper (2007) argued, “sororities and fraternities are among the most popular out-of-class engagement venues for contemporary African American undergraduates at PWIs” (p. 98). These organizations provide a vital support system for all African American students, including those who are not members of these organizations. Black Greek Letter Organizations are insulators for,

in particular its members, as membership staves off the feeling of not belonging. Further, the research indicated that membership, increased levels of self-esteem for both male and female members. However, for Black *fraternity* (male) members, Black Greek Letter Organization membership had additional benefits such as fostering a significant feeling of racial awareness, cultivating deeper connections with other Black men, and creating more meaningful ties to the campus community for Black male students (Patton et al., 2011, p. 116).

In addition to the impact on connection and identity, Black Greek Letter Organizations also can have an impact on other college outcomes. Patton et al. (2011) concluded that membership in these types of organizations had a significant effect on classroom experiences as its members were more likely to interact with faculty members (p. 119). Further, they proposed that “there were positive effects of Greek [letter organization] affiliation on the active and collaborative learning scale” (p. 119). Similarly, Thomas et al. argued that there is a relationship between quality faculty interaction with Black students and improved Grade Point Averages (GPAs).

Black Greek Letter Organization membership has also found to be important vehicles for leadership development. Patton et al. (2011) found that these organizations can provide opportunities for its members to be exposed to “various leadership roles, opportunities for civic responsibility ... and a network of men and women who promote and encourage academic achievement and community service” (p. 113). Kimbrough and Hutchenson (1998) argued that “Greek letter organizations have traditionally been identified as key players in the development of leadership skills among college students ... fraternities and sororities have produced some of academe’s most visible college

leaders” (p. 97). The potential to become chapter president, for example, is a transferrable skill that can be used by students in the classroom, the residence halls, and other student organizations and potentially beyond campus and into the workforce.

Student Organizations

Participation in organizations such as religious or political groups, academic honors organizations and student government (Guiffrida, 2003) are also common opportunities for African American students to become involved on college campuses. Participation in these organizations provide opportunities for African American students to “give back to other Blacks” (Guiffrida, 2003, p. 307). They may also offer them a sense of comfort by being in the company of others perceived to be just like them and feeling of connection to the campus community.

Further expanding on this point Guiffrida and Douthit affirmed in their 2010 study asserted that “Black and other underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students at PWIs socially integrate mostly through more formal associations, such as those inherent among members of racial/ethnic minority student organizations” (p. 314) i.e., Black Greek Letter Organizations and campus chapters of national advocacy groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). According to Guiffrida and Douthit (2010), participation in student organizations offered African American students an opportunity to give back to their communities as well as affording them breaks from their predominately White campuses and spaces where they could move in ways (walk, talk, dress, etc.) in which they were comfortable.

Involvement in organizations whose specific focus is on race or ethnicity can have an important impact on student belonging at an institution. Museus and Quaye (2009)

validated participation in racial/ethnic student organizations in their study. They concluded that involvement in racial-centered organizations “facilitated the adjustment and membership of those students of color in college by functioning as spaces that provide cultural familiarity, vehicles for cultural advocacy and expression, and cultural validation” (p. 71). They, in agreement with other researchers like Dehlye (1995), Tierney (1992), and Museus (2008b), asserted that these experiences afforded African American students opportunities to give back to the Black community at large.

Same-race interaction, the research showed, was significantly beneficial to the academic success of Black students enrolled at PWIs. However, interactions with diverse peer groups and multicultural organizations also proved to be advantageous. Two of those key factors, peer-to-peer interactions and faculty-student relationships are discussed further in the following sections.

Peer-to-Peer Interactions

Peer-to-peer interaction such as mentoring, tutoring, in-classroom group assignments, and other shared activities are additional ways in which African American students become actively involved in their college experience. It was, according to Patton et al. (2011), “the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 120). Strayhorn (2008) noted that “African American males who interacted with diverse peers reported higher levels of sense of belonging than those who did not interact with diverse others” (p. 513). Johnson et al. (2007) affirmed that persistence and completion of college are inextricably linked to the connections students are able to create with peers and faculty (p. 525). These collaborative relationships between contemporaries produced positive outcomes. Additionally, those

relationships created by involvement in student organizations can lead to improved leadership abilities and enhancement of educational goals.

These types of informal groups were defined by Museus and Quaye (2009) as collective agents. The authors found that informal peer groups, “provide smaller and more manageable environments within the larger campus, offer a conduit for socialization in the larger campus community, and provide a venue in which students can maintain and express a sense of racial identity on campus” (p.72). They contended students’ ability to create connections with peers was the most frequent deduction of previous studies students enrolled in college.

Faculty-Student Relationships

Positive faculty-student relationships play an important role in the college experience; these connections are even more significant for African American students (Thomas et al., 2014). However, they concluded, that these relationships were difficult to foster, particularly between African American students and White faculty, because African American students “often have concerns with White faculty making stereotypical comments about African-American students, generalizing student’s opinions as representing those of all African-Americans, and failing to incorporate an African-American perspective in their lesson plans” (p. 555). Conversely, the literature indicated that African American students felt more favorably about the relationships between themselves and African American faculty. Thomas et al. found that the students felt that African American faculty were more concerned with their academic success and would “go above and beyond” (p. 555) to ensure they achieved it. This point was also validated by Guiffrida and Douthit (2010). They argued that African American students viewed

Black faculty members as “other-mothering” them. In other words, Black faculty members were perceived as more willing to extend themselves beyond their roles as faculty and often assisted with matters both inside and outside of the classroom and took on a more parental role. Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) also point out that is imperative that Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) hire additional Black faculty who not only teach courses but who serve as mentors and role models for African American students. They ascertain that this is a critical component to improving the experiences of African American students.

The importance of the relationship between faculty and African American students was also identified in a study conducted by Museus and Quayle in 2009. They found that faculty can act as “cultural translators, mediators, and models” (p. 72). “Cultural translators ... are individuals in the campus culture who can help racial/ethnic minority students navigate their home and campus cultures simultaneously” (p. 72), mediators were defined by the researchers as those who belong to the majority culture (White) who assist minority students with negotiating the campus community. Museus and Quayle explained, “Increased numbers of connections with campus cultural agents are associated with greater engagement and socialization into the culture” (p. 86). These agents are important in examining the experiences of students of color and are critical in understanding the persistence of students of color.

Creating a caring campus environment, according to O’Keeffe (2012), is the “single most important factor” in preventing student attrition. O’Keeffe espoused that a supportive campus environment includes fostering positive relationships between students and faculty. O’Keeffe concluded that students successful in knowing even one

faculty member closely are likely to feel more satisfied with their college life ...” (p. 607). Further, a positive relationship between student and faculty can be viewed as mutually beneficial. The student benefits from positive faculty interactions include increased academic and cognitive development and greater levels of self-esteem. One benefit of student-faculty interactions for faculty members is improved teaching assessments.

As mentioned by O’Keeffe (2012), citing the 1999 work of Jaasma and Kooper, students must perceive their instructors as empathetic in order to build a successful relationship with them (p. 608). Students are more likely to communicate with their instructor if the faculty member demonstrates that they are understanding of the student’s individual needs and responsive to their requests. On the other hand, a negative relationship with a faculty member can negatively impact a student’s motivation. Citing, Tinto (1993), O’Keeffe asserted that the *quality* of the faculty-student relationship is equally as important because merely having an interaction is insufficient.

Retention

Vincent Tinto’s extensive research exploring student retention will establish the foundation for my hypothesis that student persistence is directly impacted by what Tinto first described in his 1975 model as “academic and social integration.” The collaborative research of Vincent Tinto and John Cullen (1973) established a theoretical model of attrition and persistence. Two years later, in 1975, Tinto integrated Arnold Van Gennep’s (1960) rites of passage theory which had incorporated Emile Durkheim’s (1953) theories of suicide and departure to develop his theory/model (Metz, 2004). Durkheim asserted, in part, that suicide was rooted in one’s inability to integrate into their community. The

development of Tinto's theory was also influenced by the work of William G. Spady (1970). Spady was the first sociologist to relate the alienation that Durkheim described (1953) to dropping out of college.

Tinto's (1975) research, focused on four-year college students, suggested that those students came to campus with certain hopes and goals. Much like Astin and Kuh, Tinto postulated that student outcomes such as graduation were influenced by the student's ability to integrate into the campus community. This work suggested that those students came to campus with certain hopes and goals. Tinto postulated that student outcomes such as graduation were influenced by the student's ability to integrate into the campus community. He sought to define dropout more definitively by differentiating the characteristics of dropout behavior. Tinto categorized dropout behavior in two ways: voluntary and academic. Further, his research strove to create a theoretical model that would demonstrate more fully the dropout process from higher education. He aimed to more carefully examine "the processes of interaction between the individual and the institution that lead differing individuals to drop out from institutions of higher education..." (p. 90). In other words, he was seeking to answer the question, what type of relationship, or lack thereof, does a student have with the university/college that would result in their exodus from campus?

Tinto (1975) hypothesized that both background i.e. socioeconomic status, race, gender, etc. as well as educational expectations and motivations must be considered in developing a sound theoretical model. Further, he considered measuring the intensity of the aforementioned expectations essential to developing his model. presented a *Longitudinal Model of Dropout* from his study's findings. The model "argues that the

process of dropout from college can viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which the person's experiences in those systems ... continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout" (p. 94). Further, he argued that students came to colleges with varying attributes i.e., race gender, aptitude, socio-economic status, etc. He contended that these varying attributes influenced the experiences of college students. Tinto suggested that the relationship between the student's commitments to complete college and to the institution are the factors that determine if the student drops out and the type of dropout behavior the student assumes (p. 96).

In his research Tinto (1975) defined dropout as a process in the following categories: "Individual Characteristics and College Dropout" (p. 99), "Past Educational Experiences" (p. 102), "Goal Commitment" (p. 102), "Interaction Within the College Environment" (p. 103), "Academic Integration: Its Varying Forms" (p. 104), and Social Integration and Institutional Commitment (p. 110). In this model, a great deal of emphasis was placed on the broader category of integration. He hypothesized that remaining in college was more complex than predicting a students' persistence based upon "individual characteristics, prior experiences, or prior commitments (p. 103). He argued that the interactions between the student and the institution must be considered when considering student departure. Further, he contended that these interactions create experiences of changing degrees that form integration into college. Tinto placed educational and institutional commitments at opposite ends of the model and described

them as both “input and proves variables” (p. 104) that demonstrate one’s movement within college.

Concerning Academic Integration, Tinto (1975) found it important to note the distinction between “academic dismissals and voluntary withdrawals” (p. 104). He reasoned that those who voluntarily withdrew oftentimes had better grade point averages and scored higher on other performance matrixes than students who remained in colleges. Tinto described those who voluntarily withdrew as “social isolates and/or deviants regarding the intellectual norms of the institution” (p. 117). Further, and not surprisingly, he stated that students who were academically dismissed scored lower on the same performance matrixes than those students who remained enrolled. He labeled students who were academically dismissed as academically deficient and overly socially integrated.

When considering socioeconomic status, Tinto (1975) maintained that students who were academically dismissed tended to only have lower grade point averages and score lower on performance matrixes, they also tended to come from families of lower socio-economic status (p. 118). Further, he postulated that additional research would need to be conducted to uncover if programs aimed at improving the academic performance of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds would also enhance the educational outcomes of students of color as they represent a disproportionate number of students on the lower end of the socio-economic scale.

Tinto’s models (1973, 1975, 1994) have been reevaluated and reexamined. Museus and Quaye (2009) argued that research in the previous three decades focused heavily on challenging and employing Tinto’s models (p. 69). They noted that

“researchers have critiqued the underlying assumptions of Tinto’s integration theory for their cultural bias and inadequacy in explaining the departure of students of color” (p. 70). In their study, they offered an alternative model for understanding the persistence of students of color which considered what they defined as cultural integrity, cultural perspectives, and cultural agents (p. 70). Some of their findings are discussed in the engagement and sense of belonging sections of this paper. However, they suggested, for example, that the quantity and quality of relationships between cultural agents and students improved opportunities for engagement and socialization within and throughout the campus community (p. 86).

Tinto’s (1973, 1975, 1994) models were also critiqued by Cabrera et al. (1999). In direct conflict with Tinto’s postulation that students must sever ties with their home communities, they argued that persistence was influenced by “parental encouragement, followed by institutional commitment and academic performance” (p. 149). They found that disconnection from one’s culture was not proven to be a prerequisite for the effective adjustment to college for African American students the opposite seemed to be a more appropriate assessment (p. 152).

In direct conflict with Tinto’s (1987, 1993) model of student persistence Hausmann, Schofield and Woods (2007) found that students who participated in their study who reported greater interactions with peers, faculty, and family also reported an increased feeling of sense of belonging (p. 829). Moreover, Hausmann, Schofield and Woods (2007) asserted that earlier research regarding persistence had fused sense of belonging with other concepts such as fit or commitment. Further, they suggested that future persistence research should consider sense of belonging as a “stand-alone variable”

(p. 835). Sense of belonging as its own variable in research may further demonstrate to higher education professionals at PWIs its importance to the academic success of the African American students enrolled on their campuses.

Sense of Belonging

In *Motivation and Personality* (1970) Maslow replaced the term “love needs” from his 1943 work with “the belongingness and love needs” (p. 43). Essentially, he coined the term “belonging” with this work. According to Maslow (1970), the needs are: physiological (food, water, shelter); safety (security, safety, freedom of fear); belonging (friends, family, lover, spouse); self-esteem (achievement, mastery, recognition, respect); and, lastly, self-actualization (pursue inner talent, creativity, fulfillment). Maslow’s model theorized belonging as having a communal milieu and is essential to fostering students’ sense of worth and confidence (Kunc, 1992). How welcomed or unwelcomed a student feels on his/her campus is often a contributing factor in his/her decision to continue or discontinue their education. Often these decisions are based on whether a student feels they “fit in” at their institution. The idea of fitting in has been described by researchers, like Strayhorn (2008, 2012), Allen (1992), and Cabrera et al. (1999), as sense of belonging.

Researchers have dissected, reevaluated, and built upon Maslow’s theory to create a more recent topic: college students’ sense of belonging. However, according to Johnson et al. (2007), previous researchers investigated concepts similar to but not indistinguishable to the construct of sense of belonging. Much of the previous research was rooted in “psychological or sociological theory or the literature exploring issues of person-environment fit” (p. 527). According to Johnson et al. (2007), studies conducted

by Berger (1997), Nora (2004), and Schlossberg (1989) found that students possess an essential need to be affirmed, valued, and supported by their campus communities (p. 527). Further, Johnson et al. (2007) contended that “sense of belonging as a theoretical construct has been little studied and inconsistently defined in the higher education literature” (p. 527).

In a 1992 study, Allen affirmed that “feelings of psychological comfort and belonging, and a sense of empowerment/ownership—a sense that ‘this is our campus’” (p. 40) increased the chances for African American students to succeed on predominately White campuses. Conversely, the academic success of African American students who were made to feel unwelcomed, inept, marginalized, and isolated, was impeded. Moreover, Cabrera et al. (1999), suggested that students who encounter positive experiences, both socially and academically, “become more involved in a healthy socialization process, feel more committed to attaining a degree, and develop a sense of belonging at and commitment to their institutions” (p. 138). In other words, students who were allowed to develop meaningful encounters on campus with peers and faculty and who felt welcomed, valued, and respected more often persisted than those students who did not have these experiences on campus.

Additionally, the research signified that the college experience, overall, is improved by on-campus involvement (Thomas et al., 2014) which they defined as participation in “out-of-class” organizations. Citing the work of Astin (1984) they concluded that this type of student involvement has a direct impact on student persistence. Additionally, the literature argued an essential relationship between on-campus involvement and a sense of belonging. “Sense of belonging describes the extent

to which a student perceives himself/herself to be a welcomed, valued, and respected member of the school community” (Thomas et al., 2014, p. 557). Again, citing the work of Astin (1993) they summarized that how well a student can join his/her campus, both academically and socially, deeply influenced the likelihood that a student would persist to graduation.

In recent years Terrell Strayhorn (2012) has become a widely recognized voice in the conversation about sense of belonging. Strayhorn has written extensively on the concept of sense of belonging and its influence on the college experiences of, in particular, African American students. Strayhorn framed sense of belonging “as a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior” (p. 3). He described this, in relation to college students, as their perception of feeling supported by, connected to, and valued by the campus community. Strayhorn noted, however, that there is some discussion, even some disagreement on the appropriate definition of sense of belonging. He pointed out that it “is one term with many meanings” (p. 8). For example, in their study, Thomas et al. (2014) defined sense of belonging as “... the extent to which a student perceives himself/herself to be a welcomed, valued, and respected member of the school community” (p. 557). Another definition illustrated by Strayhorn stated that sense of belonging “refers to the students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class” (p. 8). The perceptions of feeling welcomed, appreciated and/or respected is assessed and internalized by the student and in turn often elicit affective reactions or behaviors.

Unwelcoming campus climates are often perceived as racially inequitable and hostile by African American students and are frequently the reason why this student population leaves their college campuses. Often, White students rate the campus climate higher than the African American cohorts. A positive climate, according to Thomas et al. (2014) is “evidenced by the academic, social and financial support provided to the students who are attending” (p. 558). Citing a 2005 study conducted by Jacoby and Garland, Strayhorn (2012) asserted that “students who do not have a sense of belonging complain that their college experience is like ‘stopping by the mall’ to get what they need on the way to somewhere else” (p. 2). Further, Strayhorn (2008) concluded that the campus climate plays an important role in “sustaining sense of belonging on campus” (p. 507). The overall college experience can be improved by participation in “out-of-class” organizations, according to Thomas et al. (2014). Additionally, their work concluded that there is a direct correlation between on-campus involvement and a sense of belonging which will be further discussed later in this paper.

Researchers have concluded that the existence of sense of belonging increases interest and commitment to daily activities. Conversely, the lack of sense of belonging lessens the interest and commitment to those same pursuits i.e. studying, attending class, etc. Strayhorn (2012) argued that a student’s development can be impaired in the absence of sense of belonging (p. 9). In sum, in order to succeed students must feel welcomed, valued, respected, and supported. I will next discuss factors that can either cultivate or hinder sense of belonging for African American students enrolled at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs).

Contributing Factors to Sense of Belonging

Campus Climate

The campus climate can be a determining factor in an African American student's decision to "fight or fly." This group of students make conscious decisions to remain on college campuses or leave based on how the campus makes them feel—the more welcoming a campus the more likely they are to stay. For African American students in particular the racial climate on college campuses is of great importance as these students rate campus climates much lower than their White cohorts.

A key factor in the persistence of African American students, according to the data collected by Thomas and his co-researchers, is the racial climate on college campuses. O'Keeffe (2013) reasoned that creating a caring environment is critical to ensuring that "students perform to the best of their abilities, and in preventing student attrition" (p. 607). Further, he contended, citing the previous work of Heisserer and Parette (2012), that the dearth of sense of belonging is a significant factor in the high rates of attrition. Any perceived racial inequity or detection of hostility toward their group can lead to an exodus from the campus on which they find themselves. Similarly, Allen (1992) argued that Black students enrolled at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) reported lower academic achievement, lower levels of social involvement (engagement), and less than favorable interactions with faculty. He found that "on predominately White campuses, Black students emphasized feelings of alienation, sensed hostility, racial discrimination, and lack of integration" (p. 39). Further, he argued that the student's perception of and response to their campus climate ultimately shaped the student's outcome.

A 1999 study conducted by Cabrera et al. defined racism and discrimination as “psychological and sociocultural stressors” (p. 135). They differ from other stressors and are unique in that they are only experienced by minority students. These issues mitigate a student’s sense of belonging and can negatively influence student outcomes. Further, they contended that “exposure to a climate of prejudice and discrimination in the classroom and on campus has gained attention as the main factor accounting for the differences in withdrawal behavior between minorities and non-minorities” (p. 135). The ways in which the members of the college behave are often viewed by African American students as intolerance. Cabrera et al stated, “This intolerance establishes a climate of racial prejudice and discrimination that permeates the interactions of the minority student throughout the campus” (p. 136). Further, these experiences are directly related to academic performance and persistence, and these occurrences were found to have the “largest negative effect on African Americans’ academic experiences” (p. 144).

Institutional Responsibility

The research is clear regarding the efforts students must make to enhance their college experience. However, the research also indicated that the onus of responsibility does not fall solely on the shoulders of the student. Institutions of higher learning are equally responsible for the success of their students. This idea is validated by Johnson et al. (2007) as they contend that “rather than placing the burden on students to adapt to an unalterable campus context ...” institutions should understand the importance of “students’ perceptions of their college environments and experiences” (p. 537). Further, institutions should use those perceptions as guiding influences to create positive climates that are inclusive and cultivate sense of belonging among a diverse student population.

The disconnect between a student's home and college culture can cause further issues. Museus and Quaye (2009) argued that "expecting college students to sever ties with their traditional cultural heritages places an unnecessary burden on nontraditional (i.e., students who are not White, middle-class, and aged 18-24) college students to assimilate to their respective campus environments, rather than recognizing an institutional responsibility to facilitate those students' socialization" (p. 70). In other words, institutions should seek to cultivate campuses that offer meaningful opportunities for students of color to create positive experiences through activities within and outside of the classroom.

Institutions should also, according to Johnson et al. (2007), further understand what students perceive about their campuses and the experiences they are having. Understanding these perceptions would allow the creation of more welcoming environments for students of color thus increasing their sense of belonging (p.538). This suggestion was corroborated by Allen (1992) as he contended that students' perceptions and the students' responses to these perceptions shape both their experiences on campus and their outcomes (p. 39).

Several researchers outlined additional suggestions for higher education professionals to follow in their quest to create welcoming campus environments and students' sense of belonging. For example, O'Keeffe (2013) proposed a student model that allows students of color to sustain their individual identity versus disavowing who they are on the campuses of PWIs. Citing Tierney's (1999) study, O'Keeffe pointed out that "a model which welcomes diversity, recognizes that a sense of belonging, which is so critical to student success and retention, will be difficult to attain if the student feels as

though they are required to compromise who they are ..." (p. 609). Johnson et al. (2007) recommended strategies within the residence halls to promote students' sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2008) authenticated these suggestions by providing the following proposal to residence hall staff members: "... plan living configurations and conditions that promote peer interactions. For example, residence hall councils, themed housing, residential colleges, and living-learning communities ..." (p 518).

This argument was further corroborated by Harper and Quaye (2009). They stressed that learning communities as well as active engagement in "purposeful campus activities" dramatically increase sense of belonging and persistence (p.180). Adopting educational practices, within the classroom, that embolden peer-to-peer relationships and cross-racial interactions is another recommendation offered by Strayhorn (2008). Strayhorn (2008) also specifies ways in which admissions officers might use their admission data to heighten students' sense of belonging by appropriately matching them with their interests (p. 517). Faculty members can incorporate Culturally Responsive Teaching (Adams et al., 2007) into their pedagogical style as a means to more actively engage their students in becoming part of their learning. The framework of is more widely known in K-12 education. However, its core principles have been theoretically tested by a growing number of higher education researchers. According to Heitner and Jennings (2016):

Engaging in culturally responsive teaching means valuing cultural differences; challenging stereotypes, racism, prejudice, oppression, intolerance, and injustice; using cultural knowledge to guide pedagogy; mediating classroom inequities in power stemming from culture, class, race, and other disparities; and embracing

cultural responsiveness as integral to educational effectiveness for all students”
(p. 56).

Culturally Responsive Teaching challenges faculty members to put into practice the aforementioned tenets to create environments in which all students feel that they matter, essentially establishing a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

The fundamental objective of institutions of higher learning is to educate the students in their charge. How and what students learn varies from campus to campus. What I have outlined is that learning can and often does occur both inside and outside of the classroom. What has been documented in this review is that African American students in particular are influenced by experiences inside and outside of the classroom. The research of Kuh (1993, 1995, 2005), Tinto (1973, 1975, 1993), Guiffrida (2003), Thomas et al. (2014) and others have expressed the relationship(s) between active participation in out-of-classroom activities such as becoming a member of a Black Greek Letter Organization; developing positive faculty-student relationships; participating in student government, etc. as greatly impacting student retention and persistence. Together, sense of belonging and active student engagement, the literature suggested, improved the likelihood that African American students would persist and ultimately graduate from their institutions.

The experiences of African American college students enrolled at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) are shaped by their perception of feeling welcomed, respected, valued and supported by their college campuses. The campus climate, particularly the racial climate, is incredibly influential in the decision-making process of African

American students. That is to say, for example, if a student perceives an unwelcoming campus climate, they may decide to depart their campus.

Additionally, the significance of having meaningful relationships with members of the faculty was a major theme throughout the literature. Hoffman et al. (2003), “identified a positive relationship between supportive faculty interactions in both academic social environments and students’ subsequent sense of belonging” (p. 528). In fact, Johnson et al. suggested that persistence and completion of college are inextricably linked to the connections that students are able to create with peers and faculty (p. 525).

In addition, the research in this area has dealt with several interpretations of students’ sense of belonging. The research conducted by Strayhorn (2008, 2012), Johnson et al. (2007), Hurtado and Carter (1997), and others specified the importance of sense of belonging among African American students. Strayhorn (2012) called sense of belonging essential to the scholastic success of African American students. Hurtado and Carter (1997) defined belonging as an observable fact that “captures the individual’s view of whether he or she feels included in the college community” (p. 327). Similarly, Haussmann et al. defined sense of belonging as a sense of feeling valued by the broader campus community (p. 804). However, there was a clear consensus that one definitive definition of sense of belonging did not yet exist. A more concise definition was one of many implications of the previous research. For example, Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) cautioned that more research should be conducted regarding sense of belonging in relation to student persistence.

Researchers have offered other valid suggestions for higher education professionals to consider when addressing the complex issue of African American

student engagement, persistence, and fostering sense of belonging. For example, concerning student organizations, Museus and Quaye (2009) recommended that institutions should ensure sufficient support to assist racial/ethnic student organizations to flourish and exist on campus (p. 90). Similarly, Guiffrida and Douthit (2010), recommended that participation in Black student organizations should be encouraged by institutions as it is shown: (1) to allow Black students opportunities to give back to their communities, and (2) it can connect them with mentors from their communities while providing them spaces to which they feel they belong (p. 317).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

My study examined the interactions of third-year African American students in an effort to discover their sense of belonging while enrolled at a Predominately White Institution (PWI). The interactions I focused on for this study occurred inside and outside of the classroom and are operationalized as student engagement and/or involvement throughout this study. Further, I also sought to connect their involvement with sense of belonging and their persistence. To better understand these possible relationships, I employed a phenomenological approach to my study to uncover the lived experiences of African American students enrolled at a Predominately White Institution (PWIs).

Research Design

Phenomenology emphasizes comprehending and explaining the lived experiences of a group of people who share a particular set of circumstances or have experienced a particular phenomenon (Harper, 2007, p. 57). The phenomenon is, according to Savin-Baden and Major (2013), “typically a concept, such as love, care, hate, anger, beauty, neglect” (p. 215). The phenomenon can be researched in its “outward” presentation i.e., artifacts or in its inward presentation such as beliefs, emotions, and illustrations. Phenomenologists illustrate what the group mutually experiences as they encounter a phenomenon.

My principal dissertation questions are: in what ways does student engagement and sense of belonging shape the experiences of African American students at

Predominately White Institutions (PWIs)? And, what influence does student engagement and sense of belonging have on those students' retention and persistence; lend themselves to phenomenological study? Because phenomenology is rooted in sense making of the lived experiences of the study participants it is a viable option to seek to answer my overarching research question. Further, this approach is flexible which allowed me as the researcher to examine the lived experiences of my study participants and the meaning of those occurrences in great detail. Additionally, the opportunity to conduct single or multiple interviews was an attractive feature of a phenomenological study.

In this study, I followed the hermeneutic approach to phenomenology. Heidegger (1962) contended that the lived experiences of individuals could not be fully understood without considering the culture(s) in which they lived and applying social and historical context to the timeframe in which they lived. Heidegger coined the term *dasein* "the human way of being in the world" (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p. 174) to define his phenomenological stance. Further, Heidegger's approach sought to consider each of the pieces of one's lived experience(s) and *dasein* working together collectively instead of separately. Explained another way, when we examine the lived experience of those who are now healthy, we must also consider their lived experiences when sick and apply social, cultural, familial, etc. context to both the experience of being well and sick. Heidegger (1962) called this type of consideration *forestructure of understanding*. Wojnar and Swanson (2007) citing the work of Benner (1994) detailed the following:

The *forestructure of understanding* consists of: *fore-having* (all individuals come to a situation with practical familiarity or background practices from their own world that make interpretation possible); *fore-sight* (the sociocultural background

gives a point of view from which to make an interpretation); fore-conception (sociocultural background provides a basis for anticipation of what might be found in an investigation (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p. 174).

Heidegger espoused that forestructure is both inextricably connected to how individuals understand the world and how they also interpret reality. Forestructure requires that the researcher ponder their own past experiences before conducting an examination of any phenomena.

I believe my primary research question aligned more with Hermeneutic Phenomenology than Transcendental Phenomenology as I, like Heidegger, believe that the lived experiences of individuals could not be fully understood without considering the culture(s) and applying social and historical context to the timeframe in which they lived. As my study sought to examine the experiences of African American students at a PWI, this approach was well-suited.

Participants

The participants for this study are enrolled in a mid-sized university located in a Mid-Western state in one of the largest counties in that state. The university is a public doctoral research institution with approximately sixteen thousand students. A majority of the student population, approximately 69%, identify as white. As the percentage of white students is over 50% the university is classified as a Predominately White Institution (PWI).

Table 3.1 shows the overall distribution by race of the students at the university in the term I was collecting data. It was computed using the information collected by the University's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment.

Table 3.1*Enrollment Percentages by Student Race/Ethnicity*

<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Winter 2022 Percentage</i>
	<i>Enrolled</i>
<i>American Indian or Alaskan Native</i>	0.2
<i>Asian</i>	6.1
<i>Black or African American</i>	7.5
<i>Hispanic or Latino</i>	4.3
<i>International</i>	4.5
<i>Multiple Races</i>	3.4
<i>Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander</i>	0.07
<i>Unknown</i>	4.0
<i>White</i>	69.9

It is clear from this table that the student body of this University is predominantly White.

To glean meaning from their experiences and to answer my overarching research question(s), I decided to interview African American students who were in their third year at the university. I chose to study this group of students because they are in the “middle” of their college career, two years behind them and, traditionally speaking, they have two years to finish. I determined that this particular group of students would be both reflective about their experience and would be able to articulate the factors they believed helped them to persist.

I requested a list of students who had achieved junior standing at the university from the Office of Institutional Research. This list allowed me to send out a pre-interview survey. The survey was used first as a screening instrument, as the first question asked for the students' self-described racial/ethnic background. The remaining questions helped gather information on the pool of potential interviewees (described below).

Survey Participants

As a result of the screening item concerning race/ethnicity, 31 students completed the pre-interview survey. Almost three-quarters of those participants identified as female (74.2%). Only three marked themselves as something in addition to marking Black or African American – one identified as Arab, one identified as Asian, and one wrote in “*Black, however, I am White presenting (Mixed race).*” The average age was 23.4 years, but respondents ranged from 19 to 44 years old.

In addition to demographic characteristics, the survey asked about the students' academic status. More than three-quarters of these participants were Juniors (77.4%) with the remaining group as seniors. Most were full-time students (83.3%) and not transfer students (60%). Across the 31 participants, there were 21 majors named, with at least one student from each school except nursing. A large majority (86.7%) reported having received financial aid. The students were evenly divided between those who did and did not have parents who completed college.

The final part of the background information gathered by the survey asked questions about different elements of students' connection with campus. Half of the students who responded to the survey lived in a residence hall. Almost half (46.7%) reported belonging to one or more student organizations. However, very few reported

taking courses that included community-based or service-learning projects (13.3%).

Similarly, only about one-third of the students reported having had an internship, co-op, or other type of field placement (33.3%).

Interview Participants

I interviewed seven students for the primary focus of the study. There were six students who self-identified as female and one who self-identified as male on the pre-interview survey. The participants were between the ages of 20 and 44 years old at the time of the interview. When the interviews were conducted three of the seven participants reported that they had previously or were currently living on campus. All but one participant reported receiving financial aid previously or currently. Four of the seven study participants described themselves as transfer students. Three of the seven participants indicated that their parent(s) had completed college. Finally, all of the study participants had reached junior standing, 56-90 credit hours, and all but one reported that they were enrolled in twelve or more credits at the time of the interview. To protect their identities the participants were given pseudonyms. Table 3.2 displays some of the key background characteristics of the study participants.

Table 3.2*Background Characteristics of the Study Participants*

PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYM	AGE	GENDER	MAJOR
NAOMI	21	Female	Mechanical Engineering
THELMA	32	Female	Human Resources Development
KAMALA	20	Female	Management Information Systems
MONET	24	Female	Public health
KETANJI	44	Female	Social work
DENISE	Not Answered	Female	Not Answered
KING	21	Male	Graphic Design

Data Sources**Pre-Interview Surveys**

The pre-interview survey (see Appendix A) was used to gather basic information such as name, age, gender, academic class standing, etc. This information is described more completely in the previous section, as it all had to do with establishing background characteristics of the pool of potential participants. Gathering this information was useful as it allowed me to diversify the research participant pool which provided a broader perspective of the experiences of this student population.

The survey also asked a question regarding students' experience as an African American student at a Predominately White Institution (PWI). Specifically, it asked about students' level of involvement with faculty, with peers, and with staff.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I conducted one-hour semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. Utilizing the semi-structured interview allowed for adjustments if needed, for example, if a participant's response lent itself to a different follow-up question than initially anticipated. I asked questions that I anticipated would uncover the lived experiences of the study participants. These questions focused on the student's overall experience and their engagement on campus. I designed the interview so that the data collected from these questions would assist in revealing the depths to which the study participants felt connected or disconnected to campus, who or what fostered those connections or disconnections and provided an account of their overall experience.

Before each interview, the participants were emailed an information sheet for exempt research. Before the start of every interview, I reviewed the information sheet with each participant and asked if they had any questions regarding the process. After reviewing the information sheet, I then asked each participant for their permission to record the interview. Upon receiving the participant's verbal permission recording began and the interview was officially started. Within 24 hours of completion of the interview I received, from Zoom, the following files: an audio file, a video file, and a written transcript of the interviews.

Data Collection

After obtaining approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) I conducted this study according to the guidelines provided by the review board and under the supervision of my dissertation committee chair. Based on the enrollment information, at that time, there were nine hundred seventy-six African American female students and

three hundred eighty-six African American male students enrolled at the university. Table 3.1 provides a snapshot of the African American students enrolled at the university for the winter 2022 semester. Additionally, based on the enrollment data, there are a total of three thousand three hundred sixty-nine students with junior class standing.

In November of 2022, a request was sent to the Office of Institutional Research asking for the email addresses of all African American students who had reached junior standing (56-90 credits) at the university. Unfortunately, the office was unable to provide a list of students who had achieved junior standing *and* were African American. Therefore, I had to send an email request to *all* students who were juniors at the university. After receiving a list of just under four thousand students, I sent an email to those students describing the study and asking them to complete the pre-interview survey.

The data collected from the pre-interview survey allowed me to use purposeful sampling to determine which students would be invited to participate in the semi-structured interviews. Examples of the criteria I initially looked for were: non-transfer students, a mix of students who have and who have not participated in student organizations, and students who have and who have not lived in the residential halls. The pre-survey explicitly asked: “Are you willing to be interviewed if your background characteristics match the study parameters?” Thirty-one students responded “yes” to this question, however, when contacted by email to schedule a one-hour interview, to be conducted via Zoom, only a few students responded. Another email was sent, approximately two weeks after the original email, to those who had not yet responded which garnered additional responses. In total seven students were scheduled to be

interviewed on a date and at a time that was convenient for them. The one-hour semi-structured interviews were held between January 2023 and March 2023.

Data Analysis

Interviews were both video and audio recorded via Zoom. Zoom provided a transcript of each interview. Those transcripts were downloaded and converted to a Word document. The audio files and transcripts were reviewed to ensure reliability and validity. For example, I first listened to the audio recording of each interview to ensure there were no technical difficulties such as sound distortion, audio interference, background noise, etc. The second time I listened to the audio files, I engaged in note-taking to capture my initial thoughts and reflections. I then listened to the audio file a third time and compared it to the written transcript. During this review process, inconsequential information like timestamps, filler words, etc. were removed from the transcript. This process was time-consuming, comparing the audio file to the transcript, and took an average of 7 to 8 hours per interview to complete. However, I felt it important to do so in a concerted effort to accurately convey the lived experiences of the study participants.

I reviewed each interview transcript repeatedly to identify emergent themes. Savin-Badin and Major (2013) recommended that researchers engage in submersing themselves in the data. By reading transcripts, listening to the recordings, and viewing the data over and over again, Savin-Badin and Major (2013), suggested that researchers are able to “understand it at both a gut level and as a whole, before they begin to analyze it” (p. 420). I then uploaded the transcripts, individually, to Dedoose. Dedoose is a secure, cloud-based application that allowed me to analyze my qualitative data (interviews). I employed thematic analysis, “the process of recovering the theme or themes that are

embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work” (van Manen 1990, p. 78). I looked for repeating themes among the participant responses and color-coded those themes accordingly. I developed broader themes from these repeating themes and some subthemes became evident. As the data was organized into these broader themes and subthemes, I began to see similarities and interconnections between participant experiences. From these patterns and interconnections, I was able to make some meaning of the lived experiences of this student population.

Reflexivity and Positionality

A phenomenological approach allows researchers to interpret the experiences of their study participants. Additionally, as a methodological approach, it allows the researcher to be reflexive before, throughout, and subsequent to the process. A component of reflexivity is transparency. Researchers are encouraged to be transparent with their participants. I shared my own undergraduate experience as an African American student at a PWI with the study participants as that experience is the very reason I am so passionate about the experiences of students currently enrolled. Additionally, I shared with them the activities and organizations I was a part of during my four years as an undergraduate student. I was open to questions from them regarding my experience. I saw myself as a researcher and observer. I believe that my experiences enriched the analysis of the data collected. Yet, I understood that I had biases and that I, as a Black, heterosexual, cis-gendered woman, had to acknowledge those parts of myself and reconcile the ways in which my positionality played a role in my research. Additionally, as I further immersed myself in the process of being reflexive, I came to terms with the possibility that my desire for African American students to have a college

experience similar to my own may have been unreasonable. This notion seemed merely anecdotal at the start of this research; however, this assertion became evident at the completion of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to gain a richer understanding of the experiences of third-year undergraduate African American students, and what specific factors they attributed to their ability to have successfully remained enrolled. Further, this study, by allowing the students to share their lived experiences, sought to uncover if they felt a sense of belonging. And, if that sense of belonging contributed to their persistence. This study also sought to discover a clearer definition of sense of belonging.

The lens from which I viewed my research was that of Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT, in short, posits that racism is normal, storytelling is an important part of the discourse, liberalism should and must be critiqued, and that whites were the primary benefactors of the Civil Rights Movement. Further, CRT rebukes notions of color-blindness, meritocracy, and equality among the races. It is through the lens of CRT that systemic racism in, for the purposes of this study, higher education can be scrutinized. In other words, the veil of inequality between the races can be lifted, exposed, and dismantled.

I also approached this research with the theory of Double Consciousness in mind. W.E.B DuBois postulated that African Americans perceive themselves as having two identities that are often in disagreement with one another. These identities exist in two worlds, one Black and one White. How might African Americans (Black world) navigate their journey at a Predominately White Institution (White world)? I used the previous research of Astin (1984), Tinto (1973, 1975, 1993) and Kuh (1991, 1995, 2008), Maslow

(1943, 1970) as well as the more recent work of Strayhorn (2012) as the theoretical foundation of this study. These theories provided insight into student engagement, retention, and sense of belonging which are the cornerstone of this study.

This chapter illustrates the findings revealed using the two aforementioned lenses and theoretical frameworks. First using open coding, I was able to uncover some emergent themes from the data: (Campus Climate), (Student Engagement), (Belonging), and, (Why Am I Still Here). Each theme has been delineated below using the words of the study participants to tell the story.

Theme One—Campus Climate

Analysis of the data revealed that participants were keenly aware of how their race affected their interactions on campus. Campus climate, as discussed in Chapter Two, refers to “general campus climate (i.e., global perceptions of the campus environment), academic campus climate (i.e., perceptions of academic experiences such as interactions with instructors and peers)” or “racial campus climate (i.e., perceptions of the overall racial environment including one’s experience as a member of the racial majority or minority; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003)” (Mills, 2021, pp. 356) It can impede or facilitate the experiences of African American students enrolled at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). Participants were asked to describe their interactions with other students, staff, and faculty. Their experiences range from cordial to questionable/unacceptable. Their lived experiences are shared below in the following subthemes: Being Black on Campus (racial campus climate); Traditional We Are Not (general campus climate); and, It’s a Mixed Bag When It Comes to Faculty and Hello Advising, We Have a Problem (academic campus climate).

Being Black on Campus

Participants were asked to describe their relationship(s) with other students on campus to assess the campus climate. Participants spoke about being an African American student in the classroom setting. Denise simply said: “*I am like the only African American in my classes.*” Others detailed their experience as the only or one of a few Black students in the classroom in more detail. Ketanji expressed the irony of being in a course centered around working in groups and feeling isolated because of their race:

I’m usually like either the only Black student...when I’m in my classes I’m usually the only Black student or one of, and just specifically, for my group dynamics and communications class. I noticed I was the only black student in that class (and) it was like everybody had people that they talked to. But I was like the only person that will come in and like I didn’t have anybody to talk to. Nobody really tried to like, include me, which is interesting because we were learning about like, how to work in groups, and how to make sure that everybody feels like they’re included in the group.

Ketanji’s experience in this specific course was intriguing. The fact that the topic of this course was about group dynamics and no one actively sought to include her in a group is eyebrow-raising at best. Her experience, unfortunately, is not uncommon as Black students often feel excluded while enrolled at PWIs.

The isolation reported by the participants was very specific to their own experiences in the PWI environment. Another participant, King, talked about how he felt like the center of isolation.

The first time I walked in the class [and] I'd be...like all eyes on me when I first walk into the class and [I'm] especially like on the first day. I feel like it's more eyes on me because [like] I'll be [like] the only Black student in the class. It's not an issue with that. But it's, I don't know, I say it's kinda like hard in the sense because...we [all I] don't see too many like Black people in my major. So, it's like I guess, it will feel, I will feel more, not comfortable. I don't know the word I want to use to say that it's kind of like 50/50, you trying to connect with people in my class outside of my own race.

In other words, he was the focal point of the classroom yet still felt isolated:

Other participants expressed feelings of isolation and exclusion on campus in general and expressed concern regarding how their white counterparts interact with them. Ketanji stated that she felt her white classmates were not being inclusive and lacked awareness of their behaviors. She stated, *“I think that they kind of just like, I don't think that they realize that they aren't including African American students.”* Similarly, Denise spoke of her white classmates exhibiting similar behavior and how she perceived their actions. She explained, *“I would go to the classes and stuff [like] a lot of students wouldn't like sit next to me and stuff like that. I thought that was kind of weird.”* The participants were very clear about the treatment they received from other students. Naomi boldly called out what she believed to be prejudicial treatment from fellow students:

I feel like the discrimination kind of comes from the students because they kind of have like these, these pre-conceived thoughts about me and they don't know me. And, I'm just like, how can you think something about me, you don't know me and it's not even what they say out of their mouth. It's [like] how they act and it's

certain people...I've seen it [they] really don't want to like sit near me and stuff...they'll get up and move.

Naomi, Denise, and Ketanji were describing not only the isolation they felt in the classroom but also how they felt their race played a part in how their White counterparts in these situations did or did not interact with her because she was Black. These participants were describing, in a sense, their classroom settings as being segregated by race.

Participants candidly discussed their interaction(s) with departments on campus. Ketanji spoke about the time she was mistaken for another Black student and how that experience shaped her future contact with a staff member. She explained:

There are only 2, me and this other Black girl [are] in the program, and she got us mixed up and that kind of [like] left a bad taste in our mouth. We don't look anything like. But if I've actually like met with her to like plan out and I know I don't know how many students they have, but I'm one of your students and we've talked a few times. I had to interview to get into the program so that kind of left the uh little [bad] taste of my mouth

Similarly, Naomi spoke of navigating a campus where there are not very many people who look like her and how that was initially jarring to her:

It was kind of a culture shock when I got to college, because you know what you been used to being around a whole bunch of black people just like a lot of people here that doesn't [like pretty] much look like you

In addition, Thelma conveyed what she felt about university programming in this way, “As an African American student everything (is) at [Name of University] is geared

toward uh predominantly white students.” Much like previous quotes, these participants were speaking to the isolation African American students feel being on a predominately White campus. The type of isolation Naomi and Thelma were describing comes from being “the only,” sensing that campus events like workshops, presentations, and seminars are not designed to involve African American students on campus.

Part of the experiences described by participants was as simple as a familiar or different look between themselves and the rest of the students. One participant, who self-identified as Black/African American, provided a unique perspective on her experience. I asked Monet if she felt her experience was different from other Black students on campus because she presents as white and she answered:

Ab-so-f!cking-lutely, yes! I see what a lot of people don't see. I get let into groups where I appear to be a safe space but I never am. I am like, my family jokes, I am the most hostile friend but it's so bad, I think a lot of people think it's better than it actually is in there. There are like a lot of like microaggressions that I'm very quick to realize [and], especially as somebody who looks like I do. I've always kind of been like the stand-in for my family because there's no safety in any darker skin color whatsoever. And, so it's always kind of been my job to kind of be like a lookout, and so I see a lot more. And, I'm recognizing it and organizing it within my brain going: hmmm, that's not it...I would definitely say I'm very quick to call it out too especially...I mean, I'm 24 and I'm kind of like [in this] no bs kind of stage and especially like with like the professors.

Monet also described her interactions with students on campus as superficial and spoke about the role the university and race, in her opinion, played in her peer-to-peer relationships.

So, at [Name of University] specifically, it's at best as deep as like a kiddie pool. It's very, again, it kind of goes back to like the sense that [Name of University] is just a mechanism to get people, you know, to point B to a job. It's not a place where people are like no, no this is my university, like I cannot wait to, you know bring my family back here in 20 years...and, if you are a POC, it's just disgusting and it's hard to get through it even just [to] get a sense of what's there...

Finally, when it came to being Black on Campus, Naomi described her experience on campus in a way that might be perceived as justification for the isolation she felt, in the following way: *"It's not always going to be a lot of people that's the same color as you and sometimes you have to pave your way through so you can be successful."*

The study participants described, in varying degrees, how Being Black on Campus influenced their overall experience on campus. Many of the participants discussed feeling excluded and isolated in the classroom and while on campus in general. Their stories, for this section of the dissertation, were meant to illustrate how being a Black student enrolled at a Predominately White Institution influenced their interactions with other students on campus and to ascertain if these interactions aided in fostering meaningful relationships on campus as these relationships are often noted as significant in developing sense of belonging.

Traditional We Are Not

Another subtheme that emerged from the conversations with the participants was being an adult learner on campus and the university being mostly a commuter school. For this study, a commuter school is loosely defined as a school that students drive to for classes but do not live in the residential halls. The respondents perceived the university as a commuter school and therefore, for this dissertation, considered a non-traditional campus and thus included in the subtheme: Traditional We Are Not. It is also important to note for this sub-theme that, at the time of the interviews, only one of the seven respondents lived in the residential halls and their ages ranged from twenty-one to forty-four. For the purposes of this study, an adult learner is defined as a student outside of the traditional college-aged student (between the ages of 18 to 24).

Kamala spoke directly about the “traditional” college-aged students and expressed how she felt the university did not include them as older students. She explained, “*I think still (they’re) doing things just geared towards the 18- to 24-year-old[s] is very old-fashioned thinking.*” She went on to express concern about the lack of marketing to older students and how, in her opinion, this impeded their ability to access critical resources such as financial aid. Kamala said:

I don't think they market going to school for older learners a lot. There's not a lot of scholarships for older learners...and most of us don't have the resources to go directly to university, so some of us do have to transfer over and then that scholarship money gets cut in half [you know]. So, there needs to be also more of these things talked about. So, we know what we're getting into.

In sum, Kamala felt that there was a lack of communication from the university to its adult learners. She seemed to be aware that there are resources for this student population, however, she felt that the university did not provide adult learners with the proper tools to find those resources. Kamala was deeply disheartened with the lack of communication from the university about one resource in particular: financial aid for adult learners. She felt that the university needed to do a better job informing adult learners about the cost of tuition and the monies available to assist them in covering those expenses.

Thelma offered another perspective on being an adult learner on a college campus with traditional college-aged students. Additionally, she spoke of how race affected her experience, stating:

The age group of you know the demographic of students are, you know 18, 23 or 21, between those age ranges. They're just younger than I am. Of course, they're all majority white.” She went on to say, *“Everything that they do offer has it does not fit a, you know, background experiences or my culture or just even in my age group as well...”*

From Thelma’s perspective, both her race and age played a role in her feelings of exclusion and overall experiences on campus. She also placed the burden of responsibility for those feelings at the feet of the university. She perceived that the institution intentionally designed experiences, programming, and opportunities that did not include students who are older and non-White.

The participants spoke of how being a student on a predominately commuter campus can prevent friendships from developing and a sense of belonging from being

fostered. Monet expressed that she was delighted about the varying ages of the students enrolled at the university. However, she also expressed concern regarding the ability to cultivate long-lasting friendships, in part, because most students do not live on campus. She explained:

There's a lot of different ages on the campus, which is fun...I think my ideology of like a lifelong friend is also somebody who you just like immediately know or you like. There's something here, I like you. There's something about you that I want to learn and know more about, and I can totally see like a friendship blossoming. Not as much with students. But, again it's also part of that commuter aspect of they're just there to get it done to get the degree and get out. I found that most in-class acquaintanceships end in class which obviously [part of] being a big commuter school.

Similarly, Ketanji spoke of the commuter aspect as a stop along the way. In other words, a means to an end, the end being graduation, “*I feel like a lot of people are here just because it's such a commuter school. A lot of people are really here just to get a degree and not necessarily to make college memories.*” What Monet and Ketanji seem to have expressed is the differences between being a student on a campus that is primarily a commuter campus versus a campus where students live and learn. Both women, in different ways, were able to correlate how being a non-traditional student on a commuter campus has shaped their interaction with other students and possibly inhibited them from developing long-lasting bonds with their peers and as Ketanji stated creating memories.

These findings indicated that the respondents were aware of the campus demographics. They also seemed to be aware that most students commute to campus

versus living on campus in the residential halls. Additionally, the participants were able to convey how their ages and race shaped their experiences.

It's a Mixed Bag When It Comes to the Faculty

As noted in Chapter Two of this study, faculty-student relationships play a pivotal role in students' academic success. Developing a positive relationship with at least one faculty member is particularly imperative for African American students. To glean what type of relationships African American students at the university were able to foster with their professors, participants were asked: do you have a relationship with one or more members of the faculty? They were also asked to describe their relationship(s) with faculty. They responded honestly and candidly to this question. I found that their interactions with faculty run the gamut from polite to unprofessional; most fall somewhere in between.

When recounting their relationship with faculty one respondent, King, spoke of it in a way that seemed transactional in the sense that their professors were kind to him *if* he was in need of their help. He stated:

My experience with them it's been pretty decent...they treat me the same as anyone else, if I have an issue, I can go to them [if] I need like an extended time on the project. Most professors, you know, they can work with me depending on why I need the [help]. But it's been good, you know, ...with my professors.

Similarly, Naomi spoke about the willingness of professors in her program to assist her when needed. Her experience seemed less like a transaction and more in line with what a faculty-student relationship should look like. She explained, *"I feel like, even though [Name of University] it's a really hard school, especially engineering. It's really hard*

program, but they do have a lot of professors that are willing to take the time and help you.” Thelma also indicated that her relationships with faculty were adequate, however, she wondered if her age played any part in her interactions. She described:

With the teachers, with my professors, that has actually been a pretty, you know, well rounded experience like that. That has been perfectly fine. But I wonder if I was a lot younger and if I was a first-year student, would it have been the same experience?

In general, there were aspects in participants’ interviews that highlighted functional connections with faculty.

Then there were the participants whose relationships with faculty were not so pleasant. The respondents’ perceptions ran the gamut from superficial interactions with faculty to highly questionable behavior from faculty. Monet was very vocal regarding her frustration with faculty. Her perception was that faculty are less passionate about their jobs and are more concerned about achieving or maintaining tenure. She explained:

I've been completely disappointed. I've noticed a lot more professors are teaching to keep their position and not teaching for the pride of educating....specifically I've noticed almost every professor teaching out of like the publisher's handbook which, as we know, the publishers can never be trusted. It's like that. I've had a lot of times where I feel, where I feel less respect for my professor because this does not feel like it is interesting for them let alone for us.

She went on further to expound on why she felt this way, “*I am so tired of like seeing professors like almost disenfranchised entirely because they like this isn't enjoyable. They're just, they're just doing their 5 sections and then calling it a day.*” Her point

punctuates her overall frustration with faculty. She wanted her professors to be passionate about educating students. She seemed to intimate that the professors she had throughout her time at university were teaching for reasons other than the joy of educating their students.

Participants also discussed changes in their connection with professors over their time at the university. Denise spoke about how her interactions with faculty members were initially good experiences, however, these interactions shifted during her second semester of enrollment at the university. She described:

So, my first semester there both of my teachers were very positive. They [tried] to help me out a lot. They tried to give me like a resources and stuff like that. That was like my first semester. My second semester, I didn't really, I didn't really like the teachers too much. I felt as though I didn't really learn much from the teachers. It wasn't really helpful. Not too much.

Although it was not clear during the interview if she was referring to the same professor(s) or if she felt that her race was a factor, she went further and gave an example of an encounter with a faculty member. Interestingly, in this passage, she almost seemed to be asking for permission to share her experience:

One particular teacher, I won't say their name or anything like that. I can't really. Hmm. He would. I would notice that he would show favoritism towards other students like when they would answer questions and like he would be like. Oh, dang, am I supposed to say this? Okay. This person [the teacher] would be more excited like, oh, when they got the answer versus if I got the answer, they [the teacher] wouldn't like jump for excitement.

Ketanji, however, was certain that race played a part in the interaction a fellow African American student had with faculty member. She stated:

I just had some professors say like interesting things. In my first year, my writing professor, we were all zoom and there was another black student, and he was dark skin, and like when he first logged into the Zoom like the first thing she said was: oh, my gosh! You're so dark! And, it was interesting because, you know, I was so shocked because I'm like maybe she was talking about his lighting. But I'm like that's just not something like you should say. I emailed him to make sure he was okay, because she said that in front of everybody and just to make just to let him know if you wanted to pursue anything against the professor, I would support him

She offered another example where a different professor used a negative stereotype attributed to Black women to describe an incident that had occurred with his spouse. She was quick to point out during the interview that this particular conversation had nothing to do with the subject matter in class on the date of the incident. She explained the encounter this way:

And we were, I think we were talking about linguistics, maybe, or something. And, he was talking about his wife and the fact that she was white. But he made a comment about when she experienced road rage, she sounded like an angry Black woman. So that was an interesting comment. I was like, what do you mean by that?

Ketanji's experiences in the classroom are classic examples of microaggressions.

Microaggressions, as defined by Merriam-Webster, are a comment or actions that subtly

and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (such as a racial minority). Microaggressions, although not discussed in this dissertation, are often hurled at and felt by African American students on PWIs (Nadal, et al, 2014). Ketanji's interactions in the classroom validate this assertion.

The study participants expressed varying degrees of interaction with faculty. Some of their experiences were better than others. However, what can be gleaned from these participants' accounts is the important role faculty members played in their overall experiences. In other words, how the aforementioned faculty members treated them in the classroom, good, bad, or indifferent, helped to shape how they felt about the college experience as a whole.

Black Faculty

The subtheme Black Faculty emerged organically from the same question about the participants' interaction with faculty. In Chapter Two of this study, I summarized the importance of these relationships with an emphasis on the need for Black students to have faculty members who are also Black. Black students perceive Black professors as having their backs and more invested in their academic success than their white professors.

A common response within this subtheme was joy and surprise. The participants either expressed joy or surprise about having their first Black professor or were excited about the *possibility* of having a Black professor during their time at the university. Two of the participants, Ketanji and Thelma, talked about having their first Black professors and what that meant to them. Ketanji expressed her anticipation this way, "*I actually have my first Black professor, this semester. So that was really exciting.*" Thelma also talked

about having a Black professor for the first time during the second half of the semester in which the interviews were conducted. She stated, *“I have one (class) with my first African American instructors...in March. That would be My first experience. She's already, you know (sending) messages which I love already...”* It was also important to the participants that having Black professors not be an isolated experience. Kamala perceived that having three Black professors during her first year at the university was a unique experience. She went further to explain that she had discussed this uncommon occurrence with individuals outside of the university:

I do think that it was a treat for me to have [in] my first semester, all 3 of my professors were Black. So, I really like that in this semester 2 of my professors are Black...I was speaking, with some of my co-workers who've already gone through their student experience. They're like that is not something that is generally heard of. So, I think I have that unique experience which I really enjoy.

In general, these respondents expressed excitement, and in one instance astonishment, about having Black professors at a Predominately White Institution (PWI). Additionally, they seemed to understand how others may have not had similar experiences while enrolled in college.

Other participants indicated that they had not yet had an African American professor while enrolled at the university, however, they looked forward to the possibility of having one in the future. King said this regarding African American faculty members, *“I feel like it will be nice to have one, just to say I have like one Black professor while I've been here because I know there are Black professors here.”* Denise ruminated on the

disappointment she felt about not having a Black professor and how her interaction with one might play out:

(I have had) none. it kinda sucks because like if I like do have like problems and stuff like that I feel as though like I won't be able to like, talk to someone, and just relate to somebody about like my experience.

Denise's thoughts of support from and relatability to Black professors is aligned to "other-mothering" which is mentioned in Chapter Two of this study

Two respondents spoke about diversifying the faculty pool and that part of the university's responsibility is to not only recruit a diverse group of faculty members but also to retain them. Ketanji offered this suggestion regarding faculty diversity:

...make sure you have, like of diverse group professors that honestly, not even just like Black professors. I would love to see a wide range of races for professors because, honestly, I have really only had Black or white professors. I would love to see Black professors and all kinds of race[s] for professors. I think we could definitely diversify on the faculty that we have here.

Monet stated the following about retaining professors:

...specific to underrepresented and then keeping them, they can they [Name of University] can get them in the door, but they're not staying which, you know, I think is why we have great studies like this. It's like, yeah, there is a problem that we need to address immediately.

These two participants, Ketanji and Monet, expressed concern about the number of Black faculty members employed at the university. Their concern extended beyond just hiring

more Black faculty but also the retention of Black faculty members who are currently employed or will be in the future.

In general, the participants viewed having Black faculty members favorably. Those who had not yet had a Black professor looked forward to having at least one in the future and encouraged the university to hire more.

Hello, Advising? We Might Have a Problem

Another department that students mentioned often during the interviews was advising. A recent study indicated that academic advising is “frequently cited as a critical factor in student retention and development” (Ford, Woodard, & Kepple, 2023). The findings of this study are concerning as respondents reported having little to no interaction with their academic advisors. Monet seemed to be more than perturbed about the lack of communication between herself and academic advising and seemed to question the value of advising. She explained, *“I definitely got emails while I wasn't like activity enrolled. But once I was, I have not. While I've been actively enrolled at [Name of University], I have not been reached out to unless it wasn't mandatory.”* She went into further detail regarding how she felt advising was not helpful and that what the department did provide was easily found on the university’s website:

It was about as useless as like any other school advising. I specifically remember. They had like those half sheets that had, like your semesters broken up by like a year and all they did was like, write the classes that you were supposed to take to graduate within 4 years, all of which is information that is on the website that you can look at and print out at any time.

Thelma expressed a similar sentiment regarding finding information for herself or by speaking to others on campus:

My advisor, I don't feel, has been very instrumental in my degree plan and my educational experience. A lot of things that I've done, I've done for myself, for, like I advocated for myself or I'm getting information from other students or the faculty members

These two participants conveyed a general frustration with a lack of communication between themselves and academic advising. Additionally, they described feeling that, because they were able to find information that is readily found on the university's website, they in some way did not need the assistance of their academic advisor(s).

Other respondents indicated that they had not had any recent interaction with their academic advisors. King seemed to be aware of the importance of communicating with an advisor but had not yet done so:

I'm going to be completely honest I have (not) met with my adviser at all this year this whole school year. I don't even know who my adviser is, which is bad, and I should figure that out. But I haven't heard. I don't I think I got an email before, like in recently about meeting with them, and I know I still have to, because I never met my advisor at the beginning of this year at all. Actually, since my sophomore year, like only time I met with (them) my first year when we had to have those meetings, our first-year advisors.

Similarly, Ketanji indicated that she had minimal contact with her advisors, explaining, *"the first 2 years I've never really interacted with my academic advisers that much. I think I've just met with them like they're required."* King and Ketanji both described

being able to continue their academic journey with minimum assistance of an academic advisor. Ketanji seemed ambivalent about being contacted by or contacting an advisor. However, King did seem to be aware of the significance of perhaps speaking with an academic advisor in the future. This finding further demonstrates that the participants appeared to have no expectation of advising assistance and may not have had any inkling of how receiving it might help them.

The study participants were able to express their discontent and, in some instances, indifference concerning academic advising. What is unclear is if their overall lack of communication with their academic advisors will have any lasting influence on their academic outcomes.

Theme Two—Student Engagement

For this dissertation, student engagement was defined as active participation in and outside of the classroom and is an important component of the college experience (see Chapter One). Research has shown that student engagement is not only imperative for students' academic success but also plays an integral role in the retention and persistence of students. Recent studies have begun to draw connections between student engagement and sense of belonging. For this study, I asked participants a series of questions that sought to uncover their experiences outside of the classroom to determine their degree of engagement.

The analysis of the interviews revealed that these Black students had a difficult time finding ways in which to be engaged in out-of-classroom activities. Some participants expressed that race may have played a role in their difficulty in finding ways to connect to the university. Others felt that the university was, accidentally or

intentionally or both, placing obstacles in their way which made it complicated for them to be engaged on campus.

Seek and You Might Find Ways to Be Engaged

Monet was the most vocal of my study participants about this issue. She voiced her experiences passionately and described her thoughts on the student organizations on campus this way, “[Name of University] offers a lot less for those who want to find a specific cultural or ethnic community or organization, or just sense of belonging at all.” She also, without prompting, seemed to draw a correlation between student engagement and sense of belonging. She said:

At [Name of University] you have to actively pursue specifically like organizations or clubs to really get the University bonding and like friendships. I found that most in-class acquaintanceships end in class which obviously being a big commuter school. There's a part to that as well but to truly like, feel any sense of belonging you, you have to seek it out yourself and there's a lot of hit or miss which is probably at any university. But it's not as like aggressively, hey, let's be a part of this university. Let's all get together, and, like collectively, do stuff.

Additionally, she also seemed to be aware that student organizations needed faculty advisors/sponsors to exist on campus. She seemed to imply that the university did not either support or encourage faculty to do so:

I think a lot of it lacks in the backing. I know most clubs that are gonna...need professors and faculty to like sponsor it. And, a lot of people to like lead and set forth those ideas. And there just isn't a foundation for [Name of University] to even build on for things like that.

Like Monet, Thelma also spoke of how she felt that the university did not offer racially or culturally inclusive organizations or programs that she could see herself being a part of:

It's nothing that I would ever want to come to, no matter how old I was, it's nothing that [Name of University] is doing for our, the African American community that I would want to be a part of it. You know I go to class, and it's it, that's it.

In general, these participants' perspective was that the university did not offer much for African American students to be engaged with or in. Further, the lack of institutional support for programs that are culturally or ethnically centered was seen as a barrier to their participation in meaningful activities that could foster their sense of belonging.

Denise expressed difficulty finding out *how* to join a particular organization. Although different, both Monet's and Denise's experiences demonstrate perceived institutional obstacles. Denise described her frustration and how that led to her giving up on joining the organization altogether:

I tried to join I think it's this a [major specific student organization]. I think that's what it's called. I try to join them, but, like the information on their page was incorrect, because, like the students that I had contacted, they wind up graduating and stuff. So yeah, I just I didn't bother with that after that. I don't even think they gave me recommendations on who I can like, try to contact...

Ketanji and Kamala spoke of how they felt isolated because the events or organizations felt exclusively organized for individuals who had already formed a circle of friends or were intended for younger students. Kamala spoke of how not only her age, but race influenced her experience. She also places some of the blame on the university:

I think that there should be more organizations for either you know, older learners or adult students I should say, or you know whether we just be you know, the black student, or however they want to break it up. But there should be something that we feel that we can connect to through the school that doesn't have, because being 40 years old and going to the same events as a 20-year-old, we're not going to have much in common. And, to be honest, I'm not going to go to most of them unless it's required. So, we don't have anything that makes us feel engaged. That makes us feel part of the University because there's nothing that's geared towards us.

Ketanji shared that she felt alone at events and that, at the time of the interview, had made no attempt to attend any other events on campus:

So, when I go to events it's kind of like people come with their friends already, and then, like they talk to each other. I don't think they realize that there's somebody that's like by themselves that that doesn't have anybody to talk to. So, I've kinda like stop going to events because it's kind of just been like, it's kind of just not been successful for me to like meet people. So, I think, yeah, so it's been a pretty lonely experience for me I would say

However, she did share a more positive experience when she spoke about her first year at the university: *"I've participated in a little bit. I don't. I don't remember if I ever did anything last year, but I know my freshman year. I tried to participate in a lot."* What Ketanji expressed during our interview is a feeling of indifference about her social experiences on campus. She seemed to want to form relationships with her peers on campus but did not initiate those interactions which intensified her feelings of isolation.

Although she had participated in activities during her first year, for reasons unknown to me, she was no longer seeking ways to be engaged.

Kamala and Ketanji's experiences beg the question: if the university held events or created programming specifically for older students, would students like Kamala and Ketanji report having more significant ways and/or desire to engage on campus? From these participants' perspective, finding activities for them as older African American students that considered their age, their race, and personal responsibilities like their full-time jobs and caring for family was more than difficult. Additionally, Kamala admonished the university for not considering its adult learners when developing programming and/or events. Anecdotally, I took a look at the events promoted on the university's website for the weeks of January 9 through 20, 2023. During those two weeks, there were events such as a virtual graduate information session, an event for first-year students, and a reading with an author event sponsored by the creative writing department. I examined the webpage of the department responsible for student organizations on campus and found that this webpage was difficult to navigate. I attempted to use the search function to see if I could find any student organizations that on the surface were marketed to adult learners. Unfortunately, this search was futile. I mention this experience to demonstrate the difficulty students like Kamala and Ketanji might face in finding ways to be engaged on campus.

I'm Engaged Therefore I'm Connected

The only male participant in my study, King, was extremely involved on campus. He is profoundly aware of how his engagement on campus and involvement in his fraternity has connected him to the university. No other study participant was as engaged

in campus activities or involved in a student organization as King, therefore, most of this section describes his experiences being involved in his fraternity, supporting his peers, attending events on campus, and how he feels deeply connected to the campus because of his engagement with it.

King talked about showing support and being actively involved almost as a badge of honor:

I try to be involved as much as I can and to show support to everyone like any events on campus. I try to be out and support as much as I can. I participate in everything, even if I'm not like, set up a table or actively participating. I'll come out, and just to show support

He went on to talk about being a chapter member and an officer of his fraternity but again mentioned being supportive of his peers and other organizations. Additionally, he recalled how he has felt unsupported in the past:

I'm a part of [fraternity]. I'm the [officer] of our chapter right now. So, with me, being a part of a(n) org. you know, I just want to show support to every other org. just because I know how to is like trying to from personal experiences like before I even got to college with trying to do things and then not getting the support I need.

King's interview indicated that his leadership role in a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) positively affected his interaction with other student organizations on campus and with his peers. Kimbrough and Hutchenson (1998), as noted in Chapter Two of this study, argued that being an officer (president, vice president, etc.) in a BGLO affords those students opportunities to use those skills acquired from being an officer, in the

classroom, while living on campus, etc. In other words, being an officer in a BGLO equips the student to become a leader with skills that can be used not only on campus but professionally and socially.

King also voiced that he would like to, before graduation, become part of other organizations on campus:

I do want to be more involved with other orgs just to say like I've done more just outside of being in [fraternity], I would want to do more on campus outside of just that.

King very eloquently expressed how his relationship with the university and bond with his peers was developed.

So that's how I build my connection, because everybody only knew me as just that one [fraternity] who always be sitting in the OC by himself and because people will see me, and I never would see anybody else. So, when I started to make more friends and people like, yeah, we always saw you, but we didn't know if you wanted to be approached. And I'm like this. I needed friends at the time, so it would be perfect if they woulda came to me sooner.

In general, King's experiences with campus engagement validates what the literature regarding Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) membership discussed in chapter two of this dissertation. His position as an officer of his fraternity, his desire to belong to other organizations on campus, and his support of his peers and other organizations align absolutely with a 2011 article written by Patton, et al. The authors asserted, in short, Black males who belonged to BGLOs were more racially aware, had deeper connections with their male peers, and had significant ties to the greater campus community.

One participant, Naomi, spoke of being actively involved in one organization but also about her frustration with another. She said: *I'm in a creative writing program. Oh, what else...the Black [major specific organization] but they haven't had a meeting at all. I'm like what's going on with y'all?* Naomi's experience, in comparison to King's, was not as robust. However, she did seem to express a desire to want to be more involved. Unfortunately, like some of the other participants, she expressed frustration and faced challenges in becoming more actively involved on campus.

Theme Three—Belonging: Maybe I Belong, Maybe I Don't, Nonetheless I'm Here

Sense of belonging “refers to the students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 8). Feeling welcomed, valued and/or respected is assessed and internalized by the student and in turn often elicits affective reactions or behaviors. These reactions and/or behaviors, in the academic setting, can be demonstrated as persistence, retention, and ultimately graduation. Previous research contended that a direct line can be drawn between how well a student succeeds and how welcomed, valued, respected, and supported they feel on their college campuses. To better understand if African American students enrolled at the university felt a sense of belonging the participants were directly asked: Do you feel like a valued member of the broader campus community? Why or why not?

The findings of this study were mixed at best. Their responses demonstrated varying degrees of belonging, ranging from non-existent to indifference to emphatic. Monet expressed that, unfortunately, she does not feel a sense of belonging at the

university. Her words were poignant and disheartening, “*I wouldn't even know what that would feel like at [Name of University].*” Further, she spoke about the lack of cultural and/or ethnic specific groups at the university that could foster sense of belonging. She explained, “*[Name of University] offers a lot less for those who want to find a specific cultural or ethnic community or organization or just sense of belonging at all.*”

Monet also spoke very candidly about how she feels that her Black friends are “tokenized” on campus. She harshly criticized the role she believes the university plays in the tokenization of her friends:

...the friends that I do have that are Black they almost kind of I get the feeling that they're more viewed as like the token Black person. It's like how we got one. We're good. We're off the hook and not, as a you know, genuine human being, at least here, just like all of us. It's more of a okay cool. So, we're set...we've got our cover for next year's pamphlet and you know we'll get. We'll get their information, so we can make sure that they're like sitting around campus when we bring in prospective students. But, other than that we're good. Thank you. Keep paying us, and you can keep going the class.

Monet had very strong opinions when we discussed this matter. She truly believed that the university “used” the few Black students on campus as a way to market the campus as more diverse than she perceived it to be. She strongly felt that this type of marketing was intentional and detrimental to Black students who might be considering enrolling in the future.

Thelma, a transfer student from a local community college, shared a similar sentiment. She pointed out that the community college that she had transferred from was

also a PWI. Her mention of this issue suggests that she was aware of the similarity in institutional types and how her race might have played a role in her experience:

There is definitely a disconnect. I do not feel as like I am a part...of an educational institution at all. I felt more valued at [community college]. I graduated from there with my Associates degree and that was a very predominantly white school, but I felt more of a valued student there than I did here than I currently do here.

Thelma seemed to understand that sense of belonging was in some way related to building a community and that doing so enhanced or influenced experiences on campus. She also seemed to desire sense of belonging but opined that her needs were not being met:

But, when it, when it comes to some culture or community that that presence is needed in our educational experience, right? Like like I, I need certain things, and I know what I need, and it's just not happening here at this time.

Kamala, also a transfer student, spoke about having good experiences with her peers and faculty but her connection to the greater campus community was something that had not yet been developed. She stated, “...even though I am in school and I have you know these wonderful classmates and professors. I still haven't found my place here.” Plainly stated, Thelma and Kamala expressed that they did not fully feel welcomed, valued, respected, or appreciated by the university. In other words, they did not have a strong sense of belonging. Both participants seemed to be aware of what elements influenced sense of belonging but acknowledged that they, thus far, had not experienced it while enrolled at the university.

Ketanji revealed to me that she did not feel that she belonged at the university and shared one of the most heartbreaking moments of any of the interviews I conducted. She stated, “No, not really. Yeah, I think honestly, I think I feel like if I drop out and like I don't even think people would even realize that I've like left the school. It's been a pretty lonely experience here.” Denise also seemed unsure and/or indifferent about whether she felt a sense of belonging. She was clear about one thing and that was her reason for being a student at the university. She seemed to have no desire to foster friendships but also intimated feeling isolated:

[I] feel like I'm not but how can I say this...it doesn't really bother me too much, because, like I'm only there, for one thing, just to you know, get my degree, and, you know, find a career that's about it. I don't really care to like, make friends or acquaintances and stuff like that but I would feel better like if I'm able to like talk to people sometimes. I would probably recommend people attend [Name of University], but I would inform them like you might depending on your major you might feel kind of alone

The feelings these two participants expressed about their experiences -- feeling as if no one cared about their overall well-being as a student and their desire to have a peer group or someone to form a bond with but not being able to cultivate those connections -- were disheartening. As a higher education professional, it was hard to hear the loneliness each of them articulated during our conversation.

Finally, Naomi was adamant that she belonged at the university. Her explanation is interesting as she cited both difficulties from her past and perseverance as the reasons why she felt this way. She made no mention of the role the university played in her

feeling of belonging. She said, “*I feel like I've been through so much being at [name of university]. I belong. I'm where I should be where I was supposed to be. I fought to get my spot here. So, I belong.*” In general, this view suggests that the conventional ways in which we view sense of belonging may not apply to a certain group of students. Those students who are determined, in the face of adversity, to succeed academically and persist to graduation may feel belonging in another way not yet defined or studied. Or, it could be that students like Naomi’s sense of belonging is more determined by their inner strengths and capabilities than external factors such as campus climate, and student engagement.

The Diversity Center

Two of the study participants spoke of one particular place on campus that they felt was significantly important to fostering Black students’ sense of belonging. Both Naomi and King described the Diversity Center as a haven for Black students and its staff as supportive. Naomi talked about the Diversity Center as being a place where Black students felt protected.

The [Diversity Center] is kind of like a safe space for the African American students but if the campus could really like endorse [Diversity Center] like they...then maybe it'd be like more of a sense of belonging for the Black students. they really don't promote the [Diversity Center] ...they promote gender and sexuality. They promote stuff like that, but they don't promote [Diversity Center].

Moreover, she recommended that the university provide additional resources to the Diversity Center. She felt that this commitment would, in some way, help the center broaden its reach to other African American students on campus thus offering an

opportunity for those students to foster a connection to the university. She also felt that the university did not support the Diversity Center as much as it did centers for other marginalized students, such as The Gender and Sexuality Center.

King also talked about the Diversity Center as a place where Black students felt safe, welcomed, and supported. Additionally, he drew a direct correlation between his interaction with the center and his sense of belonging:

A lot of Black students on campus go to the [Diversity Center] they feel validated on campus because they get help from the staff there. I'll say my connection to the school came from the [Diversity Center]. They were caring about the students here enough to make sure that we stayed on track even if they didn't have to. So, the time [staff member] took out to meet me and get to know me more just to come out and help me more that meant a lot to me.

King's ability to interpret his interactions with the center and its staff to his belongingness signifies the importance of not only centers like the one on campus but the need for departments, faculty, and staff *across* campus that foster these types of experiences for African American students.

Although only two participants mentioned the Diversity Center by name, it is important to note that the center is widely recognized by African American students on campus which aligns with previous research that indicated that Black students often seek support from these types of cultural centers (Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011). Because of the importance of these types of centers on Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) and how passionately the two participants spoke about the Diversity Center, I felt it important to include their experiences in this chapter.

Theme Four —Why Am I Still Here?

Study participants were asked “what factors do you believe have contributed to your success” to uncover what influences they felt had contributed to their persistence. In other words, I wanted to know what had gotten them from their first year through their third year. Additionally, I also sought to know what, if any role, the institution, their engagement on campus, their relationships with peers and faculty, and their sense of belonging played in their remaining enrolled at the university. Responses to this question brought out the theme: why am I still here.

This study found that the participants’ reasons for continuing to remain enrolled at the university were diverse. Although there was no singular factor that influenced their retention there were some commonalities. Those commonalities included: family, community outside of the university, and themselves. Only one respondent mentioned the university (faculty, staff, or administration) as influencing their persistence.

During our discussions, a subtheme began to emerge when many of the participants started talking about perseverance in the face of adversity. Their determination can be defined as resilience. Resilience is defined by Merriam-Webster as “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.” Morales and Trotman (2004) defined academic resilience as “the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been academically successful, despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same background from succeeding.” In their article, they included race/ethnicity, among other things, as a risk factor or vulnerability that may impede a student’s academic success. A student’s ability to overcome a

vulnerability presents itself as resilience. The findings of this study indicated that even though the participants faced many challenges they were resilient.

Two of the participants, Thelma and King, spoke in depth about the challenges they had faced while enrolled at the university. Both respondents indicated that *they* were the source of their inspiration. At the time of the interview, Thelma had recently been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). Among the diagnosis she revealed other difficulties she faced and was determined to overcome:

It's all self-motivation, all self-motivation, you know. And, now finding out with my A.D.D that it's, you know, it's hard for me to focus and all these other things is happening to me is really hard. So, it's all just self-motivation. It's just self-motivation, every single thing I do, everything that I do is self-motivation. I have no other way to do it.

King also spoke about being self-motivated to succeed academically. He shared a conversation that he had with his mother and how that led him to an “I’ll show you” moment:

Well, my biggest one [motivation] is myself. I'm like, I'm not saying I'm not doing this for myself but I remember talking with my mom like last year...I don't think she meant it like she didn't have faith in me doing it but when she said that I was like, okay, now I gotta prove you wrong and that's been my biggest problem with someone telling me...I can't do something...I gotta do this because you did not just doubt me like that. The only person could ever tell me I can't do something outside of God is me that[s], it only I can tell myself I can't do something. If

someone else tell[s] me you will never do this or you can't do that. Okay. Now I gotta show you.

What King was expressing was what is commonly known in the Black community as “I can show you better than I can tell you.” In other words, the best way to tell him that he could not do something was to doubt him.

Naomi reflected on the challenges she faced during her time at the university. Although she did not directly define her ability to overcome these difficulties as self-motivation, it is easy to come to that conclusion:

Well, I'm still youngish. [It's] just when you're in high school you're just over dramatic for no reason, life will go on. But I feel like to an extent, it was meant for me to go to [Name of University]. That [It] was meant for me to get waitlisted. It was meant for me to go through all of the challenges that I went [through] because I wouldn't be the person I am today, because your journey is what shapes you into, who you are, and it without the journey, without the wait listing, without the crazy roommates, without the weird TAs, I wouldn't be in a position that I am today. And, I wouldn't be happy with myself, and I wouldn't have these 2 internships.

She also reflected on how her faith played a role in her journey:

I'm real patient. It took me a while, because at first, like I told you back in senior year of high school. I was impatient like: Why am I not getting this? Why? Why? Why? Sometimes God will put you in a position where you just have to stand there and be still and say, well, I'll be patient for as long as it takes in order for you to bless me...God will shake your beliefs. And have you stand in a period where

nothing is really going on with your life. But then He'll come out of the blue and bless you and you really appreciate it...It hits different because you look at your journey, you look at everything that you've been through and you just say to yourself like: wow! I've been through so many things at [Name of University] and I could have just gave up...but I kept going the course and honestly, at the end, it worked out for me.

Naomi was one of the only participants to speak of how deeply faith guided her determination to remain enrolled at the university. Her previous challenges during her enrollment, I suspect, caused her to lean more on her faith, thus increasing the motivation she felt from within to continue.

Ketanji reflected on how her family instilled in her the significance of education. She credits conversations with her family as contributing to her resilience:

Really, my mom and my dad have always talked about how important academics are, and at the end of the day, like college, you do go to get experiences. But you what you really want is the degree at the end and so I'm like, well, it hasn't turned out the way I wanted it socially, but I can still get the degree. I talk to my family a lot and that has really helped me continue. So, even when I don't feel great up here, I know I can call on my mom...I've really started talking to my aunt a lot lately, so I think just like the degree is really like because I don't really...anything else I would do if I dropped out of school. So, it's like that's really what I need.

In articulating the role her family has played in her academic endeavors, Ketanji also expressed how the journey has not always been easy. For example, she mentioned how

the social things have not gone as well as she had envisioned yet even in those instances she leaned on her family for support.

Kamala discussed how the support of Black women in her community, particularly at work, supported and inspired her to continue pursuing her education:

Support from my family support from my friends, my friends, knowing like, hey, I can't go to every function...sometimes I have to stay home and finish work or study for exam...Support from my coworkers, who are already social workers in the field like hey, you can do this is there, you know I can help you out if you don't understand this or that, it's that community...I think the support from seeing Black women come together and help other Black women like, hey, we're in this with you, we're going to ride this out with you...is what's been keeping me going. Because it's plenty of times, I'm like, you know what, this is not for me...So, it's really been that support from our community that's my keeping me going, it really has.

It is important to note that when Kamala referred to *our* community, she was referring to the Black community. Attributing her academic success to her community which included family, friends, and co-workers, seems to align with the theory that students who have a strong support system or community like Kamala, often feel a deeper sense of belonging (Hausmann, Schofield and Woods, 2007).

Summary of Findings

The students who participated in this study were honest, candid, and open when discussing their experiences as African American students enrolled at a Predominately White Institution (PWI). In many instances, they were aware of how race affected their

interaction with faculty, staff, and peers. In other instances, the participants were unsure or indifferent about their experiences in the classroom, on campus in general, and with their fellow classmates.

The findings indicated that their views of the campus climate were at best lukewarm. The respondents expressed feeling isolated and excluded because of their race. These feelings are often indicators of an inhospitable campus climate. It is important to reiterate that the students who agreed to participate in this study had achieved junior standing at the time of the interview, therefore, it is safe to conclude that the campus climate was not the sole reason for their remaining enrolled at the university.

The study participants found it challenging to become involved on campus i.e., being a member of a student organization, participating in campus events/activities, etc. Many expressed that they felt that the university intentionally made it difficult for them to engage outside of the classroom. The participants believed that their race and age affected their ability to actively engaged on campus.

Most of the students who participated in this study communicated that they did not feel a sense of belonging at the university. Those who did indicate feeling welcomed, supported, and respected cited reasons that did not align with previous research. Those reasons included: self, grit, and determination. This study found that each of the participants had faced some challenges during their time at the university. Despite these challenges, they were able to forge ahead. They credited their resilience to their families, community support, and self. Despite a tepid campus climate, minimal student engagement, and a lack of sense of belonging, the students who graciously participated in this study are determined to graduate. The participants have overcome personal

challenges, feelings of isolation on campus, microaggressions in the classroom, and less than helpful staff—they persist, and they are resilient.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to gain a richer understanding of the experiences of third-year undergraduate African American students, and what specific factors they attributed to their persistence. Using Hermeneutic Phenomenology as a qualitative approach, I collected data first by distributing a pre-interview survey, and then by conducting a series of one-hour semi-structured interviews. This chapter briefly discusses the findings presented in Chapter Four, implications, limitations, recommendations for future studies, and a reflection from the researcher.

My research question sought to uncover the ways and means, if any, by which African American students engage in meaningful activities outside of the classroom at a PWI that foster sense of belonging; and, the connectedness between sense of belonging and their persistence. The open-ended interview prompts were designed to create conversations between me and the participants about 1) campus climate, 2) student engagement, 3) sense of belonging, and 4) if the participants felt that race had affected their experiences on campus. As indicated in the previous chapters and in prior studies, campus climate, student engagement and sense of belonging, are essential to the academic success of African American students enrolled at PWIs.

Discussion of Findings

Chapter Four of this study spoke to three key elements: campus climate, student engagement and sense of belonging, and also included a discussion on resilience. The “Discussion of Findings” section of this chapter will summarize these key factors/themes,

the subthemes that emerged from the central theme, and how they do or do not align with the previous literature.

Campus Climate

In 2017 the university conducted a climate survey, per the website, the purpose of the survey was to assess how different stakeholders (students, faculty, staff) viewed the university's inclusiveness, friendliness, level of diversity, extent of cooperation, and other elements of the climate viewed to be needed for a positive learning and work environment. The survey found that when examining two primary components -- "belongingness and personal identity" and "diversity" -- African American students rated these elements lower than other students on campus. This finding was consistent with literature that indicated that African American students often view campus climate differently than their White cohort(s). My findings confirmed both the previous studies and the 2017 climate survey conducted by the university.

One sub-theme in the findings concerned the experience of "being Black on campus." The participants conveyed feelings of isolation and exclusion on campus in general and in the classroom. They were particularly vocal about their interactions with White students in the classroom setting. They spoke about often being the only Black student in class with White students who either would not sit next to them or did not include them in classroom discussions. The participants felt a sense of isolation while in class.

In addition to the participants expressing feeling isolated in the classroom, participants conveyed experiencing discrimination from White students in the classroom and having superficial peer-to-peer interactions with White students on campus. Further,

the study participants did not seem to have meaningful “peer-ships” with same-race students either. Most of the participants seemed indifferent about developing friendships on campus within their peer group. A study conducted by Paton et al. (2011) peer asserted that peer-to-peer interaction was the most important factor in the most important factor in the development of undergraduate students. Additionally, Johnson et al. (2007) concluded that college persistence and completion are directly related to positive peer-to-peer relationships. These studies indicated a these types of interactions were important, however, this study found that they were not *necessary* as the participants did not report having had positive interactions with their White peers or meaningful friendships with other Black students, they were able to persist as they had reached junior standing at the time the interviews were conducted.

Another sub-theme that emerged from the conversations was that the campus felt more non-traditional than traditional. Chapter four of this study defines a traditional campus as being primarily a residential campus with students who are between the ages of 18 and 24. Most of the participants self-identified as adult learners who commuted to campus. As with the previous, sub-theme Being Black on Campus, participants felt isolated and not included. They also expressed concern regarding university programming that they felt was intended for younger students, who lived on campus and were White.

I found that the participants felt disconnected from the university because it is primarily a non-traditional campus with little diversity. The participants, in sum, perceive the campus as unwelcoming because of their race, age, and non-residential status. This finding confirms and challenges the previous research. Past studies, conducted by

O'Keeffe (2013), Thomas et al. (2014), and others, asserted that African American students who perceived their college campus as inhospitable often left those campuses prior to graduation, yet contrary to those investigations, the students who participated in this study remain enrolled. The study participants of this study, consistent with the earlier research, regarded the campus climate less favorably than their White peers. This assertion was confirmed by the climate survey conducted by the university in 2017 and the previous studies conducted by Thomas et al. (2014), Allen (1992), and other researchers.

The subtheme, faculty, arose during the interviews as we discussed the overall campus climate. Study participants voiced concern regarding their interaction with members of the faculty and were able to articulate how these interactions affected their experiences in the classroom. It was difficult to draw any finite conclusions as the students had interfaces with members of the faculty that ranged from non-existent to adequate to unprofessional. Thomas et al. (2014) contended that African American students often find it challenging to build positive relationships with members of the faculty. Yet, they argued, that these relationships play a pivotal role in the academic success of this student group. Most of the study participants' interactions with faculty corroborate these assertions. Additionally, the findings of this study are aligned with Allen (1992) who argued that African American students who were enrolled at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) often reported having less than favorable contact with members of faculty and that as a result they felt alienated, isolated, discriminated against because of their race and did not feel part of the campus community.

Thomas et al. (2014) argued that although Black students found it challenging to build positive relationships between themselves and White faculty members they viewed their relationships with Black faculty more favorably. According to Thomas, et al. (2014) and Guiffrida and Douthit (2010), respectively, Black students perceived African American professors as being more concerned about their academic success and willing to avail themselves to them inside and outside of the classroom. The findings of this study substantiate these earlier investigations. Chapter Four of this study details how enthusiastic the participants were about either having a Black professor in the past or how eager they were to have a Black professor in an upcoming semester. Not surprisingly, hiring more Black faculty was the number one recommendation the students advocated for during the interviews, which further emphasizes how important a diverse faculty pool is to this student population and that they are aware of their race and how it shapes their view of the world and how they navigate within it. With the exception of Sense of Belonging, Faculty was the topic most discussed during the interviews.

Academic advising emerged unexpectedly during the interviews and is the last of the campus climate subthemes. Advising was not discussed in Chapter Two of this study. However, a discussion regarding this subtheme was included in Chapter Four and will be included in the recommendations section of this chapter. I found that participants reported having had little to no contact with their academic advisor(s). This finding is concerning as a previous study indicated that academic advising is vital to student success and retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Additionally, the participants indicated that they had been able to meet the general education and major requirements without the assistance of their academic advisor. The respondents stated that they were

able to find the information they needed to plan their classes, etc. by using the university's website. The students who participated in this study seem to be indicating that they do not need the assistance of an academic advisor. This finding is also of concern as it conflicts with the previous research of Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), Ford et al (2023), and others.

Student Engagement

For my study student engagement was defined as participation in meaningful activities inside and outside of the classroom which could lead to positive academic outcomes such as persistence and graduation. The well-known work of Astin (1984) and Kuh (1991, 1993, 1995) established the foundation for the contemporary studies on student engagement conducted by Harper (2007), Guiffrida and Douthit (2010), Patton, et al (2011), and others. These previous studies, in essence, deduced that student engagement was a critical component of the academic success of students. Moreover, the research of Harper (2007), Guiffrida and Douthit (2010), and Patton, et al (2011) placed a particular emphasis on the student engagement of Black students and how these activities contributed to their sense of belonging and persistence.

My findings indicate that the participants faced challenges finding ways to be engaged on campus. Participants talked about how they felt the university offered programs or had established organizations that excluded them because of their race and/or age. Though indirectly, this finding is validated by Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) when they stated: "Black and other underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students at PWIs socially integrate mostly through more formal associations, such as those inherent among members of racial/ethnic minority organizations" (p. 314). Examples of

racial/ethnic minority organizations include Black Greek Letter Organizations, campus chapters of the National Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Black Student Union. Involvement in these types of organizations, according to Museus and Quaye (2009), “facilitated the adjustment and membership of those students of color in college by functioning as spaces that provide cultural familiarity, vehicles for cultural advocacy and expression, and cultural validation” (p. 71). The findings of this study essentially validate the studies of the previous researchers.

A subtheme that emerged from the larger theme of student engagement was: “I’m Engaged Therefore I’m Connected.”. This study found that engagement may matter to and make a difference in the experiences of *some* students. However, my data did not allow me to determine if participation in out-of-classroom activities had a significant impact on the academic success of the study participants. According to Harper (2007), Black Greek Letter Organizations have historically been the first organizations African American students seek as a way to become involved while enrolled at Predominately White Institutions. Black Greek Letter Organizations, according to previous studies, often increase the self-esteem of its members and decrease feelings of isolation and alienation.

Additionally, Patton, et al (2011) found that Black males who were members of a historically Black fraternity reported more racial awareness, more meaningful relationships with their peer group, and a deeper sense of belonging. The only male participant in this study was tremendously involved on campus. He was most active as a member of a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO), in fact, he was an officer of his fraternity. He was able to articulate how his active participation in his fraternity and on campus in general attributed to his sense of belonging and persistence. As he was the

only participant in this study who was actively engaged in a student organization and involved in other ways on campus, it is difficult to know if he is an anomaly or if the findings of this study are conclusive. However, it can be asserted that the aforementioned research applies to his experience.

Belonging

Allen conducted a study in 1992 that posited that African American students' chances of succeeding at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) were increased when they felt a sense of belonging. He stated: "feelings of psychological comfort and belonging and a sense of empowerment/ownership—a sense that 'this is our campus'" was imperative for Black students on (predominately) White campuses. However, many of the participants of this study overwhelmingly indicated that they felt no sense of belonging or connection to the university. This finding does not imply that sense of belonging is unimportant to Black students enrolled at PWIs or the participants of my study, however, yet despite feeling no sense of belonging, these students remained enrolled and, at the time of the interview, considered themselves academically successful.

An additional finding from my data was that the participants viewed their experiences on campus as a means to an end. This finding, in concert with not feeling they belonged on campus, is validated by Jacoby and Garland (2005). Their study contended that "students who do not have a sense of belonging complain that their college experience is like 'stopping by the mall' to get what they need on the way to somewhere else" (p. 65). This study, unfortunately, was unable to uncover why the participants remained enrolled at the university, given what research has found about sense of belonging and how it influences persistence.

One of the objectives of this research was to better define sense of belonging for higher education professionals, as previous studies had not been able to do so. Strayhorn (2012) described sense of belonging as “one term with many meanings” (p.8). Other researchers such as Thomas, et al (2014) attempted to define sense of belonging as the degree to which the student felt valued, welcomed, respected, and supported on campus and by the campus community. Unfortunately, based on my findings from this dissertation, I was unable to develop a more concise definition of sense of belonging. This lack of a definition may have occurred, in part because the students who participated in this study indicated not having a sense of belonging on campus. Or, perhaps, those who may have felt some sense of belonging were unable to articulate their belonging. Sense of belonging as a feeling, concept, or topic was excerpted from the participant interviews more than any other theme/code and is illustrated in Figure 5.1 on the next page. This figure provides a visual representation of the words and phrases that formed themes across the interviews. In this figure, the larger the text, the more that particular concept was raised as an issue or area of importance for the participants of this study.

Figure 5.1
Packed Code Cloud



Why Am I Still Here?

The fourth and final theme that emerged from this study was “Why am I still here?” This theme sprang forth from a question that sought to uncover what each participant believed had contributed to their academic success. Participants credited their continued enrollment at the university to many factors including family, friends, and themselves. As described in Chapter Four, only one participant attributed their persistence to institutional support from faculty, administration, or staff of the university. The participants displayed tenacity, an unwavering determination to complete their education despite adversity, and thus an unexpected subtheme emerged—resilience. Although I had expected that some level of self-determination would factor into the study participants’ reasons for remaining enrolled, I had not anticipated that resilience would play such a role in their experiences. As a result, it was not included in the literature review of this dissertation.

The findings of this study showed that no one factor could be determined as the sole reason why the participants remained enrolled at the university. The factors they did speak of may be supported by previous research, however, because this particular subtheme emerged unexpectedly, a review of the literature regarding this matter was not included in Chapter Two of my study. For example, a study conducted by Rendón et al. (2000) titled “Theoretical Considerations in the Study of Minority Student Retention in Higher Education” might shed some light on the participants’ citing the support of family and coworkers as their reason(s) for continued enrollment. Moreover, student

development and/or motivation theories might address the respondents' specifying self-motivation as the driving force behind their persistence.

I found that the participants faced challenges such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), racism, a less-than-welcoming campus climate, and personal challenges yet they remained enrolled at the university and were determined to graduate. But in addition to these factors, the experience of attending a PWI, at which they experienced isolation and no sense of belonging, was frequently the adverse condition that required resilience. What the participants described regarding their experiences at the university and their commitment to complete their education despite those obstacles can only be defined as such and therefore is included here in this section.

Implications

My findings indicate significant implications that higher education professionals may want to consider as they seek to improve the overall experiences of African American students enrolled at Predominately White Institutions. I found that the campus climate, which includes faculty, staff, and students, is less than welcoming to the students who participated in this study. At a minimum, the campus climate should be closely examined to assist in ensuring that all students feel welcomed, valued, and respected on campus. Moreover, the faculty should be encouraged to, for example, include Culturally Responsive Teaching (Adams et al., 2007) in their pedagogical style. Culturally Responsive Teaching, according to Heitner and Jennings (2016), denoted:

...valuing cultural differences; challenging stereotypes, racism, prejudice, oppression, intolerance, and injustice; using cultural knowledge to guide pedagogy; mediating classroom inequities in power stemming from culture, class,

race, and other disparities; and embracing cultural responsiveness as integral to educational effectiveness for all students. (p. 56)

Encouraging faculty to implement this type of teaching could enable the creation of a more welcoming classroom environment for African American students.

Additionally, and supported by the literature, I would encourage the university to hire more faculty of color (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Hiring more Black faculty was one of the recommendations my study participants offered during the interviews. For example, “King” said: *“For one, I’ll say hire more Black staff only because I said Black Professors...”* “Ketanji” also called for the university to hire more faculty of color. She stated it this way: *“I would love to see Black professors and all kinds of race for professors. I think we could definitely diversify on the faculty that we have here.”* These are just two examples of how the participants spoke on their desire to have faculty members who look like them. However, I argue, and previous research contends that Black students more often than not find it difficult to develop *positive* relationships with faculty members that do not look like them and that they perceive those same faculty members as viewing them in a stereotypical way. For this reason, hiring more Black faculty and retaining them is of great importance.

The study participants indicated that it was difficult to find ways to be engaged on campus. Student engagement in out-of-classroom activities and student organizations has, according to prior research, a positive influence on student outcomes. Therefore, it is imperative that university administrators effectively (1) communicate to students the organizations that are available for them to join, (2) make clear how they might join these organizations, and (3) remove any barriers or obstacles to them becoming involved and

engaged on campus in ways that are most comfortable to them. Additionally, I would recommend that the university consider implementing programming and organizations that are marketed to and serve the adult learner. This issue was particularly important to “Kamala” who said: *I think that there should be more organizations for either you know, older learners or adult students...because being 40 years old and going to the same events as a 20-year-old, we're not going to have much in common...we don't have anything that makes us feel engaged. That makes us feel part of the university because there's nothing that's geared towards us.*” Given the demographics of the student population of the university, 23% of all undergraduate students are between the ages of twenty-three and thirty-four and 87% of all students live off campus, the university should at minimum reevaluate its engagement strategies when it comes to this student group.

The university espouses a sense of belonging for all of its students as a pillar of its mission and vision. However, the students who participated in this study either did not feel that they belonged at the university or were unable to express their belonging. The implications are two-fold. First, the university needs to find a way to accurately assess how African American students feel about *their* campus. These students need to be given the space to honestly communicate how they truly feel about their experiences in and out of the classroom. Interestingly, the students who participated in my study spoke of *physical* space for them to be in community with one another. “Naomi” expressed it this way:

I feel like it should be like a group that's created across campus. Maybe like a safe space where all Black students can come and talk, and you know, just talk

about their experiences and stuff because, you know like I said before, you have to get in where you fit in and stuff like that.

Kamala shared a similar sentiment: *a safe space to say how we feel...we can say how is your experience going this year? Do you have anything that we need to get together and say, hey, this maybe this needs to change where it pertains to us...*” Second, a more accurate definition of sense of belonging needs to be conveyed to both professionals and students so that each group can assess and articulate it. Without a proper assessment and a more accurate definition, higher education professionals will be unable to provide program enhancements and resources to students that will cultivate and foster sense of belonging.

Limitations

As a phenomenologist, it was important for me to not only capture the lived experiences of my participants but to share those experiences with others i.e., higher education professionals, faculty, staff, and the participants’ peers. Additionally, one of the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) commands that the lived experiences of those who have been marginalized be seen and heard. I had high hopes when, initially, thirty-one students completed the pre-interview survey and every intention to interview 10 participants. However, as is often the case with qualitative research, I had to pivot. The 7 students who did agree to participate in my study were candid and open to sharing their experiences and deserve to be heard. However, there could be certain areas where some perspectives are not being heard. For example: there was only one male student, there was more than one transfer student, four of the seven participants were not living or had never lived on campus, three of the seven participants self-reported being over the age of

twenty-four and one participant self-reported “I am Black, however, I am White presenting.” I discuss each of these issues below.

Having only one male participant limited the voices of the student population I sought to capture. Although the experiences “King” shared with me were invaluable to the study, those experiences only encapsulate a single male voice. Adding the voices of other third-year undergraduate Black male students would have either supported his experiences or shown differences in the specific engagement opportunities for Black male students on campus. Either way, it would have enhanced the study’s findings regarding sense of belonging and the overall Black students’ experience at a Predominately White Institution (PWI).

Another limitation was that three of the seven participants were transfer students. This is consistent with the percentage of transfer students the university most recently reported on its website. It was difficult to determine the degree of student engagement and sense of belonging at their previous institutions, as it was not part of my study. Further, my decision to talk with third-year undergraduates was made in part because I felt they would have had enough experience at the university to be able to report on their experiences. Transfer students, by definition, had less history with the institution. It is possible that this limitation did not at all influence the findings of this study. However, it is plausible that the experiences of a student who has only been enrolled at one institution versus a student who has transferred from another institution might be different. Additionally, the type of institution that the student transfers from might also play a role in that student’s experience at the new institution. For example, one participant had transferred from a Historically Black College/University (HBCU). It is safe to assume

that her experiences at the HBCU were much different from her interactions at the PWI she was enrolled in during the time of this study.

Many of the study participants reported that they had not ever or did not currently live in the residence halls on campus. I note this pattern as a limitation because previous studies hypothesized that staying on campus, particularly in living communities, enriched the sense of belonging for African American students who were enrolled at PWIs. With over half of the study participants indicating they did not live on campus; it is hard to determine if the previous research is aligned or misaligned with the outcomes of this study.

This study defined a traditional college-aged student as someone between the ages of 18 and 24. Three of the participants self-reported being over the age of 24. One participant did not self-report her age, however, she did speak of being an “older” student during our interview. The age of the participants was probably not unique to this campus. However, the experiences of older students are presumably different from those who entered college right out of high school. Because the study had nearly equal numbers of participants who were traditional and non-traditional, the voices of either group may not have been evenly expressed.

The last, and most interesting, limitation of this study was that I interviewed one participant who identified as Black but presents as White. Monet’s” unique perspective and experiences could be a study all its own. She is able to move in and out of spaces because of her presentation that the other participants are unable to. She was able to be simultaneously a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves and voiceless in her own marginalization.

Recommendations for Future Study

One of the purposes of this study was to offer a better definition of sense of belonging. I sought to provide this definition to and for the African American students enrolled at Predominately White Institutions and the higher educational professionals that serve them. An additional study that focuses solely on defining sense of belonging with a larger sample size that includes more Black male students might provide a deeper understanding of sense of belonging *and* more narrowly define this phenomenon.

Student engagement on a campus that is primarily a commuter campus with non-traditional-aged students would be a valuable study that could be conducted in the future. Such a focus could broaden our understanding of the types of programming and student organizations older, non-residential students would want to participate in and become a part of while informing higher educational professionals of the needs of this student population.

The number one recommendation this study's participants made was a plea to the university to hire more Black faculty members. A future study regarding the role Black faculty members play in the experiences of African American students at this university could lend itself useful to the institution's hiring policies and practices, enhance the experiences of all students, and increase the diversity of both the faculty and student population. Additionally, the findings of such a study could uncover how hiring faculty who look like the students in the classroom influences those students' experiences and their sense of belonging.

Lastly, this study unexpectedly uncovered the resilience of the participants. A future study on belonging of African American students enrolled at a PWI focusing on

resilience could deepen the academy's interpretation of this student population's motivation to overcome academic and personal challenges. A study that focuses on belonging that includes the resilience of African American students could also lead to the creation of practices and programming aimed to enhance their experiences on campus. This study interviewed third-year undergraduate students, future studies might include participants either entering their fourth year or who have recently graduated.

Researcher Reflection

As a researcher, I chose phenomenology as a research method because it allowed me to be reflexive before and after the process and to be transparent with my study participants. During each interview, I shared with the participants my own experience at a Predominately White Institution (PWI) which happens to be a "sister" institution to the university they were enrolled at during the time of the interview. I shared with them that the PWI I attended was not my first choice and that I had intended to attend a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). We discussed how I had made friends, became involved with student organizations on campus, and was a Resident Assistant during my sophomore year. I shared with them that there was one person, a Black male administrator, who saw something in me my freshman year on campus that I did not see in myself. That administrator pushed me to be involved and to build connections with the university. I would not recognize this experience as fostering my own sense of belonging until many years later.

As I interviewed the students who agreed to participate in my study, I became keenly aware that their experiences were vastly different from my own. This realization, honestly, saddened me. I was 18 when I went to college. I had lived in the dorms, I was

engaged on campus in student organizations, I had an administrator who had taken an interest in me, I made life-long friends with peers and I built a strong connection to the university that remains with me today. My participants, with the exception of King, had not. Not only had participants of this study not experienced college in the ways I did, they also seemed indifferent about their own experiences. That observation does not mean that they do not care about thriving academically and ultimately graduating -- they are invested in achieving those goals. However, being connected to the university outside of those goals seemed to be of no concern to them. Being reflexive before starting the study prepared me for the possibility that this issue might be the outcome, but it did not make it any easier to process.

In sharing their stories with me, each student was able to convey their “why.” They talked about who supported and encouraged them. They described their motivation to forge ahead. They discussed, candidly, the challenges that they faced during their enrollment at the university and how they overcame those difficulties. I admire their determination and it gave me hope for not only them but the students who will enroll in the future. Resilience is not something I thought about when embarking on this journey until I reflected on my own life’s journey compared to the stories of my study’s participants. Resilience, for most Black people, is not front of mind—it is ingrained in our being. Gospel artist, Donnie McClurkin, sang, “We fall down. But we get up.”. Black people have been falling down and getting up for centuries. The study participants are the epitome of this declaration and I could not be more honored that they allowed me to hear and share their stories.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of third-year African American students to gain a richer understanding of those experiences and to determine what factors the participants attributed to their academic persistence. Additionally, this study sought to uncover if there were any out-of-classroom activities and organizations (student engagement) in which the participants were involved in a meaningful way that fostered their sense of belonging. Further, I wanted to know if there was any correlation between sense of belonging and their persistence.

I demonstrated the need for further research regarding African American sense of belonging. Given the results of this study, such work may need to focus on their resilience, cultivating caring campus climates, and providing meaningful and easily accessible ways for African American students to be engaged.

APPENDIX A
IRB EXEMPTION LETTER



Institutional Review Board

Date: October 25, 2022

Study #: IRB-FY2023-51

Study Title: African American College Students' Sense of Belonging at a Predominately White Institution

Submission Type: Initial

IRB Decision: Exempt

Research Team:

MoNique Price

Julia Smith

Based on applicable federal regulations, the above referenced study has been determined to be Exempt, with the following categories:

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording). Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Letter and Consent Document:

This letter along with the two IRB approved (date-stamped) consent documents can be found in Cayuse in the Submission Details page under Letters and Attachments, respectively. Please make sure to use the most recent IRB approved version of the consent forms in consenting participants.

Permission from Research Sites:

Please note the following:

- This IRB exemption determination letter means that this research has met one or more of the federal criteria for exemption per 45 CFR 46.104- Exempt Research.
- Before the research is initiated, permission to conduct research at a given site must be obtained from all research locations listed in the IRB submission. You must keep copies of all such permission letters for your files.

- It is the responsibility of each researcher to follow all applicable policies and procedures of any outside institution where the research will be conducted.

Modifications:

Any changes to this exempt project must be reviewed by the IRB prior to initiation by submitting a MODIFICATION request. Do not collect data while the changes are being reviewed. Data collected during this time cannot be used in research.

Record Retention:

Exempt projects will be retained by the IRB office for three years after the last action on the project.

You are approved to start the research. Please retain a copy of this notification for your records. If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office.

Thank you.

The Oakland University IRB

APPENDIX B
PRE-INTERVIEW SURVEY

Pre-Interview Survey

I identify as:

☐ African American ☐ Black ☐ Either African American or Black ☐ Other ethnic group ☐ Other (please indicate):

I am (enter age in numbers):

I identify as Female ☐ Male ☐ Transgender Female ☐ Transgender Male ☐ Gender Variant/Non-Conforming ☐ Not Listed ☐ Prefer Not to Answer

My Pronouns are: ☐ She/Her/Hers ☐ He/Him/His ☐ They/Them ☐ Prefer Not to Answer

My current academic standing is:

☐ Freshman (0-27 credits) ☐ Sophomore (28-55 credits) ☐ Junior (56-90 credits) ☐ Senior (91 or more credits)

I am a:

☐ Full-time student (more than 12 credit hours/semester)
☐ Part-time student (less than 12 credit hours/semester)

I am a transfer student:

☐ Yes ☐ No

My major is:

I receive or have previously received financial aid (scholarships, grants, and/or loans):

☐ Yes ☐ No

My parents completed college (community college/4-year college or university):

☐ Yes ☐ No

I currently live or have lived in a Res Hall while enrolled at (Name of Institution):

☐ Yes ☐ No

I belong to one or more student organizations on campus:

☐ Yes ☐ No

Have any of your courses, while enrolled at (Name of University), included community-based or service learning projects? Examples include: volunteering at a local food bank, homeless shelter or organizing a blood drive

☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you had an internship, co-op or field placement during your enrollment at the university?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ I will prior to graduation

My interaction(s), as an African American/Black student, with the following groups are:

Peers: (1) Extremely good (2) Somewhat good (3) Neither good or bad (4) Somewhat bad (5) Extremely bad

Faculty: (1) Extremely good (2) Somewhat good (3) Neither good or bad (4) Somewhat bad (5) Extremely bad

Staff: (1) Extremely good (2) Somewhat good (3) Neither good or bad (4) Somewhat bad (5) Extremely bad

Are you willing to be interviewed if your background characteristics match the study parameters? ☐

Yes ☐ No

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

Introduction

Hello, my name is MoNique Price and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at Oakland University. I am currently conducting a research study in which I seek to examine what factors influence African American undergraduate students to successfully persist in pursuit of their undergraduate degrees. You have been selected to participate in my study based upon your answers to the pre-interview survey. If you are willing to participate further, please click on the link provided for further information.

Consent Statement for Voluntary Participation

This statement is intended to establish voluntary consent for participation in the study being conducted by MoNique Price, a doctoral candidate under the direction of Drs. Julia Smith and Jana Nidiffer in the Department of Educational Leadership in the School of Education and Human Services at Oakland University. The purpose of this study is to gain a richer understanding of the experiences of third-year undergraduate African American students, and what specific factors they attribute to their ability to have successfully remained enrolled. Participation in this study will require the completion of a pre-interview survey, an initial interview, and possibly one follow-up interview. The length of the interviews may vary and will be scheduled at your convenience. All information gathered from this project will be held in the strictest confidence and will only be seen by the researcher and her dissertation committee. The records of this study will be kept private. Any kind of report made public will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file. Agreeing to allow the use of information for the purpose of completing this research project is completely voluntary. Participants may choose to withdraw from participation at any time. If you have questions about this project, please contact MoNique Price at price2@oakland.edu.

Demographic Data

Name

Age

Gender

Full-time or part-time student

Anticipated date of graduation

Interview Questions (may change as the interview leads)

(semi structured, opened ended)

- Tell me about your experience as an undergraduate student
- What factors do you believe have contributed to your success?
- Describe your relationship(s) with other students on campus

- Describe your relationship(s) with one or more staff members on campus
- Do you have a relationship with one or more members of faculty?
 - Describe this/these relationships
- Do you take part in university traditions such as homecoming? Why or why not?
- Do you belong to any student organizations on campus? Why or why not?
- Do you feel like a valued member of the broader campus community? Why or why not?

Do you feel your race has affected your sense of belonging at the university?

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