DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

A QUALITATVE STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN

WOMEN ATTENDING PREDOMINANTLY WHITE UNIVERSITIES

MICHELE MITCHELL

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Michele Denise Mitchell

This work is dedicated to my family. My children Michael and Martina have set the example for me, by showing me that high academic goals can be obtained. I have encountered many bumps along the way and their encouragement carried me through. They are the best of me and have carried me on this journey to realize my dream. To my husband Tony, thank you for your quiet strength and belief in the unseen. To my parents, I greatly appreciate you for understanding why I was constantly missing in action. To all who encouraged me, believed in me and prayed for me I say thank you. Praise God for walking with me every step of the way.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

ABSTRACT

DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF EXPERIENCES AFRICAN AMERICIAN WOMEN

ATTENDING PREDOMINANTLY WHITE UNIVERSITIES

Michele Mitchell

Caroline L. Watts

African-American women are increasingly attending institutions of higher learning in general as well as gaining acceptance into predominantly White elite institutions. African-American students face a multitude of issues regarding adjustments and feeling out of place. The literature focusing on African-American women college experiences are based on information obtained by others to include but not limited to professors, student services staff and support staff. It is important to gain input directly from the experiences of this group of women, as they are not as prevalent as other groups in the literature. Their voices and insight have been somewhat absent in the discourse regarding their issues. In-depth interviews, focus groups and a survey were used to ask African-American women about their experiences. This qualitative phenomenological study draws on the experiences of African-American women attending a predominantly White elite university under the foundation of discourse surrounding race, class and gender (Hill-Collins, 2000). The purpose of this study was to give voice to their experiences, to better understand the experiences of this population and to use their voices to inform the field and assist universities with ways to better support them. The results of this study contribute by updating the existing research on this under recognized subgroup.

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CHAPTER 1

College Access

A quality education has frequently been viewed as having a significant impact on an individual's future. African-Americans, much like other ethnic groups have long valued education and viewed it as a pathway to a successful life for themselves and their families. Access to college for members from the African-American community has increased over the past decade (Allen, 1992). This has been seen as a direct response to the civil rights movement and as a remedy to problems of inequality commonly faced by African-American communities. However, there is an assumption, due to the media and some research that African-Americans come from dysfunctional families and are not interested in education, but instead are drawn to illegal activity and violence (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012).

Nonetheless, as an outgrowth of this expansion of higher educational opportunities many African-American students are attending universities with a predominantly White student population (Allen, 1992). These students face a variety of challenges, which schools often attempt to remedy. Even with this increased college attendance, the retention of these students can be a challenge for colleges. Some researchers suggest this challenge is due to significant differences between their experiences on campus and their community experiences (Coker, 2003; Watt, 2006). Many institutions of higher learning have implemented programs to combat the challenges faced by African-American students (Coker, 2003; Rosales & Person, 2004).

However, researchers suggest that traditional universities do not adequately address the issues faced by African-American students, especially women (Howard-Hamilton, 2005; Watt, 2006). Critical Race Theory (CRT) presents a structure for the study of the lived experiences of African-American women at predominantly White institutions. Critical Race Theory represents the work of researchers that test the methods in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American law and society (Crenshaw et.al, 1995). In this study using the foundation of Black Feminist Theory to highlight all the characteristics of experiences of African-American women attending predominantly institutions is crucial to understanding and analyzing the ways in which African-American women gain understanding of their unique location within the structure of society.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide a place to investigate and document the experiences of African-American women attending predominately White colleges. The focus will be on the experiences of African-American women, and the current responses of the colleges and universities in supporting African-American women. The current literature examines the differences in experiences of African-American women attending predominately White institutions of higher education and those attending predominately Black schools. This study is intended to provide new information that will offer guidance and strategic support for African-American women attending predominately White institutions. The present study explores these issues through the lenses of Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Theory to examine the following major questions:

Research Questions

Primary Research Question

What are the experiences of African-American women who attend predominantly white colleges and universities?

Secondary Questions

- What elements of support are implemented by predominantly White institutions to support African-American women?

- How do African-American women attending predominantly White institutions perceive these supports?

Rationale and Significance

My interest in this study is twofold. First, as a parent of an African-American woman who attended a predominantly White institution of higher education I want to have a deeper understanding of her challenging college years. Second, as an outgrowth of my work with school counselors in a majority minority school district where the majority of the African-American women high school graduates seek to attend predominantly White institutions, I feel a responsibility to help to prepare them for the challenges they may face. As an executive director of a department including counselors seeking to encourage and prepare young people to be college, career and citizen ready, I have listened to counselors, who have shared their concerns regarding their former students' successes and failures in college. Some shared concerns over what they viewed as their inability to adequately prepare students of color to assimilate into the social and academic fabric of college.

Professional school counselors verbalized that the experience of attending college appeared to be extremely difficult for African-American women when attending a school where they are in the minority. The majority of the former students expressing concerns previously attended predominantly White high schools. Multiple institutions did not seem to embrace the women students of color regarding dating, studying and making friends.

My dissertation study will expand the previous research in this area. There is a great deal of literature written about African-American women attending predominately White institutions (PWIs) of higher education, however much of the literature is 10 to 15 years old. A significant amount of the research indicates that African-American students attending PWIs generally have difficulty assimilating socially and academically (Allen, 1992). A conflict between African-American students' cultural and social values and traditional structures connected with PWI campuses has been attributed to the differences in college experiences of African-American and White students attending PWIs (Allen, 1992; Chavous, 2002). Research on the topic yields decades old literature, with current information only minimally available. This study seeks to fill the existing literature gap pertaining to the experiences and perceptions of African-American women studying at predominantly White institutions, largely regarding student supports. The findings will be able to inform the field by providing and making sense of the African-American woman's experiences in a predominantly White school. My goal was to ascertain the role played by traditional institutional structures. Specifically, I intend to examine the experiences of African-American women in PWIs and the role that the schools play regarding acceptance, support of their emotional and social development. I am interested in exploring the viewpoint of middle to upper middle class students after they have

completed at least one year of education at a predominately white institution. This is missing from the research to date.

Statement of the Problem- Evidence of a Growing Crisis

African-American women not only face barriers in gaining entry to higher education, but also undergo significant hardships during their college years. Traditionally speaking, many institutions of higher learning have been inaccessible to African-Americans with the exception of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Dahlvig, 2010). Some barriers were removed when Congress increased opportunities for African-Americans to attend the majority of higher education institutions in the 1960's. Accessibility, however, is not the only barrier in attaining an education. Undergraduate enrollment percentages of African-Americans in higher education are currently at an all-time high. While the numbers have increased, the overall four- year graduation rates remain consistently low, at approximately 24%. This is roughly 22 percentage points below their Caucasian counterparts. This figure extends itself to private colleges as well, where the graduation rate of African-American students at four-year private colleges is 45.0% compared to 66.6 % for White students (National Center of Education Statistics, 2015). It is important to consider the fact that as recently as 1995 approximately 70% of African-American students attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities. As recently as 2010, 11% of African-American women were attending HBCUs (Willie, 2003, NCES, 2009a).

It appears that the traditional climate and standard education pedagogy have been unsuccessful in creating an inclusive environment for previously marginalized students

(Harper & Antonio, 2008; Hughes & Howard- Hamilton, 2003). African-American students have not been deterred from attending traditional colleges as seen by the continued increase over the past twenty years. However, the lack of support may play a role in their relatively poor academic outcomes. African-American students made up an estimated 8% of college students in the 1990s and 14 % of the overall population of college students in 2011, an increase of 6 % (Condition of Education Study, 2011). More specifically, African-American women are attending colleges at significantly higher rates than previously; with about 89% of college-going African-American women attending predominately white institutions of learning (US Department of Education, 2011). A comparison between persistence rates of African-American students attending historically Black colleges (HBCUs) and those attending predominately White institutions (PWI's) yields vastly different results. Less than half of African-American students graduate from predominately White institutions, while 60% of African-American students graduate from HBCUs (Arminio et al., 2000). It is crucial that serious consideration be given to the study of the lives of African-American women attending PWIs.

While it is difficult for many students of color, African-American women endure a double bias, being a women and African-American, which presents them with a complex set of issues. Erik Erikson (1968) postulated that groups previously oppressed and unable to reap benefits of the dominant culture would incorporate negative images of themselves. While approximately 65.9 % of African-American women attain undergraduate degrees as compared to 34.1% of African-American males, a gap continues to persist between White and African-American college women (U.S. Department of Education 2010). While African-American women are enrolling in college

at increased rates, researchers note that many of the African-American women attending predominately White institutions often encounter social, emotional or academic barriers while on the path to graduation, which may have several consequences (Dahlvig, 2010,). A variety of factors may impact a student's experiences throughout her time attending a particular institution (Steele, 1992). While African-American women's graduation rates are higher than African-American males, in general, there is a gap in the rates regarding PWIs.

The above data are distressing as they interfere with African-American women feeling comfortable and confident that they can be successful and accepted within the school environment. Racial stereotypes created by faculty members' low expectations causes stereotype threats, which negatively impact college completion results (Johnson, 2012). Johnson-Newman suggests that faculty must be prepared to be in the forefront by promoting psychological development in African-American women without waiting for additional damage to be done to their self-esteem (Johnson-Newman & Excum, 1998). African-American women enrolled in PWIs have significant barriers that have a major impact on their ability to feel comfortable in the school environment. American history indicates that African-American women have been devalued in two distinct areas, race and gender. Societal messages, the media in particular, continually sends messages that frequently demean or negatively portray them (Johnson-Newman & Exum, 1998).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Barriers to Overcome

A multitude of research conducted in the recent past suggests that African-American students face incredible barriers while attending PWIs (Flowers, 2002; Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002; Lewis, Chester, & Forman, 2001). Barriers such as false perceptions, academic, social and financial struggles frequently leave students feeling marginalized without avenues for guidance at PWIs while in the middle of adjusting to new academic and social environments and expectations. Students feel left out while in the throes of adjusting to academic and social environments with expectations. Therefore, problems related to loneliness, indifference and lack of guidance on the part of college and university staff can be considered routine (Allen, 1992). This situation is an outgrowth of the perceived hostile racial campus climate at many PWIs (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). An institution's climate affects every facet, creating multiple paths through which these aforementioned roadblocks can significantly impede the student's collegiate success.

Theoretical Basis for Change

Significant literature has been published concerning the struggles of the significant number of African-American students seeking undergraduate degrees who attend predominantly White colleges and universities, approximately two-thirds of whom are African-American women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Race and socialization are two complex systems that work together and separately to impact the

experiences of college students. The literature review will provide an overview of Critical Race, Socialization, and Loevinger's Theories. The literature review will also examine the literature on the experiences of African-American women college students within the context of predominantly White institutions. Finally, the literature review will provide the conceptual framework used to examine student experiences and perceptions through Critical Race Theory, and Black Feminist Theory. These barriers can limit students' desire to attend activities that would build a connection between the student and the college or university. Peer and professor relationships can be influential, playing a significant role in alienation, as well as decreased academic success. African-American women university students who completed higher school in my school divisions repot feeling disrespected by faculty, difficulty in making friends, and feeling out of place PWIs. As stated by Brown (2000) "Social support is arguably the most important determinant of college success and satisfaction, particularly for Black students attending predominantly White institutions" (p. 480).

The lack of social supports and, in some cases, hostile social environments, encountered by students likely causes significant difficulty. Kimbrough (1996) shares that African-American students are often not included in study sessions, are expected to perform lower in academic arenas by faculty, and are expected to speak on behalf of all African-Americans about their experiences during class discussions. Additionally, Johnson- Ahorlu (2012), concluded that racial stereotypes impacted the expectation from faculty members, which in turn denied students the sense of being welcomed and supported. Similarly, other prevalent issues that have been reported include a feeling of being underrepresented, direct perceptions of racism, hesitation when dealing with

faculty members and connection with faculty through race, gender or other commonalities (Schweitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999). The negative experiences students may face are not solely related to academics and faculty relations. Johnson-Newman's (1998) review of the literature identifies several challenges faced by African-American women attending predominantly White institutions, including feelings of loneliness, isolation, fears connected to competence, dating concerns and a sense of inadequacy regarding personal appearance. This idea is expanded upon by Fleming's (1984) suggestion that African-American women attending predominantly White colleges may suffer from emotional challenges, isolation in social settings, and fear of incompetence.

African-American women in predominantly White environments may also feel socially or physically inadequate and react accordingly. Some studies reveal a sense of loneliness, isolation, fears, and feeling of inadequacy regarding their physical appearances on the part of African-American women (Johnson-Newman & Excum, 1998). Ancis, Sedlacek and Mohr (2000) agree that African-American students attending predominantly White colleges face "pressure to conform to negative stereotypes, inequitable treatment by members of the campus community, and faculty racism- compared with their non- African-American peers" (p.10). Additionally, the negative portrayal of this culture as depicted frequently by the media sends negative and degrading messages. In response African-American women receive a skewed view of what characteristics of beauty are and respond to this pressure to complete with others by using products, purchasing accessories related to hair length and participating in medical procedures all in an effort to fit in to society's model of beauty. Clearly these barriers do

not impact all young African-American women, but many feel a sense of oppression (Sander, 1993). It is clear that the barriers facing African-American students at predominantly White schools are multifaceted and overlapping. The generic, topical remedies currently employed appear unlikely to be successful in meaningfully addressing such problems.

The social issues and problems with self-esteem bookend the struggles this population encounters during an already stressful time in life. These issues may influence graduation rates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics in 2015 there was a significant difference of 23.7 % in the graduation rates between African-American women and Caucasian women, with African-American women lagging behind, (NCES, 2015). Many would argue that the gap continues which raises the need for continued investigation into the experiences of African-American students. In an effort to remedy these issues, higher educational leadership generally implement broad programs focused on ethnic groups as a whole and do not adequately separate the needs of African-American women from those of their male counterparts. Researchers have indicated that programs typically involve parental meetings upon arrival at school and large group tutoring programs. Swail (2003) posited that the lack of a multidimensional approach, lack of ownership by the leadership, and minimal goals limit the supports available for African-American women. Such an approach would need to incorporate trust and validation of African-American students' experiences with racism, allowing bonds to be forged (Johnson- Bailey & Cervero, 2002). Johnson and Cervero (2007) further asserted "both persons involved in the mentoring equation grow from the exposure to another culture and from the challenge of stepping outside of their comfort zone" (p.24). Multiple

theoretical approaches are pertinent to both the challenges African-American young

women face and potential solutions.

Critical Race Theory

In this country race situates itself in the center of the lived experience of people of

color, those of African descent. Undergraduate students are impacted by racism and

stereotypes, often resulting in an "opportunity gap in the academic performance of

African-Americans" (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012, p.634). Critical Race Theory (CRT)

provides a framework for the examination of the experiences of African-American

women as they relate to racial issues in culturally challenging environments. CRT is a

philosophy that is particularly applicable to the research at hand as racial tensions form a

foundation for the barriers that lie between African-American women and academic

success. CRT formed as an outgrowth of the civil rights movement and stands on similar

foundations. However, CRT differs from traditional civil rights in that the civil rights

movement focused on intermediate steps of progress while CRT condemns the idea of

unequal treatment for any length of time. CRT is quasi revolutionary in that it looks to

not only understand the social situation but to change it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

There are two major foundations of critical race theory. 1. How does one group,

White superiority become so dominant as to oppress another, individuals of color, and 2.

To recognize the connection between law and racial power to effect change (Crenshaw

et.al, 1995). Critical race theorists believe in four tenets. 1. Racism is the way business is

done in this country when engaging with people of color. It is a part of the fabric of every

aspect of the daily experiences without concern for the experiences held by those of

color; 2. Racism identifies significant system structures that support both psychic and

material power and concludes that only obvious inequality is challenged; 3. Racism demands a microscopic review of the lives of individuals of color; 4. Racism requires an investigation into the educational system from different lenses. (Delgado & Stefancic 2001, 2012, p.235.

Ladson- Billings (2009) major critical race theorist argues that there are three reasons for "naming one's own reality": 1. The person in the situation at the time is the only one who knows the truth. Critical race theorists posit that the continual telling of stories experienced by individuals forms social reality. 2. Members of marginalized groups personalize negative stereotypical images created by those in power to maintain the status quo. The telling of the situation is a reminder of where the racism originated and provides some relief for the teller in sharing his or her story. 3. Telling one's story removes power from the majority group. Often those oppressing are unaware of the oppression (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Bringing oppression into the open can weaken the power of the racial majority.

Researchers have utilized critical race theory as a framework to focus on the ways in which racism and stereotypes play a role in the lives of African-American undergraduate students. Specifically, Johnson –Ahorlu (2012) examined the ways in which racism and stereotypes assist in creating and sustaining an "opportunity gap" for success in higher education for African-American students. CRT assists educational scholars in challenging the discourse that positions students of color as deficient and the root cause of their own achievement struggles. Johnson- Ahorlu indicated a causal pattern in which racism creates stereotypes, thereby serving as the foundation for inequitable treatment of African-American students.

Using critical race theory as a framework, Johnson- Ahorlu (2012) asserted that the major barrier for African-American students today is racism. Johnson- Ahorlu (2012) argued that this barrier is a main reason reported data indicates that African-American students often earn lower GPAs then their White counterparts. Often SAT scores, environmental factors and family situations are examined as possible causes for the difference in performance (Bowen and Bok, as cited in Johnson- Ahorlu, 2012, p.634). Further research indicated that relying on the SAT score to explain the achievement gap between African-American and Caucasian students can be misleading. According to Vars and Brown, African-American students earning a high GPA are still at risk of underperforming in part due to the feelings of unequal treatment by faculty (as cited in Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012, p.634). Johnson- Ahorlu incorporated the critical race theory tenets used in education research. The findings highlight the ways in which racism and stereotypes impede the educational opportunities of African-American students. Multiple other theories complement CTR in helping to illustrate and remedy the challenges faced by African-American college students.

Black Feminist Theory

Black feminist theory contributes another theoretical lens by which most compellingly permits for the experiences of African-American women to be heard. African-American women researchers suggest that perceiving the lived experiences of African-American women through the mainstream Euro lens limits the complexity of their experiences (Hill – Collins, 2000, Hooks, 1987). Black feminist theory allows for a different theoretical lens to provide an opportunity for the experiences and voices of African-American women regarding their personal experiences while attending PWIs.

The groundwork laid by Hill-Collins (1986, 2000) provides a base for my study. One clear benefit of this theory is the connection to Critical Race Theory.

The Black Feminist theory embodies the tenets of Critical Race Theory previously mentioned, whilst probing the particular experiences of African-American women attending predominantly White institutions. The tenets in addition to the views and voices of African-American women provide an exceptional foundation for examining the plight of this unique set of women. The work of researcher Hill-Collins (1986, 2000) in the area of Black feminism has provided a backdrop for this study. Black feminist thought stresses that African-American women show strength and use knowledge as a mechanism for change. African-American women are defined as self-dependent individuals facing race, gender and class oppression and the role that knowledge plays in oppression and redefining culture (Hill-Collins, 1986).

Hill- Collins (1986) identified three vital themes that speak for Black feminist thought: the significance of self- definition, and self-valuation, the interlocking nature of oppression, and the importance of redefining culture. Notably, Black women actualize the concepts in Black feminist that illustrate the perceptions of and for Black Women. This theory was designed to interpret the experiences of African-American women, understanding the notion that there are common threads across the individual experiences and lastly recognizing that some of the connected experiences result in difference viewpoints. This presents a major shift in the ways we think about unbalanced power dynamics. It is essential to understand how African-American women make meaning of their unique situations and location as the "outsider within" (Hill-Collins, 1986, 1999).

Other Relevant Theories

Other theorists investigated the ways in which a school's racial makeup might affect students. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) contended that if incidents of racism in education were decreasing, the majority of positive experiences of African-Americans would not be outside the public schools In addition, they contended that although the intent of Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas was well meaning, the architects were short sighted, and the majority of urban districts were composed of children of color. Other researchers focused on the impact of racial issues through the lens of college demographics. Constantine and Greer (2003) asserted that the racial makeup of predominantly White colleges creates a number of psychosocial and developmental issues for African-American students.

This research supports assertions about feelings of loneness, isolation, fears and concerns about physical appearance made by Johnson- Newman and Exum (1998) regarding the emotional development of this subgroup of students. Additionally, a quantitative study identified four key elements of social adjustment involving the experiences of African-American college students. Campbell and Campbell (2007) relied heavily on the research of others, but also employed comparative analysis by using focus group and individual interview data from five women, existing research and dialogue with African-American faculty coworkers at a predominantly White, Christian College. Dahlvig (2010) suggested that structured programs need to be developed to build rapport and provide guidance.

Johnson- Newman & Excum (1998) shared some of the common emotional and developmental barriers faced by African-American women college students enrolled in

predominantly White colleges and universities. Researchers have ascertained that the roadblocks to success experienced by these students could be minimized through programs that support psychological growth and maturity. Johnson- Newman & Excum examined Loevinger's theory of ego development. Loevinger investigated social cognition as related to ego development. A major component of her work was based on the notion that a person's cognitive ability has an important impact on his or her identify formation. This formation is crucial in assisting young people to connect the past, present and future. This theory is extremely important as these young ladies are attempting to reconcile the pains of past history as they create their own identities (Loevinger, as cited in Johnson-Excum, 1998).

Socialization

Loevinger's theory based on established stages of ego development is significant for African-American women students attending college for the first time, as the theory focuses on how a person views and reasons about themselves and others. These thoughts and reasons assist with creating an identity while assisting in identity formation. Robinson and Ward (1991) contended that without guidance African-American young women might engage in the use of "resistance strategies". These strategies result in inappropriate or risky behaviors that may lead to substance abuse, early births, and failure to thrive in school. Johnson- Newman and Exum (1998) believed that African-American women attending predominantly White schools arrive with a specific set of situations and experiences that hinder their ability to adequately adapt to the college environment. Their research agreed with other researchers such as Constantine (2003), regarding the women

bearing the historical burden of being devalued for being a woman and African-American. One potential remedy for this burden is socialization.

Socialization is the major system that institutions of higher learning use to communicate the organizational and social structure to students (Kuh & Whitt, 1998). From a student's perspective, socialization is the set of procedures that assists students in interpreting and gaining the necessary skills and knowledge to acclimate themselves to the institutional structure (Weidman, 1987). Through sociological models Pascarell (1985) and Weidman (1987) outlined influences on the way that college students socialize and focused on the students' interactions with the college system (Pascarell, 1985; Weidman, 1987). These models suggest that negative and positive experiences impact the student's relationship with the formal and informal structures of the college (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997, p. 108). This model's focus on socialization renders it a particularly apt lens through which to evaluate the experience of young African-American women as social structures are at the heart of many documented issues. Socialization theory also lends itself to providing possible remedies for barriers faced by African-American women.

Johnson-Newman and Exum's (1998) article serves the dual purpose of providing an overview of the array of emotional and developmental issues encountered by African-American women attending predominantly White colleges and universities and designing an intervention strategy for the aforementioned group. Despite being somewhat dated, their investigation into the challenges faced by these young women appears to remain relevant. The researchers suggested the implementation of an intentional psychological education intervention. This strategy was based on a cognitive-developmental foundation,

which was, in turn, based on Loevinger's theory of ego development, wherein the ego dictates the ways in which a person responds to the environment. Johnson- Newman and Exum (1998) suggested confronting these developmental challenges through a role-playing strategy as part of a psychological education intervention.

In addition, they proposed a counseling program to be specifically implemented for African-American women attending predominantly White colleges. The focus would incorporate cross-age teaching peers to promote maturity among young women. The recommended timeframe for such a program is two semesters, during the first semester they would be immersed in activities from a cognitive development curriculum and the second would incorporate the cross- teaching components whereby students would be required to serve as a facilitator. It should be noted this curriculum is recommended but has never been placed into practice. Research indicated that students could benefit from similar programs at PWIs. Constantine and Greer (2003) concurred that it would be relevant for institutions of higher learning to establishing a proactive stance in support of African-American women attending predominantly White colleges. Their research was conducted and posited that counselors have a professional and ethical responsibility to be informed about the particular needs of this group of students. Their research provided a framework and intervention specifically designed to support a variety of culturally relevant factors encountered by this population. Constantine (2002) compared existing research regarding the willingness of African-American students to attend counseling and found conflicting results. Some researchers contend that African-American students demonstrate less confidence in counselors' commitment than do their White counter parts (Kenny, as cited in Constantine, 2002), whereas others suggest that African-American

students use counseling services more than previously assumed. Ultimately, Constantine (2002) asserted that African-American women use counseling services more frequently than their male classmates; this phenomenon may help with the process of socialization. The research on the potential success of positive socialization is somewhat ambiguous, however multiple positive social structures already exist that lend some credence to the notion of counseling program success.

Due to the importance of social structures, many African-American college students seek opportunities to gain access to the social aspects of school by engaging in formal and informal social structures. Black Greek- letter organizations (BGLOs) have been significant on college campuses since the early 1900 (Kimbrough, 2003; Ross, 2000). Whether attending historically Black colleges (HBCUs) or PWIs, students participate in leadership endeavors, community service, interfacing with others engaged in seeking positive academic achievement (Harper, 2008; Patton & Bonner, 2001). Researchers have indicated that racial configuration is an important element regarding how involved students are on campus (Flowers, 2002; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999).

Black Greek- letter organizations provide a level of support and affirmation for African-American students regardless of the potentially negative aspects of intake procedures (Kimbrough, 2003). The benefits provided to the students allow for a connection to others with similar experiences, goals and challenges. Participation in African-American sororities empowers women to demonstrate their leadership skills and increase their academic standing through positive support and networking (Harris, 1998). Phillips concluded, "The sisterhood network of African-American sororities has provided avenues for self-improvement, racial uplift, and leadership development" (2005; p.347).

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African-American women students especially in PWIs treasure this opportunity, which provides an example of the effects of positive socialization.

Although there is limited literature on African-American student connection to sororities there is ample research on student engagement and mentoring. Two major themes constitute student engagement, the level of engagement in positive educational practices and, the types of policies, programs and cultural structures that the school has in place. Patton, Flowers and Bridges (2011) study on the impact of Greek affiliation on student engagement utilized data from the 2003 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The conclusion of the study indicated that a moderate connection exists between participation in an African-American Greek organization and engagement. In addition, this affiliation coupled with attendance at a HBCU indicates student engagement higher than that of their counterparts attending PWIs.

Mentoring has been considered a viable option for supporting African-American students attending predominantly White universities. Campbell & Campbell (2007) indicated that increased college retention of minority students at predominantly White universities is due in part to mentoring. This research is of significant importance. Despite the need, cultural matching can be extremely difficult when there are limited people of color employed in professional positions on campus. Generally, the numbers of African-American students seeking mentoring vastly outnumbers the African-American faculty members; however faculty may feel an "obligation" to support students of color, at the expense of time for publication and scholarship. Dahlvig (2010) argued that cross-race mentoring is necessary to provide the needed support for students of color. White

mentors have significant challenges to overcome pertaining to, racism due to traditional

stereotypes and other degrading images fueled by racism.

Within mentorship programs there are a variety of program details that can have a

bearing on student outcomes. Campbell and Campbell (2007) noted that a matched

mentorship program supported an increase in cumulative GPA and graduation rate

compared to unmatched mentoring pairs. Regarding the impact of race on mentoring,

interestingly, there was no significant difference after the first year, but a noticeable

change was evident in ethnic matching when long-term relationships continued. The

challenge continues to lie in finding interventions successful in improving outcomes for

African-American students. Researchers have agreed that mentoring and interventions are

connected to retention of ethnic minority students in predominantly White institutions,

public or private (Campbell & Campbell, 2007; Nora & Crisp, 2007; Smith, 2007).

My research includes a focus on the interventions or strategies PWIs are

incorporating to assimilate African-American women into an environment that has not

traditionally embraced them. Loevinger's theory investigates the notion that the ego is the

foundation that determines how one responds to the environment (Knelfelkamp, Parker,

& Widick, 1978). This theory provides a backdrop for colleges to build an intervention

program beginning with freshman African-American women in the form of cross-age

teaching peer counseling concluding in the senior year. This study could build on the

limited information regarding counseling intervention programs specifically designed for

African-American women already in existence while incorporating cultural

competencies. Although critical race theory plays an important role in analyzing the

plight of African-American women college students, it is evident that other theorist's

works are also invaluable in beginning to understand the troubles they face and potential solutions. Socialization and support are positive additions to a college experience that may aid in adjustment and more positive outcomes for students. Both Black Greek letter organizations and mentoring programs may provide the support and socialization referenced in the aforementioned studies. The impact of this study could not only enhance the preparation of high school African-American women seeking to attend PWIs, but also provide the institutions with clarification and guidance regarding the needs of the students.

Conceptual Framework
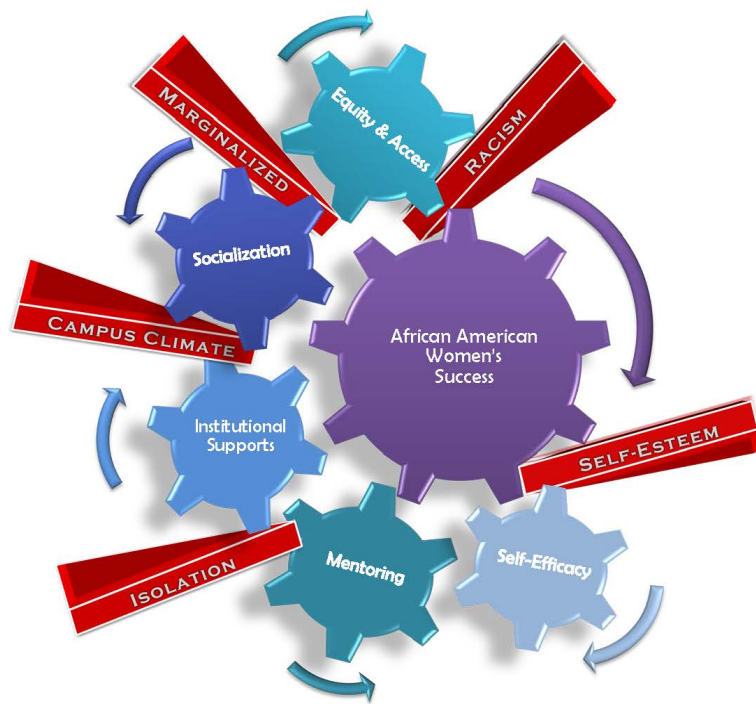
Figure 1.1

This framework is the conceptual hypothesis based on the literature reviewed.

The Critical Race and Black Feminist theories supported by other known theories

amplifies the experiences and voices of African-American women college students and are appropriate theories upon which to build a conceptual hypothesis framework based on the literature for this study. The challenges, barriers, and successes these women experienced provide a lens through which to glean their strength and examine the supports provided to them or the lack thereof, which affect the outcome of their higher education experience. Supportive structures implemented based on leadership perspectives at the institutions hold a significant place in ensuring the retention of and future success of this subgroup of women. Critical Race and Black feminist theoretical frameworks were the foundation for this study. Through these lenses, the study closely examined the lived experiences; the academic, social and cultural climate and the impact of these components have on the experiences of these young women.

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach based on Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Theory. The purpose of using the phenomenological method is to capture the perspective of research participants, emphasizing the importance of personal perspective and interpretation. It is phenomenological in nature in that it is intended to elicit the day-to-day experiences of the participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The reason a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative approach has been selected rests on the evidence that quantitative methods focus on the environments, conditions, and experiences impacting students as opposed to hearing the voices of students (Harper, 2007).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY: RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Design Overview

The purpose of this section is to describe the methodology used in the study of the experiences of African-American women students currently and previously attending a predominantly White institution and the roles played by institutional supports provided to them. Research indicates that the number of African-American women in institutions of higher education has increased significantly over the past decade (Allen, 1992). However, while enrollment has been increasing for this subgroup, Rosales & Person (2003) report that many predominantly White institutions fail to understand the specific challenges encountered by these students, and therefore often neglect to have supporting programs in place.

Both authentic, historical, and present day, experiences of African-American women are now being viewed as valid by academia as research on this topic continues to build (Tillman, 2002). As enrollment and interest in the topic increases, and more young women encounter these barriers, it is more necessary than ever to study, and if possible, remedy this issue. This study aimed to further provide an understanding of and an insight into students as a means to assist high school counselors and college level student affairs personnel with the creation of services and institutional policies for supporting this population. Additionally, it has provided this group of women an opportunity for them to lend their voice and share their experiences and stories. Challenges involving race,

gender and socio-cultural aspects of African-American women must be investigated

delicately and through a culturally sensitive perspective.

Research Design

The research study was conducted using individual interviews, a short survey and

focus groups. Figure 3.1 depicts the research design.

- Qualititative Research- Structured Interviews - Data collected from students

Connect data to search for patterns, trends, commonalities

Surveys will yield reponses with limited assumptions and will provide additional info/voice

Connect trends with interview data.

- Qualitative Research- Focus Groups

Analyze data, then connect to research questions.
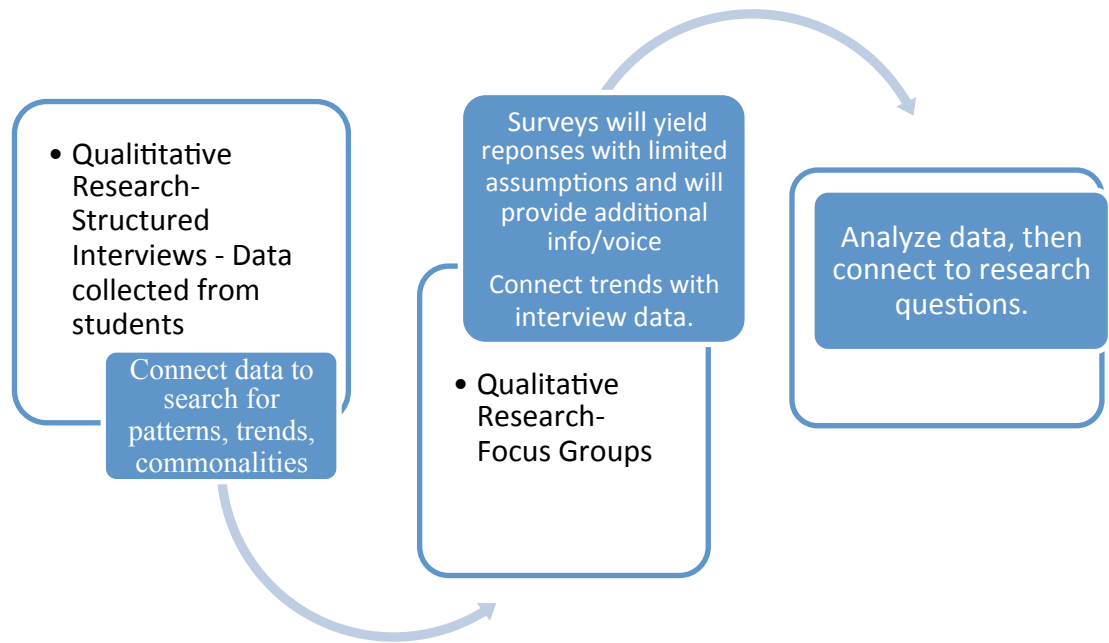
Figure 3.1

Participant Selection and Selection Criteria

Two separate focus groups and 14 individual interviews were held with a total of

five African-American women students per group from one PWI. Each participant

completed a questionnaire to obtain some demographic information. The participants

included a mixture of women associated with the following communities: 1) Greek

Organizations, 2) Arts 3) LGBT 4) Athletes and 5) those involved in other clubs or

organizational affiliation. Responses from the interview questions assisted with narrowing the scope of the focus group questions in an attempt to better query the most relevant topics. African-American women college students varying in age, attending their junior or senior years at the PWI were chosen. Additionally graduates from the university participated in individual interviews and a focus group. Individual participants, the school location and activities were identified through purposive sampling procedures to be addressed later.

This purposive sampling was used to ascertain accounts that incorporate the contextual and cultural norms that shape the college experiences of African-American women students. This type of sampling was selected because of the value the experiences of the participants added to research issue. The setting was one university in the southern part of the country, hereinafter referred to as the university. The participants were students self-identifying as African-American women, currently or previously attending college for the first time. Given that the university is within a 3-hour drive and facilitates professional development opportunities for the local districts, I utilized contacts that assisted with identifying and selecting the participants.

Participants

This section profiles the twenty-four individuals selected for participation in this study. All participants are individuals who self-identify as African-American women. Seventeen of the twenty-four participants are current undergraduate students. These participants were in their junior or senior year of college during the duration of the study. The remaining participating individuals graduated from the university between 2011-

2014. Five students participated in a phone or a SKYPE interview while the others engaged in face-to-face interviews with the researcher. Two individuals participated in both a focus group and a face-to – face interview. Five graduates engaged in the focus group while five undergraduate students participated in face-to face interviews. The total sample includes 11 juniors, 6 seniors, and 7 graduates of the university.

The participants' majors include Business, Accounting, Statistics, African and African-American Studies, Education, Speech Communication Disorders, Communications, Religion, Sociology, Psychology, Art, and Politics, Global Public Health, Engineering, Economics, Architecture. The vastly different majors are reflective of the different personalities displayed by the participants. Some will be venturing into fields African-American women may not traditionally be drawn to or been able to gain access to in the past. Due in part to the wide array of majors the participants have experienced parts of campus and school culture through a different lens. Three participants were born in Africa and one is mixed race, however all self-identify as African-American. The age range of the participants is 20-26 years old. All participants are single with no dependents. The mean GPA for the undergraduate students is 3.3 and the graduates 3.6. The following is a more detailed description of the individual participants involved in interviews, surveys, and focus groups.

Participant Profiles

Jenny

Interview/Style	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
Phone	26	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point**	**Status**

			Average	
VA	Diverse	AA Studies / Sociology	3.5	Grad/2012

Carla

Interview/Style	**Age**	**Race**	**Gender**	**Sexual Orientation**
Phone	25	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
MD	Boarding School	Psychology/AA & A Studies	3.7	Grad/2014

Abby

Interview/Style	**Age**	**Race**	**Gender**	**Sexual Orientation**
In Person	23	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
VA	White	Psychology	4.0	Grad/2013

Freddie

Interview/Style	**Age**	**Race**	**Gender**	**Sexual Orientation**
Phone	24	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
RI	White	Psychology/Art	3.7	Grad/2014

Zoe

Interview/Style	**Age**	**Race**	**Gender**	**Sexual Orientation**
Focus Group	24	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
VA	Black	Communications	3.3	Grad/2013

Regina

Interview/Style	**Age**	**Race**	**Gender**	**Sexual Orientation**
Focus Group	24	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
MD	Black	Statistics	3.9	Grad/2014

Sara

Interview/Style	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
Focus Group	23	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
VA	Black	Religious Studies	3.5	Grad/2014

Kayla

Interview/Style	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
In Person	21	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
VA	Black	Speech Pathology	3.7	3rd year

Kristie

Interview/Style	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
In Person	22	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
VA	White	Education	3.3	4th year

Shanna

Interview/Style	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
In Person	22	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
VA	Black	Biology	3.9	3rd year

Trisha

Interview/Style	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
In Person	22	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
VA	Diverse	Nursing	3.5	3rd year

Vivian

Interview/Style	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
In Person	21	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
NY	Diverse	Communications	3.5	3rd year

Kim

Interview/Style	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
SKYPE	21	African-American	Female	Gay
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
VA	Black	Business	3.3	3rd year

Glenda

Interview/Style	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
In Person	21	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
VA	Black	Politics/ AA & Studies	3.8	3rd year

Susan

Interview/Style	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
Focus Group	21	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
GA	Black	Education	3.7	3rd year

Courtney

Interview/Style	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
Focus Group	22	African-American	Female	Gay
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
VA	White	Business	4.0	3rd year

Sharon

Interview/Style	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
Focus Group	21	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
VA	Black	Nursing	3.5	3rd year

Cynthia

Interview/Style	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
Focus Group	21	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
NC	White	Finance	3.5	3rd year

Sophi

Interview/Style	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
Focus Group	22	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
VA	White	Biochemical Engineering	3.8	4th year

Andrea

Interview/Style	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
In Person	22	African-American	Female	Heterosexual
State	**High School**	**Majors**	**Grade Point Average**	**Status**
VA	White	Architecture	3.5	4th year

All students are, or were, actively engaged in their school and provided leadership in various campus organizations and the community at large (Greek Life, Arts & Music, Ethnic Organizations, Civic Engagement, Religious and Athletics). Three fourths expressed a desire to continue their learning by attaining further education and credentials (JD, MBA, MD, or MA). Two graduates have completed master's degrees and two are currently pursuing master's degrees. All participants had at least one parent complete a bachelor's degree. All participants attended public high schools with the exception of one, who attended a private school.

Focus Group Participants

Seven undergraduates and eight graduates from the university initially expressed an interest in participating in focus groups. The final sample includes five current students and five graduates who consented to participate in a focus group after receiving more information about the study. As a result two focus groups were conducted, one consisting of the undergraduates and one of graduates. All group members are African-

American women. Each participant has at least one college educated parent while the majority of the women come from families where both parents are college educated ranging from bachelor's to medical and law degrees. The women are and were engaged in a variety of student run organizations while enrolled at the university.

Site Selection

The research site was selected for the study based on the fact that many African-American women high school graduates from this identified part of the country aspire to attend this specific university. This university recruits heavily in this part of the region and is viewed by community members as an outstanding institution. This school was selected for this study based on the percentage of young African-American women high school students generally interested in attending. The institutional context will further explain the researcher's choice of study site. The university is an accredited, coed, state supported 4-year college, in a small suburban city in the Southern United States and considered by many to be an elite institution. As previously indicated, research states that at such institutions, African-American women may experience a specific set of challenges not experienced by their non-African-American women counterparts (Howard- Hamilton, 2003). However, these challenges do not appear to show in the schools statistics.

This university boasts an impressive resume. It offers bachelors', master's and doctoral degrees and has an acceptance rate of 33 percent. Approximately 16,087 undergraduates attend the school with an overall graduation rate of 93 percent within six years. Six percent of undergraduate students are African-American. Eighty-two percent

of African-Americans graduate within six years, one of the highest graduation rates for African-American students attending a major public institution in America. Eighty-six percent of graduates complete their undergraduate degrees in four years.

Sample Selection

As previously stated, purposive sampling was selected for this study. The value of purposive sampling lies in the selection of participants based on their anticipated contribution to increased understanding of the phenomenon (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993). Therefore, to support this study, participants were selected based on an expectation regarding their ability to expound on their experiences. Each participant has a proven academic record with a desire to excel. Frequently, students of color are of African ancestry and are assumed to identify as African- American or Black American however; this study focuses on women self-identifying as African-American to include those from Africa, the Caribbean or identifying as biracial. This was decided because these women may face many of the same barriers because they have many of the same physical characteristics as African-American women and may be treated in similar or identical fashions because of those physical similarities.

Undergraduates

Undergraduate study participants were current junior and senior students ranging in ages from 18 to 22 during the course of the study and considered traditional students. Kuh and Sturgis (1980) indicate that traditional students are defined as those between the ages of 18 and 23, attending school full time. The life of older students tends to incorporate aspects of adult life such as family responsibilities and working fulltime.

These students do not typically live on campus or spend excessive amounts of time at school beyond class time (Kuh & Sturgis, 1980, p.484).

Graduates

Other participants have graduated from the university within the last 4 years. All are either currently employed or attending graduate school in an effort to move to the next professional level. They range in age from 23-26. Currently each graduate participant is single with no children. Because many of the African-American women at the university are connected the researcher collaborated with student leaders to garner support from the students and to advertise for participants. Student leaders were able to readily contact graduate students to support this study. Prospective participants were contacted by phone and email as the initial contact. After gaining permission, the researcher then sent invitations via emails to elicit participants for the study detailing the expectations for the study and highlighting the protections and rights of those agreeing to contribute.

Data Collection

Based on research by Creswell (2003) the foundation of qualitative research is purposeful in the selection of participants or locations in a manner that will support the researcher in better understanding the specific area of focus. The researcher suggests that many insights about internal experiences of others can be gained through conversations and a willingness to listen to the experiences of others. Creswell (1998) further asserts that the collection of data through phenomenological research generally is completed through comprehensive interviews. Additionally, Delgado (1990) indicates that story

telling has its place in history as a means for shaping, reshaping and extending or pushing reality. To this end, this study utilized several sources to include interviews, focus groups and a short survey in order to triangulate the data. Prior to beginning the interview session and focus groups the researcher attempted to establish a positive relationship and an inviting atmosphere by reviewing the purpose for the interview, confidentiality standards and the overall plans for usage of the resulting data with participants. Time was allotted to allow each woman to ask any questions to ensure they had a full understanding of their role and the purpose of the study.

As an African-American woman designated as a minority in two areas race, and gender, conversations surrounding race and equity may cause some discomfort. Johnson-Ahorlu's (2012) research on critical race theory posited that a major barrier to the educational success of African-Americans is racism. The researcher informed them that they were not expected to respond to any questions that cause them distress or unease but intentionally reframed from specifying areas as to not lead the participants. Each woman was then asked to sign a consent form. After completing the consent form the participants were asked to complete a brief form designed to gather demographic data.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted either in person on the participant's campus, in one participant's hometown, by phone or in one case by using SKYPE. Each interview was conducted in sessions that lasted for approximately 60 to 75 minutes. This method was chosen to allow for individual differences to be evident when relevant. Glense, (1999) indicates that interviewing is a mechanism designed to provide an opportunity to interface with different types of individuals with varying personalities and perspectives.

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There are three benefits of interviewing that are stressed by Creswell (2003) as it pertains to data collection. He states that one is able through interviewing to gather data even when a participant cannot be observed, it provides an opportunity to gain historical information and it permits the researcher to direct the questions. One purpose of using the interview process was to provide open-ended questions, allowing for varied responses and an opportunity to pose relevant follow up questions.

Survey and Written Response

Each participant was asked to respond to a written survey and two questions prior to the beginning of the interview or focus group. This provided them with an opportunity to relax, and reflect on their experiences privately without sharing with others in the homogenous group. If the interview was completed by phone, the written survey and the two questions were emailed to the participants. At the end of the survey, a space was allocated for the participant to share anything of their choosing pertaining to the study. Undergraduate participants engaged in a focus group held at the campus student center. This permitted the young women to be in a familiar environment in an effort to provide them with a comfortable setting. Both the undergraduate and the graduate focus groups responded to the same questions. The researcher used email as the means of communicating a reminder notice of the upcoming meeting. After the completion of the focus group, participants were provided an opportunity to share any additional thoughts or concerns they may have in writing.

Focus Groups

The focus group participants were asked a series of questions designed to illicit responses to provide the researcher with a view of their experiences as African-American women at a predominantly White institution. The undergraduates and graduates were asked to respond to the same questions. The same questions were used in order to compare the experiences across a time period for reliability purposes. The researcher used several audio tape recorders to capture the response of the participants during the undergraduate focus group. The audio recorders were strategically placed to ensure each participant could be recorded. The participants sat in a circle to allow for all to be seen and heard. A number was assigned to each seat to help the researcher identify who was speaking. The researcher wrote the number beside the participants name while taking notes on the diagram of the seating arrangement. After reviewing the process with the participants, the researcher provided each with the opportunity to introduce themselves after the completion of the survey. The researcher conducted the group by asking questions however the participants responded with ease and kept the flow of the conversation moving consistently.

The graduate focus group was facilitated following the same process with the exception of using multiple audio tape recorders as it was conducted on the phone. The researcher utilized a phone bridge and provided the call in number in advance to the participants. Similarly, the participants spoke freely and the dialogue flowed smoothly following the first question. The responses were transferred to a single tape recorder in

order to keep all responses together. At the conclusion of each focus group participants were asked if they had any additional information to provide.

Data Analysis

In an effort to protect the validity of the data, member checks were implemented using the participants from whom the data was originally gathered. Lincoln and Guba suggest that member checking is an important technique for establishing accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This allowed participants an opportunity to correct errors and misconceptions. Additionally, it provided the participants with a record of their data. Participants were able to check all data obtained from the interviews and focus groups. Member checking also confirmed significant aspects of the data as evidenced by emails and phone calls received from the participants. I chose not to provide them with a copy of the survey because the participants completed it and interpretation wasn't necessary.

Interviews

I incorporated Attride- Striling's proposed structure in the analysis process and utilized segments of thematic networks as an analytic tool (Attride-Striling, 2001). Attride-Striling (2001) identify three broad steps as a means to divide the thematic analysis: (a) the reduction or breakdown of the text; (b) the exploration of the text; and (c) the integration of the exploration. Data analysis began immediately following the interviews. The responses to the focus group followed the same process. Audiotapes were listened to and transcribed using REV an on-line service designed to transcribe from audio devices. Throughout the interviews and focus groups, I wrote notes in the margins of my papers paying close attention to what was said, but also to voice tone and body gestures and movements. This was done in an effort to help me paint a clear picture of the

experiences. Following transcription I took notes in a graphic organizer while replaying the tapes. I wanted to visualize the participants as I listened to their voices and reviewed the notes previously taken. Additionally, I wrote memos after every third interview. Memoing allowed me to use my notes to reflect on body language, tone of voice and nuisances of the participants.

After this process, I coded the data and had a second person, a colleague experienced in qualitative research review my coding to ensure the reliability of the coding themes and constructs identified from the data. I used a variety of methods to include the constant comparative methodology individually and across data types to delineate the different themes and patterns in the data. Lincoln and Guba, (1985) support the use of the comparative methodology analyzing individual groups of information.

I then utilized Seidman's (1998) system by constructing separate profiles of each participant's data to create thematic associations of the participant's responses. I reread the transcripts and continued to work through the themes and patterns for associations using sticky notes and large posted paper. I used individual files to catalog themes emerging from each participant. The data on the large posted notes were organized in terms of emergent themes and coded by color in a matrix of participants. This system produced the initial list of coding themes. Seidman (1998) proposes creating profiles for the experiences of each individual as a way to "present the participant in context…by displaying coherence in the constitutive events of a participant's experience, to share the coherence the participant has expressed, and to link the individual's experience to the social and organizational context within which he or she operates" (p 102-103). This system helped me to create a coherent picture of the participants' experiences. This initial

analysis of the data provided me with key words, terminology, phrases, and themes from the participants.

Next, I used Dedoose, a computer software program used for qualitative data. The software was used to set up codes, categories, and segment the interviews into ideas, concepts, and themes. I chose to use a computerized system as a means to compare the data with initial data gleaned from the hand system described earlier with the sticky notes. This system enables one to set up codes and categories divided into ideas and themes. Key words and phrases taken directly from the transcript loaded into Dedoose helped to create a coding framework to identify themes and codes. I then reviewed and compared the themes gleaned from both systems, the hand analysis and the computerized analysis to seek commonality between the two and devised a coding framing resulting in five, majors themes and 17 subthemes.

Survey

Entries from the survey and responses to the two questions were coded by the researcher and reviewed by a second individual. Participants received specific questions to respond in writing. This provided the researcher with demographic information regarding some aspects of their background. I used the individual files previously utilized for coding the interviews and looked for common themes and trends in the responses. The data was disaggregated by the categories identified in the survey as it related to things like educational background of parents or type of high school attended. Then I created a database reflecting the information. The researcher coded any additional information gleaned from clarification during discussions with the participants. The

information was then cross-referenced to check for any cross connection to the interview themes.

Focus Groups

Researcher David Morgan indicates that focus groups require a great deal of planning especially as it pertains to ethics and confidentiality. Maintaining separate focus groups allowed for opportunities for the participants to engage in conversation that is specific to their individual frame of reference. These individual differences provided for rich discussions. However, demographic homogeneity may have permitted the conversation to move smoothly between the participants within each group and provide an avenue to explore the differences between the two groups. For that reason undergraduates were separated from graduate students for the purpose of the focus groups. The audiotape was transcribed and data coded to be compared with themes that emerged from the interviews. The process for data analysis for the individual interviews was repeated for the focus groups.

Triangulation

After I completed the second cycle method of coding using Dedoose, I incorporated Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's, (2013) recommendation and grouped the coded summaries of data. This included the analysis, coding, and thematic organization of themes and key concepts as they connected to findings in the literature. This step also consisted of looking for triangulation across data sources for each participant. The use of memos, interview, focus group, and survey responses from the participants provided points for triangulating codes significant in the participants' interviews and the resulting

emerging themes.

Emerging Themes

Researcher Role/Issues of Validity

Glense (1999) believes that the role of a researcher should be distinctly described. Creswell (2003) suggests that the role of the researcher as a data collection tool requires the establishment of personal values, assumptions, and biases at the conclusion of the study. The role of the researcher as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is to focus on credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability as a means to measure the durability of qualitative research. Credibility in qualitative research is the equivalent of internal validity when conducting traditional research. It also relates to showing the ways that the researcher accumulated various formations of reality and that the analysis of these formations "are credible to the constructors of the original multiple realities" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Furthermore, it is critical to identify multiple methods for

establishing credibility as a means to verify formation of these realities as compared to those from whom the data was obtained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln & Guba (1986) propose some procedures to establish credibility: vast time in the field, triangulation of data using a variety of different sources, methods, review with an experienced peer familiar with qualitative research and ways to expand inquiry.

Transferability attributes to the extent that the results of qualitative research can be connected to another context or setting. The researcher demonstrates dependability through the disclosure of changes in the context in which the research occurs, and confirmability accounts for the level that the results are substantiated or corroborated by others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As a means to ensure internal validity, the researcher used another individual experienced in qualitative research to monitor through double-checking the preciseness of the results and share the findings with the participants to ensure accuracy (Creswell, 2003). Morrow (2005) asserts that transferability is accomplished when the researcher offers ample information or knowledge about his or herself as a research tool and the research situation, processes and the relationship between the researcher and the participants.

Dependability is accomplished through careful detailed monitoring of the emerging research design. The use of a chronological database of research activities, data collection and analysis supports the goal of dependability. The last measure offered by Lincoln & Guba (1985, 1986) is conformability, which is predicated on the thought that research is not objective. The understanding that findings must be built upon the true results of those being researched and their situations instead of through the lens and bias of the researcher is key. Conformability is based on the probity of findings in which the

researcher combines the data, analysis and the findings in a way that confirms the findings for others.

Positionality

Dubois' (1903) framework of the African-American experience also known as double- consciousness in a predominantly White college continues to exist 60 years after integration. As a researcher this study is pertinent to me personally and professionally. As an African-American woman with an African-American daughter educated in an elite predominantly White institution I am inherently associated with the continued plight of this subgroup. My family has a variety of college experiences that I believe spurred my interest in this topic. As a first generation college graduate, I am one of six children, with five brothers. I grew up in a single parent home headed by my mother for approximately 10 years. We lived in poverty and had very little knowledge of what it meant to attend college. I attended a fairly diverse high school with minor challenges between the dominant culture and the non-dominant cultures. Most of my teachers were White and unengaged in my life beyond assigning me a grade. My three oldest brothers were extremely athletic, which afforded them an opportunity to attend college. Each began college but ended up dropping out at some point. One eventually completed his degree many years later. After high school I choose not to attend college but in hindsight I cannot say exactly why I did not attend. It could have been financial concerns, or lack of confidence. One fact that does not escape me is the fact that my school counselor never held a conversation with me about going to college. Eventually, I realized that in order to have the life I desired, college would have to be a part of my future, so I enrolled in college.

I attended a mid-sized historically Black college (HBCU) and felt extremely connected to other women students, faculty and staff. Study sessions were plentiful and college counselors met with you to review your academic standing when a change was noticed. There was an unspoken expectation that you would make every effort to perform academically. In many ways your professor explicitly stated it when your performance appeared to be slipping, in addition to the intrinsic pressure you felt when conversing with the support staff such as custodians or maintenance staff. The encouragement received from the support staff left you feeling as if you had to make up for the possible lack of opportunity presented to them. My son attended a different HBCU where students were required to enroll in a class meant to teach them about both the history of the university and African-American culture with an expectation of earning a C or better in the course or students were required to repeat the class. On numerous occasions he has commented on the choices he felt he had to make while attending a predominately White high school in contrast to how he felt attending a school where he was not in the minority. His experiences bring to mind Beverly Daniels Tatum's book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*. Contrary to my daughter's experiences, the adults on his campus, regardless of position, were extremely encouraging. My daughter often felt isolated and did not feel a sense of belonging. She was frequently the only student of color in her classes and was expected to speak for the African-American race. While there were supports in place for students needing academic support, there was a specific time and day of the week for African-American students to receive tutoring or academic support. Howard- Hamilton states that more traditional universities do not

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address issues faced by African-American women in particular (2005). My daughter's experiences are a testament to that research.

As the executive director for a department that supervises school counseling, this research will provide me with an avenue to provide valuable information and feedback for high school counselors as they attempt to prepare students for college selection, expectations and preparation. Education has always been viewed as the gateway to improving the quality of life for individuals specifically the African-American population, and I am hopeful that changes can be made to keep it that way (Allen, 1992).

CHAPTER 4: STUDY FINDINGS

Their Experiences

"You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so you can know who you are, what you can rise from, how you can still come out of it." Maya Angelou

The previous chapters have focused on the urgent need for a deeper examination of the experiences of African-American women at PWIs, significant literature about these experiences, findings from relevant research studies, and the methodology used in the present study. In Chapter 4, I discuss the experiences using the women's own words and how they coalesce to depict the reality of these women's lives. I have chosen to use a phenomenological approach because I believe allowing participants to be vocal about their own life experiences will most clearly convey data on this topic. Further, looking back on past events may have allowed participants more emotional distance and the ability to think more clearly about their experiences. As stated by Patton, "Phenomenological reflection is not introspective but retrospective"(Patton, 2002, p. 104).

This study intends to interpret and preset the perceptions of the participants and to report findings in a manner that will inform and encourage higher education faculty and high school counselors as they look to support and prepare African-American women for college. The themes in this study respond to my research questions: (1) What are the experiences of African-American Women who attend predominantly colleges and universities? (2) What elements of support are implemented by predominantly White

universities to support African-American women? (3) How do African-American women attending predominantly White institutions perceive these supports?

Context and Location

It is necessary to understand both the study participants and the setting in order to situate the findings of this study in the appropriate context. The university has a large scenic campus and is composed largely of White students, primarily from wealthy family backgrounds. Many of the students attended private schools or wealthy school districts prior to attending college. Upper middle class to wealthy neighborhoods surround the campus on almost all sides, with the exception of a small African-American population in a segregated part of the community. University service workers are often minority community members, increasing the number of African-American adults interacting with the students, while highlighting their class difference from faculty. The African-American faculty count stands at a 3to 1 ratio of the entire faculty currently teaching at the university. Another factor vital to understanding the study location and the environment in which the participants exist is the school's history. This university has strong and seemingly nostalgic ties to its past, an embattled founder, and roots in the antebellum south. This historical connection to the past continues to haunt the campus in ways not easily seen by outsiders but often felt by a small segment of the population.

A Word about the Participants

Study participants were women originating from seven different state whom self-identify as African-American. The participants provided a personal view into the ways in which they conduct their lives on campus as double minorities. Their perceptions offer a

window into how African-American women in a predominantly White university see themselves and how they believe others see them. This study details the experiences of 24 young women living in an environment not always kind to them. They are bright, funny, and academically capable women who arrived at the university filled with energy and promise. They are women who have demonstrated the ability to handle rigorous academic standards throughout their high school experiences, have participated in service to their communities, and enjoy the support of their families.

Prior to attending this university few had experienced the kinds of interpersonal challenges they would encounter in college. The participants attended a variety of high schools public and private described as diverse, majority Black and majority White. Ninety – six percent of the participants attended public high schools. Fifty-four percent of the participants attended Black high schools, 29% White and 17% diverse. Over the course of this chapter the lived experiences of the participants will be described based on interviews, focus groups and surveys. The following is a more detailed description of the individual participants involved in interviews, surveys, and focus groups followed by a brief description of the composition of the focus groups.

Kayla is in her junior year, having attended the same university for the past three years. She is a speech pathology major and maintains a GPA above a 3.0. Both of her parents are college educated, each earning a bachelor's degree. She attended a private high school with a predominately African-American student population. Her current roommate is of a different ethnicity from her and they spend very little time together. Her family nourished a college going culture in their household and she received constant

encouragement and preparation from high school staff about topics ranging from class selection to conversations about college. Counselors and teachers influenced her selection of this university. While she felt her school prepared her for the academic rigor of college, little attention was paid to the emotional, cultural or social aspect of college life.

Kristie is an African-American woman in her fourth year of college completing all of her higher learning at this university. She attended a high school with an advanced International Baccalaureate Program in a minority majority high school. Her GPA has been consistently above the 3.0 mark. She pledged a Greek Sorority with a membership consisting of African-American women. She is from a two-parent home and her mother is college educated with a bachelor's degree. The expectation in her, family has always been that both she and her brother would attend college and at a minimum complete their bachelor's degree. She has roomed with the same young woman throughout her college years. They met at an orientation and are both African-American. She has completed all requirements for graduation in December 2015, a semester early.

Shainna is a woman who self identifies as African-American but was born in Cameroon. Prior to moving to the United States her experiences had been primarily with individuals who were of African descent. Upon arrival in the United States the majority of her day-to-day interactions were with Hispanic and African-American individuals through her high school and neighborhood interactions. Her high school experiences included support in developing improved communication and team working skills. She frequently made use of the college/career center and found tremendous support from teachers, counselors and coaches. She is first generation for attending an American college; her father graduated from college in Cameroon. Her mother is currently

attending a community college, majoring in bilology. The inclusion of a Medical School

was an important factor in her selection of a university. She feels the university focuses

on women's issues. She spends time with her roommate on a regular basis who is also

African-American and feels supported by other women of color.

Kim is a third year African-American woman attending the school of business at

this university. Both parents and both of her grandmothers successfully completed

college on the undergraduate level. She had extensive involvement and leadership as

experienced through the Health Sciences Specialty Center, Freshman Mentoring Program

and Varsity Basketball during her high school years, which helped her develop invaluable

time management and leadership skills that she transferred over to management of her

college responsibilities. Additionally, she believes that her high school experiences

prepared her to be a role model at the collegiate level. She selected her university because

of its academic reputation. In regard to women's issues, Kim is unsure about the

university's commitment to improving their experiences. Kim is a gay woman involved

in a long-term relationship and feels the support of the African-American community.

Trisha is an African-American woman whose high school was situated in a city

where the majority of the population is African-American. Her leadership positions and

roles in high school prepared her for expanded roles in college. Both parents graduated

from college; additionally her father earned an M.D., and her mother earned both an

M.D. and an M.P.H degree. The maternal and paternal grandmothers completed

undergraduate school and one grandfather has an M.B.A., while her brother graduated

from college as well. The academic reputation of the university was a major draw to this

school for her. She does not believe her high school prepared her for the rigors of college

in general but indicated the time management skills learned while taking advanced placement courses was the vehicle she used to be successful.

Glenda is a third year student double majoring by pursuing a degree in politics with an emphasis on government and African-American and African studies. She is involved in local ministries and a campus Christian organization. She has participated in college athletics. Glenda attended a minority majority high school with a large number of African-American students. She believes that her school provided a rigorous curriculum but does not feel that anyone from the school helped to prepare her for her current school environment. Additionally while she agrees that the challenges have been many, she feels the adversity has forced her to become more self-aware and is pleased with the person she has become. She comes from a family of educated individuals.

Vivian was raised in an environment with some diversity where the population consisted of a relatively equal number of Caucasian and African-American residents. She is an African-American woman whose positive high school experience helped her to earn an International Baccalaureate diploma. The adults in her school encouraged her to set goals and attend college. She characterizes her former teachers as "amazing." Parents, counselors and teachers all worked to ensure that she was prepared for college. Her mother completed a Master's degree. She selected this university based on the academic reputation. She is in her third year and has concerns about the university's commitment to women's issues.

Abby is an African-American woman who attended a predominately White high school and lived in a predominately White neighborhood with only two other African-American families. She is a graduate of the university, earning a bachelor's degree in

psychology and her master's degree in forensic psychology from another university in the northern part of the state. While attending undergraduate school she participated in the psychology club, and was a founding member of a club created to support wounded service men and women. Additionally she pledged a traditionally African-American Greek-letter sorority. Both parents and her sibling have earned a Master's degree.

Jenny attended a diverse high school with a student population that of approximately 40% African-American, 40% Caucasian and 20% Hispanic and Asian students. She double majored in African-American Studies and Sociology resulting in a bachelor's degree. She currently is enrolled in graduate school earning her master's degree in school counseling. Her mother is a college graduate with a master's degree while her father has attended some college. Her sibling is a college graduate. She does not see evidence of the university's commitment to women's issues.

Carla as born in Sierra Leone and travelled widely with her family and was exposed to various cultures unlike her own. Attending college was a self-expectation that her family actively encouraged and supported. Her sibling is also college educated. She participated in the Peer Mentoring program, organized and supported by the university. She is a psychology, African and African-Americans studies major, studied abroad in South Africa. She travels to Africa approximately every other year. She felt fortunate to have an African-American roommate and forged a lasting bond with her. She enjoyed the academic experiences at the university.

Freddie was raised in the northeast and attended a high school where she was one of approximately 10 African-American students in her graduating class. She double majored in psychology and studio art. Additionally, she participated in the Program of

Black Affairs mentoring program, which provided her the opportunity to be a guide for new students on tours and advise underclassmen. Additionally she spent a semester at sea. Her mother attended the university thereby making her a legacy. Freddie is a member of an African-American Greek Sorority and participates in community service.

Zoe is a graduate from the university with a degree in communications. She feels strongly that the university has not adequately addressed women's issues especially African-American women. She comes from a family of educated individuals and was raised to be open-minded about others. She indicates that there are some structures at the university that prevent equality for minorities. The university has a student-facilitated court for specific infractions. Because there are no minorities on the court she feels justice is not always equally served. She is member of a Greek sorority and is heavily involved in community service. She felt it was beneficial to have an African-American roommate for four years. They were able to share common challenges and support each other through those challenges.

Regina was born in Africa but also self- identifies as African-American. She is from Maryland and attended a Black high school. Both parents have some college. One has completed a bachelor's and the other is currently enrolled. She feels empowered by the notion that some of her ancestors may have built the university and tries to honor them through the way she approaches her academics. She is a statistics major, a field not many African-American women enter in to.

Sara was raised in Maryland and graduated in 2012 majoring in religious studies. She was heavily involved in an organization created by the students that focused on

issues for African-American women. They met on a weekly basis and felt empowered from the time spent with others facing isolation and other challenges.

Susan is completing her third year at the university and is very clear on her goals and the vision she has for herself. She indicated that she was working on herself to find ways to strengthen the positive attributes that she knows belong to her. She indicated the environment has been challenging at times but it only forces her to rely on other African-American women whether they are students, faculty or service workers. She stated that she feels a certain synergy with them. In some ways it helps her feel at home. Susan is from Georgia. She is an education major and would like to positively impact the future through education. Her parents are college educated and currently one practices law while the other is an engineer. Her siblings all attended and graduated from historically Black colleges or universities and supported her school choice.

Courtney is an undergraduate completing her last year in school. She is a business major with the intent of earning a MBA. The campus climate has been frustrating to her and was not what she was expecting. You attended a summer program designed to bridge the gap between high school and college. She felt deceived because during the summer there appeared to be a lot of African-American students but the shear numbers during the year let her feeling like a speck of dust in a sea of snow. Courtney also identifies as a gay women but this has not caused her to be disconnected from the African-American community. She involves herself in the supports provided by the women of color and strongly identifies with her ethnic support structure. She does not regret her decision to attend the university because she has learned many life lessons. The most important one being the strength she draws from others like her and the strength within.

Sharon comes from a high achieving military family. She has travelled the world experiencing other countries and cultures. She is reserved and labels herself an observer. She is finishing her third year and will graduate with a nursing degree. She prefers to surround herself with others espousing the same core beliefs in their words and actions.

Cynthia attended a high school in North Carolina where the majority of the students and teachers were White. Throughout her high school years she believes she was often mistaken for White because of her extremely fair skin, straight hair and body type. In high school these physical characteristics caused other students to say inappropriate things about race around her. The comments decreased once students saw her parents. She is finance major.

Sophi is a senior biomedical engineering major from Virginia. She attended a school where the majority of her classmates were White. She is considered by many to come from a wealthy family but does not feel her values have been impacted by the income associated with her family. Her parents were strict when she was growing up. Study time was structured until she reached high school. She reflects on it now and sees the value in it. Her experiences in high school were positive. Her counselors encouraged her to major in biomedical engineering because of her abilities. The high school focused on future careers and conducted yearly career fairs. She thought she was prepared to attend a predominantly White college but for her the size and number of majority students changed the dynamics.

Andrea will graduate in May, and plans to return to the university for graduate school. The quality of the education outweighs the challenges she has experienced. She is architecture major with an emphasis on Design Thinking. At the age of 22 an African-

American teacher has never taught her from kindergarten through her senior year in college. She attended a high school with a limited number of minority students. Her parents do not live together but she does not consider it a broken home, because her parents are both supportive emotionally and financially. Her extended family takes an active interest in her education and has high expectations.

Charlene attended a high school with a majority Black student population. Her family is considered middle class but due to zoning policies she attended a school outside of her neighborhood in an area known to struggle. She found the classes to be adequate initially but was quickly moved to advanced courses and is appreciative that her counselor and teachers challenged her to take on more rigorous courses which she indicated prepared her for the academic side of college but not the social side. She is an economics major and the oldest of five children. Both parents have a bachelor's degree and she feels a responsibility to set the standard for her siblings. .

Cheryl encountered a shock when coming from Massachusetts to the south to include understanding southern accents. She is a junior majoring in Global Public Health a field not frequented by African-American women. She is an only child with a legacy of college graduates in her family. Her parents, aunts and uncles each have earned a bachelor's degree. She is involved in organizations that focus on health concerns especially health issues regarding African-Americans and access for their care. She uses the word loner when describing herself but has formed relationships with other African-American students as a source of support or encouragement.

Donna characterizes the transition from a mainly African-American high school to a predominantly White college as one filled with twists and turns. She credits her

competitive nature for her college success. She credits her teachers from high school as one of the reasons she is focused. She prioritizes her studies by following the schedule a teacher from home helped her create during her first semester that has helped her maintain a GPA above a 3.2 each semester. Her major is education and she aspires to go back home to teach in an improvised neighborhood. She volunteers in schools in her hometown when she is on break from college.

Renee is a senior accounting major from the south. She describes her family as a nuclear one with supportive parents. She stated that she valued being given the opportunity to go to a school with a positive academic record. She believes the barriers they have faced will only prepare them for true adulthood and the professional workforce. She has mentored other African-American students and is considering trying to gain a position with Teach for America before starting her career in her major field of accounting.

Analysis Results

The five themes that emerged from the interviews, surveys and focus groups were (1) Racial Tension, (2) Socialization and Empowerment, (3) Historical Perspectives and School Culture, (4) Intersectionality of Gender and Race, and (5) University Supports. These themes were present in the experiences of all participants in varying degrees. The most prevalent theme that permeated the participant's experiences was racial tension. The racial aspect of the experiences of the participants overlapped with others and included the subthemes microaggressions and stereotypes, both of which were often directed at them from students and faculty. All participants witnessed or directly experienced

incidents of racial tensions. Empowerment with a subtheme of self-supporting emerged as another main theme. Participants were asked to articulate strategies utilized to deflect the negative experiences enabling them to continue to remain in this academic and social environment. They unanimously detailed ways in which they encouraged themselves and others. While participants acknowledge having friends outside of their race, they appear to have created a network exclusive to women self- identifying as African-American and designed to meet their social and emotional needs.

The third main theme to emerge, referenced by 96% of participants, was an interchange between the Historical Perspective and School Culture, highlighting the ways in which the universities' past as a slaveholding and racially scarred institution continues to dictate present day culture. The intersection of Gender and Race was another major theme, with 71% of interviewees discussing related issues. Emergent subthemes included feelings of invisibility and isolation that could impact participant's sense of self-worth. All participants indicated that race was always a factor when dealing with gender issues. Support through Mentorship emerged as the final theme in participant's experiences. Participants described both formal and informal levels of mentorship designed for academic support including receiving and providing the services. 100% of participants discussed university programs centered on mentorship, but they expressed uncertainty as to the validity of these programs.

Theme #1 Racial Tension

These concerns fell into four subthemes to include racial encounters, microaggressions, stereotypes, and racial literacy. When the researcher or a participant

introduced the topic of race, every participant engaged in thought provoking, passionate, and emotional conversation. They were demonstrative in tone, volume, and word choice, as they provided examples of what they felt were forms of racism. The topic of race was a part of each interview in varying degrees. 25% of comments made by participants, a total of 247 instances, related to racial tension were referenced during this study. Some participants described witnessing incidents while others spoke of personal victimization.

One hundred percent of the women interviewed felt that race is a concern on campus and in the larger community. The experience of both microaggressions and more blatant racially charged interactions appear to be an unwelcome companion in the lives of African-American women at this university. Despite the prevalence of these issues across multiple aspects of student life, interviewees felt that the university administration has done little to nothing to attempt to address racial tensions. Figure 1.1 demonstrated the overlapping of racial tensions. Each comment that was coded was counted once, even if one or more participants reiterated the same sentiment later during the interview or focus group.
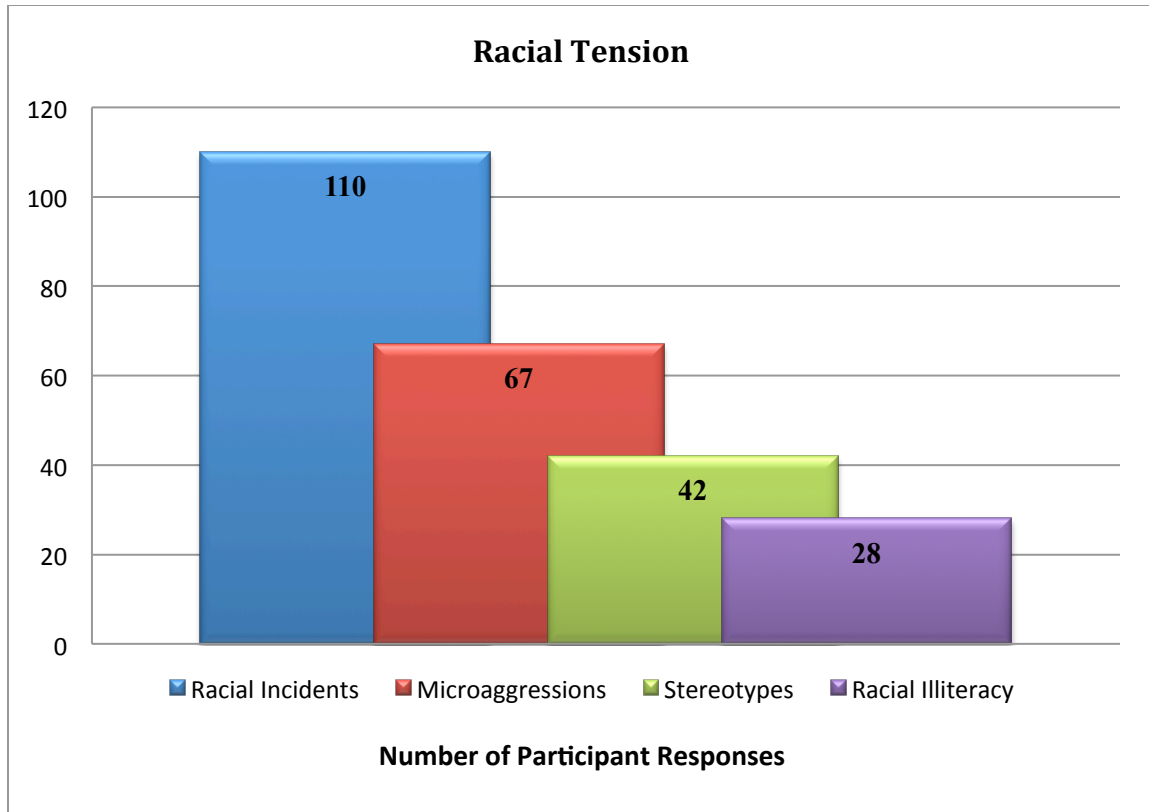
Racial Tension

A bar chart titled "Racial Tension" with the y-axis ranging from 0 to 120. Bars: Racial Incidents = 110, Microaggressions = 67, Stereotypes = 42, Racial Illiteracy = 28. X-axis label: "Number of Participant Responses"

Figure 4.1

Kayla: "What did you say to us?"

Racial Illiteracy

Kayla believes that she represents herself as a well-rounded student open to making new friends with others not from the same ethnic background. She grew up in a church going family and was raised to be accepting of others. She prides herself on being involved in, and supporting, her school through sports and leadership activities. She feels that she does not care about social status, race, gender or sexual orientation. She was of the assumption that because she was accepted to the university based on her academic ability that she would not encounter challenges due to her race. When approached by a

fellow student one night as she returned from a basketball game, she was confused. She

recounted this incident during her interview.

> We were coming from a basketball game and this guy was walking in the opposite direction of us. We were in the front, my friend and I, and then he was like, "Excuse me, F-ing N's," to us when we walked by. Then we turned around because we were surprised that he said that to us and we were like, "What did you say?" Like, "What did you say to us?" There was an African-American man behind us that we didn't realize. The African-American man asked him " What did you say to them"? Once he realized that he was standing there, he wouldn't repeat himself because he was nervous and he knew that ... I feel the end result probably would have been different if he had said that directly to the African-American man versus when he saw us as African-American women.

At the time this was a novel and frightening experience for Kayla. However, she

made it clear that the years since this incident have changed her perspective on racial

incidents. Now, she feels she is "not as sensitive" as she was as a freshman. She states

this change is "maybe just because I've adapted to the culture and I'm kind of just used to

it."

Trisha: " … the intersection between gender and race…"

Trisha does not believe that the high school experience can prepare students for

the many aspects of college life. While her honors and AP courses aided her in preparing

academically, she now feels that she was unprepared socially. Her parents both have

Medical Degrees and her mother also earned a MPH. They exposed her to many different

cultures and ethnicities growing up. Because of this, she believed that she would be able

to assimilate fairly easily and did not feel that race would become an issue when entering

college, however described a personal incident that colored her early college experience.

When asked to describe her experiences as an African-American woman at this university

she reported:

It was my first year. Yes, it was my first year, either first or second semester. I was walking on the corner to go, it was like 7:00 P.M. at night, and I was going to one of the grocery shops on the corner, and like these three people started shouting the "N" word at me.

When asked to describe the three individuals Trisha responded: "Two were male and one was a woman" and further clarified that:

All three of them were White, but the woman wasn't actually saying anything. It was just the men. So I think that's a case where, you know there's like, the intersectionality between gender and race where, you know, I'm being sort of targeted because of my race, but then the fear that I felt, was largely impacted by being a woman, and like you know, not feeling as though I was protected, which is really unfortunate that I have to feel that way.

Throughout the majority of the interview Trisha's body language was relaxed and she laughed and smiled. However, her posture became somewhat ridged as she described her encounter when she was walking to the store. Her facial expression changed and her hands became agitated when explaining the feeling of vulnerability in respect to being a woman. She was intrigued by the fact that the woman accompanying the men did not participate in the slurs but also did not attempt to dissuade them from taunting her. Trisha wondered about the positionality of this woman, and the intersectionality of her race and gender. Did she have the privilege not to speak up or as a woman did she feel she had no choice?

Stereotype

Kim: "That might have been the most uncomfortable I've ever been, just being in …

a White classroom"

Race not only permeates student's experiences as they walk the campus and in the nearby town, but is experienced in the classroom as well. Kim is a gay student and she believes that while her sexuality has not presented her with significant issues at the

university, her race has been a more prevalent source of negative experiences. Kim

shared an encounter that she characterized as unsettling when asked about classroom

experiences:

> There is one example probably that could speak to that question, earlier this
> semester. I was in a predominantly White class with me and two other African-
> American women all sitting next to each other. We were in a computer lab. One of
> us raised our hands for the professor to come over to answer a question, and before
> my friend could even get out her question, the professor said, "What do we have
> going on here, a little ghetto?" We were all caught off by that. That was definitely
> the most blatant racist thing ever said to my friends directly. That might have been
> the most uncomfortable I've ever been, just being in like a White classroom. I
> know that this is the one time it happened and stuff like that I hear stories about
> professors or restaurants at the corner anywhere around the university campus.

Kim and her friends were left with a sense of powerlessness because of the position of

power this professor held over them. However, they later discussed amongst themselves

what to do in the event that a similar circumstance occurred again. They decided to go to

an African-American professor should they be faced with similar situation.

Microaggressions

Freddie: "…people look at you differently…"

Freddie, an alumna from the university grew up in a town where there are few

individuals of color. She expressed a great deal of frustration about her high school

experiences, where her counselors discouraged her from applying to the university. While

she was used to the stigma felt in high school, she was expecting something different in

college. She believes she earned the right to attend this university and not to have her

history repeat itself. She recalled how she and others were treated.

> You have people who are gonna' say things to you, and I know people always
> say, "Oh, it was 2014," or 2015 or 2016, whatever year it is, and they want to tell
> you that racism or prejudice doesn't exist anymore and that you need to get over it
> and you're being paranoid, but people look at you differently, people interact with

you differently, and it's just something that I've seen, whether it's people calling you the N-word at school, or people just not wanting to sit next to you on the bus, they're looking at you funny, or second guessing your work, or not taking your answers in class seriously. I don't know, it's kind of sad to see and, myself, as being an advisor for underclassmen, it was just kind of disheartening to hear their experiences as well and see them struggle with those kind of experiences, where they had people looking at them and interacting with them differently than they would a White student, whether it's professors or other kids.

All participants in the study spoke about the array of racial encounters experienced personally or experienced by a close college friend and found it unsettling.

Racial Iliteracy

<p style="text-align:center">**"The Incident"**</p>

There was a clear concern for the well-being of African-American men on campus and how authorities and peers perceive them. This is an issue that bears on the experiences on their female peers, as many African-American students appear to be at least friendly or familiar with one another, due in part, to the small percentage of the student body that identifies as African-American. One indent in particular was mentioned in each interview and focus group. This incident involved a young African-American man, Jamar, who was wrestled to the ground and arrested by White Alcohol Beverage Control (ABC) officers outside of a popular student hangout. Jamar sustained serious injuries during the arrest, which was for suspicion of using a fake ID. The student in question did not have a fake ID and responded appropriately when informed he could not enter with his valid under aged ID card. The anger felt by the participants generally stemmed from the fact, as reported by Abby "that most college students have fake ID cards and attempt to get into bars and are generally successful."

The sentiment of the graduate focus group was that the community at large simply accepted this incident despite the fact that many White under aged students frequent bars in the university area, often without incident. This incident and a few others spurred several student organizations to collaborate under the leadership of an African-American woman student in an attempt to open dialogue with the school administration. As stated by Carla "Yeah, it impacted the community pretty quickly on a grand scale. There was a lot of anger. There was a lot of sadness that something like this would happen. That incident definitely stuck in the minds."

Conclusion

Trisha's response to the question "How has race impacted your experience at the university?" incorporates the collective emotionalism of most of the participants who responded to that question:

> I think more so than anything else, my experience has been primarily defined by my race as an African-American more so than as an African-American woman at a predominantly White institution. So a lot of the, I guess you could say, microaggressions or other forms of discrimination that I face, it hasn't been so much because I'm a woman, but simply because like, you know, I have melanin on my skin. So I think my experience is ... I haven't found that it's been that largely defined by being a woman as much as it's been defined by being an African-American.

The majority of the participants agreed that race seems to be central to their experience at the university. African-American women are confronted with multiple challenges when maneuvering a majority White landscape. These challenges force them to seek other ways to connect and create community systems of their own.

Theme #2 Socialization and Empowerment

This theme included four subthemes, empowerment, community- interdependency,

resiliency and exclusion.

Community- Interdependency

Kristie: "I feel like you could be lost…"

The participants overwhelmingly identified the bond they have with other

African-American women as an intricate part of their college experience. During the

interviews many participants alluded to feelings of exclusion and isolation from the

mainstream student community. In an apparent effort to counter these realities,

participants describe creating and moving through community- interdependency activities

or actions. This homogenous support system connects with other themes identified in this

study. Participants expressed that at times racial tensions have limited their ability or

desire to socialize with members of other races. This racially driven social isolation has

been a real source of frustration, which was exhibited in a show of anger as one

participant verbalized how it can impact your self–esteem if you are not already a

confident person. Kristie stated,

> All of that goes into your mental and how you perceive who you are. You have to
> be… I feel like going into [this university], you either have to know yourself or
> you have to find it quick because if you aren't secure in being who you are and
> sticking with who you are, I feel like you could be lost and feel about yourself.

Socialization and Empowerment

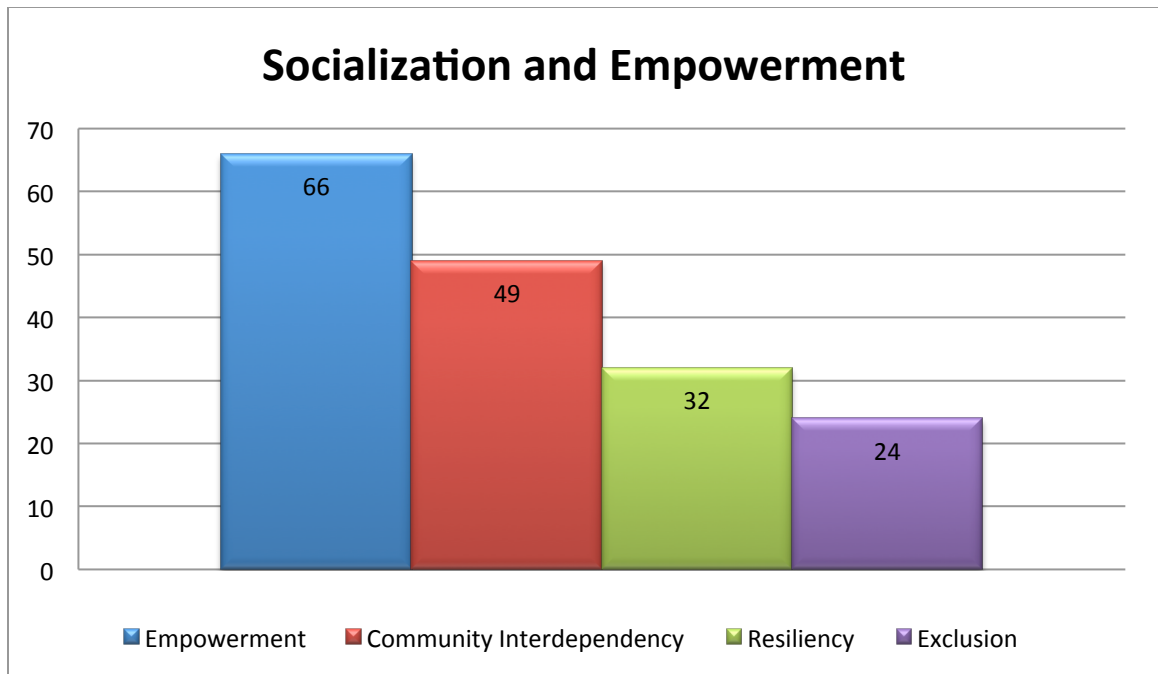| Category	Value
Empowerment	66
Community Interdependency	49
Resiliency	32
Exclusion	24

Figure 4.2

Entering college with an African-American roommate provided many participants a sense of comfort and security. The majority of the participants, 20 out of 24, (83%) had a roommate that was African-American during freshman year. Participants agreed that security came from being able to participate in things traditionally associated with their culture, for example how to wrap their hair, sharing hair and skin products, and talking about the pressures of being at school and being different. Dorm rooms became a safe haven after dealing with feelings of isolation in class or felt just in walking across campus alone.

Exclusion

Jenny: "It was absolutely not a positive experience for me."

Jenny is a graduate of the university, currently working toward her master's degree in school counseling. She is a legacy both in her sorority and at the university as

her mother pledged the same sorority and attended the same university. While still an undergraduate Jenny participated in university sports, and served as a peer mentor. Her idea of what university life would be like was influenced by what she heard from others, and she disappointed to find that the university culture had changed little since her mother attended. Jenny began to describe her experience with a White roommate and became emotional during the conversation.

> It was not the best situation at all which is odd though because a lot of African-Americans at [this university] were paired with African-American roommates. I don't know if that was intentional or that just happened but a lot of African-American women during the freshman year had African-American roommates. All of them did not know each other because you couldn't select your roommate so I don't know how that happened or how I didn't get one.

When asked if this was a positive experience she replied: "It was absolutely not a positive experience for me." This was an emotional conversation for Jenny, which resulted in tears. She changed roommates prior to her sophomore year.

A great deal of time was spent discussing participant's freshman year at the university. A common concern was making friends. Participants noted that while freshman year relationships do not always develop into lasting friendship, it was disappointing and painful to be ignored by someone believed to be a friend, particularly if it was due to race.

Kristie: "I would just add that it's hard."

Kristie is a member of a traditional Black sorority and completed college a semester early. She is an aspiring teacher, who recently completed her student teaching. Kristie stressed that,

I would just add that it's hard. It is hard. It is not easy to go to [this university] and stick it out when you are made to feel so different ranging from your choice in clothes to how you spend your time.

Carla: "They would pretend like we never even knew each other"

Carla is from the Mid-Atlantic region and served as a peer mentor when attending the university. She is a member of traditionally Black sorority and is currently working in the field of communication, interfacing with a diverse staff. She added her own experience with making and keeping friends of other races.

I think that ... I don't know. I didn't have very many negative experiences with people but I had friends who ... I don't know if you would even call them "friends". People that I would go out with and interact with, my [freshman] year, first semester of college, when second semester of [freshman] year came around; they joined the predominantly White sororities and things like that. They would pretend like we never even knew each other, never even saw each other in passing. When we would pass each other, walking to classes, it was like, "Who are you? Do you even exist?"

Empowerment

Kim: "For me personally, its Black community first."

The support the African-American student community provided often balanced out these situations. The university boasts over 40 student clubs facilitated by and for African-American students, with the majority of them led by women. This connection to the Black community is a foundation for these young women regardless of major, sexual orientation, sorority affiliation or involvement in the arts and provides them with a sense of security. Kim expanded by saying,

As I mentioned earlier, yes I am dating a woman, so technically I am part of the LGBT [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender] community, but I would say that it's not an integral part of my identify, not at all. We have a LBGT Center here. I was talking with my other friends who are Black and gay and technically we're part of the gay community. We all kind of seem to understand first and foremost we're part of the Black community, that's just how we identify first. The

LBGT community, as I mentioned before, that's not integral for our identity. "For me personally, its Black community first".

Intentionally or unintentionally, the African-American women seem to have created a system of community- interdependency. Participants sit together in class, for lunch, and tend to congregate at the same bus stop. Interfacing with one another, is a powerful motivator not only to remain at the university, but also to excel in their course work. The use of encouraging words and acts of appreciation for each other was common regardless whether they were undergraduates or women who had graduated from the university from 2012-2015.

Kim: "…one of us has to speak up"

Community Interdependency

Trisha: "What is the Black perspective?"

Participants stated that they felt compelled to sit with other African-American women in class both to support one another and because professors often make them feel as though they must speak on behalf of the Black community, which is often an uncomfortable experience. Additionally, they indicated that they feel the need to speak up for their race at times. Kim said, "I'm not the only African-American, I'm pretty sure there's like a shared sense that like, 'Hey, one of us has to speak up', and it's definitely noticeable sometimes." Trisha felt it was a commonplace expectation for African-American women to speak on behalf of the race. She shared her thoughts: "I think that's pretty common. Sometimes it is easy for people to view minorities as monolith. People look at me as like, oh you know, what is the Black perspective?" The participants relied on their after class time to discuss and vent about and dissect the events of the day. Many

look forward to spending time with other African-American women to engage in self-expression and to dialogue with someone who may understand.

Kim: "…I deserve to be here…"

Carla: "When I am shunned, I remember"

Participants indicated that they owe it to themselves, their parents, and young African-Americans coming behind them to remain at the university. Each young woman interviewed was accepted based on their previous academic ability and stand firm in the knowledge that they can handle the classes without major struggles. However they acknowledge that other factors can and do interfere with their confidence and comfort in their place at the university. The constant access to each other and the willingness of other African-American women to support each other has empowered them to continue at the university rather than transferring. There is a collective determination to rise above the challenges and demonstrate their right to be there. Kim shared her thoughts on being admitted to the School of Commerce, "the commerce school has about 350 [junior] students come in, and this year only about eight were African-American. She added "Hey there's so little of us, not only do I deserve to be here but the other seven that I came in here with deserve to be here too, so we support each other." Carla added, "When I am shunned I remember. I know I have other friends…. specifically friends in the Black community who accept me regardless of whatever the situation is." Glenda summed it up by sharing her thoughts:

> I think I've gotten more self-love, so I love myself more or I appreciate my growth and I see where I've transformed myself. We've come up with this idea that in college, particularly in our [junior] year we became butterflies. You transform from like this caterpillar stage where you don't know a lot about

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yourself through like adolescence and your teenage years. We could not have done it without each other's support.

Conclusion

These participants are young women with a strong desire to achieve and to be accepted for who they are. They have utilized each other's strengths to support and sustain themselves and one another through difficult times. They recognize that not all of their challenges stem from being African-American women, but that their hardships may be compounded by it. They have found a way to counter the feelings of isolation and exclusion through community- interdependency and empowerment to move forward socially and academically. These young women appreciate and acknowledge the support provided through the university but indicate the value of their own informal support structure as equally important and successful. In sustaining one another through difficult times, participants seem to believe that they are growing and maturing to be able to deal with reality after college when institutional programs will not be there to help.

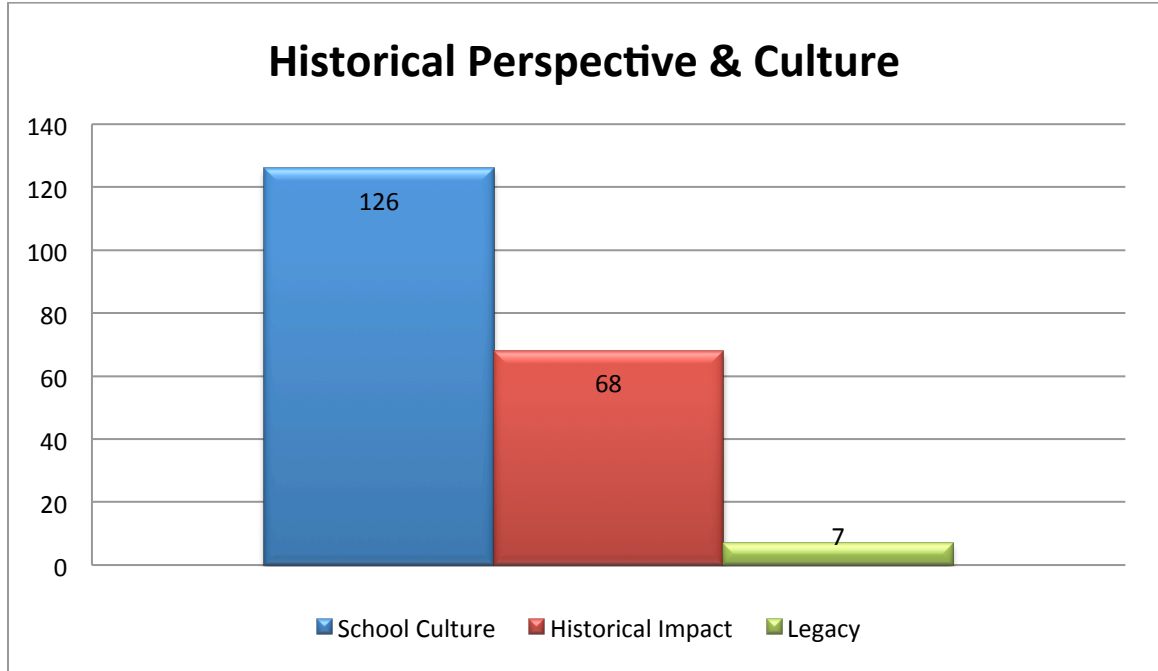**Theme # 3 Historical Perspective and School Culture**

Historical Perspective & Culture

Figure 4.3

A vital part of any student's college experience includes campus culture.
Questions and discussions centered on participants' viewpoints of their university's
culture yielded a strong tie to the school's history. Multiple subthemes emerge during
conversations with participants including faculty experiences, peer relationships, and
physical spaces. Many participants felt that each of these subthemes was influenced by
the university's scarred history. They were disheartened by the perceived lack of respect
they felt from White peers and administration and by a sense of alienation in traditional
school spaces. The beauty of the campus was not lost but participants were clear in their
conversations that they remember daily that slaves built it. A main theme in the focus
group discussion was the dichotomy presented by the university's strong academic
reputation and high ranking for graduation, while many students interviewed feel the

literal skeletons in the history of the university remain metaphorically present and are

negatively impacting the overall school culture. This theme resulted in several

subthemes: school culture, historical impact and legacy.

Historical Impact

Abby: "They didn't even think about it"

The noticeable reminders of slavery on campus were clearly painful for many.

Participants spoke about walking across campus seeing plaques as place markers for

slaves who died while working there. The experience of seeing the markers resonated

conflicting emotions such as pride, pain, frustration and anger. Abby struggled to make

intellectual sense of the way the university boasts diversity in their meetings with

African-American parents and highlights pictures of "us" in school publications but puts

little energy into changing our experiences. She is a graduate of the university and is

proud to have endured because the school has an excellent academic reputation but wants

better for the next group of African-American women. She shared one experience that

left her reeling when she was participating in orientation:

> They housed us in that dorm on one end of [campus] when you needed to be
> completely at the other end for everything that they do at orientation. When you
> come in with all your suitcases, you walk right past a plaque that says, essentially,
> that there are unmarked slave graves under your feet. That's it.

When asked how did that make you feel? She had this to say,

> I was shocked, I was appalled, I was disgusted and I was hurt. I've grown up in
> the South and I knew, at the time, that [it] was a very old school, but I have never
> thought so specifically about what that would mean. In this day and age, I was not
> prepared for the callousness with which the people who built that university were
> treated. I was also surprised because, to me, having that be all students' first
> introduction [this] was either a decision that someone made or probably worse,
> they didn't even think about it. That said to me that they thought so little of the

fact that there are unmarked graves buried all over the place in the housing area that they thought it was unimportant and it wasn't going to influence anybody.

Others demonstrated their agreement by sharing similar examples of school culture.

Freddie: "Are you kidding me?"

When asked: How does the campus culture impact your school experience, and can you give me an example? Freddie, a graduate revisited her feelings about part of the school culture that still evokes passion in her:

> I felt like, when you come into the university, the Office of Black Affairs has one of their slogans is "This is our university," and they want to encourage students to take ownership of the university and to make it their own, and to treasure their experience in their own way, however they want to define it. Even though you want to feel comfortable in the university space, sometimes it's just, whether it's the physical history of the building, like the famous [commons], the way that's constructed, the gardens that everyone thinks are so beautiful, were actually constructed to hide the institution of slavery within the university, physical structures of the university that have so much history that's not talked about.

Vivian: …it's acknowledging its past shame…

Vivian was used to a rigorous curriculum and earned an International Baccalaureate degree from her high school, which she felt prepared her for college. Vivian has a more positive opinion of the university's progress on the issue of its history. While she understands their discomfort she feels the university is making efforts to reconcile the past. She acknowledges that the university is taking steps to recognize the contributions of the slaves. She shared her sentiments about universities efforts. When asked, she had this to say:

> I don't know exactly how I feel about it. I do feel like the university thinks it's a good thing to start acknowledging this, just like the new dorm that was created [named after former slaves]. People call it the slave house because it's named after two, I think they were slaves at the university, but then they were later freed. I'm not exact sure about the history. In fact, the university feels very proud of it so that it's acknowledging its past shame.

The vast majority of the participants felt there was still the unfinished business between the African-American community and the university. It is a chapter that needs to be closed to help change the role the dominant culture currently holds in the campus community. The participants feel this would assist with the healing between groups and the change in status of African-American students in the eyes of their White peers and professors. Many of the participants suggest that an increase in African-American professional staff like professors would be a starting point to changing the perception of the role African-Americans currently hold at the university.

School Culture

Jenny: "People would look at me like I didn't belong there"

The school's academic and social spaces are a large part of the culture. This university serves not just as a school for students, but also a home, a recreational area, and the focal point of memories and life lessons. Jenny felt alienated from multiple areas on campus.

> In the library in the stacks where it's supposed to be really quiet, where it's supposed to be the real studying. People would look at me like I didn't belong there. They looked at me like I was supposed to be in [the other library] so [this] is the library that people actually used to call [The] Club… because it was a library where people talked. A lot of people would be in there but they would go with their friends at the library before dinner, after dinner, after class, free time. People sometimes then the serious Caucasians would go in the classroom and all you would see is Black students in [The Club]. I don't know there were definite spaces where I felt that I wasn't welcomed and I think that sometimes I would let that get the best of me and I wouldn't go to those spaces. Now I'm kind of like well I should have done that, probably would have been done with my paper a few hours earlier but yeah.

Shainna: "…these spaces belong to me"

Shainna shared a different opinion on feelings of belonging. Again, a historical lens permeated her perspective on the issue. She was born in Africa and lived there until middle school. Both parents are African and she takes pride in her natural heritage but also considers herself African-American. She voiced her opinion about the spaces.

> I think all the spaces available on the grounds are available or are publicized as being available to everyone, but I feel like I'm here to get my degree so I don't really think about all the spaces that belong to me or not. One of the reasons I like being here is that I know this university was created by the hands of people who shared an African descent. That's why I feel comfortable that these spaces belong to me, but at the same time, it's as if the space has been taken over.

Feeling uncomfortable or removed from academic and social spaces is a reoccurring theme in the life experiences of these young women. They were vocal about the culture of exclusion that appears to permeate this university.

Legacy

Kayla: "I was really surprised by that"

Support or acceptance from the university and peers was another subtheme that emerged. A sense of apprehension or fear of speaking about race was a thread throughout the interviews while discussing the efforts on behalf of the students to engage in dialogue about the treatment of African-American women and African-American students in general. Kayla immediately began to discuss the administrations role in the schools culture when the topic was approached. She shared her knowledge and opinion about administration:

> Some of my friends work close with some of the administrators and the faculty, and have just talked to them about it. One of their concerns that they expressed was they don't think it's a possible idea because you take into account the Board of [Governors], which is like, the governing body of the university. The administrators' take on it was that they wouldn't agree with it because they would

see it as brainwashing the student body. I was really surprised by that, because here students had tried to come and sit down with faculty and administrators and talk to them to address the issues that are going on. Then they weren't really receptive and open to it because they were saying, "Oh, the governing body, they're not going to really agree with that, so that's not really the best idea."

School Culture

Trisha: "…there's not like that much intermingling going on."

Trisha felt similar discomfort surrounding overall peer relationships in the

university culture.

> So I think we have a huge culture, like a kind of a separationist culture here at [this school]. Where people tend to stick within their races and within their ethnic groups. So there's not like that much intermingling going on.

> In feeling that student self-segregation is a main part of university culture Trisha

is not alone.

School Culture/Microaggressions

Carla: "It's never overt"

While discussing the relationship between African-American women and White

students and faculty, some participants indicated they had stories to tell about double

standards. Carla discussed the differences in how authorities handle parties based on race.

> That's when you get Black students having their own parties off campus, which ultimately become a problem because our parties are deemed rowdy and dangerous, whereas people are having bigger parties, louder parties, on [fraternity row], but then when you go off campus and have your parties the cops are called. Then that becomes an issue and I think that, I don't know, that's the divide that you see at [this university] all of the time. It's never overt. It depends on what you consider overt, because to me that's obvious, but it's little innuendoes and nuances like that that you see as the divide being a Black student and being a White student.

Zoe: "…then it becomes an issue…"

Zoe is from the mid-Atlantic and has her master's degree from a prestigious university. She is currently a journalist working and living on the West Coast. Zoe echoed Trisha and Carla's viewpoints and gave examples of her own experiences with the racial double standard that she believes is alive and well. She stated,

> You'll go to a frat and you'll see all these other girls walking and then me and maybe I'm with 1 other White girl and maybe 4 other Black girls, and you'll get to the door and then the conversation will be, "Do you know any brothers? Do you know 5 brothers that are part of this fraternity?" If you don't, then it becomes an issue and you can't get into the frat.

Vivian: "They don't have faith in your ability to produce quality work."

Vivian feels that the culture of double standards applies to the classroom as well as the social environment:

> It seems that other students don't have confidence in your ability and it just comes out in different ways. One thing that really stuck out for me was when I was in physics lab. I guess the majority of the students in physics are White, and so when I had physics lab we had groups that would rotate so it would be groups of three and every three weeks you would be in a different group of three. Each week a different person in the group had to write the answer down, so when it was my week to write, the two other students in my group, it was a White male and a White female, they kept reading over what I was writing and they were like, "Okay, what are you about to write?" It never happened when it was either of their turns to write. …the week when I wrote for the group is when we got the highest grade out of those three weeks. They don't really have faith in your ability to produce quality work.

Many participants felt a certain expectation to perform academically because of the history of the university in honor their ancestors. Their expressions of disappointment or surprise at what they feel is a lack of responsiveness to the needs of African-American students, while not specific to women, was evident. Focus group members verbalized if the culture improves for all African-Americans it will improve for both men and women

of color. When asked how change can happen 82% indicated that open dialogue with administrators would be a good start.

Kristie: "this how real life is sometimes"

Despite the negative experiences many participants have gone through during their time at the university, 98 % feel that these experiences can be turned into something personally positive. Kristie talks about the life lessons she has learned from campus culture.

> I wouldn't necessarily change anything. Except for the fact that the racial demographics there but that also taught me how real life was and how to navigate in that space and make the space for me, in some way. Of course I want them to be more inclusive but the exclusion just shows you that this how real life is sometimes.

Conclusion

Not unlike the themes preceding it, Historical Perspectives and Culture speaks to a deep fissure within the school and a culture of exclusion. It is evident that participants feel as though racial tension is an embedded part of university culture. However, this culture creates the opportunity for in-group connections. Carla explains the other side of this exclusionary culture:

> Yeah. It's crazy. Those are the situations that I was just like, "You know what? You just have to leave it alone." I can't spend my energy trying to force you to be my friend because I know that there are other people who I don't have to ... It's not like pulling teeth to become friends with them. I don't know. I feel like I removed myself from the situation. It probably would've been a better opportunity to be like, "Hey, this is how Black people are. This is how Black women are, Black men." It could've been a great teaching and learning experience, but for me, at the time, I was like, "it's ... specifically friends in the Black community who will accept me regardless."

Theme #4 Intersectionality of Gender and Race

  Race and gender are separate topics that intersected to create one main theme in this study. Participants are keenly aware of the duality brought about by their role as double minorities and expressed the ways in which their womanhood and blackness intersect to create a position that is uncomfortable, yet uniquely theirs. They discussed their experiences and the impact of their race and gender on their social lives, confidence and identity as African-American women at this university in a total of 137 comments made throughout the study, 14% of total significant comments. 71% of participants spoke specifically about the challenges of being African-American and being a woman at this school. Race & women's issues, insecurity and invisibility are subthemes that emerged in this area.
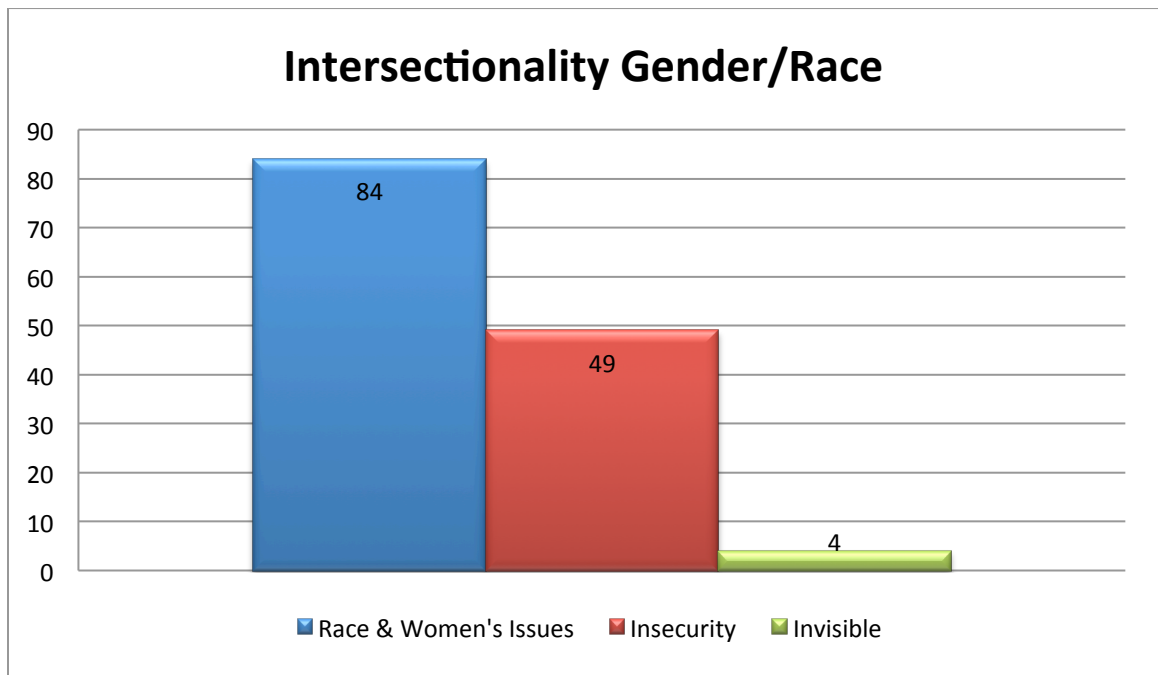

Figure 4.4

Their comments and experiences cover a range of subtopics and themes to be discussed below.

Glenda: "You have to take those falls"

Glenda is a junior majoring in Political Science and African and African-American Studies. She is slight of build and considered by most standards to have a fair complexion. She wears her hair in a natural style in part to demonstrate her heritage and in part because she loves the way it looks. She acknowledges that she has experienced her share of self-doubt regarding her confidence as a young woman when she first began college. She later came to appreciate whom she is and has grown into her own skin. She is proud to be an African-American woman and says "proud to be me and not she." When asked, "Who is she?" She laughed and replied "The White women attending the university."

Race & Women's Issues/Insecurity

One hundred percent of the participants felt as though they were separated from their non-minority peers in multiple ways as a result of their status as African-American women. However, they did not necessarily view this separation as an entirely negative experience. Participants such as Glenda acknowledged that being both African-American and a woman has its own burden. She describes her feelings.

> You have to take those falls; you have to fail sometimes in order to succeed. As a Black woman I feel like you're going to experience that regardless of whether you're here or any other place. Whether it's how you look, how you act, how you dress, you have to experience that so I think in order for us to succeed it's kind of learning yourself and learning how to combat those things that aren't necessarily easy, aren't necessarily what you planned for.

Glenda sees the struggles she is going through now as preparation for her future. She recalled her earlier college years and the self-doubt she carried. She has accepted the fact that her journey may be a bit different from the dominant culture. She speaks about her experiences with a relaxed tone and a big smile. It appears that she has come to terms with the roles she plays and knows that she will be successful.

Invisible

Kayla: "…they just don't even see you."

Kim: "…there's slim pickings."

Zoe: "I think it was the first time that he said it to someone that wasn't"

The topic of dating and relationships was one that arose often during discussions with participants. They are well aware that being an African America woman limits their opportunities to find meaningful relationships with men their age on campus and acknowledge that due to the demographic make- up of the school this is less challenging for White and Asian women. These issues are not only relegated to the world of dating, they tie into other types of hardships faced by these young women such as self-esteem and feelings of exclusion.

Kayla recalled how she believes White men feel about them:

> It just seems like that sense of invisibility exists as an African-American woman attending a predominately White university. The perspective that I feel that White, Caucasian men look at me as kind of in a sense of invisibility. You'll see them interacting and exchanging with other people of non-African-American, non-Black women. You see that exchange. Even say, when it comes to just walking down the street going to class, it just seems like literally the vibe they give off, it's that they just don't even see you. They're just really not even taking into account that you're a person.

While discussing how they perceive White males, Abby and Kim elaborated on their feelings. Abby, references barriers that interfere with finding a person to date by saying: "Yeah, it was like there were Black guys that wouldn't talk to Black girls, but then none of the White guys are going to pay you any attention, which, I don't care, but it just shrinks the pool." Kim adds: "I guess you could say there's slim pickings." The dating culture appears to leave these young women feeling disheartened about their prospects for finding a significant other. While it is clear they do not attend college seeking a spouse, there is a universal expectation that one could find a boyfriend in college. The small chances of them enjoying this part of the college experiences is clearly troubling to them, however they do not appear to begrudge other men or women for their dating successes. Zoe described one experience that shed light on what some White males might think about before considering interracial dating:

> Yeah, also I think it can work in the reverse, too, where like the [previously mentioned] class that you were speaking of, A Dialogue in Diversity, I remember we would talk about any and everything in my small group. I remember one White guy actually expressing himself, and I think it was the first time that he said it to someone that wasn't White, because I do feel like they have conversations about race all of the time amongst themselves, but they either don't have any Black friends or are too afraid to say it around people that are Black or of a different race or something …
> I remember him saying him saying … this goes, actually back to the whole dating thing. Anyway, it stuck in my mind that he said that he sees a lot of Black women around grounds that he finds attractive, but he knows that he can never take them home to his grandparents so, therefore, he would never talk to them. I was just sitting there like, "Okay, that's interesting." We talked about it and he was like, "Yeah, but at the end of the day," he came across as saying it's not worth messing up his relationship with his family for someone, when he could find someone that would just be better suited for not only him but his family as well. I was like, "Okay."

The focus group participants appeared to be somewhat validated by the fact that he found them attractive. The sense was that the problem really was not just that he was

racist but that it is a systemic problem that goes deeper into his family and his culture. The participants seemingly generalized this belief to apply to White culture in general.

Abby: "…being so different…has been very hard for me."

Ninety two percent of the participants mentioned during their interviews that they recognize they look different from the stereotypical university student in ways that range from hair texture to body type. All but one mentioned that this issue could initially create uneasy feelings and self-doubt until one finds a way to make peace with it. Abby commented that; "I think that being physically…Physically being so different from what's considered beautiful in the mainstream has been very hard for me. I sort of feel like it affects me socially."

During the focus group discussion, the question of the school's commitment to women in general surfaced. The women felt an allegiance to the Women and Genders Studies major and expressed disappointment when discussing the disproportionate funding allocated to majors with high concentrations of male students, such as engineering. When asked if the university focused on women's' issues half of the women indicated yes, one fourth stated no, and one fourth indicated they were unsure. Abby had a strong opinion about equity between majors and had this to say:

> I took a couple of classes in the Women and Gender Studies Department that was just getting off the ground in my last couple of years there, but I remember talking to a professor who had some beef with the school because they weren't giving them enough money, like, "Are they going to pay her anymore?" Stuff like that. My experience academically, I don't think was hindered or anything because I was a woman, but thinking about that department and classes geared towards women or femininity, I don't feel like they were given the same status as other classes. I don't know if it's a thing at this university or an academia thing.

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Zoe: "I graduated from college, but I graduated from [this college], and I'm Black, and I'm a woman, and that was not easy."

Overall, the participants of the focus group supported Abby's stance on the issue of equity and discussed at length the differences in funding for African and African-American Studies, a major largely populated by African-American women, verses that for other majors. This caused some angst over possible reasons why these majors were not fully support by the university.

Zoe indicated that often there is a lack of confidence in African-American women. Zoe shared her thoughts:

> I don't know what word I'm trying to say. I don't know if anybody else understands what I'm saying, but I just feel like through my experience at [the university] and even after, I've encountered circumstances where a lot of people didn't believe that I would be where I was, because of my race and my gender, if that makes sense. When I'm able to tell people, "I went to [this college]," that carries a significance for me because in a way it was kind of a struggle, and so I'm able to say, "Oh, I graduated from here," and that's like an extra win. "I graduated from college, but I graduated from [this college], and I'm Black, and I'm a woman, and that was not easy."

Regina is from the mid-Atlantic and is a graduate of the university. While an undergraduate she was very involved in dance and other artistic endeavors. She is currently employed in the finance field. Regina shared a similar experience.

> When I tell people, "Oh, I graduated with a statistics degree from [this school]," they're like, "Oh, my God, it must have been like a struggle. Wow, you actually graduated and got a degree and all that stuff," so I definitely do feel proud, the fact that I'm Black, I'm a woman, and on top of that I majored in an area where typically Black females don't major in.

Conclusion

The participants seem to own their experiences and the impact intersectionality has on how they view themselves. They refuse to allow what they determine to be a lack of support for women to cripple their sense of self. One hundred percent of the participants reported that they identify strongly with the African-American women attending the university and the lack of opportunities to engage in typical college experiences such as dating is an experience contrary to their friends attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The participants admitted that it would be nice to have a boyfriend but ultimately they are at school to get an education from a strong academic university, which many have accomplished, and others continue to strive for. They are aware of how this could impact self–esteem but make a conscious effort to support each other and maintain their focus. This trait is best exemplified by Glenda's statement:

> I love being a Black woman and I don't think me looking or being surrounded by people who aren't; Black women affects how I see myself. It doesn't make me want to be anyone else, if anything it makes me want to be myself more. It makes me want to be stronger in myself love, if anything.

Theme # 5 University Supports

One of the main focal points of this research is the examination into how participants recognize, utilize, and benefit from university support. When asked about elements of support implemented by the university participants discussed the notion of support as it applied to their situation. Participants in the focus group collectively determined that having assistance with social, academic and psychological issues defined the term, support in the context of college. Many participants interviewed individually included the need for direct support from faculty and peers, in addition to the definition

the focus group determined, as instrumental to having a positive school experience. Responses on this topic account for a total of 96 individual comments, totaling 9% of all comments made during the study. Subthemes to emerge include mentoring, organizational and events.
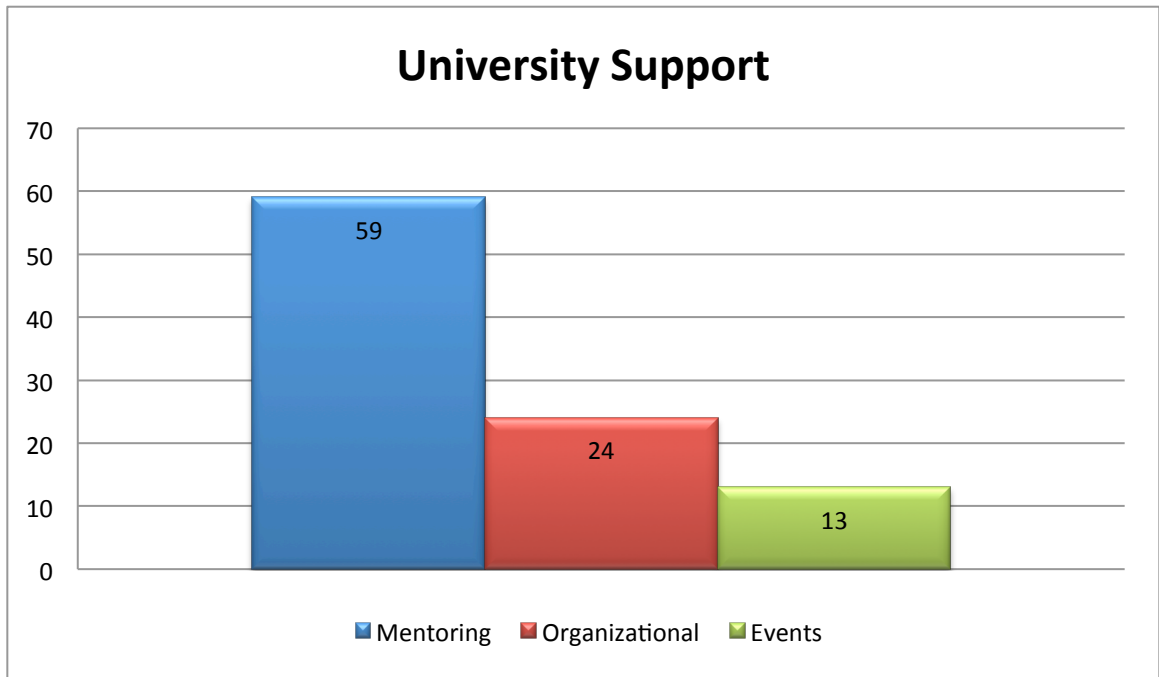

University Support

Figure 4.5

For participants in both the focus group and individual interviews, being questioned about university supports provoked reflection on their initial campus experiences and how they felt attending a weekend event designed solely for African-American prospective students. Seeing so many African-American students together provided them with an opportunity to begin to connect with others who may have similarities in ethnicities, gender and interest. Throughout the focus group, the young women interjected comments and laughed and smiled frequently when remembering this event. While this discussion stirred up positive memories and appreciation for the event,

multiple comments spoke to the idea that this singular event was often, incorrectly, confused with a deep level of support.

Events

<p style="text-align: center;">**Sara: "…that was sealing the deal for me."**</p>

There were varying opinions from the participants about the long-term effectiveness of this event the spring before fall matriculation. Sara is a soft-spoken young woman with a bachelor's degree from the university. She was heavily involved in an organization for African-American women (Sister to Sister) and her sorority when she attended the university. She is currently employed. Sara articulated how she felt when she attended the event:

> [This event] was just a time when all of the Black community comes out of hiding, and has events for the weekend, welcoming prospective freshmen, and so there's events and parties and just ways to connect with other Black people on the [campus]. I met a lot of people from that weekend and that was the sealing deal for me.

<p style="text-align: center;">**Abby: "I feel like it's a completely misleading experience…"**</p>

During a focus group discussion Abby expressed a slightly opposing thought as she reflected on the event as an upper classman and wondered about the purpose.

> I don't know what you guys thought, but having been at [the university] during [this event], I feel like it's a completely misleading experience for [freshman]. It's like the time when all of the Black people come out and do everything and make you think that it's like this all of the time, the Black people are always here, and then in the real world, during the rest of the year, it's not like that at all.

<p style="text-align: center;">**Zoe: "…I really thought that I could have the best of both worlds."**</p>

Zoe supported Abby's perspective by saying:

Yeah, can I piggyback off of that? Yeah, that's the exact same thing that happened to me. By my second year, I felt a little duped, because I went to the event and, of course there were just all of these Black people there, and I thought that, "Oh, wow, it's like an HBCU, and like a reputable institution," so I really thought that I could have the best of both worlds.

Throughout the discussions and interviews another main support designed to acclimate African-American students involved attending classes during the summer before attending in the fall, earning credit and learning how to navigate the campus. Speaking about one summer program Zoe expressed: "I already knew my way around (campus), because I was there during the summer. I already had a routine in place, because the Bridge Program, it was very structured, and that was very nurturing for me."

Shainna: " …with the support of [the PBA] …I've been having a good experience so far."

Eighteen of the participants agreed that the [Program for Black Affairs (PBA)] is a strong positive structure within the university. Shainna stated, "Overall, with the support of [the PBA] the support of my friends, I think I've been having a good experience so far." The university administers it, and responsible for providing tutoring for academics, leveraging support resources, and arranging opportunities for camaraderie of African-American students.

Mentoring

When mentioning this programs offerings participants reported feeling supported and highlighted the peer-mentoring program as a key mechanism of support that touched every African-American student. Through the peer-mentoring program every African-American student is automatically assigned an African-American peer mentor prior to the start of his or her freshman year. All participants engaged in the program but to different

degrees all as mentees and others as mentors. An interchange of thoughts ensued between the participants in reference to the effectiveness of the program. Of the 96 comments about support, 59 comments, or 61% were in regards to the mentoring from the peer program. A few participants described this peer mentoring support.

Organizational

Carla: "I think the program kind of puts all Black students into one box"

Carla stated,
Yeah, and I think that just being in [PBA] and being in that environment with the various faculty and advisors, they always make it seem as if the program causes more Black students to stay and causes Black students to do better in their classes and socially, and all of that. I don't know, I don't know if it's a correlation or a causation kind of relationship. I personally liked it, and I know there are mixed views about the program, and I can see it from both standpoints. I think that the issue is that although people identify as Black, not all people have the same Black experience, and I think the program kind of puts all Black students into one box, even though that's not the idea or the goal.

Jenny: "They're not really coming to check on you"

Jenny added the perspective of a peer mentor:

Great idea, great philosophy but I feel like the way that it was executed didn't really make sense for a lot of people. You had to turn in a weekly report and I think that that just takes the, I don't want to say compassion out of it but it makes it seem like it's work and I feel like the school tries to do a lot of things so that they can say that they support their city through A, B, C, D, all these different programs. Number one [PBA] was great because it reached out to the student; the student didn't have to reach out to [PBA]. A lot of the other programs the student has to do the reaching out. They're not really coming to check on you and saying, "How was your experience?"

Participants agreed that the effectiveness of the peer advisor program is a matter of personal opinion, in part because you have to put something in it to get something out of it. It requires time and commitment from both parties the mentor and the mentee.

Undergraduate and alumnae participants alike looked favorably on the peer

mentor program, but were clear that it was not the only support. University students create supports for one another. Participants believe the university encourages students to create and lead organizations they felt were needed. The university funds organizations that are completely run by students. Participants shared that once you have an idea, you present it to a representative student council, write a proposed budget and a constitution and move forward.

Shainna: "I think it has meaning."

When asked to describe her experiences with student run organizations Shainna commented:

> I think most of those stem from [the PBA] office. I think they're doing a great job in trying to make African-American students comfortable as well as African-American women comfortable. There's [Sister to Sister], there's something Black Women join. I think it has meaning. The purpose is to help us feel more connected and to also help African-American women get to know each other better and to act like a support group in times of need.

Glenda: "…they're student organizations that are here to help…"

Glenda added this in reference to organizations outside of the PBA "they're not necessarily university based they're student organizations that are here to help and here to help you find yourself in your circumstance that you're in." The participants appreciate the opportunity to identify what they need as African-American woman and the autonomy to meet their own needs without being overly reliant on others. An example of a structure created for African-American woman by African-American women is the standing meeting at a local restaurant every Friday evening. Women have a chance to discuss feelings of loneliness and isolation, and to discuss more concrete issues, such as where best to find a hairdresser and what church to attend in the community.

Conclusion

Participants agree that the university has few, if any, supports designed specifically for African-American women or for women in general. They also agree that the focus on student run organizations allows them to create or join structured supportive groups that allow them to determine the type and level of support that is right for them. While all participants appear aware of institutional supports, there is contention as to whether these supports are helpful or problematic.

Chapter Conclusion

The information represented in this chapter provides a depiction of the lives of a sample of African-American women attending a predominately White university. The support provided by the university appears surface level, in that it is primarily designed for what university leaders assume is the "Black experience." The details gleaned from interviews, focus groups and survey responses offers a foundation to further explore the experiences of women of color as they seek to obtain an education during the next phase of their lives. These data also provides educators with the experiences and perceptions of students to be considered when preparing students for college. While scholastic opportunities for African-American women have increased, barriers continue to attempt to impede their progress. Despite these barriers these participants are evolving into strong young women aware of the challenges and trying to maneuver their way to success. The implications of this study for African-American women are that institutional support is necessary to assist them with a smooth transition for their college experience, but that in the absence of such supports these women will find ways to support one another and succeed.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary of Findings

As increasing numbers of African-American students attend colleges and universities, research into the experiences of African-American women in PWIs is becoming ever more necessary. Understanding the initiatives taken up by the school, or the lack thereof, is an invaluable step toward ensuring the academic and emotional well being of such students. A body of research has been published regarding the experiences of this subgroup. Today's students face a multitude of different challenges compared to students attending PWIs a decade ago. They also have vastly different needs due to the changing times. A fuller understanding of the challenges and needs of African-American women students is needed to provide guidance to the professionals charged with assisting these young women with transitioning to new environments and overcoming barriers to academic success. This study allows for the participants to discuss their experiences in their own words, a critical element lacking in much of the existing body of research.

This qualitative study examined the experiences of African-American women attending a selected PWI in the southern part of the United States. The study included 24 individuals self-identifying as African-American women, either currently attending this university or who have recently graduated. These participants include women from a variety of majors, athletic affiliations, artistic organizations, Greek organizations and sexual orientations. An effort was made to include a cross section of women with varying viewpoints, who share the common experience of being African-American. All participants attended at least two full years of school at the chosen site. The school is

situated in the southern part of the country with a long and well-known history nestled in a picturesque town. This university is one of the town's major employers and a source of local pride. Due in part to its long history, the school has always struggled with racial issues, coloring the experiences of its students. This study seeks to lend a voice to the unique experiences of these women and to respect the journey they have traveled.

This chapter will discuss the findings identified in Chapter 4 and their implications, and review literature that focuses on the themes identified in the previous chapter: racial tension, socialization and empowerment, historical perspective and culture, intersectionality-gender and race and, university support. Major findings were identified from a review of data collected from participants and grouped into themes that emerged during data analysis. Conclusions will be discussed as it relates to the data previously utilized in chapter 4.

This study has expanded the literature on the experiences of African-American college women attending elite PWIs due to the methodological aspects of the study. The uniqueness of this study lay in its methods of participant selection, the use of phenomenological methodology, and the isolated, in depth analysis of one particular school site. Many studies in the current literature were narrowly focused on specific subsets of women, while this study's participant selection included a cross section of the school's student population, as mentioned above. Student populations on college campuses are more diverse than in previous years as students of different races, ethnicities, cultural backgrounds and sexual orientations seek out opportunities for higher education. Further, while other studies have investigated similar research questions, this study stands out in reporting the participants' own words and reaction to the subject at

hand. Additionally, this research adds an in depth analysis of one particular school site from women who have attended across multiple years and had a variety of school experiences. While only one site was studied, the results gleaned from this study provide a rich and multilayered understanding of the study site.

The researcher's status as an African-American woman likely allowed the participants to feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. Eighty seven percent of the participants verbalized their comfort upon learning the researcher's race and gender. This allowed the researcher to provide both the physical and psychological space for each woman with the clear opportunity to have her opinion heard and to expand upon an experience uniquely hers within a sense of community. The evidence suggests that these women have learned to navigate between their dual environments all the while sustaining self and others. They are likely mindful of varying expectations and at times surprised by unyielding barriers they frequently face. The researcher was encouraged by the honesty, bravery and forthrightness of each participant as they revealed deeply personal pain and joy. The value of telling their own stories is in line with some notions of Critical Race Theorists reasons for "naming one's own reality." 1) The participants clearly knew the truth of their experiences as recounted vividly and passionately, and 2) they were empowered by telling their stories thus reclaiming some power from the dominant group.

The previously reported findings inform the questions and themes that drove the study. The findings reported in Chapter 4 shed light on the research questions: What are the experiences of African-American women who attend elite predominately White colleges and universities? What elements of support are implemented by elite predominantly White colleges and universities to support African-American women? and

How do African-American women attending elite predominantly White institutions perceive these supports? These findings support and add to the conceptual framework, confirming the challenges and support structures faced by African-American women at PWIs, and better framing which factors are the most salient in the lives of students.

The findings support the notion of CRT, in that educational institutions address only the most glaring notions of inequality and have a dire need to examine these practices. Additionally, giving participants a space in which to share their experiences has removed power from their oppressors as now the truth of their situations has come to light. Upon analysis, narratives provided by each participant showcased her unique perspective and personal history, but overlapped with that other participants discussing similar situations or encounters.

The findings in direct response to the primary research question conclude that even in the year 2016, they are confronted with many of the challenges described in previous and current literature to include racism, isolation, and feelings of invisibility. In response to the secondary questions: "What elements of support are implemented by predominantly White institutions to support African-American women?", it was determined there are no supports specifically designed for this population, although the students create their own. The institution implements a program designed to assign a mentor to every African-American man or women attending the university but it is not exclusively geared toward women. In response to the final secondary question: "How do African-American women attending predominantly institutions perceive these supports?", while all participants agree that the university assumes they are responding to their needs, the findings indicate there are no specific programs established by the university to meet

their unique needs. There was no consensus from participants as to whether the singular institutional support was welcomed. Some participants greatly valued it, while others felt that it is only a single step in the right direction.

Five specific themes emerged from the data: Racial Tension, Socialization and Empowerment, Historical Perspectives and School Culture, Intersectionality of Gender and Race, and University Supports emerged from the data. These themes coalesced through the participants' responses and narratives. They overlap, intertwine, and together paint a representative picture of the lives of many African-American women at this PWI. Many subthemes also evident in the data offered a window into the day-to-day experiences encountered by these women.

Racial Tension

As evidenced in the literature review, race embeds itself in the everyday experiences of individuals of color. The women in the study shared multiple situations where race played a major role in their lives. One clear finding was the intersection of race across multiple themes. Race appeared as a common thread that bound participants' experiences together more so than gender. Incidents centered on racial tension were evident on campus, in town, in classrooms, and the housing areas on and off campus. The study findings suggest that racism is a key feature in the school environment, affecting the ways in which African-American women are viewed and treated and impacting their experiences. That these students encounter racism in a variety of forms regarding their ability to master course work, by both students and professors, and within the social environment support Spanierman's notion that African-American students must grapple with learning to effectively cope with racism in campus cultures.

The pervasive nature of this campus culture was evident as a finding. The study reveals evidence that African-American women who graduated from this university in 2011 were confronted with many of the same negative racial experiences as those enrolled for the first time in 2013. There were no significant changes in the ways that African-American women felt about their physical and emotional well-being and safety due to their race regardless of when they matriculated. Often it was necessary to change the way they spoke or acted due to negative experiences because of their race. Jenny a graduate of the university, began dressing up for class after noticing that she was taken less seriously and asked if she was an athlete when she wore sweatpants to class despite the fact that she was dressed the same as her White peers, is a prime example of this reality. She noted that she did not see anything wrong with being an athlete but was offended at the assumption, of an African-American athletic scholarship student as a prevalent stereotype. In order to be taken seriously, Jenny, and others like her, felt they had no choice but to work harder, and leave no room for questions as to their right to attend this university.

Racially charged comments and actions followed participants into the classroom. Johnson-Ahorlu (2012), posits that racism and stereotypes impact the academic performance of African-American undergraduate students. One hundred percent of the undergraduate participants in the study performed well academically by any reasonable standard, consistently above a 3.0 GPA, and dismissed the idea that they would cede their academic status or future career opportunities to those who misjudge them. The participants revealed numerous incidences of disrespect from faculty members, with professors engaging in inappropriate actions and using stereotypical comments

specifically directed at the women at a level of frequency that is alarming. In these instances, all participants felt they lacked the power to challenge these stereotypes and were unaware of any potential recourse. The abuse of power is evident throughout the themes revealed during data analysis. Black feminist thought emphases the strength of African-American women and their ability to transform challenges into systems of change. In keeping with this theory, findings suggest that these women rebuffed negative expectations and utilized their collective scholarship and commitment to help one another succeed academically. As noted by Johnson- Newman, (1998), African-American women must work to adapt to and coexist in the environment. The most salient takeaways from this thematic cluster is the prevalence and lasting impact of racism in any form, be it overt or in the form of microaggressions.

Socialization and Empowerment

Another strong finding to arise from this research is that of peer support, frequently managed through self- separation and community interdependence. The participants reported relying on other African-American women as they experienced isolation, fear, invisibility and social concerns. This finding supports the research of Bradely and Sanders (2003), which encourages the creation of relationships among African-American women. Bradely and Sanders (2003) state, "Sisterhood is a prevailing ethos within African-American culture. The special closeness of Black women has been intergenerationally transmitted from its cultural roots in many African societies" (p. 188)." The finding of a sisterhood-like support network is significant as it was incredibly prevalent in the lives of each woman.

The ability to create and maintain a strong African-American community has greatly helped participants to navigate the college environment. This community seems to be inclusive of all African-American women, as discussed by a gay student. She felt that there are multiple communities within the university, but that she views herself as a member of the Black community first and receives a sense of comfort belonging to it. All of the women relied heavily on support networks constructed and nurtured on campus by other African-American men and women. Most of these networks were self-created while others were engaged in a mentoring program designed by the university. Despite the difficulties brought to light in this study, it is evident that peer support is instrumental in participants remaining academically, socially, and emotionally grounded. They report creating safe emotional spaces built upon trust and mutual experiences that allow for understanding and a tight knit community in which African-American women can vent, challenge, discuss and empower themselves and others. This culture of community reliance appears to allow participants and their peers to remain strong despite the myriad of difficulties they face. This strong sense of community may have provided them with a foundation to soften the effects of the loneliness, fear and isolation.

While community interdependency was reported to be a large part of school culture, this mechanism does not appear to prevent participants from engaging in their school community. Community interdependency is the act of a group to freely choose to separate based on a specific criterion. In this case that criterion is race. Despite this practice, all of the women were involved in leadership opportunities but more heavily in African-American organizations. This finding indicates that while participants are still engaged in the school community, they remain barred from, or unwilling to join, the

larger school community. This evidence runs contrary to literature that identifies African-American women as disengaged at PWIs. As one of the most ubiquitously mentioned aspects of student life among participants, these peer structures appear to influence all aspects of their college experiences and buffer participants through those that can be difficult.

Historical Perspectives and School Culture

This university has a long and complicated history. Situated in the south and maintained by legacies of wealthy families, this institution lends itself to entrenched patterns of thinking. The findings indicate that this university struggles to find ways to consistently recognize the impact the existing and previous culture has on African-American women and to better understand non-dominate cultures. Actions on behalf of professors and students are marked by negative, hurtful overtones, yet these actions continue to go unchallenged and unchanged. These unchecked racial incidents suggest a culture of ignorance at best, and racism at worst, that permeates the school. In line with Hughes' (2002) research, discrimination is a tremendously intrinsic part of the historical climate on campus. Her research depicts the campus climate for African-American students, indicating that African-American students feel excluded from traditions and social situations (Hughes, 2002). It should be noted that while the African-American women in this study report feeling excluded, they resort to self-efficacy by creating their own social situations.

Intersectionality of Gender and Race

Race was an integral part of the experiences depicted by the African-American women throughout the study. Findings indicate that race was a larger barrier to confront than was gender by far. The women noted that the times when they felt gender was brought to their primary consciousness in a negative way it was related to their double minority status. Each time it was in reference to physical safety and at times they felt race was the initial reason for the interaction. While the women acknowledged that being a double minority had implications in the classroom, in the social arena, and with professors and peers, they overwhelming agreed that African-American males struggle with similar issues. The participants were keenly aware of this double status and felt that because they are members of two marginalized groups they must always be vigilant in times and places where their non-double minority peers do not (Winkle-Wagner, 2009).

University Supports

Investigating the university supports available to this student population was a major impetus behind this study, and one that generated significant discussion. Students discussed one university driven support, the Program for Black Affairs mentoring program, which pairs each incoming African-American freshman with an upperclassman mentor. Students did not reach a consensus as to the usefulness of this support. Some became mentors themselves and actively participated in the program, while others resented the program's "one size fits all" attitude. One significant finding is that many student-generated organizations exist to fulfill the needs of African-American women on this campus. While the university does not appear to have generated many supports for

the student body, the students themselves have created a network of support to bolster one another and help each other succeed.

Implications for Future Research

The findings that have materialized in this research study echo and reinforce the work that has previously existed over decades in the literature evolving around African-American women attending PWIs. This research study has augmented the literature through the incorporation of the exact story telling from undergraduates and graduates (Delgado, 1990). The knowledge gained from the voices of these women is in some ways contrary to the typical young college women's' experience regarding academic success but the same in many respects as many African-American women. There continues to be a need to explore more first person accounts of their experiences and build on the knowledge gained across other African-American women groups to include first generation, and those considered economically disadvantaged. The literature would benefit from additional research on programs designed specifically for African-American women. The idea of success should be reformatted as being accepted and supported academically and socially due to intentional planning. Specific professional development should be provided for college mentors to assist new students for possible racial rejection and for racial coping.

An interesting and necessary research study would be the perspective of White students as it pertains to the African-American woman experience to better understand the complexity of the challenge. Whether White students at PWIs believe race and gender

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biased attitudes exist among the dominant culture on behalf of students or faculty is a key factor in changing such school climates.

Implications for Practice

This study provides an understanding into the actual narratives of African-American women at PWIs. Ancis, Sedlacek and Mohr (2000) contend that African-American students are confronted with unequal treatment that can negatively affect their college experience at a PWI. While this study confirms the aforementioned, it also substantiates that academically driven African-American women can be successful in course work at PWIs if they identify ways to effectively circumvent the many barriers placed before them. The question then becomes, who has the professional training and the ability to assist this population prior to entering college with the extensive challenges they will face in college? The emerging findings in this research study are key themes that can assist high school and college counselors or faculty members in student affairs in better preparing this subgroup for the many challenges they may face.

High School Counselors

The role of the high school counselor is one uniquely located in the educational arena to help frontload students with tools to ease the transition to college. Twenty- three participants agreed that their high schools had prepared them academically for the rigors; of colleges, however, regardless of the demographics of their high school, none felt prepared for the stark difference in the culture and environment. It is suggested that high school counselors have little exposure to the counseling literature targeting the plight of African-American women while attending a PWI. Counseling departments need to

engage in professional development and ongoing scholarship through literature review to gain a better understanding of the challenges college students may face. The research suggests that a clear set of policies and expectations should be standard for high school counselors responsible for guiding students in their college selection and understanding of what it means for an African-American woman to attend a PWI. High school counselors should work collaboratively with the students and families during the senior year to simplify the complexities and challenges the students will face regarding academic rigor, faculty indifference and social isolation.

This preparation can be accomplished by facilitating small family meetings at the school or in the neighborhood, guiding family members through ways to support their student from a distance, and sessions for the student regarding the realities of what to expect. Additionally, students need to know that they can be successful and be provided with strategies and resources to assist with feelings of isolation and cultural confusion. It would be advantageous for counselors to identify students planning on attending the same college and create support groups in advance. This would provide students with a sense of home and possibly a sense of support as they navigate their new surroundings. The formation of a curriculum designed to acclimate the students to the interworking of a PWI complete with a resource guide could facilitate a level of readiness or exposure to the school. This resource guide should include resources when faced with professor misconduct. Enlisting the participation of former African-American women students, currently attending a PWI to engage in direct frank dialogue about their experiences could ease the strain.

Student Affairs

Research indicates that involvement in school organizations leads to ways for African-American students to give back to their community and feel connected to the school. The office of student affairs could facilitate this by informing new students while still in high school of these specific opportunities through mailers and phone calls. Inclusion in outreach efforts may counter the feelings of loneliness and provide a sense of purpose at the college. This could facilitate opportunities for upper class women to mentor future women, therefore forging a close bond with other African-American students, filling the gap left from being a part of the African-American community. This is typically met through family, church and extended family.

It is suggested that the student affairs office provide professional development, sensitivity training and racial literacy understanding to all faculty and staff taking the lead on expectations for interacting with African-American women. This training would be appropriate for anyone interacting with students, to include administrators and residential advisors. Additionally, a requirement to enroll in a course first semester uniquely designed to engage students in open dialogue about differences and understanding other cultures would be advantageous for all students and faculty. Universities might also consider utilizing the ubiquity of the Greek fraternity and sorority systems by encouraging cross group activities. This option could create bonds across cultures and decrease the divide that exists. Student Affairs could monitor the experiences of all students to assess their sense of comfort through focus groups and surveys. Currently students are not asked about their experiences. Finally, a strong recommendation is made

to expand the current Program of Black Affairs, or the equivalent, to design a separate branch to focus specifically on the needs of African-American women college students facilitated by women professors. Current practice and the reality of its success are on opposite tracks and need to converge together.

Limitations

This study presents with four deficits or limitations. There are issues related to the selection process where student leaders were contacted to assist with soliciting participants for the study. First, this restricted some who may have aspired to engage in the study, but was unaware of the existence of the research. Therefore important data may be missing due to the exclusion of those unaware of the study. The second issue centers on the lack of representation of students attending their freshman and sophomore year of college. It is highly possible that their experiences may provide a contrast to those of upper classman and alumni based on the amount of time spent at the university. The third limitation deals with the interpretation of the researcher. While participants confirmed the exactness of the researcher's interpretation of their experiences based on a review of their transcripts, it is possible that another researcher's interpretation would bear little resemblance to mine. The fourth limitation pertains to the finite size of the study at one university therefore minimizing the ability to generalize the results of the study to other predominantly White universities.

Conclusions

African-American women face a variety of challenges when trying to assimilate into the college world. This study was designed to outline the experiences of women self-

identifying as African-American and the support provided by an elite PWI. The story told by these young women is captivating, yet disturbing. This institution is immersed in rich traditions of academic excellence, and high graduation and retention rates for African-American women, but has a significant problem with race relations and a lack of cultural understanding. The university, like many others, creates support programs that are generic in nature and encompass all genders and no nuances of ones race or culture. This structure eliminates the ability to focus on the unique needs of those situated in the double minority status. The research study acknowledges the intent of the program but notes the lack of depth of the program. The shared stories validated the existing research as the data explicitly illustrated a lack of understanding of this double minority population from class, to dorms, to local establishments and relationships with professors. The inside story, gleaned from interviews and focus groups, is that of strength, of character, and of resolve on the part of these women despite the lack of resources and the barriers they face. The power of their lived experiences, the depth and breadth of their words has the capability to help guide the university in a different direction for future students.

APPENDIX A: Definition of Terms

1. African-American- of racial or ethnic decent from African, born in the US or Africa

2. CRT: Critical race theory

3. Community interdependency- intentional choose to separate from the majority group in an effort to find commonality and support

4. PWI- Predominantly White College- student population where the majority of the population is of White/Caucasian Ancestry

5. Racial microaggression- subtle negative comments, non-verbal or verbal exchange that indirectly refer to race, communicate a negative or uncomfortable feeling towards a specified group of individuals

6. Racial illiteracy- communicating an offensive racial message through verbal or written words, actions, etc., designed to target an identified group of individuals and a lack of understanding or respecting another's race or ethnicity

7. Racism- a set of ideas, practices, and behaviors, oppression of a subgroup of people on the basis of ethnicity, and culture

8. Self- efficacy- one's individual ability to create the desired results

9. Self- identifying- a deliberate choice to identify with one specific race or ethnicity.

10. Story telling- Lived experiences as told by the participants verbally or in written form

APPENDIX B: Interview Questions

1. As candidly as possible please describe your experience as an African-American woman college student.

2. If you could change your experiences at this university what would you change?

3. How does the campus culture impact your school experience? Please give an example.

4. What does an African-American women need to do to be successful at this university? Please share specific things?

5. Outside of academic supports are there specific resources made available to help acclimate you to this university? If so please describe.

6. Describe the group of friends you spend the most academic and social time with?

7. Do you feel as though being an African-American woman in a predominantly white institution has impacted what your experiences or interactions have been with faculty?

8. Do you feel as though being an African-American woman in a predominantly white institution has impacted your experiences or interactions with your peers?

9. Please share what you have done to adjust to the experiences encountered with faculty and peers that you have the described.

10. Do you have any recommendations for the university regarding gender and racial diversity?

11. Describe your support network.

12. Describe the activities you are involved in on campus and in the community.

APPENDIX C: Focus Group Questions

1. What was the most influential factor supporting your decision to attend this college or university?

2. Does being an African-American woman attending an elite PWI carry a specific significance for you? If so explain how or why?

3. Please describe structures or programs designed to support the success of African-American women at your institution that you used or participated in? Please provide examples of the effectiveness of the specially designed institutional supports.

4. Please describe any experiences you have encountered on campus where you felt there were elements of racism.

5. Please describe any experiences you have encountered on campus where you felt there were elements of sexism.

6. Please describe your involvement in social activities on campus; dating etc.

7. Do you perceive that your ethnicity impacts your relationship with your professors? If so why?

8. Do you perceive that your gender impacted your relationship with your professors? If so why?

9. Describe any stressors or challenges you encounter at school that are associated with being a Black/African-American woman.

10. Do you feel that the university culture is embraces women?

11. Do you have any recommendations for the university regarding gender and racial

diversity?

APPENDIX: D Focus Group Survey

To obtain a better picture of the participants of this survey, please complete the questions by circling the appropriate response to each question.

1. What was the majority racial make of your city (circle all that apply)?
   A. African-American/Black
   B. Latino American
   C. Caribbean American
   D. Caucasian/White
   E. Asian

2. How certain are you that you selected the right university to attend?
   A. Definitely the right selection
   B. Probably the right selection
   C. Uncertain
   D. Likely the wrong choice

3. How much do you feel a part of campus life?
   A. Never
   B. At times
   C. Frequently
   D. Undecided

4. Does the university pay attention to women's issues on campus?
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Not Sure

5. Do you have a roommate of a different ethnic group?
   A. Yes
   B. No

6. How frequently did you spend time together with your roommate?
   A. Daily
   B. Once a week
   C. Bi-weekly
   D. Monthly
   E. Bi-monthly

7. What is the highest level of education obtained by your mother?
   A. High School

B. Some college
C. Bachelor's
D. Master's
E. Doctorate
F. Other

8. What is the highest level of education obtained by your father?
   A. High School
   B. Some college
   C. Bachelor's
   D. Master's
   E. Doctorate
   F. Other

9. Prior to high school graduation who encouraged you to apply to college?
   Mark all that apply.
   A. Classmate
   B. Friends
   C. Teachers /Counselors
   D. Family
   E. Other
   F. No one

10. Why did you select this institution?
    A. Teachers/Counselor
    B. Academic Reputation
    C. Family Encouragement
    D. Social Reputation

APPENDIX: E Written Questions

Upon arrival each participant will be asked to respond to the following questions in writing:

1. Please describe your high school experiences and supports you feel prepared you for college and your transition to college.

2. Are you First Generation College?

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