Lgbtq Student Experiences On Historically Black College And University Campuses

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http://dx.doi.org/10.25774/w4-rqhk-0y03

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LGBTQ STUDENT EXPERIENCES ON HISTORICALLY BLACK

COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William & Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Kirstin D. Byrd

May 2020
LGBTQ STUDENT EXPERIENCES ON HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES

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ABSTRACT

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have historically provided a nurturing academic and social environment for African American students. Yet, a pervading homophobic climate exists on these campuses that adversely affects lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or questioning (LGBTQ) students attending. The purpose of this study was to document and explore the experiences of LGBTQ students attending an HBCU. It was designed to provide institutional leaders with information on how to improve their campus environments in becoming more inclusive and responsive to their needs. Documenting student voices helps their campus and community understand the issues they face. This qualitative study included participants who were undergraduate HBCU students who identified as LGBTQ. Feminist/queer methodology provided a way to study how LGBTQ students navigate homophobia on campus as they develop their adult and professional identities. A cross-case analysis of student experience narratives, gained by in-depth interview, allowed for a deeper understanding of this group and their needs. This study produced a new map of participants’ developmental journeys at the Black and queer intersection from childhood through college. Participants described campus climates as tolerant but not accepting and found it difficult to be both Black and homosexual in these contexts. This conflict hinders positive identity development, leaving them at-risk. Homophobic discrimination catalyzed internal growth, leading to resilience and reliance on the internal voice. To them, education found on these campuses gives them the knowledge that helps them heal, stand up to homophobia and help others who may be oppressed.
LGBTQ STUDENT EXPERIENCES ON HISTORICALLY BLACK
COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the issues facing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students within the context of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The HBCU context differs from other types of universities and colleges in the U.S. in that these institutions were founded and exist to nurture African American leadership and culture (Turner, Baez, & Gasman, 2008). The protestant roots of these institutions have left an indelible conservative religious impact on the cultures existing on these campuses (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Homophobia, in particular, is seen within this tradition as a deviant lifestyle (Patton & Simmons, 2008). This environment leaves LGBTQ students at HBCUs facing a hostile social and institutional climate, which is an example of intra-racial marginalization. This context compounds the stress of the multiple minority (Renn, 2010; Tyre, 2009).

Homophobia, a disdain of homosexuals, is a pervasive problem in the U.S. and is amplified within the African American community (Battle & Bennett, 2000). This outlook manifests in many ways, including harassment, insult, intimidation, physical assault, rape, and murder of those thought to be LGBTQ (Evans & Wall, 1991; Obear, 1991). Effects of homophobia on students include internalized homophobia, repression of identity and feelings, fear of the reaction of others, risky sexual behaviors, drug use, and suicide (Rhoads, 1994). Among African Americans, homosexuals are highly stigmatized, within the church, media, the home, and school (Battle & Bennett, 2000; Eyre, 1993; Harris, 2009; Jenkins, Lambert, & Baker, 2009; Wall & Washington, 1991).
As institutions founded to support Blacks, HBCUs are an important pillar in the Black community. A mission of these colleges and universities is to prepare future African American leaders (M. C. Brown & Freeman, 2004). Yet, over the last few decades, HBCUs have been the site of egregious homophobic acts and institutional discrimination against LGBTQ students (Lee, 2014; Richen, 2014; Watson, 2014). Because HBCUs have been bastions of conservative Christian African American values, the campus culture often creates the setting for intra-racial homophobic harassment and discrimination.

On an institutional level, LGBTQ HBCU students are typically denied charters for student groups, face constrictive dress codes, have issues with chapel requirements and adhering to faith traditions, suffer from a lack of LGBTQ role models, face discriminatory curriculum, and a dearth of events and activities affirming their identity (Fassinger, 1991). On the interpersonal/social level, these students face humiliating insults, bullying, a lack of protection, and a lack of voice (Fassinger, 1991; Upchurch, 2014). On the psychological level, students face internalized homophobia, the damaging effects of remaining “in the closet,” and isolation.

**Problem Statement**

Homophobia is pervasive in the Black community, which carries over to HBCU contexts. In these arenas, LGBTQ students face physical harm, emotional damages, and threats to mental wellbeing (Richen, 2014). To date, most HBCUs offer few supports for LGBTQ students, as evidenced by the fact that only approximately 21% of the 105 HBCU campuses have an institutionalized LGBTQ student group, and only a handful have a reference to gender identity/expression in their nondiscrimination statements.
(Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaints filed against HBCUs (particularly at private institutions with a church-based affiliation) pertaining to sexual orientation are growing (Watson, 2014).

College is an important time and setting for student psychosocial development. According to Coleman (1982), during the “coming out of the closet” process, negative reactions to an LGBTQ student’s identity may reinforce negative feelings and a low self-concept; alternatively, positive reactions help the student accept their feelings and increase their self-esteem. The college campus is a setting in which students need support in moving from a liminal space of adolescence to their adult and professional identities. The Black LGBTQ HBCU student exists at an intersection of racial identity and sexual orientation where they face marginalization on multiple levels. Faced with dual and multiple marginal identities, African American LGBTQ individuals have to navigate through multiple layers of oppression and discrimination to sustain positive racial and sexual identities. When they face discrimination, the development of a positive and healthy self-esteem is denied them, and they become at-risk to experiencing a plethora of negative outcomes.

The problem addressed by this research was to understand better how LGBTQ students experience homophobia at HBCUs. There is scant research on individual experiences of LGBTQ HBCU students (Hill, 2006). HBCUs are still bastions that condemn homosexuality (Richen, 2014), but these institutions also have a responsibility to protect and nurture their homosexual and heterosexual students equally. The focus of this research was to explore how LGBTQ individuals experience homophobia on HBCU campuses and in what ways the intersection of various identities contributed to the
students’ development. Understanding and analyzing the individual experiences of LGBTQ students can help institutions understand how to better serve these students (Lee, 2014). Documenting their stories/experience narratives in formal research gives these students a place at the table, where their voices are heard by HBCU institutional leadership and hopefully taken seriously with regard to their needs for safety and inclusion.

Ultimately, the focus of this study was to ground strategic action in participant/student-informed experiences that provides HBCU student affairs practitioners with an understanding of how traditional queer theory, feminist/queer research methodology, and queer of color theory affect their LGBTQ students. The goal was to collect personal experience narratives that contribute information regarding how to advocate for the queer HBCU student population.

Homophobia is a reality across the HBCU landscape. Just as African American students are nurtured by these institutions to resist racism, these institutions should support LGBTQ students as well. Given the scant research on the individual experiences of LGBTQ HBCU students (Hill, 2006), it is critical to explore the ways in which their intersecting identities are experienced on campus. Even though race/ethnicity and sexual orientation are distinct identities, it is the combination of these dimensions and others that forms the whole identity.

**Research Questions**

This study had one overarching question intended to understand the LGBTQ student experience. The sub-questions focus on the ways in which the HBCU culture influences identity development for LGBTQ students.
How do LGBTQ students experience the HBCU?

a. How does the HBCU context contribute to the LGBTQ student identity?

b. How do LGBTQ students describe the HBCU culture and subcultures?

**Significance of Study**

When homosexual students on Black campuses face homophobia, often insulting, sometimes violent and fatal, there is a particular need for intervention. I argue here that researching LGBTQ HBCU students will inform student affairs practitioners in understanding how to change campus cultures and environments to nurture their success and wellbeing. Ignoring the personal identity development and social issues that keep LGBTQ students at the margins of both the racial and sexual norm leaves them at-risk for humiliation, isolation, discrimination, and other harms. Formalizing LGBTQ student experience in academic dialogue, in the forms of dissertations, books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and so forth, helps to inform HBCU leadership and sensitize entire campus communities to Black LGBTQ issues, subcultures, and needs. The goal of this research is to give HBCU student affairs practitioners a framework for understanding intra-racial homophobia, supporting the development their LGBTQ students, and spreading tolerance among campus constituencies. This study provides insights on the struggles and needs of this segment of the student population. The findings from this study can begin to address homophobia as a major societal concern. Because the study focuses specifically on intra-racial homophobic discrimination and hostility experienced by LGBTQ students across the HBCU landscape, the results help inform practice. I share Lee’s (2014) conviction that once every individual LGBTQ college student’s experience is analyzed, their institutions can understand how to serve them. This study provides a
template for HBCU student affairs practitioners to address LGBTQ student needs, negotiate an inclusive environment, and prevent the violation and humiliation of students.

According to Carter, Hilton, Ingram, and Greenfield (2015), HBCU administrators and educators should structure experiences and conversations that allow heterosexual and LGBTQ students opportunities to learn from their differences, challenges, stereotypes, and misunderstandings, and to develop a mutually respective social code of conduct that extends beyond avoidance and segregated sexual grouping (p. 347). Research at predominately White institutions (PWIs) provided many suggestions for implementing diversity and inclusivity measures, which may be tailored to HBCU settings. This research used African American and LGBTQ identity formation theory and the experiences for queers of color, an area that to date has received scant research attention. Institutional change on campus requires formalized knowledge of student experiences, and to date, there is a need to expand and support research on the LGBTQ HBCU student population.

The issue of HBCU homophobia is important for many reasons. An atmosphere of homophobic discrimination and harassment often leads to diminished safety and wellbeing, which creates an at-risk subgroup among college students in pressing need of support. HBCUs are unique in that they service the African American population, nurturing leaders, educating students despite academic and financial limitations, and maintaining a cultural unity (M. C. Brown & Freeman, 2004). This context provides an important institutional type to explore because the perpetuation of a homophobic climate by HBCUs continues the victimization and intra-racial marginalization of LGBTQ African Americans. To stunt the growth of LGBTQ students within the culture due to
their sexuality would echo the oppression of a racist society in which people are harassed due to their skin color. Alleviating the hostile climate pervasive across the HBCU landscape would help support an evolution of the African American ethos to a point of protecting and strengthening its queer youth.

This study aims to battle intra-racial oppression of sexual minorities. Facilitating the inclusion of homosexual students in the campus environment is important for the wellbeing of LGBTQ students, the future of Black culture and leadership, and for the African American community as a whole. Exploring homophobia through queer of color theoretical lenses shines a new light on African American and HBCU homophobia, Black queer subculture, HBCU culture, disidentification/resistance on the part of these students, and how to improve student wellbeing from the standpoint of student affairs practitioners. Documenting the experience narratives of LGBTQ HBCU students contributes to the evolution of knowledge about African Americans, HBCUs, and queers of color. It is hoped this research will build LGBTQ-inclusive strategies to support students at HBCUs. The intention is to build an infrastructure template on how to support and maintain LGBTQ student wellbeing and success.

This research extended queer of color theory as well as research on the LGBTQ HBCU student population, filling a gap in the literature at the intersection of queer of color and college student development theory. It gives voice, visibility, and empowerment to LGBTQ students, making a progressive contribution to research literature and the dissemination of information. This research study evolves knowledge about homosexuality in America, the Black community, and HBCUs. In practice, the student narratives provide an informed reference for HBCU student affairs practitioners.
and campus leadership that will facilitate advocacy and protection for this marginalized
group. The practical application for this research includes its use to alleviate the hostile
homophobic environment existing on these campuses. Evidence of progress would be for
this group of students in the future to report a nurturing and supportive campus, a safe
place to come out of the “closet.” The interviews helped delve into the subculture of
LGBTQ students on HBCU campuses. Since this study involved only a few students, the
generalizability is limited, but the questions asked should serve as a usable template for
getting more students to compare their personal experiences across the HBCU
community. It is important to document the harassment of these students in order to
appropriately respond to discrimination, and support their safety and visible integration
into the HBCU community

**Overview of Literature Review**

The interview questions for this study were grounded in the literature from a
broad range of facets that contribute to LGBTQ HBCU student identity and how their
campus experience influences identity formation. These students experience Black as
well as LGBTQ identity formation during their college years. Most research on LGBTQ
college students conducted on PWI campuses yielded suggestions and interventions also
adaptable to the HBCU campus environment (D’Emilio, 1990; Rankin, 2003). The
review in Chapter 2 covers literature on the effects of homophobia (Rhoads, 1994), the
process of “coming out” in college (Drazenovich, 2015; Noack, 2004; Rhoads, 1997a),
the intersectionality of experience (Crenshaw, 1991; Kasch & Abes, 2007), and the
influence of the Black Church on HBCU culture and climate (Stewart, 2009).
Homophobic harassment on U.S. college campuses manifests in many ways, including verbal, physical, and institutionalized discrimination (Evans & Wall, 1991; Obear, 1991). This hostile environment puts this population of students at risk for academic attrition and diminished overall wellbeing. Over the last decade, HBCUs have often been characterized in the media as conservative and somewhat behind the curve on diversity issues (Carter et al., 2015). Coverage of homophobic events on these campuses resulted in calls for HBCUs to address homophobia. To date, these institutions have been slower to adopt LGBTQ inclusive measures compared to PWIs (Richen, 2014). The findings from this research can help HBCUs understand their LGBTQ student experiences better and contribute to making campuses safer and more nurturing places for these students.

**Methods Summary**

I used a case study methodology in this study (Merriam, 1998). The units of analysis for the cases were individuals on campuses with an LGBTQ student support group and individuals on campuses without any institutionalized support group. Participants were recruited using a variety of online social media platforms. Students participated in a two-part in-depth interview. After collecting demographic information, the first interview covered questions on intersectionality, identity formation, queer of color experience and the effect of church/spirituality. The second interview explored students’ experiences with homophobia on their campuses, their campus environment, and their suggestions for improving campus climate. The interviews were audio recorded online. The content of the recorded narratives gained from the interviews was transcribed and then coded based on the conceptual framework. Common emerging themes were
collated. Rich, thick descriptions were used to report the findings and to represent the students’ voices.

**Assumptions**

There are assumptions underlying each level of theoretical framework used for this study. It was assumed that there are ways to reduce homophobia on HBCU campuses. Research informed by queer of color/feminist theory allows practitioners to see various aspects of the intersectional student experience and apply appropriate and effective interventions based on the students’ unique intersections of identity. Regarding the environment level, it was assumed that supporting students’ coming out processes and the tolerance of the campus community will build healthier leadership and a healthier environment within the African American community and society. It was assumed that the participants were truthful in their interviews. Queer of color lenses provide ways to enrich the body of research on this student population and work to bring the “flesh to theory,” formalizing knowledge gained from everyday experiences of formerly silenced marginalized groups (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015). It was assumed that HBCUs will be able to change to accommodate the needs of its LGBTQ population.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

This research was delimited to LGBTQ HBCU students. It purposely included a small number of participants in order to go in-depth into important information pertaining to the details and commonality of homophobic discrimination on HBCU campuses. The use of only nine participants in a qualitative study restricts generalizability. Instead, the data provide a snapshot of this population and create a narrative that may be applicable to others in similar situations. Although the generalizability is limited, this research gave
voice to LGBTQ students enrolled in HBCUs. Others may find applicability in their own contexts based on the voices represented.

Limitations to this study included the ability to present the complexity of intersectionality when the participants were still in the process of identity formation. Because of the HBCU context, it might have been difficult for students to feel comfortable sharing perceptions or views that are often repressed on campus. Finally, the coming out process is individual and personal. Participants may still be exploring their sexual identity during the college years and may move from questioning to being either homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual or so forth. The fluidity of the gender continuum is difficult to reduce to these polar endpoints, especially as students are in the questioning phase.

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms were used in this dissertation. Where applicable, notation was given regarding the interchangeable use of terms.

**Allies.** Persons from a dominant group advocating for persons of an oppressed group, serve a protective function (Washington & Evans, 1991).

**Bisexual.** A person who has strong emotional, physical, sexual, and spiritual attractions to both self-identified men and women (Russell, 2012).

**Coming out.** Coming out of the proverbial closet is the developmental process of identifying as LGBTQ and disclosing this to others (Evans & Broido, 2002; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Rhoads, 1994; Schneider & McCurdy-Meyers, 1999; Yeung & Stombler, 2000).
**Cisgender.** Self-identifying with the same gender at birth, though it also refers to an LGBTQ person who keeps their birth gender, this label more privileged than transgender.

**Congruence.** An overlap in themes gained by interview narratives.

**Gay.** Usually refers to a self-identified man who has emotional, physical, sexual, and spiritual attractions to another self-identified man. This term can also be used as an umbrella term to refer to anyone whose gender/sexuality is not straight or cisgendered (Russell, 2012).

**Gender expression.** How people communicate their gender to other people. This can include style of dress, vocal tone and rate, body hair, how individuals interact with other people, and so forth. Some categories include masculine, feminine, and androgynous (Russell, 2012).

**HBCU.** Any historically Black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose “principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency” (Higher Education Act, 1965, section 322).

**Heteronormativity.** Belief that heterosexuality is normal, and homosexuality is deviant (Kasch & Abes, 2007).

**Heterosexism.** The belief in the inherent superiority of one sexual expression over another and thereby the right to dominate (Collins, 2000).

**Homonormativity.** Belief that homosexuality is normal.

**Homophobia.** Refers to the aversion to gay or homosexual people or their lifestyle or culture (Upchurch, 2014).
**Incongruence.** Lack of overlap among participant narratives.

**Intersubjectivity.** Accessible to or capable of being established for two or more subjects/individuals, agreement across participants.

**Identity development/formation.** The transitions, exploration, meaning making, and identity crises that are involved with establishing identity and developing characteristics of self (Russell, 2012).

**Intersectionality.** Analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age are mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape Black women’s experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women (Collins, 2000).

**Lesbian.** A self-identified woman who has emotional, physical, sexual, and spiritual attractions to another self-identified woman (Russell, 2012).

**LGBTQ.** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning

**Performativity.** How an individual performs or expresses their gender and sexuality (Kasch & Abes, 2007).

**Queer.** An umbrella term to identify anyone who identifies as non-straight or non-cisgendered (Russell, 2012).

**Safe Space/Zone.** Programs that teach LGBTQ allies (see Allies definition on this list) and LGBTQ persons on a college campus how to confront homophobic comments, correct misinformation, identify and address incidents of harassment, and how to infuse the campus curricula with histories and cultures of LGBTQ people (Draughn, Elkins, & Roy, 2002; K. N. Jones, Brewster, & Jones, 2014).

**Same gender loving.** A term primarily used within the African American
community to identify anyone who is attracted to people of the same gender. This term has been created out of a feeling that lesbian and gay are terms that reflect the White queer community (Russell, 2012).

**Sexual orientation.** The description of how a person is emotionally, physically, sexually, and spiritually attracted to other people. Some categories include lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and omnisexual (Russell, 2012).

**Transgender.** An umbrella category related to gender identity and expression that may describe a person who breaks the traditional social norms for gender identity and/or gender expression. For example, a biological male who exhibits a feminine gender expression might identify as transgender (Russell, 2012).

**Summary**

The lack of inclusion of LGBTQ students at HBCUs calls for research into their college experiences. The problem at the heart of this study was to understand better how student experiences compare on HBCU campuses with a student support group compared to students on an HBCU campus without a support group. This study was important because of the dearth of research on the LBGQT student on an HBCU campus. The agenda for the broader queer movement on college campuses calls for removing the stigma that damages the wellbeing of students. This study aimed to give LGBTQ students a voice and to empower them to resist homophobia and alleviate the hostile campus environments across the HBCU landscape.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The question guiding this research was whether there is a commonality of experience, needs, and a coherent LGBTQ HBCU subculture across institutions that have LGBTQ student groups and those that do not. The literature that will help explore the evaluation of the student experiences draws from several different areas. To address the evidence of homophobia on HBCU campuses, there are theories pertinent to the aspects of LGBTQ student life. Those used here cover psychosocial identity formation, specifically how the HBCU context and environment affect student fears of coming out of isolation. Feminist theory and its pioneering in the use of the experience narrative and cross-case method provide a way to channel LGBTQ HBCU student voices into the field of academic dialogue and institutional change. Queer of color theories are becoming more common and diverse and are powerful tools for linking the experiences of marginalized individuals and groups to empowerment and agency. The following section provides an overview of the framework for the study and the literature reviewed to inform the research.

Campus Environment

The 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York sparked college movements to end homophobic oppression. This event happened in an era of civil rights, Brown v. Board of Education, the integration of institutions of higher education, and the beginning of the HBCU competition with PWIs for talented African American students. Since then, the university campus in the U.S. has been a site of increasing queer visibility, research, and
activism (Renn, 2010). Regarding the African American LGBTQ role in the Stonewall riots, Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson not only moved the original riot to a movement, they founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, helping homeless drag queens and transgender women of color (C. M. Brown, 2016a). According to C. M. Brown (2016a), at the time of Stonewall, the LGBTQ movement was seen as a largely White male movement, with transgender women of color on the margins. Rivera rallied against racism, sexual violence, and transphobia, exhibiting the application of intersectionality in vivo (C. M. Brown, 2016b).

Over time, LGBTQ researchers directed attention to the role of multiple intersecting identities on student lives. Research on LGBTQ students during the 1990s focused on campus climate and the experiences of sexual minorities. Ultimately, this research was used as evidence for creating, improving, and expanding LGBT programs and services.

In the U.S., attitudes toward homosexuals are becoming increasingly tolerant (Altemeyer, 2002; Avery et al., 2007). LGBTQ individuals comprise approximately 10-15% of the total population (Fassinger, 1991). The historical script of homosexuality as deviant and immoral is being chipped away by research and activism aimed at alleviating the harmful effects of homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity. Institutions of higher education provide a space for research on LGBTQ persons, but these same institutions have been slow to adopt the gay agenda as far as institutional policies (Renn, 2010). LGBTQ college students face unique challenges when it comes to identity development (coming out as LGBTQ) and dealing with hostile social and institutional structures (Zubernis & Snyder, 2007). According to Renn (2010), climate studies are
critical for uncovering persistent, systemic disadvantages based on identities and group membership, as well as for measuring progress where it is occurring, providing crucial evidence for holding institutions accountable.

In the realm of higher education in the U.S., LGBTQ students, staff, faculty, and administration have been at the forefront of research and advocacy on the issues faced by sexual minorities. Yet the college campus remains a hostile environment (Garvey & Inkelas, 2012). Institutions of higher education have historically served as battlegrounds for the culture war to normalize homosexuality (Eaklor, 2008, p. 219). Historically, LGBTQ students were shunned by institutions of higher education, often expelled upon discovery, referred to psychologists, and denied student groups (D’Emilio, 1990; Renn, 2010). According to Lance (2008), homosexual and heterosexual freedom to engage in consensual relations should be seen as a basic human right to be protected by law. Homonormativity, or seeing homosexuals as normal, as a shared cultural construct is a major goal of the LGBTQ agenda, which has the potential to alter the landscape of cultural values and human rights (Murphy, Ruiz, & Serlin, 2008).

On college campuses, LGBTQ students are becoming more visible, but with this visibility comes harassment (R. D. Brown & Gortmaker, 2009; D’Emilio, 1990; Doubet, 2002; Rankin et al., 2010; Trammell, 2014; Schneider & McCurdy-Meyers, 1999). Homophobic harassment is a major function of heteronormativity (seeing heterosexuals as normal, and homosexuals as abnormal), which enforces its dominance through violence directed toward the “other,” or non-normal individual or group.

The campus environments of higher education institutions in the U.S. are seeing more students coming out and organizing (K. N. Jones et al., 2014). Most campuses by
1990 did not have gay student groups (D’Emilio, 1990). According to Westbrook (2009), LGBTQ student groups serve three purposes: support, socializing, and activism. Gay and ally student groups serve as a protective factor from stigma for LGBTQ students (Mancini, 2011). The chant “We’re here, we’re queer,” symbolizes the LGBTQ movement and the growing visibility of LGBTQ persons in all facets of society. The term queer is a derogatory term for homosexuals that has been reclaimed by the movement. It is a political term both coopting and confronting the hostile structures and conditions from which the epithet arose (Dilley, 2002). The term queer is used as a political unifier for peoples across the LGBTQ spectrum. According to Ferguson (2012), bringing “queerness” under institutional administration (at a college or university) as an administrative “object,” such as race or gender, comes from formalized research/social science. “Formalizing forms of difference gives them permanence and institutional protection” (Ferguson, 2012, p. 225). How students see this difference as part of their identity formation is important to further explore.

LGBTQ students are becoming more visible, and higher education institutions will be judged by how they respond to LGBTQ inclusion. Students expect their institution to advocate for and protect their equal rights (Trammell, 2014). Postsecondary institutions have an obligation to address forms of marginalization to create welcoming and affirming campus climates for LGBT people now—not sometime in the future (Vaccaro, 2012).
HBCU Context

HBCUs arose from the mire of slavery, from which African Americans over two centuries were denied an education and were punished when caught reading and writing. With the help of abolitionist missionaries, churches, and fundraising within the Black community, these institutions evolved under intense racism and economic hardship to become flagships of the race (Turner et al., 2008). Prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, segregated schooling meant the only colleges that most African Americans could attend were HBCUs, creating a nurturing space for a coherent African American system of education, professional culture, and community mores (M. C. Brown & Freeman, 2004).

The current battle regarding HBCUs and their LGBTQ students is a conflict of a religion-backed binary gender system and an evolution of student identity and expression. Despite a history of providing access to higher education for Blacks, LGBTQ students have had different experiences than their heterosexual counterparts. They seek respect and protection from harassment and discrimination. Lee (2014) posited that once every LGBTQ individual’s experience is analyzed, their institutions can understand how to serve them. This assumption guides my current research exploring the LGBTQ HBCU student experience. According to Pinder (2011), as many as one in six HBCU students is harassed for being or seeming to be on the LGBTQ spectrum. The focus of this study is to ground strategic action in participant-informed theory that provides HBCU student affairs practitioners with an understanding of traditional queer theory, feminist/queer research methodology, and queer of color theory. The goal is to collect experience narratives that shed light on how to advocate for the queer HBCU student population.
The conservative HBCU culture and climate create a particular context for LGBTQ experiences.

**Conservative HBCU culture.** HBCUs are defined as schools that were founded before 1964, whose mission is to educate African Americans (Turner et al., 2008). HBCUs have their roots in American slavery. During this era in American history, African Americans were legally forbidden to read, much less acquire a college education. The first HBCU, Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, was founded in 1837 despite the reality at the time. After slavery ended, the Morrill Act of 1890 mandated states to fund agricultural and mechanical institutions for their Black constituents, leading to the establishment of 17 public land grant HBCUs (Gasman, 2013; Turner et al., 2008). The timing of this act indicates that the education of African Americans in the decades following the civil war and emancipation was a national priority.

According to M. C. Brown and Freeman (2004), HBCUs fell into three groups: those founded by missionaries, by Black churches, and by industrialists. During Reconstruction, many HBCUs were founded by Christian missionaries and ministers. Examining this history sheds light on the critical role of the Black church in HBCU life, which today still maintains a system of rewards and punishments for conforming or not conforming to gender norms, leaving LGBTQ students harassed, afraid, and feeling unwanted (McIntosh, 2011).

A conservative social ideology, bolstered by Christian norms and values that would allow African Americans to fit in with their financial supporters (religious groups, private philanthropy and industrialists) and the broader society, developed for college-educated African Americans (Gasman, Nguyen, & Conrad, 2014). Thus, a whole
subculture of educated African Americans who graduated from HBCUs emerged based on conservative morals and values. Mobley and Johnson (2015) noted that HBCUs, though active in the civil rights movement, remain culturally conservative, actively suppressing LGBTQ individuals. HBCUs are complicit in this conservative ideology as they have typically denied LGBTQ students approval to form student groups, and they also enforce a traditional dress code, which limits individual expression. The doctrine of in loco parentis, which influences these and other institutions in the U.S. to act as authority figures to stand in for the students’ parents, also explains the policing of gender expression and sexual orientation among HBCU students (Patton & Simmons, 2008).

Watson (2014) asserted that change is difficult on HBCU campuses, particularly at private institutions that typically have church-based affiliations. Today, the world has changed significantly, yet HBCUs remain bastions of conservative gender roles (McIntosh, 2011). They have yet to adequately address the subject of homosexuality among students or support LGBTQ student populations. The Black Church, like the HBCU, is a pillar in the African American community. Their common values result in the intra-racial marginalization of homosexual individuals. It is in institutions like these that religious, racial, and sexual identity intersect to form a complex composite. For example, on many HBCU campuses, race and religion are more salient than the discourse on homosexuality, in which a Christianity-bolstered rhetoric undergirds a form of intra-racial intolerance that has become a common cultural element. This culture puts LGBTQ students at risk on Black campuses. This multidimensional reality has a major effect on the culture and climate experienced by LGBTQ students.

**HBCU climate.** Climate studies based on LGBTQ student perceptions are
critical for uncovering persistent, systemic disadvantages based on identities and group membership (Renn, 2010). These climate findings provide a formal way of measuring progress and holding institutions accountable (Renn, 2010). Using a queer theoretical foundation helps highlight existing problems based on homophobia and provides a dialogue for change and improvement on all levels and aspects of the institution.

HBCUs have a lot to offer their students. Black college students have reported better campus climates at HBCUs than White institutions (Turner et al., 2008). Students reported feeling supported and nurtured, and have higher levels of involvement, both on campus and in the community (Turner et al., 2008). Yet, HBCUs promote the ideology of respectability, and tend to view homosexuality as a deviance that merits less respect, or at worst, insults and violence against LGBTQ students within their gates (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Enabling the full integration of LGBTQ students into college life is the present objective of queer research on HBCU students. Most HBCUs have yet to house student LGBTQ organizations, which puts these institutions behind the trend of the broader American higher education landscape, in which LGBTQ students are becoming more visible in leadership positions and the general student population (Patton & Simmons, 2008).

Pinder (2011) discussed how LGBTQ advocacy can produce a friendlier, more inclusive climate at an HBCU. The Audre Lorde Project was an initiative across HBCUs designed to promote safer environments for sexual diversity. Its goal was to bolster a dialogue among HBCU constituents surrounding African American LGBTQ experiences, breaking the silence that keeps this population in the margins of society (Williams, 2013). The effect of religion on these campuses also creates an unhealthy environment in which
insults and discrimination against homosexuals on HBCU campuses are justified by the Bible. Pinder (2011) also pointed to the need of credible Black scholars, both hetero- and homosexual, to find ways to support these students in creating a climate in which they are free to be themselves. Pinder (2011) used queer qualitative research methodology, adapted from feminist theory/methodology, to understand the meanings people have constructed about their world and experiences. A result is the availability of a range of LGBTQ narratives on the HBCU climate they face.

Mainstream American institutions of higher education are ahead of HBCUs in acknowledging the sexual identities of students. HBCUs are a paradox when it comes to sexuality. For example, they are bastions of homophobia, yet maintain an environment of tacit acceptance of LGBTQ students. Despite running a high risk of harassment and its resulting damage, LGBTQ students are able to rally resilience and graduate (Mancini, 2011). According to Pinder (2011), there are significant numbers of mainstream institutions which have established multifaceted LGBT programs designed to meet the needs of homosexual students. Yet, HBCUs have not formally given systematic support or overtly articulated institutional commitments to LGBT issues on their campuses (Pinder, 2011). Few HBCUs have LGBTQ Safe Zones, and even fewer Gender/Sexuality resource centers and majors (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Both the academic curriculum and the social environment of HBCUs must evolve to stop the intra-racial hatred revolving around homosexuality. Largely absent in the literature are the voices of LGBTQ students attending HBCUs.
Campus Student Affairs

Research on the LGBTQ college population provided many suggestions for institutional inclusivity. According to Roper (2005), senior student affairs officers should create spaces for the emotional, psychological, structural, and social support for LGBTQ students. They have the power to normalize LGBTQ individuals on campus; this requires formalized knowledge of student experiences and needs, often using a climate study (Ferguson, 2012). Climate studies are essential in understanding what specific aspects of campus life LGBTQ campus community members find most unwelcoming (Vaccaro, 2012). The present study not only gathers information on HBCU climates regarding homophobia, but how they affect LGBTQ student identity development, and what these students feel they need for safety and inclusion.

According to Sanlo (2004), few higher education institutions gather data on the number and needs of sexual minority students. D’Augelli (2006) noticed a strategy of institutional resistance in which LGBTQ student demands are placated and stalled for four years until the activist cohort graduates, often without leaving successors. A critical mass of non-student supporters on campus is required to make institutional change at a college or university (D’Augelli, 2006). This includes faculty, staff, and administration. Faculty are key in institutionalizing LGBTQ issues in the curriculum, inviting LGBTQ scholars to campus, as well as in obtaining funding for LGBTQ centers and conferences (D’Augelli, 2006).

Research presented a plethora of suggestions for making the college experience healthier and more productive for LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students come to campus unaware of how to protect their rights and persons from homophobia; student affairs
professionals must address this proactively (Yep, 2002). One of the more successful strategies for institutional responsiveness at American universities in the U.S. is adding sexual orientation and gender expression to the university nondiscrimination policy (D’Augelli, 2006; Gonzales, Fedewa, & Black, 2012; Ivory, 2005; Macgillivray, 2004). According to Davis, Hilton and Outten (2019), fewer than 10 percent of the nation’s 3,500 colleges and universities have sexual orientation in their non-discrimination policies, and nearly 15 percent of HBCUs. Nondiscrimination policies are important in protecting students. Responding to insults and attacks against LGBTQ persons as soon as they arise and documenting their frequency and the form of harassment is a first step in making a campus safer (Herek, 1993; Talbot, Viento, & Sanlo, 2005).

Often institutional change toward inclusivity arises from incidences of hate crimes (Brauer, 2012; Ritchie & Banning, 2001; Sanlo, Rankin, & Schoenberg, 2002). Other times, LGBTQ faculty members (who also report discrimination on campus) or supporters (also stigmatized for helping this population) choose to spearhead changes in the institution’s nondiscrimination policy, to teach an LGBTQ course, or procure funding for LGBTQ centers (Brauer, 2012; Croteau & Lark, 2009; D’Augelli, 2006). Research has found presidential or campus leader-penned memos on same-sex marriages/partnerships rights useful in making LGBTQ rights, privileges, and policies visible (Ferguson, 2012).

Research findings suggest that institutionalizing a coming out day, providing safe and gender neutral bathrooms and showers for transgender students, allowing students to use a preferred name for their student ID, Pride week, Rainbow or Lavender graduation ceremonies, and recruiting LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff all create a more inclusive
campus environment (Brauer, 2012; Rankin, 2003). Allowing LGBTQ students to be open and respected on the HBCU campus will create a climate of tolerance and allow them to fashion healthier identities and maintain more positive self-image (Cass, 1984).

Campus police and public safety are also integral in implementing LGBTQ inclusivity (R. D. Brown & Gortmaker, 2009; Obear, 1991). Incidences of homophobic harassment often go unreported (Obear, 1991). According to R. D. Brown and Gortmaker (2009), the nature of the reporting process and how comfortable students are in reporting incidents can influence campus police reports. Ivory (2005) stated that “colleges have the responsibility to encourage and protect LGBTQ students, addressing harassment quickly and effectively, having nondiscrimination policies enforced” (p. 67). Campus police should be trained to act as the frontline of institutional responses to incidents of harassment, making the campus safe for LGBTQ students (Herek, 1989).

Though currently a small fraction of U.S. colleges and universities have LGBTQ resource centers, the number of these centers on college campuses is increasing (Fine, 2011; Holland, Matthews, & Schott, 2013; Young & McKibban, 2014). Approximately 21% of HBCUs have an official campus LGBTQ group or resource center (Richen, 2014). LGBTQ-specific campus resources include campus centers that provide internships, workshops, referrals, handling of homophobic incidents, interventions, and information on empowerment and student organizing (Westbrook, 2009). These interventions can improve life for LGBTQ students. LGBTQ and ally student groups serve the purposes of socialization, support, and activism (Rankin, 2005; Ritchie & Banning, 2001; Young & McKibban, 2014).

Since the 1990s, Safe Zone and ally training (gay-straight alliances) have gained
popularity in American colleges and universities (Alvarez & Schneider, 2008; Draughn et al., 2002; Evans & Broido, 2002; Finkel, Storaasli, Bandele, & Schaefer, 2003; Russell, 2012; Ryan, Broad, Walsh, & Nutter, 2013; Schindel, 2008; Young & McKibban, 2014). They teach allies and LGBTQ persons how to confront homophobic comments, correct misinformation, identify and address incidents of harassment, and how to infuse the campus curricula with histories and cultures of LGBTQ people (Draughn et al., 2002; K. N. Jones et al., 2014). Cyber bullying is a new aspect of campus environment that should be addressed by student affairs administrators and campus allies (R. B. Johnson, Oxendine, Taub, & Robertson, 2013). High-level administrators are key in connecting oppressed and privileged groups on campus (Poynter & Washington, 2005, p. 43).

**Student Experiences and Identity Formation**

Personal narratives help in exploring the LGBTQ HBCU student experience. One way to understand these narratives involves using college student identity development theories. For example, the purpose of Astin’s (1999) model of student involvement is to help college professionals design more effective learning environments. Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) created a seven-vector model that highlights college student identity progression through different stages of competence. Extending this work, Renn (2010), focused specifically on LGBTQ identity formation using in-depth narratives and other qualitative accounts. The current project builds on this type of LGBTQ student identity research and application. Also a part of LGBTQ students’ experiences are factors that put them at risk, as well as factors that promote resilience and enhanced wellbeing.

**Astin’s theory of student involvement.** In order to help college professionals design more effective learning environments, Astin (1999) proposed an input-
environment-outcome (I-E-O) model of student involvement that allows for an opening of the black box that exists between the arrival of new students on campus and the outcome of their college experiences. Involvement refers to the amount of energy a student devotes to the academic experience (Astin, 1993). It provides a snapshot of student experience focusing on behavior and participation in campus life. It removes the uncertainty of measuring only inputs (e.g., SAT/High School GPA) and outputs (e.g., college GPA, LSAT scores). It adds the dimension of an ecosystem, an environment in flux, leading to an understanding of what can be done to support the college student.

Astin (1999) proposed that the I-E-O model is useful for helping student affairs professionals learn and understand how to structure the educational environment to maximize talent development. Environmental variables include programs, supports, seminars, educational experiences, and responsiveness of campus security.

Astin (1999) posited that a mediating mechanism could explain how educational programs and policies are translated to student achievement and development. For this study, policies such as LGBTQ nondiscrimination, allowing LGBTQ student groups and/resource can be correlated to student reports of campus climate, identity, and student development. The input variable relative to this study is self-identifying as LGBTQ. The environment variable would be the presence or lack of an official LGBTQ student group or resource center. The outcome variable would be the experience narrative gained by in-depth interview. This study compares the experience narratives and how they correspond to HBCU context. If students with the same type of campus context report more similar experiences than those with a different context, it could suggest that merely having an LGBTQ student group/resource center would improve their experience. This approach to
understanding student development serves as the foundation for the theoretical framework for this study and is discussed in more depth later in this chapter.

**Chickering and Reisser’s model of student identity development.** Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) “seven vectors” theory of identity development is a widely known and applied psychosocial model of college student development (Long, 2012). According to this model, students typically progress through the first four vectors during their first and second years of college and through the last three vectors during their third and fourth years of college. Students move through the vectors at different rates and may move back and forth between vectors as they re-examine issues and experiences. The foremost issue during the college years is the development of students’ identities as they transition from childhood to adulthood.

The first vector, developing competence, describes the initial time in college in which students acquire a wide range of new cognitive, psychosocial, and technical skills as they encounter new academic challenges, living environments, diversity, and uses of technology. As students develop new competencies, they become more confident. The second vector, managing emotions, highlights how students develop the ability to recognize the appropriateness of certain emotions and reactions in different contexts, and it is in this stage that students develop the skills to manage feelings/emotions. During the third stage in the model, students move from autonomy toward interdependence with others. Even though these first three vectors are critical for student development, I argue that the last four vectors are of the highest importance with LGBTQ HBCU students. It is in these latter stages that integration of identity occurs (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

For example, a focus for this research regards fluidity of identity (Renn, 2010).
The fourth vector specifically involves establishing a stable, but fluid positive identity. LGBTQ HBCU students must integrate a marginal sexual orientation along with a marginalized racial identity, resisting the challenges of society’s reaction to both of these identities. The fifth vector, developing mature relationships, is especially important for LGBTQ students as they explore their sexuality and are involved in dating. Seeking and finding other LGBTQs is important both for socializing and support as students form their intersected identities. The sixth vector focuses on developing purpose. In this case, student organizations, like those supporting LGBTQ students, can serve as a location for students to engage in purposeful activities. Finally, the last vector, developing integrity, occurs when students are guided by internal values, yet can respect diverse values in others, and operate out of a sense of social responsibility (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Evans, 2010). LGBTQ students represent a type of diversity on HBCU campuses and are central to helping not only themselves develop integrity, but also others on campus. In addition to developing as a competent college student, LGBTQ HBCU students must face development stages involved with being both LGBTQ and African American.

**Baxter-Magolda’s model of self-authorship.** Self-authorship is a concept useful in addressing college student development. Baxter-Magolda (2009) defined self-authorship as an individual using their internal voice and core personal values to guide their life. This development is a process of moving from a reliance on external formulas to self-authorship toward a reliance on one’s internal voice. The individual evolves during their journey, facing ever-more complex ways of making meaning.

This psychosocial theory focuses on how students construct internal frameworks to navigate external influences. For the LGBTQ college student, they must deconstruct
(negative stigma/homophobia) and reconstruct (positive homosexual image/performativity) external influences in order to stay stable (Kasch & Abes, 2007). Baxter-Magolda’s (2009) model features three dimensions of development (cognitive, intrapersonal, interpersonal) and seven key locations on the journey to self-authorship (external, crosswords, listening to internal voice, cultivating internal voice, self-authorship, trusting internal voice, building internal foundation, and securing internal commitments).

Self-authorship can be seen as the “internal” development of a student during their college years. Cognitive development refers to deciding values and what to believe. The LGBTQ HBCU student comes from a context built on African American values and lives in a generally homophobic society. Many are taught that homosexuality is a sin, and HBCUs reinforce this Christian value. As their journey proceeds, they begin intrapersonal development, or reshaping their identity to reflect internal voices. Because of the dissonance of facing one’s homosexuality with society’s homophobic stance, the individual must mold his or her self into a new identity, or embrace a new gender performativity in order to have their external presentation of self become more in-line with their internal view of self (Baxter-Magolda, 2009). This timeframe may involve switching gender roles or wearing clothes without regard to the gender binary. The third dimension of development, the interpersonal, occurs when the LGBTQ student is able to interact with others, building much needed relationships for support.

Baxter-Magolda (2009) discussed key locations on the college student’s journey to self-authorship. The freshman comes to campus reliant on external formulas (parents, church, school) and authority. Baxter-Magolda’s (2009) “crossroads” refers to an
important time where they are disillusioned by external authority (p. 6). According to the model, pain is the usual catalyst for this conflict. For example, homophobic insult on campus may spark entrance to the journey of listening to the internal voice. The third location, listening to the internal voice, is where students begin to resolve this pain, and marks a time when students begin to listen to their internal voice (feelings, beliefs, expectations, happiness). Cultivation of the internal voice occurs when students develop their positions on what they value and prioritize, and they sift out beliefs that no longer work, enabling them to plan for the future. Self-authorship occurs when the internal voice is in the foreground coordinating information from external voices, trusting self to decide what to believe. In trusting the internal voice, reality is beyond control by the individual, and individuals can use their internal voice to shape their reactions to others. The student builds an internal foundation by using the internal voice to make commitments and build a philosophy of life to guide action. This model of college student development provides a roadmap to assist LGBTQ HBCU students in internalizing a positive core sense of self.

**LGBTQ identity formation.** Historically, psychologists in the U.S. have labeled homosexuality as a mental disorder, compelling other institutions in society such as colleges to marginalize these individuals to the point that some institutions even expelled students or banned certain faculty (Renn, 2010). During the civil rights movement of the 1970s, and during a period of ongoing clinical research at the time that created new definitions of “healthy homosexuals,” homosexuality was removed from the list of mental disorders. Since the 1990s, the experiences of LGBTQ college students have been common in research. More recently, Renn and Arnold (2003), using
Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, focused on how the college environment or ecosystem (physical space, faculty interaction, peer culture) affects the development of the student. This person-environment theory is common in research on student development, and shows connections between individual outcomes (including behaviors such as sexual orientation/performativity), decisions (process of coming out of the closet), identity (formation, risk/protective factors), and learning (context/resilience to graduate).

The college years are critical in LGBTQ identity development. Interacting with the campus environment and its social culture shapes whether the student feels comfortable in making the decision to come out of the closet. The HBCU campus culture is important to study because homophobia diminishes feelings of acceptance within the African American community. Facilitating tolerance and inclusion at these institutions will alleviate the stresses of this student population, allowing for healthier identity formation.

A prominent area of LGBTQ theory deals with identity formation (Renn, 2010). The homosexual identity is constructed through the social and cognitive processes of everyday life. The binary gender construct (e.g., the idea that male and female are mutually exclusive), promoted by a heteronormative and homophobic dominating culture, constricts gender expression and performativity of those living outside these norms. This restricted identity oppresses those marginalized, and to maintain a stable identity and sense of self, the LGBTQ individual learns to resist the norm by deconstructing the male/female binary. This process of deconstructing an oppressive social construct as a mode of resistance is important in queer theoretical traditions.
Specifically, queer theorists find that the lived experience of homosexuality and resisting oppressive homophobic social constructs are part of an important avenue to address in alleviating the damaging effects of homophobia on the individual’s psyche and overall wellbeing (Kasch & Abes, 2007).

There are several models of LGBTQ identity formation. Bilodeau and Renn (2005) analyzed LGBTQ identity development models and discussed implications for practice. During the 1970s, researchers focused on the internal tensions of coming out. For example, according to Troiden (1989) there exists the early childhood tension of being different from same-sex peers, the confusion of same-sex arousal and identity confusion/guilt/secrecy/social isolation, and the tension of coming out continuously throughout life as one enters new social settings. Currently, LGBTQ researchers have created and validated lifespan models of development (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). These models follow a common theme of stages, which rely on frameworks for a more fluid identity development. These stage models tend to begin with discomfort and denial regarding same-sex feelings. They move to a tentative acceptance of feelings, followed by behavioral/emotional exploration of homosexuality. Negative responses to their homosexual exploration create inner turmoil; positive responses increase self-esteem. Eventually, a positive view of self helps the individual face new situations, where they must perpetually negotiate coming out as LGBTQ when around new people in new settings (Fassinger, 1991).

Cass’s (1979) model of homosexual identity formation is the most well-known and most often used model of LGBTQ identity development. The model consists of six stages, the first being Identity Confusion. This stage includes a first awareness of
homosexual feelings. Stage 2, Identity Comparison, describes a tentative commitment to a homosexual self. Identity Tolerance, Stage 3, is marked by an increased commitment to a homosexual identity and is coupled with the consequences of homophobia, in addition to seeking out the homosexual culture. Stage 4, Identity Acceptance, involves the increased contact with other homosexuals and accepting one’s self-image. The fifth stage, Identity Pride, entails an awareness of being different from society, seeing homosexuals as positive and heterosexuals as negative, and the individual immerses self into gay subculture. The final stage, Identity Synthesis, is the awareness that not all heterosexuals are homophobic, and the individual gains support from both LGBTQ community and heterosexuals. Fassinger (1991) critiqued Cass’s (1979) model, arguing that the model is linear and prescriptive, is insensitive to racial/age/class/locale diversity, and does not account for flexibility in sexual orientation. Fassinger (1991) also argued that politicizing the highest stage of identity synthesis omits non-political homosexuals, and that Cass’s (1979) model gives men and women LGBTQ the same linear development when in fact there might be a difference in development.

Homosexual identity development models provide a foundation for understanding the psychological and social experiences of LGBTQ college students. Students come to campuses with internal conflicts unique to minority sexual orientation development. These development models serve as a theoretical guide for student affairs practitioners to sensitize the institution to the special needs and protections for LGBTQ students.

Further, according to Hill (2006), African American LGBTQ students are a prime example of individuals that embody multiple marginal identities. Each individual is at an intersection of multiple identity domains such as race, class, and sexuality (Crenshaw,
1991). The fluid nature of identity provides a foundation in which multiple identities interact with each other in response to an individual’s environment. Wall and Washington (1991) asserted that students who are racial, gender, and sexual minorities often feel forced to select which identity they will recognize above all others. This forces choice places them in an unyielding position of having a compartmentalized and fractured identity, which damages the integrated identity.

African American LGBTQ students at HBCUS are African American and queer, facing the racial oppression of U.S. society, and the intra-racial oppression of homophobia (McIntosh, 2011). Both Blackness and queerness intersect differently for each LGBTQ HBCU student. Male LGBTQ students may or may not feel the need to assert their masculinity, whereas lesbian and bisexual women may feel the need to live up to a binary of stud (masculine role) or femme (Howard, 2014). Living up to hegemonic norms creates a problem for HBCU students on the margins. They have a burden of constantly battling homophobic attack and discrimination, while forming their adult and professional identities. This results in many choosing and suffering a “closeted” existence, where they must hide their identity while trying to come to terms with their sexuality in the face of homophobia. Even though Black students in general often have more positive experiences at HBCUs than their counterparts at White colleges (Patton & Simmons, 2008), homophobia on HBCU campuses counters this positive effect for LGBTQ students. There is a virtual wall between the LGBTQ HBCU student and the heterosexual student. In this case, the heterosexual student is accepted, but the homosexual student must hide or constantly face forms of physical and emotional intimidation (Holland et al., 2013; Oldham, 2012). How best to support the wellbeing of
these marginalized students is a focus of this study.

**Effects of Homophobia**

LGBTQ college students are a vulnerable population exposed to hostile social environments and bullying (Gonzalez et al., 2012; Meyer, 2003; Rankin, 2003, 2005; Ritchie & Banning, 2001). This environment creates an atmosphere of stress, isolation, and fear (D’Augelli, 1992; Evans & Broido, 2002; Harley, Nowak, Gassaway, & Savage, 2002; Herek, 1993; Rankin, 2005; Young & McKibban, 2014). Common harassments include verbal insults and threats, physical attacks, and sexual assault (R. D. Brown & Gortmaker, 2009; D’Augelli, 1992; Fassinger, 1991; Gonzalez et al., 2012; Jenkins et al., 2009; Matthews & Adams, 2009; Obear, 1991; Rankin et al., 2010; Rhoads, 1997a; Schneider & McCurdy-Meyers, 1999; Vaccaro, 2012). As these stressful and often traumatic experiences accumulate, they can damage the psyche and well-being of the LGBTQ college student.

Damage to mental well-being is a major effect of homophobia and its resultant abuse (Gonzalez et al., 2012; R. B. Johnson et al., 2013; Matthews & Adams, 2009; Meyer, 2003; Williamson, 2000; Vaccaro, 2012). This damage comes from the cumulative stresses of experiencing harassment and discrimination, which are sanctioned by a homophobic society (Kulkin, Chauvin, & Percle, 2000). According to Matthews and Adams (2009), mental health consequences include “somatic reactions, increased sense of vulnerability, self-blame, decreased self-worth, internalized homophobia, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation and/or attempt” (p. 13). Suicide and internalized homophobia are major issues affecting young LGBTQ individuals.
LGBTQ youth and young adults are at an increased risk of suicide when compared to straight youth (Cochran & Mays, 1994; Draughn et al., 2002; Evans & Broido, 2002; Gonzalez et al., 2012; Jenkins et al., 2009; R. B. Johnson et al., 2013; Kulkin et al., 2000; Matthews & Adams, 2009; Rhoads, 1994; Sanlo, 1998; Vaccaro, 2012; Whiting, Cohn, & Boone, 2012). Research posits that LGBTQ youth are two to three times more likely than heterosexual youth to attempt suicide (Rhoads, 1994). Much of this pressure comes from stress at school (Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, 1989). Here, the college or university campus is very often the setting of homophobic insults and physical threats, which are accumulating stressors that result in increased suicidality in the LGBTQ population (Jenkins et al., 2009). Suicide ideation also emerges due to the internalization of self-disdain and denial that often comes with remaining closeted (Rhoads, 1994).

Internalized homophobia is a psychological state in which the sexual minority looks down upon his or her sexual orientation (Obear, 1991; Washington & Evans, 1991; Williamson, 2000). According to Obear (1991), when LGBTQ individuals are socialized within the same homophobic culture as heterosexuals, they can internalize negative stereotypes and develop a degree of self-hatred and weakened self-esteem and internalized homophobia results. Internalized homophobia is a negative psychological reaction to the stress and stigma of being a sexual minority (Gonzalez et al., 2012; Matthews & Adams, 2009; Rhoads, 1994; Washington & Evans, 1991). Mohr and Fassinger (2000) see this condition as a part of normal identity formation, in which the LGBTQ student must negotiate same-sex desires within the context of an oppressive and
unsupportive societal culture. Internalized homophobia is a psychological outcome of the stress that comes with being a sexual minority.

Meyer (2003) defined “minority stress” as “explaining that stigma, prejudice, and discrimination create a hostile and stressful social environment that causes mental health problems” (p. 674). Minority stress is the experience faced by those belonging to a minority group and it comes from societal attitudes and institutional discrimination, where laws and public policies marginalize individuals in spheres such as work, healthcare, and marriage (Bowleg, Huang, Brooks, Black, & Burkholder, 2003; R. B. Johnson et al., 2013; Williamson, 2000). Minority stress among college LGBTQ college students often leads to the many effects of homophobia listed above due to the negative effects of being in the closet, family rejection, college attrition, church rejection and social rejection (Cochran & Mays, 1994; Gonzalez et al., 2012; Mancini, 2011).

**Risk factors.** Research on risk and protective factors for the LGBTQ student to date have come from data collected on PWI campuses. Yet, this literature provides useful information that can be tailored to the HBCU environment. LGBTQ students face a plethora of issues that make them an at-risk population (Doubet, 2002; Jurgens, Schwitzer, & Middleton, 2004). In addition to the developmental challenge of fashioning a stable identity, this group must face the additional challenge of negotiating this evolving identity in a context of societal hostility and discrimination. According to Rankin et al. (2010), the “unique challenges of a hostile environment prevent LGBTQ students from achieving their full academic potential and participating fully in the campus community” (p. 2). This group has a high risk of attrition due to the negative impact of homophobia on campus life (Mancini, 2011; Young & McKibban, 2014).
Campus bullying and harassment are major problems on American U.S. campuses for LGBTQ students. The campus environment assumes a level of heteronormativity and heterosexism, and is a front line of the battle for LGBTQ human rights. LGBTQ students live in fear of harassment and are commonly subject to verbal insults (Nicol, 2011). Woodford, Howell, Kulick, and Silverschanz (2013) found homophobic insults to be very common in American schools in the U.S., and using these insults makes a victimizer more likely to view LGBTQ students negatively. Socially sanctioned homophobia (hatred/disdain toward homosexuals) on college campuses has a highly damaging effect on LGBTQ students as well (Obear, 1991). What remains unknown is how LGBTQ students on HBCU campuses describe their identity formation and how these risk factors within the campus environment effect this process.

**Protective factors.** There are also factors that positively influence the LGBTQ college student. Whiting et al. (2012) defined protective factors as “aspects of a person’s life that promote resiliency and reduce the vulnerability to certain risks that an individual in a given population may encounter” (p. 509). Researchers have found several protective factors. These include (a) supportive people, (b) using visual media in courses, (c) LGBTQ role models including visible LGBTQ faculty, (d) interaction with LGBTQ persons, and (e) liberal sex role attitudes (Ivory, 2005; Marx & Little, 2002; Stotzer, 2009; Szalacha, 2003; Walters, 1994; Wright & Cullen, 2001). Other supportive factors include being female, liberal protestant, less religious, and not being a member of a fraternity or sorority (Rosenberg & Hinrichs, 2002). Support networks and a feeling of belonging with family, peers, supportive adults, and institutions such as schools and churches, all help shield the LGBTQ student from the effects of homophobia (Rosenberg
Promoting resilience is key to protecting LGBTQ students from the harmful effects of homophobia. Whiting et al. (2012) define resiliency as “the psychological ability to ‘bounce back’ or recover from painful or challenging events or experiences” (p. 509). According to Bowleg et al. (2003), the stresses posed by heterosexism, heteronormativity, and homophobia serve to activate resilience in this population. Some students are able to resist homophobia (Fine, 2011). Despite living in an environment of harassment and discrimination, LGBTQ “students learn how to cope with these stresses and graduate;” this indicates that these students acquired coping mechanisms and developed resiliencies while in college (Mancini, 2011, p. 18).

**African American Identity Formation**

The Black college campus creates a nurturing environment for the development of a positive racial identity. Though African American LGBTQ students face a double or triple minority status, it is important to understand their racial development alongside their development of a queer sexual orientation. The Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001) model of Black identity development follows individuals’ growth from childhood through adulthood, describing the paths of both negative and positive internalization of Blackness.
The Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001) life span model of Black identity development is important in understanding how the dimension of race affects African American students. Their model of Nigrescence reviews the “process of becoming Black” (Cross, 1991 p. 147). Like Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) model, this model of Nigrescence also contains stages, in this case six sectors that contribute to three patterns of Nigrescence.

Sector 1, infancy and childhood, involves the family playing a central role in identity development. Young children are typically unaware of racism, and social networks like school and church make up their human ecology. In Sector 2, preadolescence, family and social networks are still of high influence, and it is during this time of development that three types of identity emerge. Sector 3 includes low race salience, high race salience, and internalized racism. Black children with low race salience receive little information from parents regarding race. High race salience children have parents who have instilled the importance of being Black. Internalized racism develops when children see patterns of negativity toward being Black. During Sector 3, adolescence, children authenticate their identity personally, apart from their parents and outside influences. Low race salient adolescents may become more aware of what it means to be Black. High race salient children may explore identities not related to race. Children coming from an identity built on internalized racism may maintain this view if the negative view of Blackness is not challenged. Sector 4, early adulthood, is the stage in which most Blacks develop a high race salience. These adults orient themselves to Black values and culture. Adolescents with high race salience expand their understanding of a Black self-concept; Nigrescence helps in personalizing their sense of
Blackness. Low race salient adults will have constructed diverse identities across an array of categories/dimensions. Internalized racism may persist into adulthood. Ultimately, in order to have a positive/corrective self-concept, Black young adults must experience an adult conversion event (often racist encounter), moving toward Nigrescence. Some individuals with internalized racism never develop a positive Black self-concept, and some with low race salience may never need to deal with race in a serious manner (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001).

During Sector 5, adult Nigrescence, four states occur: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization/commitment. Pre-encounter involves low race salience (assimilation to dominant culture), and internalized racism. It is when an individual encounters an event that causes a conflict/cognitive dissonance in their understanding of their racial identity (usually negative racist encounter) that further identity formation evolves. Immersion-emersion occurs on two paths. On the one hand, individuals may immerse themselves in Black culture, opposing White norms. In emersion, on the other hand, individuals re-examine internalized beliefs and their identities begin to coalesce into a Black identity. Internalization/commitment happens when the individual participates in meaningful activities that address concerns shared by African Americans. Finally, the last sector, Nigrescence recycling, occurs when an individual’s preexisting Black concept /identity is called into question. Throughout adulthood, African Americans will experience situations that prompt resolution, leading to wisdom and a complex, multidimensional understanding of Black identity (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001).
There are three patterns of Nigrescence that emerge from the various stages. The first pattern (A) describes a socialization process in which individuals establish their Black identity through interaction with parents and significant others through childhood and adulthood (Sectors 1-4). Nigrescence Pattern B describes conversion, where the individual identifies as Black due to an event and is associated with Sector 5. Pattern C is called Nigrescence recycling (Sector 6), and is evident when identity is modified or expanded throughout adulthood (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001).

Understanding the Cross-Fhagen Smith model of Nigrescence is important when dealing with African American queer identity. LGBTQ HBCU students are dealing with double minority status. One cannot separate race from sexual orientation. This model will be used along with queer identity development models in contextualizing the experiences of this student population.

**Black Church and Identity Formation**

When looking at the various intersecting dimensions of identity, religion and spirituality are very influential in the identity formation of Black LGBTQ individuals. In addition to race, class, sexual orientation and gender expression, religiosity influences the coming out process of the homosexual college student. Historically, the Black Church offered refuge during times of struggle, as evident in the Civil Rights movement. Yet, often this religious influence negatively impacts the healthy formation of homosexual identity. A major theme from research on African American LGBTQ college students is the influence of Christianity on the homophobia they encounter. The Black church is an integral part of the African American community, which is more influential among Blacks than the White church is for European Americans (Schulte & Battle, 2004).
Church, as a major social system, is the source of much of the homophobia in the Black community. It dictates religious values and gender roles yet remains silent on issues such as the HIV crisis for fear of seeming to support homosexuality, ultimately closing its doors to affected members of the community. According to Wilson and Miller (2002), LGBTQ students often mentioned “punishment by God” as a strong message acquired in the church context (p. 380).

The Black church has been criticized for its slow response to the AIDS crisis in the 1990s, and for failing to help those infected for fear of seeming to condone homosexuality (Battle & Bennett, 2000; Harris, 2009; Lewis, 2003). There is also a lack of attention paid to pre-marital sex and other requirements outlined in the Bible, but not followed by the Black church. The “pick-and-choose” nature of African American Christians weakens moral authority to persecute and marginalize homosexuals in the name of religion. African Americans historically viewed homosexuality as a “White man’s” disease (Whitley, Childs, & Collins, 2011, p. 300). The Biblical notions of anti-homosexuality have always been used to sanction violence against others. Gay activists fight back, claiming this sanctioned hatred and violence is more pathological than homosexuality itself. Though not fully accepting, the Black church is still a major aspect of African American LGBTQ life. Due to the foundations of most HBCUs this Christian ethos pervades the campus environment.

According to Stewart (2009), religion is a powerful aspect of college student identity in the U.S. To African American students, religion has played significant roles in building leaders and motivating social resistance (Stewart, 2009). Being aware of the cultural influence of the Black church on the intersectionality of LGBTQ student identity
and experience is key in understanding why many remain closeted or must fight both within their race and against the hegemony of White culture. In LGBTQ research on African Americans, the Black church and its perpetuation of homophobia are a common theme (Jenkins et al., 2009; Schulte & Battle, 2004). When looking at African American LGBTQ college students, religion is a major dimension of identity that influences coming out of the closet in college. What remains unknown is if more LGBTQ students come out if there is an organization on campus.

**Effect of Black Church on HBCU Environments**

Because religiosity is important in the Black community and influences homophobia among African Americans (Plugge-Foust & Strickland, 2000; Whitley et al., 2011), it is important to understand how this perspective extends to college campuses. For example, religious messages were incorporated into homophobic graffiti in 2014, when students at Morehouse College, an HBCU in Atlanta, caught another student writing “homo sex is a sin” (Lee, 2014, para. 1). At the same college in 2002, a student beat another student with a baseball bat for looking at him in the shower. The victimizer was a friend and my Morehouse dorm brother. We were in the second semester of our freshman year, and all of a sudden, I saw his face on CNN, and was very surprised. At the time he was sentenced to 10 years in a penitentiary, of which he served 8. Our interaction was very social and easy-going. He was no more hypermasculine than any of the other men I knew, but African American culture already involves hypermasculine perspectives. It is also important to note that the perpetrator was a preacher’s child, which may indicate how the children of preachers tend to enter campus contexts differently due to their fuller indoctrination into church views relative to the average
African American. Religion-based homophobia may have been a factor in this case. In an odd twist, two years later, the victim ran for student government president at Morehouse, and his campaign flyers featured a picture of scantily clad Black women in bikinis. This over-sexualization of campaign material may have been an example of internalized homophobia and heterosexism, as it appeared as an attempt to over-compensate for being accused of eyeing another man and desiring to appear hypermasculine instead of homosexual.

The Black church is still the center of tradition and empowerment in the African American community, and its values spill over into the HBCU context (Ward, 2005). It dictates gender roles and religious values that should be followed. Unfortunately, according to Boykin (1996), “many Black LGBTQ people cannot find peace in their churches” (p. 124). Historically, religion meant a lot to African Americans while enslaved, ensuring a better afterlife that would be eternal, but this same religion teaches that this reward will be denied to LGBTQ individuals (Ward, 2005). A healthy dialogue on homosexuality among Black Christians is far from being on the agenda, and homophobia is uncontested in the church, and in turn at HBCUs.

Coming Out: Homosexuality in College

A major milestone in the lives of LGBTQ individuals is coming out. Coming out of the proverbial closet is the developmental process of identifying as LGBTQ and disclosing this to others (Evans & Broido, 2002; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Rhoads, 1994; Schneider & McCurdy-Meyers, 1999; Yeung & Stombler, 2000). Coming out is a major part of LGBTQ identity development (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; D’Augelli, 1994; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989; Yeung & Stombler, 2000).
According to Yeung and Stombler (2000), coming out of the closet is the experience that LGBTQ people have when first acknowledging their sexual orientation, identifying as LGBTQ, acting on sexual desire, disclosing this desire to others, and publicly entering the gay community (p. 137). This process often occurs in a college environment given timing of LGBTQ identity development. LGBTQ individuals come out to three populations: self, other LGBTQ individuals, and heterosexuals (Evans & Broido, 2002).

Most LGBTQ students have not come out by the time they enter college, but most self-disclose by the age of 21, often coming out during their college years (D’Augelli, 1991a, 1991b; Drazenovich, 2015; Noack, 2004). LGBTQ students often come to campus from homophobic households, thus, disclosing one’s sexual identity helps end self-denial and self-punishment (Draugn et al., 2002; Rhoads, 1994). Once LGBTQ persons come to a point where they can visualize themselves as happy being gay, they are closer to the point of coming out publicly (Rhoads, 1994).

Coming out has been described as a significant experience that is both frightening and empowering (Rhoads, 1994). According to Ivory (2005), coming out is difficult and being closeted protects one from harassment, although the downside of not coming out can be an unhealthy denial of one’s identity. The effects of both disclosing and remaining closeted can be negative. On one hand, being visible on campus most assuredly brings harassment, whereas, on the other hand, remaining closeted usually leads to internal strife and diminished mental well-being. Coming out and subsequent harassment are a commonality across the LGBTQ spectrum (Rhoads, 1994).
According to research, the campus environment, or climate, had a strong influence on whether and how individuals, including staff, faculty, and administration as well as students, disclose their sexual identity (D’Augelli, 2006; Evans & Broido, 2002). Having supportive campus environments and LGBTQ role models encourages students to come out of a closeted existence (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006).

Sometimes coming out is not an explicit event. For example, wearing LGBTQ symbols and clothing, as well as posting signs and stickers in dorm spaces, communicate identity without explicit disclosure (Evans & Broido, 2002). Often the residence hall, a place where sexual orientation is more difficult to hide, is a site of hostility to LGBTQ students. According to Evans and Broido (2002), “coming out to one’s roommate possesses particular challenges” (p. 662). Being out in a residence hall, as opposed to being closeted, increases the chance of homophobic experiences (Rhoads, 1997a). Students coming out to roommates may end up switching rooms, or worse, face confrontation; supportive residential staff are a protective factor for LGBTQ students in dorms (Evans & Broido, 2002).

Coming out is an ongoing process, with varying levels of “outness.” Whenever one is in a new situation with new people, coming out is an issue (Rhoads, 1994). Coleman (1982) presented a five-stage model of “coming out.” The first stage, Pre-Coming Out, describes how gender roles are formed by age 3, and the child, without knowing why, feels alienated from other children, sometimes experiencing emotional problems due to feeling different. The second stage, Coming Out, is where the youth acknowledges homosexual feelings. During the third stage, Exploration, the individual experiments with her or his new sexual identity, interacting with other homosexuals,
building sexual competence and self-esteem. Stage 4, First Relationships, is marked by the need for intimacy and learning how to function in a same-sex relationship. Finally, Stage 5, Integration, is where the individual incorporates both their public and private identities, and faces a future cycling back through stages as future situations lead to new identity management tasks (Coleman, 1982; Davies, 1992). Identity models usually peak where the LGBTQ individual pushes back at oppressive influences in society (Fassinger, 1998).

Manning (2015) recently presented a typology of coming out conversations. The seven types of conversations for disclosing one’s sexual identity include: (a) pre-planned, (b) emergent, (c) coaxed, (d) confrontational, (e) romantic, (f) educational/activist, and (g) mediated. The pre-planned conversation comes from a prior decision to disclose, where the LGBTQ might rehearse what they will say. When the topic comes up in conversation and the LGBTQ person decides to disclose their identity then, this is the emergent conversation. Coaxed conversations come from someone hinting or asking the LGBTQ person to admit his or her sexuality. Confrontational conversations, usually negative, come after someone (e.g., a parent) finds evidence of the LGBTQ person’s sexuality, and the student is demanded to disclose. Romantic conversations come when the LGBTQ person reveals their attraction for someone. Educational/activist conversations occur publicly, for example, coming out while speaking on an LGBTQ panel to an audience, opening the floor questions. Finally, mediated conversations are not face-to-face, such as disclosing through letters, telephone, or the internet (Manning, 2015).
Coming out of the closet frees the individual from mentally/emotionally damaging internal rumination and exposes them to the queer community, where the student eventually finds a welcoming community and a positive sense of self. What remains unknown is how the coming out experience differs, or not, from that found on PWI campus environments.

**Theoretical Framework**

To better understand the issue of homophobia on HBCU campuses, this research relies on five layers of exploration, with Astin’s (1999) I-E-O model in the center. Astin (1999) proposed a way to understand the effect of the college environment on a student’s development. He posited the I-E-O student development model to find how campus programs and policies translate into student achievement development (Astin 1999). This study seeks to compare two types of environments, HBCUs with LGBTQ groups/resource centers, and HBCUs without official LGBTQ resources. The existence or lack of LGBTQ-friendly programs and polices allows for a comparison of how LGBTQ students experience homophobia in the two contexts.

Contributing to the theoretical framework is literature reflecting different aspects of the LGBTQ HBCU student experience. Theories undergirding the layers cover college student development, LGBTQ and African American identity formation, the effect of the college environment on coming out/safety, feminist/queer methodology, and queer of color lenses. This framework provides a multidimensional approach to understanding the LGBTQ student experience at HBCUs.

Contributing to the framework for studying the experiences of LGBTQ HBCU students is the input of student experience, which consists of a focus on college student...
identity formation, LGBTQ psychosocial identity formation, African American identity formation, the effects of homophobia, factors that leave these students at risk, and protective factors known to promote resilience with this student group. The context of HBCU campuses provides the environment under consideration and addresses how the U.S. college campus environment influences whether LGBTQ students are afraid of coming out, or exhibiting their true selves on campus. For this study, the outcomes of Astin’s (1999) model were the student experience.

Feminist/queer methodology describes how qualitative analysis, pioneered by feminists and adopted by queer researchers, is useful in gathering experience narratives. These narratives can give those with marginalized status a voice in the realm of theoretical dialogue, academic/social knowledge-making, and institutional change. Queer of color lenses, which consist of Intersectionality, the Black Queer Identity Matrix (BQIM), Disidentification theory, and Theory in the Flesh, interact to bring color and flesh to theory. This Queer of Color analytical approach assumes that gathering the lived experiences of LGBTQ HBCU students will inform institutional leadership, specifically student affairs practitioners, regarding how to protect students from homophobic harassment and institutional discrimination.

Figure 1 illustrates the connections and contributions of the various theories contributing to the overarching framework. The central theory used for analysis is understanding the input (here, entering LGBTQ students at HBCUs), environment (HBCU campuses with and without LGBTQ centers), and the outcomes (the experiences of LGBTQ students at HBCUs). Informing the analysis are identity theories, as outlined
above, feminist/queer methodology, and Queer of Color theories. The latter areas are explicated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Theoretical framework. Astin’s (1993) I-E-O model adapted to this study. It begins with pre-college characteristics. Once the student comes to campus, this study examines the progress of intersectional identity formation as the student interacts with their campus environment. An ecological model, campus homophobia impacts the student, in response the student develops an inner voice to resist this discrimination. In the end, the students in turn seek to change their campus environments.

This theoretical framework provides a lens to analyze the data to determine if campuses evidence inclusivity, whether students at different HBCU institutions have common complaints, or if unique climates exist when it comes to supporting LGBTQ students. For example, in research done across PWIs, common complaints of LGBTQ students were limited non-discrimination policies, lack of events, lack of support, and
lack of visible role models (D’Augelli, 2006; Fassinger, 1991). What remains unknown is if these issues are the same facing LGBTQ students at HBCUs.

I make the argument that interventions useful at PWIs may also be useful for student affairs practitioners at HBCUs, and that using the findings from this study present a research-informed template for addressing homophobia, which can be tailored to different institutional contexts. The goal of this research was to assist in making HBCUs, as a group, safe and inclusive environments for LGBTQ students to develop and maintain positive senses of self and wellbeing.

**Feminist Theory**

According to Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), feminist researchers study how people make sense of their experiences, and the nature of power in molding these experiences. Experience refers to how people live and make sense of the world in their daily lives. Feminists use methods to explore social reality in hopes of gleaning viable knowledge from narratives of experience (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Feminist methodology addresses how power plays in both conducting research and the lives of study participants.

Feminist methodology is reflexive, in that all researchers exist at an intersection of social relations. To Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), feminist methodology implies that the researcher bears moral responsibility for their politics and practices. Feminist methodology accounts for how feminist researchers have personal goals and objectives and are themselves embedded in social and political locations. The shared objective of feminism and queer theorizing is to deconstruct oppressive situations and facilitate
resistance through individual and collective agency (Kasch & Abes, 2007; Marfield, 2012).

In discussing the feminist standpoint, researchers explore the relations between knowledge (gained from personal experience/narrative) and power (facilitating agency and eventual liberation of oppressed individuals; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). A feminist perspective is useful in understanding the experiences of LGBTQ HBCU students given the rigid gender roles embedded in Black cultural structures such as HBCUs, churches, and families. It is important to understand how the student voice can be used to inform theory, which can be used to evolve institutional policies that protect and include LGBTQ students. HBCUs are organizations that hold power over their constituents, including students. The normative power of heterosexism is pervasive, discouraging students to “come out” of the closet. These students are disempowered by institutional structures such as dress policy, non-existence of gender-neutral bathrooms, anti-discrimination policy, and lack of institutionalizing LGBTQ student groups and activities.

Feminism operates on the assumption that women have common political interests across their social divisions and can form alliances for eradicating oppressions (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). During the 1960s, feminists discovered through consciousness-raising groups that women shared common experiences (as wives, mothers, workers, etc.). They had in common experiences of racism, classism, and heterosexism. From these groups arose the saying “the personal is political,” in which personal relationships were discovered as a source of influence to address systemic power relations evident in society, exemplifying intersubjectivity (Kleinman, 2007). Kleinman
(2007) asserted (a) we cannot understand our beliefs, feelings, and behaviors without putting them into the larger context of oppression and privilege; (b) any action we take (individually or collectively) has consequences for reinforcing or challenging unfair patterns; and (c) “the personal” is not synonymous with “the private,” and can be experienced in realms conventionally thought of as public (e.g., sexual harassment outside of home). Assuming that experience is tied to power dynamics, what participants feel and experience and do are important.

**Queer Theory**

Borrowing from feminist theory and methodology, queer theory also ties the personal to the political. Queer theory aligns with feminist theory in its view that gender is not biological, but a construct influenced by social dynamics and power inequalities (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Queer theory focuses on the complexity and fluid nature of identity, and how we construct and make meanings of roles and norms regarding gender and sexual orientation (Russell, 2012). The standpoint of Queer theory is that all people are fluid in their sexual and gender identities; any attempts to normalize identities or behaviors takes a faulty direction (Russell, 2012). This theory challenges heteronormativity and its embedded power relations (Kasch & Abes, 2007).

A strength of queer theory is its position that multiple aspects/dimensions of identity, such as race, class, and gender, are inseparably linked (Marfield, 2012). Regarding college students, queer theory provides student affairs practitioners multiple aspects and lenses to understand student development of identity, and how social power structures (of the university) affect students. Queer theorists address ways in which heteronormativity influences the students’ self-identification with the various dimensions
of identity. The goal for HBCU administrators is to foster an environment where sexual minorities can develop healthy senses of self.

In higher education, a queer research lens brings to light problems of access, diversity, academic success, student leadership, and activism (Renn, 2010). Supporting LGBTQ students in developing healthy identities should involve helping them overcome homophobia and resist harassment and discrimination. The intersection/fusion of multiple identities should be addressed for each student (e.g., identities like athlete, Christian, pre-med major). Of note is the fact that students actively change the meaning of a construct (e.g., man, Christian) by redefining it to suit them (Kasch & Abes, 2007). They resist homophobia and heteronormativity, creating new performances of gender outside of the binary norm. This is part of the power of queer theory. Feminist and queer theoretical lenses allow for analysis of the LGBTQ HBCU experience, how they experience and resist homophobia, how their internal identity development is affected by the campus culture/climate and bringing their voices to theory and empowerment.

LGBTQ HBCU students live at many intersections of identity (gender, race, class, religion, sexual orientation, HBCU student, etc.). They are queers of color, bringing to their campuses unique cultural experiences that could enrich and empower other African Americans. The following sections detail various aspects of Queer theory and the intersection of a range of theories contributing to the theoretical framework for this study.

LGBTQ HBCU students can be considered queers of color, though the use of the term “queer” is often rejected among many African Americans (Hayes, 2016). Queer of Color lenses center on the lived experience as a source of knowledge production (Brockenbrough, 2015). Four specific theories combine under the umbrella of queer of
color lenses, namely intersectionality, Black queer identity matrix, disidentification, and theory in the flesh. These theories provide a way to view the narratives of LGBTQ HBCU students.

**Queer of Color Theoretical Lenses**

Central to the queer/LGBTQ of color experience is the intersectionality of multiple identities. The students included in this study are African American and LGBTQ, and as such, share a double marginal status. Contributing to the elements that intersect are theories specific to Blacks and LGBTQ students. The BQIM ties this intersection of marginal identities to the uprooting of structural inequalities that oppress the individual on multiple interacting levels. Disidentification refers to how the individual LGBTQ HBCU student pushes back or resists homophobia through everyday actions and creates new performances and expressions of gender and sexuality subverting heteronormativity. Theory in the flesh arises from queers of color, expressing unique intersections of ethnic identity and LGBTQ identity. It ties the fight against heteronormativity with the ongoing fight against racial oppression.

**Intersectionality.** Queer theory takes a critical stance in exploring the meaning of identity, focusing on the intersection of identities within the individual and facilitating their power to resist and counter oppressive social constructions of sexual orientation and gender (Battle & Barnes, 2009; Kasch & Abes, 2007). Identity is a fluid construct (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Evans & Broido, 2002). Within each person, multiple identities such as race, class and gender intersect, interacting with and influencing one another (Poynter & Washington, 2005). According to S. R. Jones and McEwen’s (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, factors like family background, sociocultural
conditions, current experiences, personal identity and attributes affect homosexual identity development. This model addresses how individual LGBTQ HBCU students make meaning among the interplay of multiple identities.

The LGBTQ group is not a monolith, but a diverse continuum of sexuality (Rhoads, 1997b). Queer theory acknowledges the influences of multiple and fluid identity domains, such as race, class, gender, religion, and so forth on a person’s self-definition and self-expression (Renn, 2010; Stewart, 2009). This theoretical tradition provides a rich, multifaceted framework for assessing the development of LGBTQ identity within an individual and advocating for their rights. For the African American LGBTQ college student, an intersectional lens is helpful in understanding their experiences and needs.

Intersectionality is an interpretive framework used in many disciplines. Crenshaw (1991) coined the term in her discussion of the legal and institutional discrimination against Black women, which arose from Critical Race Theory. The Critical Race Theory framework focuses on the intersection and interplay of race, law and power. The current study focuses on race, HBCU student status, and sexuality. Crenshaw (1991) used intersectionality as a lens to promote how various dimensions of identity (race, class, gender) intersect to influence experience and perpetuate oppression. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) defined intersectionality as an “analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age are mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape Black women’s experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women” (p. 299). Intersectional analysis arose out of the latter end of the second wave of the women’s movement in the 1980s, spearheaded by African American lesbians, then
women of color worldwide, and has since been co-opted by the queer movement and broadly used as a tool and strategy for LGBTQ activism and advocacy. In the realm of queer theory, intersectionality researches how heterosexism is a form of oppression and can be deconstructed by resistance, formal dialogue, and advocacy. This theoretical lens and its methodology, mainly qualitative analysis, specifically the acquisition of first-hand accounts of experiences, is used to give voice to LGBTQ individuals and combat heterosexist and homophobic institutional structures and policies (Renn, 2010).

In the research of the African American LGBTQ college population, intersectionality has been a key theoretical tool for understanding personal accounts and narratives (Kasch & Abes, 2007). These students deal with the stressors of being sexual minorities while facing the damaging effects of racism, all while developing Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) intellectual, manual, and interpersonal competencies as students. This confluence creates a vulnerable student population whose needs are to be addressed. African American LGBTQ students were found to be exposed to multiple oppressions, but were also found to be resistant and resilient (Bowleg et al., 2003). These students in their daily expressions redefine what gender and sexuality, and indeed what it means to be Black. According to Kasch and Abes (2007), the “individual can restructure external authority by resisting heteronormativity and the destabilizing structures it created, in a process of refining self-identity perceptions in relationship to external influences while redefining the meaning of those influences” (p. 629). African American LGBTQ students redefine what it means to be male or female, as LGBTQ individuals may exhibit masculinity, androgyny, femininity, or hyperfemininity/ hypermasculinity, etching new
types of gender expressions and performativity, which is how people create genders through everyday behavior (Kasch & Abes, 2007).

Intersectionality research analyzes how heterosexism, as a system of oppression, interlocks with other oppressive systems such as race, class, and gender to create minority stress. Within the LGBTQ person, multiple identities intersect and interact. LGBTQ students who are African American, especially female, must come to terms with multiple oppressed identities (Harris, 2009; Patton & Simmons, 2008). African American lesbians experience triple oppression issues, being marginalized by a White women-led women’s movement and a male-headed led racial movement, where they are treated as second-class status (Washington & Evans, 1991). According to Collins (2000), since the early 1980s Black lesbian theorists and activists have identified homophobia and its toll on Black women. Research on LGBTQ college student experiences has been shaped by this analysis; these studies acquired many demographic details, such as race/ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status, religion, student activities, parent education levels, sexual self-definition, and so forth in order to assess the unique challenges of the LGBTQ individual.

Yep (2002) acknowledged the larger context of heteronormativity at the intersections of race, class, and gender. In order to deconstruct an oppressive system in society, one must consider both the microscopic level (psychological, interpersonal), and the macroscopic level (social and cultural) of inequity. LGBTQ research explores the personal and interpersonal, as well as the devices of marginalization deployed by a heteronormative society. LGBTQ students live a double-consciousness, operating in two worlds, gay and straight (Patton & Simmons, 2008; Rhoads, 1994).
**BQIM.** The BQIM is a theoretical framework useful in exploring the experiences of queers of color. It rests on the intersectional approach and uses standpoint theory to explore the experiences of queers of color (Howard, 2014). The BQIM hopes to find various valuable insights along the lines of social inequalities and social identities of this group, thus enabling practitioners, policy makers, and researchers to begin to assess and understand the characteristics, desires, expectations, needs, and demands of the Black lesbian female community, or LGBTQ HBCU student population (Howard, 2014).

The BQIM counters all oppressions, positing that the lives of individuals who have been historically oppressed are rooted in structural inequalities based on intersections such as class, race, and gender (Howard, 2014). This stance allows for research grounded in strategies for resistance for oppressed groups across social and cultural contexts. Gathering data on the experiences of LGBTQ HBCU students adds to queer of color theory in the U.S. The BQIM framework moves scholarship and discussion based on queers of color toward a politics of resisting heteronormativity and racism, promoting the equality of marginalized groups through modes of political action (including research-informed political strategies).

BQIM is grounded in five assumptions. First, sexuality and race exist primarily as social constructs. Second, struggle is the centerpiece of a Black queer conceptual framework. Third, race, gender (as well as gender expression), and sexual orientation are interlocking systems of oppression. Fourth, different social locations and social knowledge often produce distinct communication patterns and can influence one’s own self-awareness. Finally, the fifth assumption is the Black lesbian female experience can be known only by attending to Black lesbian female interpretations of this experience.
(Howard, 2014). Regarding LGBTQ HBCU students, these assumptions create a framework for taking their day-to-day social and personal experiences into the world of academic and social discourse. By using the standpoint and intersectional (race, class, gender, gender expression) lenses to interpret the homophobic environments of HBCUs, one can gather data on these students which informs inclusivity and safety measures at Black institutions.

The BQIM furthers two theoretical bases, standpoint theory and intersectionality (Howard, 2014). Feminists have used standpoint theory to explore the lived experiences of women as they participate in and oppose their own subordination (Howard, 2014). It poses that research must begin from lived experiences rather than abstract concepts. The goal of this framework is to make visible the inhumanity of existing relations among groups in effort to end oppression.

The BQIM is useful in studying and deconstructing African American cultural elements seen among LGBTQ individuals. Other queer cultural elements that may be seen across campuses are the “down low” (when men who identify as heterosexual secretly sleep with men) and gender bending/drag gender expressions. The African American LGBTQ subculture thrives on countering homophobia and racism simultaneously.

**Disidentification.** According to Muñoz (1999), disidentification in part describes “the survival strategies that the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously obscures or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the constructed illusion of normal citizenship” (p. 4). HBCUs are known to be homophobic, and LGBTQ students need intervention informed
by their real-life experiences (Carter et al., 2015). Homosexual students must cope with harassment from heterosexual students, faculty, and administration. Disidentification theory is useful as a lens to gather student coping methods. These coping methods can be viewed through a racial dimension (how HBCUs teach students African American history and culture in order to empower them to lead within the Black community and resist racism in larger society), and a sexual orientation dimension (LGBTQ HBCU students reject stifling heteronormative gender constructs, creating and publicizing new gender expressions, making campus more tolerable for upcoming queer students).

Disidentification theory for the LGBTQ HBCU student population explores how these students resist heteronormativity, perform alternative gender expressions, and construct new identities on the intersection of race and sexuality. An example of disidentification is the recycling of stereotypes meant to marginalize (coopting terms like queer or the n-word). Unique to African American culture is the recycling of the n-word, a term originally used to harm Blacks now used within the community to mean strength, boldness, and an existence of a counter-public to the hegemonic White norm. This cooptation circulates throughout African American community (e.g., music, books, conversation, Black movies), creating a shared meaning and a form of resistance. This disidentification with the n-word is a strategy that allows the community to re-write its definition in both looking through the eyes of the dominant society (n-word meaning lazy, ignorant) and through the eyes of the subculture (n-word as endearing term).

According to Muñoz (1999), disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence. Being African American and LGBTQ simultaneously exposes one to various systems of oppression. In addition to facing the
huge system of racism, LGBTQ HBCU students must face discrimination in their home community/campus. Disidentification on the HBCU campus may take the form of negotiating religion/church involvement, refusing to dress in cisgendered manner, student activism, and so forth. This form of resistance on the part of LGBTQ students creates a space where future students find it easier to come out publicly, feeling more at home on their campuses.

**Theory in the flesh.** Feminism and queer theory both value the lived experience of individuals as a source of knowledge. Moraga and Anzaldúa (2015) introduced the concept theory in the flesh to describe how the physical realities, the experiences of our lives, coalesce into a politic borne of necessity. African Americans, LGBTQ individuals included, have borne generations of slavery, where their flesh was taken as a commodity, and refused them. This legacy is common among Black people and a part of HBCU culture. Just as African Americans fight a broader society for their rights, the LGBTQ HBCU student must fight campus leadership for physical safety, respect, and inclusion.

The goal of theory in the flesh is to empower politics of liberation. It assumes feminists and queers of color cannot separate their sexuality or ethnicity from the realities of racial and economic oppression. In the case of Black LGBTQ HBCU students, there is a necessity out of which a political stance arises. This necessity takes the form of battling homophobia within the Black community and on the HBCU campus.

Moraga and Anzaldúa (2015) refer to the minority individual’s daily tug of having to choose which parts of their ethnic heritages they want to claim and which parts obscure them from self-knowledge. Theory in the flesh can be used along with the African concept of “Sankofa,” meaning return to one’s cultural roots and history for
Sankofa refers to individuals in the African diaspora exploring their African cultural roots in order to understand themselves and perpetuate a legacy of wisdom, intellect, art, and political empowerment. African Americans have a notion of reaching back to help others and to understand what aspects of the past should be healed/corrected and what aspects should be used in molding the future. The barbaric realities of the Mid-Atlantic slave trade made Africans give birth to a unique politic and aesthetic. The aesthetic like the politic comes from the “blood and sweat” of experiencing oppression and slavery (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015). This commonality across the Americas, Europe, and the Caribbean manifests in arts, politics, and an ethos of resistance.

Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983) brought “blood and pus and sweat” to research, theory, ideology, and politics (p. 173). Valerio (as cited in Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015) reaches back to his history, documenting the knowledge of his ethnic group, and preserving his culture and its traditions. His story brings the flesh and blood of the lived experience of his ancestors and present culture to the realm of academic discourse and theorizing. This can powerfully be applied to the Black LGBTQ HBCU student, since HBCUs provide a nurturing forum for future leaders who progress Black culture. In his essay, Valerio (as cited in Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015) presents his home, the culture that birthed him, and the people that nurtured him. His “reaching back” is important for marginalized voices to document their existence in resistance to erasure by the hegemonic culture. Black LGBTQ students would be empowered by exploring their African and American roots while attending a Black college, finding examples of acceptance of flexible gender roles and multiple sexualities. Every individual’s story within this group is valuable in bringing the marginalized population to equality.
E. P. Johnson’s (2001) description of “quare” studies is an example of theory in the flesh as applied to queer African Americans. Theories in the flesh emphasize the diversity within and among gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgendered people of color while simultaneously accounting for how racism and classism affect how we experience and theorize the world. Theories in the flesh also conjoin theory and praxis through an embodied politics of resistance and action. They engender an identity politic that does not just group identities into a monolith, but it recognizes the subjective agencies of diverse individuals within the identity group. It goes beyond the question of a monolithic or shared identity but moves toward a shared commitment of improving the conditions of those within the group without regard to intragroup differences (E. P. Johnson, 2001). In the HBCU context, there is the shared identity of African American, yet there are diverse economic backgrounds, social statuses, and occupational trajectories. There is a wide diversity among individual students at HBCUs; each person has a unique position and identity. LGBTQ students at HBCUs will often find that they are marginalized within the social milieu. Though homophobia is common across HBCUs, there is still the advantage of a culture of home, where these students still receive the benefits of being nurtured by those of the same ethnic group. Within the African American cultural monolith, as evidenced by pervasive homophobic HBCU culture, the LGBTQ minority lacks equal access to protection, being outed verbally, emotionally, and physically. This leaves many students who attend Black institutions suffering a closeted existence, creating a theory in the flesh for their campus experience.

These examples of theory in the flesh are important in addressing the lives of queer African American students on HBCU campuses. Each individual has a story to
tell, and this fact is valued by feminist and queer researchers of color. The purpose of theory in the flesh is to give voice to the lived experience of LGBTQ HBCU students and this approach will help in situating the narratives gathered from the participants in this study. Understanding the coming out process these students face in college is an important focus of feminist/queer research. This can be done by respecting the journey, or the sweat and blood, these students shed in fighting both racism and homophobia daily.

Theory Interaction

The four queer of color theoretical frameworks (Intersectionality, BQIM, Disidentification, and Theory in the Flesh) can work together harmoniously to thresh out commonalities faced by those at the intersections of the racial and sexual orientation margins (Figure 2). These lenses arise from the methodological approach pioneered by second wave women of color and adopted by the queer social justice movement (Ferguson, 2012). Tying lived experience, gained by individual narrative, to formalized knowledge-making designed to alleviate oppressive embedded social structures informs HBCU leadership in creating an inclusive, safe campus environment (Ferguson, 2012).
Figure 2. Queer of color lenses. Each lens represents a queer of color theory which ties lived experience at the intersection of African American and queer to formal knowledge-making and theorizing. They are useful in understanding queer HBCU student needs and how to design permanent measures of support and inclusion. They also allow for further understanding of African American culture from the queer standpoint.

Gathering information on the coming out process, the interaction of multiple identities within each individual, and the personal experiences and perspectives of this group gives these students a voice in gaining equal protection and equal access to the benefits of the HBCU. The BQIM is useful in tying the commonalities among these students to strategic action for social/political equality on campus. Disidentification, as applied to this group, explores how new and unique identities and gender expressions emerge from resisting gender binaries, heterosexism, and compulsory heterosexuality. The Morehouse College example is important because those students who disidentify with the hyper-masculine norm embolden younger generations of students to feel
comfortable in their bodies while on campus. Theory in the flesh regarding these students, already in a cultural immersion space, allows the African American queer voice to become more nuanced and connected to its roots.

**Summary**

Using various frameworks for exploring the experiences LGBTQ HBCU students provides complex and nuanced perspectives that tie daily life to broader systems of homophobic oppression. Eradicating the strong hold that homophobia has on African American institutions, like the HBCU, benefits from research on the issue. The problem of homophobia is a historical phenomenon that all African Americans are born into, requiring social action aimed at preventing violence, harassment, and discrimination. The personal experience of LGBTQ identity development, occurring in a backdrop of homophobia, involves both risk and protective factors and serves as an input into understanding students experiences. The college environment is an important space for coming out of the closet and finding allies within the campus community (Astin, 1984). Feminist and queer methods of research provide a powerful tool for fostering empowerment and collecting qualitative data aimed at informing institutional change initiatives. Queer of color theoretical lenses provide differing approaches to the same research objective. LGBTQ HBCU students can benefit from climate studies that reach across institutions, which can provide a clearer picture of Black LGBTQ sub-culture. The goal is to enrich this culture by providing a forum and a voice for every individual to contribute to a dialogue aimed at eradicating homophobia and its effects.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The purpose of this research was to document and explore the experiences of LGBTQ HBCU students in order to provide institutional leaders with information on how to improve the campus environment in becoming more inclusive and responsive to the needs of these students. To begin, it is important to understand how these students navigate homophobia on campus while at the same time develop their adult and professional identities. Astin’s (1993) input-environment-outcome model of student involvement facilitated a way to demystify the black box between student characteristics prior to college and the outcome of their development as professionals and healthy individuals. Gaining LGBTQ HBCU student experience narratives helps bridge a link of understanding between the entering student’s identity (pre-college LGBTQ status, African American culture, religious background); the effect of living, learning, and developing in a particular HBCU (homophobic, not so homophobic) environment; and a positive/negative analysis of their campus experience and personal growth.

Feminist theory provides a mechanism of inquiry for this study as this approach highlights how people make sense of their experiences and the nature of power in molding these experiences (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Feminists and queer theorists use research to explore social reality as perceived by participants in hopes of gleaning viable knowledge from their narratives of experience. The objective of feminism is to deconstruct oppressive, social, and material oppressions and facilitate resistance through
individual and collective agency (Kasch & Abes, 2007); this perspective proves useful for advocating for the equality and inclusion of LGBTQ HBCU students in campus life.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the qualitative methods used in this research. Key data included experience narratives uncovered via in-depth interviews with LGBTQ students at HBCUs to understand their experiences. Eligible participants included those who identify on the LGBTQ spectrum, including male, female, intersex (having varying degrees of both sex characteristics), and those with a self-described gender/sexuality. Analysis assessed whether there are commonalities or a coherent LGBTQ subculture across varying HBCU contexts. Participants were sought from HBCUs with an official LGBTQ student group and from HBCUs without a recognized support group. The experience narrative, used by feminist researchers and queer research, is appropriate for linking the personal to the political (Hanish, 1969). Understanding how these students navigate homophobia on campus while developing their adult and professional identities is important in giving them a voice, which in turn can help campus administrators craft appropriate support mechanisms.

Feminist standpoint theory provides a foundation for queer theory and allows researchers the ability to explore the relations between knowledge (gained from personal experience/narrative) and power (facilitating agency and eventual liberation of oppressed individual; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). These perspectives bring the voices of women, LGBTQ individuals, and any other marginalized group into the center of analysis versus on the margins as is typical in patriarchal society (Harding, 1992). The experience narrative provides an appropriate method for bringing historically marginalized voices into the center. The current research explored the LGBTQ experience across HBCUs to
bring to light any common features that may indicate a coherent LGBTQ African American subculture based on the common experience of homophobia. The questions guiding this study included:

How do LGBTQ students experience college life in an HBCU?

a. How does the HBCU context contribute to the LGBTQ student identity?

b. How do LGBTQ students describe the HBCU culture and subcultures based on the availability or not of a recognized support group?

**Qualitative Methods**

Qualitative research is useful in the study of natural social life and to address questions of experience (Creswell & Poth, 2017). It uses textual materials such as transcripts, field notes and websites that document human experiences about others and/or one’s self in social action and reflexive states (Saldaña, 2011). This study blended multiple genres of qualitative approach to document social life and a group’s culture. The data units, collected from interviews and web reviews of HBCU campuses, provided building blocks for coding (Saldaña, 2011). Importantly, a feminist methodology approach provided a critical inquiry into the social and political mission to improve LGBTQ student experiences at HBCUs. The primary methodological approach used in this study was a case study, specifically a cross-case design (Yin, 2014), which uses a small sample, permitting in-depth examination into the student experience with homophobia. The two cases compared were LGBTQ students from HBCUs with an official LGBTQ group or resource center, and those without. Cross case comparison allows for comparison and contrast across these two settings. The qualitative approach
provides a basis for giving LGBTQ HBCU students a voice and documenting this nuance of HBCU and African American culture.

Documenting LGBTQ students’ lived experiences of homophobia and capturing their narratives can yield richer and more useful data with respect to facilitating HBCU student affairs practitioners in making their campuses tolerant and free of discrimination. Of the various methods of qualitative design available, I opted to conduct a cross case comparison of two groups of students attending HBCUs, namely those participants with student support groups for LGBTQ students and those without support groups.

**Social Constructivism**

Queer research on the college population gains its rich texture from the use of qualitative analysis, grounding theory in the lived experience (Amoah, 1997). This methodology arises out of the larger qualitative domain based on social constructivism. Social constructivism is a useful paradigm for exploring the relationship between student inputs, their campus environment, and the outcomes based on that interaction. Berger and Luckmann (1966), sociologists who first theorized on the social constructivist approach, discussed how a socially constructed reality, such as the notion of sexuality in U.S. society, is maintained by measuring the symmetry between subjective and objective reality (congruence/incongruence across respondent reports). For example, subjective aspects of the experiences of LGBTQ HBCU students, when compared, may lead to a greater understanding the objective reality of campus homophobia as a shared social construct. In the case of the current research issue, an LGBTQ HBCU subculture is reified in students sharing and comparing experiences, cultural memes, methods of resistance, and support networks. Collecting experience narratives captures the
subjective and finding themes across narratives implicates that homophobia exists as an objective reality or societal construct.

This research allowed LGBTQ HBCU students to compare experiences, cultural memes, methods of resistance, and perception of campus climates and supports. The data from these interviews provide a snapshot of HBCU LGBTQ life useful in evolving institutional inclusion efforts as well as addressing in-depth the construct of intra-racial homophobia.

**Feminist Methods**

As noted throughout this dissertation, a feminist perspective for the methodology of this study is central to understanding better the experiences of the participants. According to Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), feminists study how people make sense of their experiences, and the nature of power in molding these experiences. Feminist methodology addresses how power plays in both conducting research and the lives of study participants (Kleinman, 2007). The objective of feminism and queer theory is to deconstruct oppressive, social, and material oppressions and facilitate resistance through individual and collective agency (Kasch & Abes, 2007). This perspective is very useful for advocating the equality and inclusion of LGBTQ HBCU students in campus life by creating narratives for the participants in which their typically marginalized location moves to the center of interest.

In discussing the feminist standpoint, which provides a foundation for queer theory, Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) explored the relationship between knowledge (gained from personal experience/narrative) and power (facilitating agency and eventual liberation of oppressed individual). In studying the experience of LGBTQ students at
HBCUs, it is important to give voice to their situation in order to inform student affairs practitioners and others in power in protecting safety and equality on campus. The experience narrative (Kasch & Abes, 2007), gained by in-depth interview, is appropriate for understanding the commonalities across HBCU contexts between LGBTQ students from institutions with an institutionalized student group, and from institutions without an LGBTQ group. The current research explored the LGBTQ experience across HBCUs to bring to light any common features that may indicate a coherent African American subculture based on the common experience of homophobia. Both factors that damage wellbeing and those that promote wellbeing will inform inclusion efforts.

**Summary**

The practices of qualitative research guide the research design for this study. Feminist methods contributed to the focus of attention for the analysis and helped in the construction of the guiding questions for the interviews. Context, experience, and environment provide a theoretical backdrop for student development of LGBTQ individuals. Given the role of context, here the HBCU, a case study method was selected to allow for a focus on a particular institutional type to understand better the influence of institutional culture on its LGBTQ students.

**Case Study Method**

According to Russell (2012), research arising from intersectional theory often uses case studies and narratives as appropriate methodological approaches. Cross-case analysis helps to understand relationships that may exist among discrete cases/respondents; this provides opportunities to learn from different LGBTQ student experiences and gather critical evidence to modify (HBCU) policy (Khan &
VanWynsberghe, 2008). The telling and recording of experience transfers experience into abstract knowledge, adding to research and literature the voices of historically marginalized groups.

This study is an example of a multiple case study. According to Creswell (2007), the defining characteristics of case study method include:

- Use of a bounded system, here the HBCU campus. This method operates with the understanding that student experience is strongly linked to context (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007).
- In-depth data collection using multiple sources of information—here websites were searched for evidence of an active LGBTQ student organization. In-depth interviews and demographics sheets provided experience and context.
- In a multiple case study, a single issue, HBCU homophobia, is selected, but multiple students are interviewed from both contexts (schools with and without an active group) to illustrate the issue using different perspectives.
- A detailed description of the case emerges in which the researcher details aspects such as the history of the case or phenomenon, the chronology of events, or a day-by-day description of activities dealing with the case. The product is a rich, thick description of the phenomenon that enlightens the reader’s understanding of HBCU homophobia (Costello, 2015).
- The researcher focuses on a few key issues and finds themes, not for generalization, but to find commonalities that transcend the multiple cases or narratives. When students from different contexts report the same experience, it implies that the phenomenon transcends the individual campus and is part of a
larger overarching phenomenon. This study sought to provide a picture of how homophobia looks for the individual student as well as with students across HBCU campuses.

- When multiple cases are chosen, a typical format is to first provide a detailed description of each case and themes within the case (within-case analysis), followed by a thematic analysis across the cases (cross-case analysis), as well as interpreting the meaning of the case. In this study, each transcribed experience narrative was analyzed to gain an overall sense of how participants, individually and collectively, navigate campus environments regarding intra-racial homophobia.

- In the final phase of the case study, the researcher interprets and reports the meaning of the case. Lessons learned from student voices are useful in formalizing experience for academic research and to inform others, specifically HBCU leadership and student affairs practitioners.

For this study, the two cases explored include students who are LGBTQ undergraduates at an HBCU with an institutionalized LGBTQ student group or resource center, and those who are LGBTQ undergraduates at an HBCU without an institutionalized LGBTQ group. The unit of analysis has two levels: individual and institutional. This study explored the subjective student experience with homophobia and its impact on the individual level, and the institutional climate of homophobia on the broader campus level.

The case here was bounded by several factors. On the institutional level the college was an HBCU. On the individual level, the student was an undergraduate who
identified on the LGBTQ spectrum. This study did not focus on graduate students, faculty, or staff. The in-depth interview responses of participants served as an individual case that details the experience of each student in the study. Transcripts were subject to a cross-case analysis in which students from HBCUs with and without official LGBTQ groups or resource centers were compared for congruence and incongruence within the experience narratives (Creswell, 2013).

Kahn and VanWynsbeghe (2008) presented a useful process of analyzing across cases. First, transcripts of interview data are separated into units of meaning (decontextualizes individual responses into narrative data). Second, the units of meaning are recontextualized (common concepts/words across responses become clustered under themes). Third, themes become a reduced data set that can be explored for congruence. Both themes arising from congruence, and unique experiences not found across respondents will become subject to researcher and respondent interpretation.

According to Schwandt, Lincoln, and Guba (2007), it is also necessary to conduct a negative case analysis, documenting responses that were not repeated or fitting with a theme. Case study research is limited because a plethora of obscured variables exist that affect LGBTQ HBCU student life (Kahn & VanWynsbeghe, 2008). To guard against this, demographic information such as hometown, socioeconomic status, and campus information, including college mission and location, were collected. Interviewees provided their background information in the demographics sheet, and campus information will be collected from their school websites.

During data analysis, it became apparent that it was important to note the reasons why participants chose their HBCU. Emails were sent after data collection asking why
the student chose their institution. Four students responded (Tewa, Kandace, Max, and Hallie). Three students reported wanting the community offered at this type of college and the HBCU experience. Max noted the hatred she experienced in predominantly White spaces and wanted to feel safe a little longer.

**Research Design**

A set of stages build the research design for this study. Given the case study nature of the methodology, the first step is to identify the criteria for selecting the cases (Merriam, 1998). The next step in the design was the recruitment and selection of the case participants. Finally, a summary of the means for storying the data and for analysis is reviewed.

**Site selection criteria.** This study included two types of institutions: HBCUs with LGBTQ student groups/resource centers, and those without. The availability of a support area on campus may influence how LGBTQ students experience college life at an HBCU. Currently, approximately 34 of the 105 HBCUs have an institutionalized, official LGBTQ student group or resource center (Campus Pride Index, n.d.; Appendix A). A more focused attempt was made to represent students from institutions with and without support centers, in the attempt of having similar sample size for the two cases.

**Participant selection criteria.** I intended to select a total of 10 undergraduate students to participate in this study to allow for in-depth interviewing, but I was only able to recruit nine students. Instead of relying on schools for recruitment, I opted to use social media to find individual students who identify as LGBTQ and attend an HBCU. Social media is a burgeoning aspect of today’s technology, and one heavily utilized by college students. Social media (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat) also
provides platforms for individuals in affinity groups to connect with others who are similar to them. For example, Facebook pages are dedicated to sharing our day-to-day lives, while LinkedIn is a networking site for professionals. I recruited participants by posting on social media sites and listservs that LGBTQ college students frequent, and I targeted sites that had affinity connections with HBCUs. I also used the snowball strategy (T. Johnson, 2014) to select participants and to aid in additional recruitment if needed. Recruitment materials from online social media and informal email contacts were archived. See Appendix B for a copy of the text used for recruitment. I used an incentive to recruit students as the amount of time I asked for the interviews was lengthy. I offered to mail them $20 cash as the incentive.

Participants were selected from HBCUs with an institutionalized LGBTQ student group and from HBCUs without an official LGBTQ student group. I sought sample diversity (student demographics, geographic location of HBCU, expected year of graduation, etc.) by using information collected on a demographic form when the students first expressed interest in participating in the study. A copy of this form is located in Appendix C.

Data Collection

According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007), the in-depth interview seeks to understand the lived experiences of an individual and the subjective understanding that individual brings to a given set of situations. It is issue-oriented, focusing in this context on homophobia on HBCU campuses. The intent is to explore this issue to gain focused information on the subject from the respondents (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). In-depth interviews were conducted via web-based video conferencing, with an audio recording as
back-up. According to prior research, computer technology facilitates researchers in recruiting participants and following up with them later via email, text, email, and social media (Rosa, Campbell, Miele, Brunner, & Winstanley, 2015). Videoconferencing is now viewed as an alternative medium for face-to-face interviewing (Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009). As noted, the participants were recruited by multiple social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) using a flyer with contact information (Appendix B.)

**Participant selection.** When students contacted me indicating they were interested in participating in my study, I sent them a consent form (Appendix D) and a short demographic questionnaire (Appendix C). All participants were 18 years of age or older. First, I determined if the student’s HBCU had a support center or not. Next, I looked for individuals who provided the widest range of experiences and diversity to select as participants.

**Interview protocols.** According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007), the in-depth interview seeks to understand the “lived experiences” of the individual. This form of interviewing allows the feminist/queer researcher to access the voices of those who are marginalized in a society; women, people of color, homosexuals, and those with lower socioeconomic statuses are examples of marginalized groups. It is fitting for gaining an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon using a small sample. Since HBCUs are predominately scattered throughout the South East U.S., online videoconferencing and telephone interviews allowed for including a broader pool of participants as college students increasingly have access to videoconferencing via cell phone. Once participants consented to participate, completed the demographic survey, and were selected for the study, I arranged a time for their first interview.
A set of two interviews occurred for each participant. The first interview focused on questions about the participant’s identity development, whereas the second interview targeted gaining data to illustrate the student’s experiences on an HBCU campus (Appendix E). Most participants opted to complete both in one session, which on average lasted a little over an hour. The interview protocol included questions that allowed for gathering views on homophobia and identity, homophobia as a campus phenomenon, campus environment/LGBTQ representation, intersectionality, identity formation, Black queer identity matrix, disidentification, theory in the flesh, religion/spirituality, and institutional supports.

The interview protocol is original, derived from the layers of exploration and aspects of the literature. The questions were piloted with an instructor and students attending William & Mary. These pilot interviews (Creswell, 2007) provided an opportunity to see if the questions were clear, to estimate the length of the interview, and to determine if the questions provided the depth desired in understanding the student experiences best. The interview was semi-formal yet structured, with the same set of questions for each respondent (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Both open-ended and closed questions were used, with the intent to gather data and in-depth understanding. As noted, the interviews were conducted via internet (e.g., Skype, Zoom, Google Hangout). The interviewees scheduled their interviews from any place they deemed convenient. I conducted the interviews on my end in a private media room in Swem library at William & Mary.
Institutional Case Descriptions

In addition to interview responses, I collected data on the campus environment from respondents’ home institutions. Information was gathered by searching HBCU websites, discrimination policies, descriptions of student groups and their activities, and LGBTQ events. This background case data helped contextualize the student responses and contributed to the institutional aspect of the case study comparisons. For private institutions, a further internet search focusing on news articles yielded more information on whether the institution had LGBTQ activities and/or supports.

Data Analysis

As noted throughout, feminist methods (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002) provided the orientation of analysis for this research. Further, intersectionality theory, used commonly by feminist and queer researchers, values the participants’ definitions of self and identity while simultaneously exploring systems of domination. This framework uses case studies and experience narratives as methods (Russell, 2012). Narrative analysis (Bamberg, 2012) was used to extract common themes of experience across participant cases. According to Bamberg (2012), narrative analysis is useful in exploring aspects of human experience. The aspect of experience central to this project is LGBTQ identity development on the HBCU campus. Through in-depth interview and the analysis of the transcripts across respondents, I built a composite sketch of the LGBTQ HBCU experience. Since feminist/queer research and intersectionality theory tie lived experience to political agency, the goal of this project was to link lived student experiences to formal research, in hopes of encouraging and informing a political process of ensuring the rights of LGBTQ students at HBCUs (Cass, 1979; Collins, 2000).
Otranscribe, a free online transcription tool, was used to transcribe and code interviews. The narrative analysis of the transcripts was much like the content analysis of other materials (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). A priori coding revolved around how positive or negative the HBCU experience has been from the students’ perspectives. The data for questions falling within the I-E-O (Astin, 1999) were coded by reading each transcript, grouping similarities among participants, as well as differences that may be useful in informing HBCU student affairs practitioners. For each question, the transcribed responses were summarized for meaning then coded for comparison with other responses. Hunter (2010) suggested the following method of analyzing and coding interview transcripts:

- summarizing each narrative in a few pages
- coding data into themes and sub-themes
- using participants’ own language to describe each theme
- highlight quotes
- pulling out one phrase to represent each participant
- using one phrase to summarize the main theme of the thesis
- using many different analysis techniques
- continuously interrogating the data (pp. 49-50)

Resulting themes were organized within the theoretical framework (Figure 1). After the initial themes were derived and interpreted, a member check with participants checked for agreement in interpretation (Foss & Foss, 1994). The open-ended, in-depth interview produced a narrative that was analyzed for themes across individuals who identify as homosexual. These commonalities brought to light a picture of common
marginality, where the dominant society constructs seem to dehumanize individuals outside of heteronormativity. According to Kasch and Abes (2007), interviews and surveys are useful tools in LGBTQ college student research. Interviews provide in-depth information on lived experiences, and surveys are useful for quickly finding themes among LGBTQ individuals across institutions. Queer theory borrows the narrative analysis research method from feminist theory (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Feminist theory aims to give voice to women, speaking back to power structures that relegate them to mediocrity and second-class citizenship (Kasch & Abes, 2007). Queer theory shares with feminism the resistance to patriarchy and the sexual dominance of men over women. It critically analyzes the meaning of identity, focusing on intersections of identities and resisting oppressive social constructions of sexual orientation and gender (Kasch & Abes, 2007). Just as women seek to empower their voices to gain influence and progress in obtaining equality, queer theory seeks to give voice to homosexual individuals who also seek to free themselves from rigid sexual constructs that result in constant and damaging emotional and physical encounters with a hostile majority.

The experience narrative, in this project a transcribed in-depth interview, is a qualitative research method used by feminists and queer researchers to explore the experiences of individuals belonging to marginalized groups. In this tradition, the transcribed experience narratives and the arising themes across participants were coded and summarized in a format useful in informing strategies to alleviate the damaging effects of homophobia.

Analysis of the institutional data gathered from the web analysis of the HBCUs and their documents will occur to provide another layer of cross-case analysis (Yin,
2014). The websites for each HBCU sampled were searched to confirm whether there is an active LGBTQ student organization. The data gathered was coded using a priori and emerging themes. The a priori codes for this study deal with how participants report their overall campus experience, simply a range from positive to negative. Emerging themes were determined by how many times a finding was echoed across the sampled students. When a result was found among three or more students, it was considered a main theme; if twice, a subtheme. If only one student notes an important issue, it was considered a unique theme of importance that still adds to the description of their experience and the HBCU context.

**Researcher Role**

In conducting qualitative research, the role of the researcher is to first reflect on personal motivations and biases as they relate to the population under study. There is no absolute objectivity. Feminist/queer researchers must detail their personal experiences, and how they affect the interpretation of qualitative data. According to Stake (2010), each researcher has an obligation to think about activism and recognize how it will be used for the good of community, welcoming difference in others. Järveluoma, Moisala, and Vilkko (2003) argued that the researcher has his/her own experiences of the gendered world and society and that these experiences influence how data are interpreted in qualitative research. The researcher has both a gender and sexual orientation. There is no innocent research; research and the politics of gender are intimately related (Campbell, 2004, p. 133). The endeavor of research adds to the construction of gender, so the researcher must be self-reflective, becoming conscious of his/her gender position.
in order to explain their rationale for methodology, and frame of qualitative data interpretation.

My role in this study was to give voice to LGBTQ HBCU students. In doing so, it was important to understand how my own positionality influence how I understand the data. My interests stem from my undergraduate years at an HBCU, beginning when my dorm brother, child of a pastor, committed a hate crime. At the time I noticed how the gender norms of the Black church can perpetuate violence against those who are LGBTQ. During my undergraduate years, my peers and I were etching our identities based on our growing knowledge of the world. Many of my female friends and I spent a lot of time not only discussing race, but gender relations between Black men and women. When I studied the works of Black women throughout history, I became frustrated when I observed how Black men, since slavery, held tightly on to male privilege, countering progress of the community. I saw Black women hold fast to men who did not really care for them. I chose to have only platonic friendships with men, while learning how things operate from their perspective. I became fluid because individual personalities and chemistry proved to be more important to me than gender. To me at that time it was about gravitation and positive interactions. Since the undergraduate years, I moved to becoming a lesbian due to gender relations not improving, and it felt very comfortable and under my control. My identity development evolved a lot when the history I was learning about had not progressed in the past 200 years. Regarding studying LGBTQ identity formation, I take the position that their voices can catalyze progress in Black gender relations. It is assumed that normalizing student voices, their issues and needs, helps change homophobic environmental structures at HBCUs. The limitations of my
role include: (a) only attending two HBCUs (out of nearly 100), and (b) existing at one intersection of gender, sexuality, religion, race, and class. Each LGBTQ HBCU student has a unique background, many foreign from my own. It is hoped that collecting data on the experiences of LGBTQ HBCU students will bring to voice the diversity of intersecting identities among African Americans.

In bridling my position, I took the stance of an older HBCU graduate, who graduated almost 15 years ago, talking to current students about their experiences with campus homophobia from the identity intersection of being Black, queer, and HBCU students. My motive was to serve as researcher-advocate, contributing to the activism of current LGBTQ students on campus, because I think they have the potential to alleviate HBCU homophobia, but need the help of research, allies, supporters, and a critical mass of HBCU leaders to institutionalize permanent LGBTQ supports. The HBCU trend highlights that when activist students graduate, queer student groups fade unsupported.

In bridling my position as researcher, I made sure every in-depth interview question was tied directly to literature, with a citation from the literature base. I then piloted the interview with a professor and graduate student. During the interviews, I refrained from judgment, and did not offer advice. I let the participants talk, and I talked about my own HBCU experience during the interview. I wanted to learn about what campus homophobia currently looks like based on the interviews with my participants, and to learn from the participants’ reactions to discrimination and how this affected their identity development. I wanted to capture any pain or frustrations, explore their wellbeing to understand how harmful the homophobia is to their progress as Black queer professionals who will go on to represent their institutions. In addition to exploring
homophobic climates and identity formation, I wanted to understand what queer HBCU activism and resistance look like currently.

I used bracketing after data collection. Early in data analysis I created a reflexivity journal. As soon as I gathered all of the transcripts, I pulled out major themes (experience reported by at least three participants) from each interview question and colored them dark blue. In red, I wrote my personal reflection on what the theme means to me. I did not use these reflections in the results or discussion, focusing only on direct quotes, but with an awareness of what I thought at the time of analysis.

**Limitations**

The long duration of the in-depth interview and the longer transcription and analysis process limited the sample and generalizability of the data. A total of nine students were recruited, coming from HBCUs with and without LGBTQ student groups. Only 20% of HBCUs have a LBBTQ group. This study sought to highlight this experience, though less generalizable than the LGBTQ experience at HBCUs without a student group. By focusing on the minority of HBCUs with LGBTQ groups, I expected that useable strategies for inclusivity would emerge that can be used across institutions. Comparing students across institution type yielded subjective data on homophobic campus environments and gives voice to this subpopulation/subculture.

Since participants came from various institutions in various states, the interviews were not conducted in person. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007), interviews that are not face-to-face make it difficult to establish a rapport with the student, and this limits the impact of cues such as gestures and eye contact. Since this study explores student experiences with homophobia in-depth, and intersectionality pertains to an
individual’s unique constellation of identity, this study is not generalizable to all LGBTQ HBCU student experiences.

**Delimitations**

This study was delimited by the criteria for respondents (current undergraduate, self-defined identity on LGBTQ spectrum, attending HBCU, representing an HBCU with or without a LGBTQ student group/resource center). There are 105 HBCUs in the US, and approximately 34 have LGBTQ student groups or LGBTQ resource centers (Appendix A). Both types/cases of institutions were represented in this study.

The interview questions were derived from the literature and not prior instruments because the theoretical framework was original, composed from the unique intersection of theories used to study the LGBTQ HBCU student population.

**Trustworthiness of Study**

This study sought to document the voices of LGBTQ HBCU students. Feminist researchers have uplifted the experience narrative from an individual’s struggles, to the broader analysis of collective marginalization. The qualitative experience narrative emerged from questions pertaining to the facets of the participants’ experiences. These facets were derived from commonalities found in research on LGBTQ college students, HBCUs, and LGBTQ communities of color. As a measure of validity, follow-ups (or member checks) were conducted with each student to assure agreement on the interpretation of their responses.

Schwandt et al. (2007) presented rigorous criteria for increasing the trustworthiness in qualitative research. They parallel four criteria (internal validity, external validity, replicability, objectivity) used in scientific inquiry using useful
alternatives for qualitative inquiry (truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality; Shenton, 2004). They tilt the conventional positivist frame, adapting it for the uses of qualitative research, linking the search for truth with contributing to a higher social good. Guba and Lincoln (1989) echoed feminist researchers in agreeing that multiple realities are socially constructive, and must be approached holistically, or as applied in the current research, regarding multiple intersecting dimensions of identity. Here, I avoided statements of ultimate truth and resist making generalizations. In studying LGBTQ HBCU students, though common themes were found, it is acknowledged that there are far more unique experiences among those not sampled.

To check for internal validity, my interpretations were reviewed by respondents in follow-up interactions. For external validity, I coded interviews to determine emerging themes common across the participants. To address replicability, all recruitment and all other project materials that do not compromise participant confidentiality were archived. To address objectivity, follow-ups with respondents were recorded and reviewed by a peer at William & Mary.

Strategies to increase trustworthiness of this study include: conducting two in-depth interviews (the first interview addressed Student Identity/Homophobia, the second interview addressed HBCU culture), using the same theory-derived questions; piloting interview questions with peers in the School of Education; maintaining files of each stage of dissertation process; making literature review available for interested respondents; and having participants serve as reviewers in interpretations of their responses.

Schwandt et al. (2007) also present a fitting form of trustworthiness called “catalytic authenticity” (p. 12), which is also known as feedback-action validity. This
calls for linking theory to action through research-informed strategy. It aims to educate by disseminating findings to relevant institutions and stakeholders on a larger scale. This process also seeks to evaluate the implementation post hoc to see if the marginalized were empowered or further impoverished (Scwandt et al., 2007).

**Summary**

Analyzing the experience narratives of LGBTQ HBCU students is important in documenting and advocating for inclusion at HBCUs. Using the experience narrative as data, this project gives voice to this student population. Themes arising from this data will provide valuable information useful in informing student affairs practice at HBCUs. These data are also for students, giving them a glimpse of the experiences of the sample enables them to connect their often private struggle to a broader population of LGBTQ HBCU students with the same struggles.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this research was to document and explore the experiences of LGBTQ HBCU students. The findings from this study can provide student affairs administrators and other institutional leaders information to build a more inclusive campus environment that is responsive to the needs of these students. This qualitative narrative study sought to provide a platform for participant voices to tell their story of what it means to be an LGBTQ student on an HBCU campus. Nine participants were asked how their various identities intersected, in particular being Black, queer of color and a student at an HBCU. Campus climate and culture influenced the level to which students felt included and supported on campus.

Chapter 3 described how feminist and queer methodologies are used to tie the voice of participants to power. Participants experienced a gauntlet of discrimination on their HBCU campuses in which the heterosexual majority exercised heteronormative power over the queer students. By collecting experiences and formalizing them in research, the voices and grievances of queer students provide a base for HBCU leaders to address where on campus students face problems and find supports. Renn (2010) suggested that narratives, qualitative accounts and the growing visibility of queer students and campus organizations serve as a foundation for change in policy and college programs. The following findings contribute to this base of narrative accounts.

Table 1 provides a profile for each of the participants. Demographic sheets were used to collect background information on each student regarding their
religion/spirituality, chosen pronouns, major, year, and involvement in student activities.

Participants had an opportunity to provide a pseudonym or were assigned a pseudonym. The regional location of the participant’s campus and whether it had an official LGBTQ student organization or resource center was noted to compare contexts regarding institutional support. The existence of a formalized group represented a level of institutional support.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym (Pronouns)</th>
<th>HBCU Location</th>
<th>Class Year</th>
<th>LGBTQ Center/ Formal Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asia* (she/her)</td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max** (she/they)</td>
<td>Southeast 1</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DD*** (they/them; non-binary)</td>
<td>Southeast 2</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallie* (she/her)</td>
<td>Southeast 3</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kandace** (she/her)</td>
<td>South 1</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann* (she/her)</td>
<td>South 2</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misha* (he/him)</td>
<td>South 3</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saian* (he/him)</td>
<td>South 4</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tewa* (they/them)</td>
<td>Southeast 4</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. HBCU = [historically Black college or university]; LGBTQ = [lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender and questioning].
*Participant selected the pseudonym used in the study.
^Participant provided pronoun.

Findings

Using Astin’s (1999) student involvement model (input-environment-outcome) proved useful in organizing the in-depth interview results. The three themes that emerged from this research included: Bringing yourself to college; Being Queer at an HBCU; and Clarifying identity and finding a voice. When starting out at college, some students had already come out, whereas some were just reaching this state. The past experiences of the students guided and grounded their initial campus experiences. Being
queer on campus resulted in feelings of oppression, yet the students found support in friendships, allies and in queer groups and resource centers where available. The final theme highlights how the students were finding their voice and clarifying their identity.

**Bringing Yourself to College**

Prior to coming to their HBCU campuses, participants described growing up in households in which race was highly salient. They also talked about experiences with racism and how they distance themselves from Whites. These two factors may have influenced their choice to come to a Black college. Regarding growing up queer, seven of the nine participants noticed their same sex attractions during childhood, and in their K-12 years. The other two came out around their sophomore year of college, approximately at the ages of 19 or 20. If they felt rejected when coming out to a friend, they feared disclosure, outing, and judgment. Acceptance from their friends, however, bolstered confidence and provided them a voice to come out in future situations.

The coming out process involves an individual coming out to self and others. Depending on the coming out process for the students, each started at a different location when entering college. The participants’ narratives highlight how they came out to themselves, family, friends, and a broader public like coworkers, social media and in the classroom. For example, they found it much easier to come out and be queer on campus than at home with their families. This outcome results in the students living in two worlds. With their family, many of the students found it more difficult to be their authentic selves. Whereas, when the students were on campus, they had more freedom to express their queerness, despite elements on campus that marginalized them.
Misha described her earliest attractions:

I really started realizing that, I liked the same sex, when I was like, in kindergarten, honestly. I didn’t know the feeling, but I knew that dudes made me…kinda disgusted. It’s like I never found them attractive. Like, I know several females were like “he’s so cute,” and I’m just like “yeah, I don’t care,” like that’s my friend, like, I don’t look at boys in a sexual manner. So I always knew that, I would never see myself with a guy.

Although Cass (1979) described first same sex attractions as times of “identity confusion” (p. 222), Misha exhibited no confusion. Instead, she saw this just as a natural choice. Other participants, however, experienced an internal dissonance around their attractions. Saian described his internal journey prior to college:

And then queer was second grade. I remember I had this crush on this boy, and then I would like lay in bed and I’ll be like, okay, I’m not like gay and then I’ll be like, no I’m gay. Yea, I’m gay, but I’m never going to marry the man. I used to always say that every time I went to bed because I was like, oh my God, that’s so crazy. Wow. Just thinking about it. Okay. Sorry. Yeah. I used to really sit there and just be like, I can be gay, but like, I’m never going to be like out. So yeah, it was second grade for me. And then sixth grade was when I was like, okay, because in second grade I was like, I’m going to marry a girl, but then in sixth grade I was like, okay, I just won’t marry anybody. I’m still going to be queer. And then 11th grade is when I, the summer before senior year, the end of 11th grade is when I came out and I was just like, nobody was shocked obviously.
In this quotation, Saian exhibited Cass’s (1979) stages one through three of queer identity: identity confusion, comparison, and tolerance. Saian first recognized same sex feelings in second grade, and then moved from a tentative commitment to his homosexual self to an increased commitment to this identity, followed by a gravitation toward homosexual culture.

The participants each related salient stories regarding the timing of understanding and accepting for themselves that they were queer. This identity awareness spurred on a search for like-minded individuals who also share the Black queer intersection. These types of connections helped the students deal better with the religious and cultural homophobic beliefs that do not support non-cisgender identities. Moving through this first stage propelled them toward their inner voice and served as the input factor for how they experienced their HBCU. As noted, seven of the nine came out to themselves before college, two during early college. Table 2 provides a summary of their coming out stories.
### Table 2

**Coming Out Stories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Location)</th>
<th>Age at First Same-sex Crush</th>
<th>Experience Description</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asia (Mid-Atlantic)</td>
<td>13/14</td>
<td>Crush on classmate/difficult</td>
<td>Family/friend accepting, gave confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max (Southeast 1)</td>
<td>childhood</td>
<td>Asked if I liked boys/girls</td>
<td>Guilty/confusion until exposure to other queer people, helps erase guilt/confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DD (Southeast 2)</td>
<td>19/20</td>
<td>Came out to mother/family okay with it/on social media with pronouns</td>
<td>Scared first but after telling family gained confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallie (Southeast 3)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Had girlfriend in kindergarten, joined GSA in high school</td>
<td>Family/friends non-homophobic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kandace (South 1)</td>
<td>9th grade</td>
<td>Family doesn’t know, I pass for straight</td>
<td>Friend took it weird and after that she didn’t tell anybody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann (South 2)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Questioning attracted to girl but already attracted to us/did research found pansexual pronoun fit</td>
<td>Support from friends and male family, backlash from homophobic women in family. Closeted at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misha (South 3)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Came out to friends/both positive and negative reaction</td>
<td>Kept it secret/avoid insults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saian (South 4)</td>
<td>2nd grade</td>
<td>Crush on boy, family/friends supportive</td>
<td>Becoming more prideful of queerness/strong friend group for support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tewa (Southeast 4)</td>
<td>Sophomore summer</td>
<td>Came out to mother/pronouns on social media</td>
<td>Family and friends accepting and glad I was happy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. GSA = [Gay-Straight Alliance]*

Family background heavily influences queer identity formation. Coming out to family was an important, yet also a frightening experience for respondents as most participants faced a homophobic or conservative family. If rejected by their family,
participants had to tone down their queerness at home. If accepted, they felt a load was lifted and they gained confidence in their identity.

Most participants told stories of growing up in Black households in which race was highly salient. They describe first dealing with Whites during their K-12 years, specifically in various school settings. By the time they reached their HBCU, they were in the process of distancing themselves from Whites, both in general and within the queer community. DD described this aspect of their experience:

A lot of times like White queer people are like crazy, like they’re just like, I don’t always want to associate myself with them and I make a distinction. Um, but like when it’s my community, like people who have the same identities that I do, like I’m very comfortable and proud.

DD made a distinction of alignment with Black identity over queer identity regarding the type of company they preferred.

Prior experiences of racism informed some of the experiences of the students. Six participants described experiences with racism by the time of the interview. As a result, participants viewed HBCUs as a safe space to explore Blackness. Asia described a result of trying to assimilate during her K-12 years:

[I] had to learn to love to be Black because in high school it was very suppressed. It was a very, where I come from is very rural… Um, it’s very Caucasian and so I stamped down my Blackness in an effort to fit in and so when I came to an HBCU I had to try and bring it back up. So to be a Black female I had to learn to love the inner outspoken brassy confident side of me again.
The students’ experience with racism was an important experience common across all respondents, and these experiences shaped how the students experienced their college years at an HBCU. They find comfort, confidence, and self-love in attending HBCUs.

All of the students had some exposure to the Black church and experience with the homophobia often found in these contexts. As they came into their queerness, they became frustrated with the religious rejection they experienced. As they progressed in their identity formation, they began to push back and become more critical of the church. Part of their journey to self-authorship was defining their own spirituality.

Respondents are crafting their identities from exposure to Black queer culture. Social media was a major factor in their identity formation. The internet is a space where they find queer peers, role models and artists. As they gain exposure, they learn about and choose pronouns. Artists like Alice Walker and RuPaul were an inspiration and models of Black queer culture. For example, participants described how they saw other queer people combat homophobia on Twitter and YouTube. They come into their own queer of color identity by finding the works and experiences of others. Participants acquired strategies to resist and crafted their identities from exposure to Black queers in history and media.

**Being Queer at an HBCU**

Astin’s (1993) environment dimension is used in this study to understand what aspects of the HBCU setting create problems for or support queer students. The research design here treats the campus environment as an ecosystem in which the student faces
discrimination, goes through internal development, then pushes back at the
discrimination.

Participant narratives provide a picture of the HBCU, and how this context
influenced the discrimination felt by the participants. They found it psychologically
tough to stand in the Black/queer intersection on campus. For example, participants
noted that in certain classes, both the professor and heterosexual students may have
problems with homosexuality, and homophobic speech may go unchecked. It is
important to explore the role of power in each structure. In the classroom example, the
queer student faces not only homophobia from other students, but the professors. Both
groups hold power over the queer student, who suffers psychologically in the face of this
compounded social rejection. Homophobia like this causes pain, frustration, fear of
judgment and self-isolation. When considering they face heteronormative power in
several other HBCU settings, queer students should be considered an at-risk population in
need of inclusion and safety. HBCU homophobia diminishes positive identity
development and stable wellbeing.

Students reported facing stifling administrations, which continue to maintain
heteronormative environments. They feel a need, which causes internal dissonance, to
split their identity, having to put aside their homosexuality for fear of judgment. They
have issues with becoming the quintessential HBCU man or woman. They face problems
with dress codes, being forced to adhere to the gender binary. Two students talked about
how queer candidates for homecoming courts were threatened or disqualified. Several
students noted that their institutions keep incidents under the rug, also exhibiting
palliative behavior before getting to the roots of the homophobia problem. This leaves
students feeling unsafe and unsupported. They feel their needs are sacrificed in the name of school reputation. The participants reported battling administrations to organize and maintain queer student groups. Asia described it as a fight for their rights. They want to normalize homosexuality and the right to love who they choose. They also have to battle homophobic peers, feeling disempowered when always hearing hateful speech and feeling powerless to fight it. This bombardment of speech and discrimination should be explored in-depth to deconstruct the damaging aspects of HBCU environments queer students’ experience.

Protective factors and support structures do exist, which shield students from the damages of homophobic environments. The major protective factor echoed across the transcripts was a group of close friends. Friends provide comfort, support, love, and confidence in the face of homophobia. It is also important to note that participants found supportive allies among faculty, staff, administrators, and peers. They facilitate positive identity development and foster a sense of belonging.

Queer student organizations foster interaction and belonging with others who share multiple identities. They value sameness, where they can go deeper into their experiences with others who can relate. They also bring important resources like sex education, health resources, positive role models, queer history, and cultural immersion opportunities. They provide a structure of support where queer students organize to educate their community and alleviate homophobia. This supports involvement and identity formation. For students attending the HBCU without an active queer group, one student created an alternative organization for all oppressed groups, and the others are
trying to revive the inactive organization while just trying to be visible for others who may be fearful.

Living at the Black, queer, and HBCU student intersection was tough for these students. HBCUs instill them with racial pride but punish their sexual orientation. They were asked how the development of their Black and queer identities intersect. Asia reflected that the intersection is hard to stand in and she had to choose between being Black and queer. Max talked about how Black and brown people are very affected by queer issues, that the experience is like being at the bottom of both barrels. DD, Hallie, and Max valued sameness, being around people who are both Black and queer, which makes a good argument for institutionalizing queer student organizations. Saian wanted others to understand that you can be Black and queer without taking away from any of your multiple identities. Tewa discussed a unique paradox of experience; his/their first male crush, during his/their sophomore summer, was a White man. He/they also distances himself from Whites and now only gravitates towards Black men. Hallie came into her intersection through exposure to queer Black women artists.

Student narratives showed homophobia pervading various aspects of their HBCU environments. They found their administrations stifling. Respondents indicated that they are tacitly encouraged to split their identities. For example, they are systematically rewarded for dressing in cisgendered clothing and having strictly heterosexual relationships on campus. Their Black identity was reinforced on campus, but not their intersecting Black and queer identities. Examples at the HBCU that made it tough being queer on campus included dress codes, homecoming courts, choosing reputation over responsiveness, and the battle between LGBTQ student organizers and their campus
administrators. The participants also noted how homophobia was woven into classroom discussions, campus security neglect, and in the behavior of their homophobic peers.

**Administrative actions.** Students discussed the relationship between queer students and campus administrators. In general, they found the culture of Black campuses conservative and stifling. Queer students experience internal tensions when pressured in many campus environmental structures (e.g., dress codes, chapel, classroom discussions, marginal status of queer organizations, support for homophobes when queer students are harassed, etc.) to adhere to a gender binary. When describing her HBCU, Asia commented:

It’s very stifling. Not from the students themselves, but from administration because they're still very, very traditionalist or have traditionalist ideas, but we're in the 21st century and a lot of the administration is in their late sixties, seventies, eighties.

Asia linked the traditionalist stance of administrators as a reason her HBCU held onto more conservative notions of sexuality. As an example, she further states that her administration responds to “Old timey” forms of protest: “The strategies we used are a little bit Old timey. We use mostly petitions and silent protests. Those are the only things that seemed to work and getting the administration's attention without threats of being expelled.”

Asia describes her older administrators as the source of the stifling aspects on her HBCU campus. Kandace reported this stifling aspect on her campus, too, “My HBCU is really conservative, both [the] administration and students who themselves expect this to be a completely heterosexual, gender conforming environment.” This description
highlights how queer students experience a heteronormative culture on the HBCU campus, where being homosexual is seen as negative, morally deviant and abnormal. For example, Tewa stated, “the school seems to kind of brush it under…. So if they handle it, then they’ll handle it quietly or try to handle it quietly.” Max, who attends another HBCU, describes similar institutional behavior. In the transcript, she notes that after an incident, in which a queer student was attacked, the campus lost their LGBTQ student group, saying “in general [queer student discrimination] just kind of goes under the radar and it’s accepted as just what people do and what people say.” At her institution the culture brushes off homophobia because the pervading message is that it is acceptable. Max also notes that administration fails to address casual homophobia and homophobic speech. Participants provide a picture of how administrations easily shut down queer groups, even if queer students did nothing wrong. Rather than address the discrimination against LGBTQ students on campus, the HBCU administrations sought to minimize their response and students felt this ignored their issues.

Administrators did not seem to know how to handle discrimination of queer students, and as a result these students feel unsafe and disempowered. Saian, the only freshman, reported twice that he felt that he could not do anything about the homophobia on his campus. Although six students described campus discrimination as subtle, they felt that it was both troubling and harmful. Participants viewed this lack of administrative action as toxic and a major obstacle to inclusion. Ann provided a suggestion to help alleviate the stifling aspects of the queer student-administration relationship on campus. She thought administrators should:
Have students who are members of the community review things before making decisions and to make sure that we really have the best of intentions. The priority should not be the presentation of the school or reputation; priority should be students and our experience and our education.

Respondents felt they could offer advice to their campus leadership to make positive change for themselves and queer students who will come after them. Across campuses and contexts, homophobic discrimination took similar forms (classroom discussions, socializing with peers, public safety neglect, battles between organizers and administration, etc.). Five participants described their campuses as tolerant, but this was not the same thing as acceptance. Ann exemplifies this dynamic:

I would say that [my college] is very tolerant. The issue is now acceptance because on paper they're very, very willing to say that they tolerate the LGBTQ community. It's just been more of the actual reality of the things they're allowing to take place.

Eight of the students expressed that their campuses were tolerant, yet they noted important limitations that resulted in them feeling marginalized. Participants want to alleviate the campus homophobic environments and access equality by building a nurturing and respectful campus environment based on equal treatment and visibility of LGBTQ students as part of the campus community. They demand acceptance and a place to be openly who they are.

Overall, five students reported negative interactions with administrations, three students had neutral experiences, and one student—Tewa—did not directly address whether their relationship with administration was positive or negative. Tewa did note...
that a dorm administrator wanted to take away a purple robe he wears to express his uniqueness and identity and added this was a reason he keeps to himself. The negative interactions with administrations, though not experienced by all participants, is an important environmental structure to address to begin bridging student grievances with lasting and effective social and institutional change.

**Splitting identities.** The participants discussed how they felt the campus context tries to mold students into quintessential men and women, but queer students are put into a difficult situation as a result because they do not fit the mold of the quintessential ideal based on heterosexual norms. Based on the student interviews, a major effect and risk factor of homophobia in the HBCU context is that it forces the queer student to compartmentalize, placing parts of themselves aside in order to survive and to reduce the damages of the pervading intra-racial homophobia. Max described this as “it's always kind of a battle between being queer and being Black, and sometimes you have to choose one over the other. And that's very frustrating for me.” The first two interview questions, which addressed intersectionality of their lived experiences, asked how students identify to others and how they make sense of being Black, gendered and queer. In these responses they described how, on campus, they have to put their sexual orientation on the back burner to avoid judgment. All nine participants talked about having to choose between Black and queer.

Regarding queerness they reported fear in coming out for fear of putting people off, being judged and having to explain their lifestyle more than heterosexuals in the same context. Since they are a minority, according to Ann, less of the population can relate to her experience. This describes an ever-present tension that queer students face
that is not experienced by the majority. This battle leaves queer students at more risk of diminished wellbeing. Frustration from dealing with homophobia is an important aspect of the LGBTQ HBCU student experience as the participants feel like they must choose between their Black identity and their queer identity—and the Black identity is the one valued at the HBCU.

DD describes living in her intersection of identities as psychologically tough, “I was hearing homophobic things all the time and not saying anything like that was hard in itself.” Asia was “tired of feeling helpless in the face of other people’s homophobia.” Tewa reported on social media that he was “constantly tired.” Max finds her battle between being queer and Black as “very frustrating.” This frustration is an indication of psychological hardship, a factor that diminishes mental wellbeing. Bringing these stories to the fore allows for understanding and provides a point of focus to help students who struggle internally in the face of homophobia on HBCU campuses.

For Asia, “that [split identity] is difficult because a lot of times it feels like you have to choose between being Black in my case, being feminine presenting, and being queer, like that intersection is very hard to stand in.” The adjective “hard” speaks to the effect of day-to-day homophobia queer students face on campus. Two other environmental HBCU structures that split the Black and queer identity of students are dress codes and homecoming King/Queen contests.

**Dress codes.** An aspect of HBCU life that connects students with prior generations is the dress code on campus. In molding students, HBCUs encourage business dress at times, such as with convocation, formal occasions, and job fairs, to
acclimate them to the professional world. This causes a further split with their internal identity as they cannot dress as queer. Asia describes the climate regarding dress:

[My HBCU shows] support when we go out and dress up in day-to-day business casual or business professional. A [tradition of becoming] the [quintessential campus] man or...woman. [Administration/student affairs/event coordinators] praise when you're more feminine or more masculine [daily or at events]...Or just [dressing] overtly feminine or masculine.

In my personal experience attending HBCUs, undergraduates who do not align with dress codes, for example missing a belt or wearing the wrong color shoes, meant you were sometimes sent back to your dorm to change. My undergraduate institution required we “dress for success” or others would not take us seriously. This requirement reinforces heteronormativity, because women at my college had to wear skirts and dresses to events like convocation and graduation. The lack of tolerance for fluid gender expression on the HBCU campus leaves students in a position where they have to hide their queerness for fear of insult or other discrimination. Misha expressed her discomfort as follows, “hiding my true identity and dressing in a way that I was not comfortable in. So, I definitely separated my true self so that I would be more approachable on campus.” This student’s expression overall in her interview was fearful. Misha felt isolated and disrespected on campus. The norms of dressing on campus based on gender norms causes students to look in the mirror and see that their dress goes against who they are inside. Their true identity is hidden by a pervasive HBCU heterosexual-normed worldview.
**Homecoming courts and reputation.** Another important aspect of college life, homecoming king and queen, was noted by two students attending different campuses. Hallie described a friend’s experience:

I have a friend who, she was gonna run for King of [campus], yeah. And like before she was even able to like, run, like [administrators] like, hey, we heard that you were promoting before, like before… I guess like when you were supposed to start promoting people that you're interested in it. So like they just, they just disqualified her like right off the bat.

This discrimination on the part of administrators for non-cisgender candidates for homecoming sends a clear message about how they feel about their queer students.

Gender norms were enforced for nomination and selection for the homecoming king or queen.

Similarly, another student attending a different HBCU related another experience. Asia noted:

I have heard of instances such as where um like Mr. [campus] person. He was gay and they told him he could not have a relationship for his term or he would immediately have to give up his sash. I've heard about things like that. It's quiet discrimination like that. It's not overt.

Participants told stories about the experiences of other queer student experiences with campus homophobia. Though respondents did not report physical attacks, they knew of other queer students who were attacked. This background provides more important data on campus climates and culture beyond the sample, evidence that other queer students are having a harder time with homophobia beyond those who chose to be
interviewed. This quiet discrimination came in the form of pulling someone to the side and ordering them to not to practice same sex attraction or involvement while representing the college. The students’ comments provide a peek into institutional HBCU resistance against homosexual lifestyles, where participants reported how their administrations actively threaten students for being queer. This type of coercive behavior is important in understanding the underpinnings of institutional discrimination. Ann described another administrative experience:

So, there's still overall in terms of administration, there's a lot of ambiguity which students are not comfortable with and it seems to me that a lot of the changes that [administrators] are making are more to protect the school’s reputation as opposed to protecting the students.

Regarding reputation, four students described their administrations as brushing homophobic incidents “under the rug” or “under the radar.” This type of experience left them feeling vulnerable and thinking that their campus home currently pays lip service to inclusion measures. This inauthenticity leaves students feeling unsafe and uncared for.

Despite how some HBCUs are attempting to evolve their attitudes for queer students, participants felt the institutions were at a stage in which there remains a rift between what they say and do. Misha emphatically stated:

I feel like it starts with administration. And the president of the campus. Um, instead of trying to overlook it and say “oh, they’re there,” and we, and just sending like one quote a day about “oh we care about anybody “inclusiveness matters on our grounds.” Do more, instead of that. Make sure that everybody is safe. Make sure that people are feeling included instead of just saying that. I feel
like [campus] really just throws out words instead of trying to change their actions. And I would like to see more things happen on the campus. Instead of just sending us an email here and there about how you care and all that other stuff. Don’t nobody want to hear that. We want to see things happen on our campus.

Misha argued actions speak louder than words in terms of how queer students feel on the HBCU campus.

Ann, Misha, Tewa and Max expressed how they felt campus administrators cared more about the reputation of the college versus the well-being and safety of LGBTQ students. The participants did not feel safe on their campuses. Ann, Max and Misha specifically mentioned feeling unsafe. They wanted to be prioritized above the reputation of the school. Saian did note that his environment was rather inclusive in that it publicly displayed signs that the school is against transphobia. Overall his campus was the most inclusive across participant transcripts. Despite campus efforts directed toward inclusion, the remaining participants did not feel included. Some of the HBCU campuses that the participants attend exhibited palliative behavior. For example, Ann’s institution took measures to address homophobia, but missed the mark; resulting in queer students still feeling unsafe:

The administration as opposed to trying to immediately address the issue and make people feel safer on campus, whether that's through campus security or other means, They started doing things that made the campus more quote unquote accepting for example, like putting colorful potted plants outside. So like signifying the rainbow, which is kind of just ignoring the actual issue and trying to make the situation better.
HBCU leadership are not totally at fault; many are beginning to address homophobia but need to look deeper into what queer students need to feel safe and that they belong in the community.

**Battle with LGBTQ student organizations.** Each participant was engaged on campus, both in queer and non-queer student organizations. Asia defined the struggle on her campus as a “fight for our rights.” Ann described queer student organizing at her institution as a fight against administration. She provides a picture of what queer student organizing looks like on her campus:

So I would say that [older generations of students] gave us great examples of what did and did not work in terms of making change. For example, when we were planning the protest and listing our demands for [our queer student organization], some of the older members of the [campus] community were able to give us an example of what they were fighting for while they were students, and what the administration did and did not respond to. And we're able to use that as a roadmap in a sense. and we're also able to change things in order to fit our generation and how younger people would respond to things. So it kind of gave us a blueprint which we were then able to shift and change.

Descriptions of queer student battles at different campuses highlights how homophobia takes the same form across HBCUs and contexts. Even though Asia and Ann attend schools with official LGBTQ organizations, they describe struggles with homophobia and battles with administration.

Participants on the campus without an official queer student organization expressed interest in reviving their campus group. Tewa and Hallie attend the same
HBCU, which did not have a dedicated LGBTQ student group. They battled for visibility. Tewa exemplifies how the battle between queer student organizing and campus administration can be difficult for the individual queer student, who may feel overwhelmed fighting the HBCU power structure:

I try to, even though [racism and homophobia] irks me and I want to fight it, I can't or I'm not sure how to fight it correctly and how to do it in a place that is overwhelming with it, other than just not feeding into it and keeping myself queer and trying to bring about a group that shows their visibility more and start making noise for other people like that on this campus.

In the absence of a formal queer group, Tewa and Hallie were thinking about how to fight for queer recognition with strength and are currently using their individual expression of queerness, performativity, as a beacon for other students around campus. Hallie, who attends the same institution, echoes this desire to remain visible: “What [campus] can do is like, just be more visible make queer people more visible. Queer people in history more visible. Yeah. Honestly, increased visibility, increased access to knowledge of people.”

Tewa and Hallie highlighted how they were advocating on their campus for LGBTQ visibility with the intent to make lives better for other queer or closeted students. This idea was expressed across schools and contexts. Regarding organizing students, participants want ease of posting flyers, sit-downs with campus leadership, and easier modes of partnering with other student organizations for events.

Misha represents another example or context among participants. She described her battle to get the student group re-started on her campus:
Being that I started my own organization, we really faced the challenge with administration, because they acted like, they didn’t really care about us, and there was really no need for us at first. ‘Til they realized how many people were still trying to find us. Even then, they didn’t really help us push our ideas and things like that… Like, we weren’t allowed to post flyers. And, we had to get approval from everybody, while other organizations, they could just throw a flyer up and call it a day. But, for us, we had a harder time with pushing our name and things like that.

Misha recently reactivated the group and is now working for visibility. Students on the campus without an officially recognized student group reported interest in reviving their past group or starting a new group.

Hallie described how she used to be active in their group, but now that it is gone, she exists in a state of “just being queer like existing here and like thriving. So, if other people see me thriving then like ‘oh,’ and also talking about queer issues just openly.” Without a visible group, three of the four students interviewed and attending this school sought to just be visibly queer themselves as a strategy to help those who might be closeted on campus. Tewa and Hallie attended the same institution without an official group. They noted that being visible and vocal for others who are questioning or queer is an important strategy for making the campus environment less homophobic. For Tewa:

As far as combating homophobia, I try to present myself more flamboyantly…I have had to be more visible. I was very vocal about things that I do and I try to make myself known around campus…And that gives people an idea that yeah, there's different ways of looking at different types of people I guess.
Their queer student organization was last active in the spring of 2018 and they wanted to try to bring it back. Max, not waiting for things to change, founded a social change group in which members of marginalized communities present their points of view and issues. She wants to foster a dialogue to educate others and remove ignorance.

On campuses with organized groups, four of the five students sampled (Asia, Saian, Ann, and Kandace) felt like they had a safe haven and resources. For example, Asia described the importance of her campus LGBTQ group:

It's just made me feel more comfortable. Like I know I have a safe place to come back to where I always had a safe space to fall, even if I have to fall flat on my face, I always had that place where I'm not going to be judged or it hurts and that's very reassuring for me. And it makes me more, it makes me more adventurous and more prone to do things such as apply for internships, scholarships, or different, just different things.

Here, the queer student group provides comfort and confidence to students that enable them to pursue other life goals. Even though Saian’s campus group provides resources, he would like to take it further and have equal representation with other campus groups:

I would just say to have meetings with our group, the same amount of time as meetings with any other organizations because they definitely do call up other people and like go to their office and talk about stuff. We haven't gotten that yet for [our campus group].
Overall, across contexts with LGBTQ groups, the students wanted their organizations to be more visible. They actively seek more attention from their administrations in order to benefit students who may be closeted or socially disconnected.

**Classroom.** Students cited problems with homophobic class discussions and professors. The participants often felt their classes were heteronormative spaces. Max provides an egregious example of faculty homophobia in the classroom:

So I had a professor who, I don't know, just factually inappropriate, generally, but it was that where you couldn't necessarily report on it because it didn't come off as overtly “I'm trying to come for you,” but me expressing my sexual identity, just made it… he made it a whole spectacle in front of the class and that was frustrating for me. Um, [he’d] say something about how like “a good woman needs to do this” or “find a husband” or whatever, and I was not interested in that. And he said, uh, like I'll never find a husband or I'm not going to be appealing to any man and I let him know that that's not really my priority, my main focus, I’m probably primarily interested in women and he just made it like, “Oh! over here.” He made it such a big deal that I was different that I was queer, the point that “watch out for her” and was trying to like give me, give out my full name so everybody will know who I was. And it was just a lot of times people try to make a spectacle of queer.

Max felt powerless to report the faculty member even though he made her a spectacle in front of the class and identified her by name to others because she was queer. This example highlights how a professor, the authority figure in the room, can encourage the class to “watch out for her,” meaning take note of her sexuality, which is personal to
her. It demonstrates a meme transfer of homophobia from faculty to the student body. This form of outing in the class is how faculty members reinforce homophobia among students creating a toxic, less nurturing environment for them. Professors have the power to ensure safe discussion, but the participants often feared class discussions.

As far as strategies of inclusion, participants said they would like safe space training for faculty. Ann described why this type of training could help change the class dynamic: “The professors don't seem to be able to handle that discussion in a way that's safe for all students. So, um, a lot of the time there's a lot of really problematic things said without it being handled.” This experience leaves students feeling unsafe. They face homophobia from both faculty and peers, whom they must see often during a semester. The classroom, however, holds the potential for LGBTQ student inclusion. Yet, if professors do not ensure non-homophobic class discussions, classmates may verbally hurt queer students without consequence. The emotional toll of this type of situation needs exploration in order to better support LGBTQ students.

Participants also noted grievances regarding homophobic classroom discussion on the part of other students. This type of scenario left DD feeling powerless:

People will say inappropriate things and most of the time I don't feel like I have any power to say anything or like make a difference. So I just deal with it.

People saying homophobic things in class and like professors not checking them.

DD felt silenced and powerless to make a difference in the classroom setting. This example highlights how students suffer under a crushing silence imposed by their professors. This exemplifies a marginalized, at-risk existence in the face of pervasive homophobia.
**Homophobic peers.** Participants also described homophobia on the part of their peers. They cited that students around them will use homophobic speech. DD mentioned speech among queer students that exemplifies the irony of queer students showing transphobia:

Like my classmates Like we have a, like a club on campus, like an LGBT club and they are transphobic, like wild, like they use slurs and like you try to explain things to them and they're just like, well, like we’re gay, I’m like “what?”

Transphobia was also mentioned among other participants. They indicated that often homophobic speech is more violent with transgender individuals both on campus and in the Black community. For example, Kandace offered, “people are still very ignorant and especially when it comes, even though it doesn't directly affect me when it comes to transgender issues, I think people are just really ignorant and not really considering people other than themselves.” Though she is not transgender, she acknowledges that HBCU homophobia is more violent relative to transgender individuals.

Tewa also described their campus climate, reporting “there's definitely a fair amount of students that are supportive, but there's also, like I said, a lot of transphobia. uh, just around the school and sororities and fraternities and things like this.” This type of campus climate sets the tone that transgender HBCU students require more heightened safety measures than other students on the queer spectrum. Their visibility places them at the forefront of campus discrimination. Max noted this trend regarding the use of hurtful language:
I think people definitely aren't ashamed of the casual conversation that can be very offensive or harmful besides the [physical attack]. It's not like it's, it's definitely not hate crimes every day or anything, but it's very, very violent and aggressive speech about trans people about gay men, feminine gay men. So it's more subtle.

Also, regarding peers, students reported being singled out at parties and as a result, they go to fewer for fear of insult or danger. Misha experienced severe vulnerability:

So it’s like every time that I go out or choose to pick one day out of the month to experience an event that’s at night I always keep some type of protection on me. I don’t care what it is because…you’ll never know what people are thinking, and what they might do, so I always keep something on me.

The Black queer participants related a level of fear they live with on campus. They often felt ostracized. Max exemplifies this marginalization by peers:

I had been dressed more masculine, so I guess I read more queer and somebody was trying not to let me into a party because, like I wasn't going to dance with dudes and that was irritating, it because one, I felt like, am I just here for decoration because I wasn't interested, they perceived that if I wasn't interested in men that I couldn't get in, I couldn't be a part of that. I couldn't enjoy the party, like everybody was supposed to.

She was excluded because she wasn’t there for males. This example also hints at a misogynist social environment.
Safety. Participants described their grievances with campus security and commented on how they felt unsafe on campus. Participants felt that administrators paid students lip service and were unresponsive regarding safety and security concerns of LGBTQ students on campus.

Safety is a major aspect of the queer HBCU experiences. Participants did not report personal attacks but spoke about the experiences others had. This climate in which LGBTQ students feel unsafe indicates a need for responsiveness by administrators. Students specifically mention campus security neglect. Misha spoke about her experience with security:

But, the security on campus really doesn’t care, because they say they don’t get paid enough. So, it’s just like, we’re having to fix our own problems while we’re still paying thousands and thousands to go to an institution that does not care for safety.

Students felt a sense of blatant discrimination against queer HBCU students. Max remarked on a homophobic incident that made them feel unsafe.

There was a, a pride night and unfortunately someone took that opportunity to threaten and [physically attack] one of the members of the organization and, for safety [the pride event] got shut down because there was much too much sympathy and support with the person that attacked.

This example highlights how LGBTQ HBCU students can be victimized, and in this example, how students felt the campus community supported the attacker.

The participants commented that they felt the violence against them was socially sanctioned on these campuses. Safety is not seen as a given or a student right due to a
pervasive climate of homophobia across HBCU contexts. Ann describes another instance of campus security neglect:

    We as LGBTQ students still don't feel like we're being heard because, for example, they said that they added another police car, but then we were informed that that police car did not actually have a security officer in it, so people still did not feel more safe because it was kind of a fake idea of safety. I guess [campus security] needs to be more receptive to the things that we have to say and our concerns.

    These examples highlight perceived unresponsiveness on the part of campus safety to the concerns raised by LGBTQ students on campus.

    Max recounted another example in which students were appalled with one security officer’s views on rape.

    Lot of very open homophobia. It's frustrating. A lack of resources…. Um, the first time I got on the campus, during orientation this police officer and he told us that men couldn't get raped, and I just knew that that would isolate so many queer people that had been in that space. So many gay or bisexual just and men loving men that were in that space that were not going to feel validated or feel that they had anywhere to go to. On the first day, I know that isolated a lot of people and I went back and forth with the officer about it, but he really believed that it was impossible for a man to get raped. So there's not that support in that. The heteronormativity in that space was so strong that he didn’t process that everybody wasn't in the same situation at he perceived us to be.
At the core of many of the issues with campus safety was a lack of understanding of LGBTQ identities, what made these students feel unsafe on campus. The participants did not feel their concerns were heard. Here, participants are speaking out to the power structures that control their institutional and social environments. Safety is a basic human need denied queer students due to their sexual orientation and this makes them vulnerable to a gauntlet of homophobic treatment.

**Clarifying Identity and Finding a Voice**

Along the process of identity development, sparked by painful experiences, participants noted becoming stronger in their internal voice to cope and resist, crafting a more stable self-narrative and identity. They commented how education helps them cope and resist, and how these experiences with homophobia make them more compassionate. At the time of the interviews, they were in a process of questioning, deconstructing the homophobia around them and crafting a voice to counter, often on their own, a hegemonic culture of heteronormativity.

The participants’ internal developmental journeys focused on intersectional identity formation as queer HBCU students. Baxter-Magolda’s (2009) self-authorship model is useful to contextualize how participants shed old ideologies from childhood and begin to choose for themselves what they believe. Regarding campus homophobia, they have problems from being forced to conform to the prescribed gender binary.

A big part of shedding childhood views was their reaction to the homophobia of the Black church. HBCU gender roles align with the Black church, which stigmatizes, damages, and frustrates participants while they are developing their multifaceted identities. It hinders positive self-growth. In their life experiences they face an
incredibly large power structure consisting of the majority of the Black community, both in the Black church and on Black college campuses.

Regarding the psychological effects of homophobia, students exhibited damages to mental wellbeing but also acquired coping strategies. In their internal struggle they are figuring out their identity, feeling both upset and frustrated with discrimination. Psychologically, participants noted a range of complex ways to deal with this pervasive hostility. Below, in the journey section, student quotes reveal that being Black and queer on HBCU campuses is hard and psychologically tough. At first, the participants noted feeling silenced and disempowered in the face of an overarching climate of homophobia. Having to adjust their emotions in the face of the HBCU context was a difficult process and influenced identity formation.

Education found on Black campuses, particularly Black queer history, helps strengthen their self-narratives and voices. Education helps them acquire coping strategies as they move from reliance on external rules to trusting internally crafted values. Despite being in less supportive campus climates, HBCUs provide Black and Black queer educational and cultural immersion opportunities. Students noted, however, that they had to actively search for queer resources. Knowledge of Black queer history comforts them and fuels confidence in being who they are. Seeing examples of healthy Black queer people provided respondents with fodder to craft a positive and stable sense of self. They learn how to cope and resist from these examples. They valued confidence and voice because of their importance in countering homophobic debaters and ideology. They have an awareness that they will have to decide often whether to come out to others in future situations throughout life and are using their educational opportunity to acquire
an arsenal of facts and perspectives in the face of an overarching and hegemonic homophobia. In the HBCU context, educating others was one of the key strategies that participants used to push back on the gauntlet intra-racial homophobia. They want to use conversation and dialogue to make the climate more accepting. Their intersection of being Black, queer and HBCU students gives them a unique set of lenses to view Black experience.

Each participant wanted to make HBCU life better for future generations of students. Intra-racial homophobia on campus caused internal dissonance and pain. Out of this struggle, across campuses and contexts, students become liberal and altruistic. They understood how it feels to be oppressed and they became more caring for others. They became understanding and less judgmental. This is an important finding in that it leads members of the Black community that oppress them to a point of caring for all oppressed peoples. It aligns with Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) sixth and seventh vectors, developing a purpose and operating out of a sense of social responsibility. As a concept, it is important to understand how this common and overarching moral grounding pervades the queer subculture across HBCUs and within the Black community.

Students began to internally shed old ideologies and construct new ones based on being on an HBCU campus and where they were developmentally. For example, they mentioned the damage of being stigmatized within their religion. Seven grew up Christian, one Nation of Islam, and one noted being mainly spiritual. Four discussed being critical of the church. Four students noted that they are on a more personalized spiritual journey beyond religion, exhibiting a growing reliance on their inner voice. Another key internal process included coping psychologically with the effects of intra-
racial homophobia. As far as coping mechanisms described, the participants mentioned they talked, cried, attended therapy, removed their emotions from the situation, repressed, self-isolated, spoke up in homophobic situations, talked with friends, and thought about how not to have another outburst in reaction to homophobia. These elements, when analyzed together, provide a glimpse of the internal identity formation process. Students felt pushed down by religion and terrorized by homophobic beliefs espoused in the Black church.

All nine students mentioned frustration with Christianity, either in their home churches or on campus. This oppression resulted in an internal struggle. The participants revealed a move from struggling inside and feeling wrong about their sexuality to questioning this church-informed ideology. They describe how they are in the midst of crafting their own perceptions of homosexuality and becoming spiritual as opposed to religious. They became more critical of and distanced from church.

Stage four highlights how students find the ability to cope with homophobia by taking advantage of available HBCU academic resources, ultimately building an arsenal of knowledge that helps them both understand their intersecting identities and resist homophobia. In discovering more about Black queer history, they found self-love and the words to ward off homophobic confrontation. Knowing that there were queer Black people throughout history consoles and empowers them. They want to be visible and contribute to Black history themselves.

Participants experienced psychological distress, discrimination, and isolation while attending HBCUs. Bolstered by education they found in these settings however, they move from being hurt by what they have encountered to becoming more vocal and
activist-oriented. Their agency resulted in them pushing back on institutional and societal heteronormativity, which symbolizes the re-hardening of what was softened by homophobia. Intersectional identity formation for participants echoed this experience.

**Internal developmental journey.** Students gave examples of painful incidents in their lives that sparked an internal journey of finding themselves. There were different times when the participants became frustrated with Christianity and Black church-based homophobia. They made individual decisions, deciding to have a personal walk with Christ or to move toward crafting their own form of spirituality. Their journey was sparked as a result of feeling rejected by Christianity, which led to a more personal spiritual journey or nuanced relationship with their faith. Having a queer identity led them to internally questioning, deconstructing, and crafting a countering voice in response to facing homophobic structures.

Students described shedding childhood ideologies, exemplified by a distancing from homophobic home churches in a move toward personalized Christianity and/or spirituality. As part of their internal identity formation process, this stage addressed the damages of homophobia to their mental wellbeing and identified a range of coping strategies.

Kandace’s journey aligned with Baxter-Magolda’s (2009) self-authorship model. Kandace described a shedding of old ideologies in order to construct a new way of perceiving the world. She no longer used her childhood viewpoints and went from slight guilt about queerness to feeling that others shouldn’t force students to conform to gender or anything else. Kandace reflected:
Okay. Well honestly, like the interest is, I don't think I hold any of the, like the ideologies, the viewpoints that I was raised and I don't think I use any of them to determine how I perceive the world. I think, I really, maybe when I was younger. Yeah, especially when I first discovered my queer identity that I was kinda like, okay, well maybe this is not what I should do. Things like that. This is not what I've been raised to do. But as I've gotten older, I think I've just developed my own perception and so like when I say, I describe myself as a Black queer…that's always the lens that I'm looking through, you know, I don't think religion really affects, affects me so much. I don't think, you know, being, being at [this campus], it does, but it doesn't. I think just overall is that I feel as though the way I look at everything as though, nothing should be, you shouldn't have to conform to anything. Nothing.... So I don't think there should be any type of standards as far as gender, sexuality, anything like that. So I guess it just, it makes me a very liberal person because I'm very open to everything.

At first, Kandace operated by taking cues from what was externally valued, and over time, through the internal journey of coming to grips with her queerness, she identified as more liberal, speaking out against standards that maintain conformity. By acknowledging her queerness, Kandace began to develop her own perceptions. As she became more liberal, she engaged in the process of deconstructing heteronormativity and a gender binary. Kandace was developing a voice to liberate others from stifling social standards.
**Religion and spirituality.** Gender roles in HBCU contexts align with the norms of the Black church. Participants mentioned the damage of being stigmatized within their religion. Max described her experience at her home church:

I remember being deeply upset because I had gone to church with my parents and honestly I don't like church that much anyway. I just, because it's long and I would like to be... I like being at home and I don't like the part where you have to shake hands with everybody. It’s just like minor stuff, like petty stuff. But the pastor said, if you want to be cured of your homosexuality, I know you’re home. You want to be curious with your homosexuality. Just talking about how God said something like something about like gay people being sinners and I was just so upset. Um, I just, I was so upset I couldn't even fit in because they were just going on so long about everything that was wrong with gay people and I just, it is deeply frustrating that to see that's something that you can do and say and get that kind of support. Um, I guess [parents] didn’t make me go to church with them again, but they also didn't stop going to that church. So I mean, I don't know, it’s things like that can really affect the, um, feeling of community.

The frustration Max feels with the church was echoed by other participants. This frustration highlights an internal dissonance between the tenets of the religion they were raised in and their developing queer identity. Max felt psychological distress due to the homophobic words of her pastor, who is seen as a leader in the Black community.

Saian was also disillusioned with his home church, but was able to find a positive church experience on campus:
I wouldn't say religion did, but my preacher definitely did because he would always preach about not, like not having, not being homosexual. Not [to start with], he would just, he would throw that in there after like adultery and stuff. So I think that was the last time I went to church at home…But, no convocation here… before mostly every service or like, uh, we're gonna make this non-gender conforming. Uh, no, not heteronormative. And that's helped a lot. Definitely because I can, even my religion class, he does the same thing. He does the exact same thing. So yeah, that's helped a lot more than back at home with my Baptist 4,000-person church.

Saian was able to experience an academic and religious space in which queer students were acknowledged and valued. This example show how some parts of the HBCU campus life are successfully including queer students.

Some participants distanced themselves from Christianity, moving toward a more spiritual path sparked by pondering their queer identity. Misha described her personal spiritual journey:

If you have your own personal walk, and your own, like, path with Christ or whoever you believe in, then you know at the end of the day they’re going to have your back. And it’s just felt like me finally being confident enough to be an individual that’s gay and proud to stand on it

Misha has developed a personal faith, derived from Christianity that helps her in her daily struggles. She has learned to become proud with being gay and feels loved by whom she believes in.
Likewise, Tewa, who was raised Christian, now that he is practicing yoga, is learning about other spiritual belief systems:

I was raised Christian, started having problems with that faith in high school and now that I'm here in college and I've started doing yoga…. I have allowed myself to slip slightly back into Christianity to pick up on some of the things that it says there and recognize that the religion does have parts that are true and aren't, you know, messed with by the people trying to make these words. But I still keep it at a distance.

Tewa is also beginning to become the self-author of his life, piecing together scraps of different religions to guide his way through life.

Asia recounted the damage she felt listening to the beliefs about Christianity, a journey of being terrorized by homophobia in youth. She too switched from following Christianity to listening to herself, and coming out of the closet. Luckily, she told a friend who accepted her, saving her from the accepted pathway the Black church extolled, which was to deny being homosexual. Before coming out, Asia recounted she was in a state of terror:

Yeah, [my family] instilled a lot of terror. It wasn’t fear. It was just blind terror in me that nobody was going to accept me the way that was and that I needed to, um, literally pray the gay away and when I couldn't do that, I just had to tell someone. [My friend] was like, okay, sure you're fine. And that was, honestly, the best thing she could have done for me.

The importance of friends and allies was critical for the participants. Asia was able to move past the closet with the simple accepting words of a friend. She moved
from the darkness of feeling terror to being confident in herself and her queerness. This is an important milestone, but she had suffered over five years prior.

**Psychological effects of homophobia.** Students commented on how they suffered psychologically due to homophobic campus environments. They felt in the midst of an internal struggle, due to figuring out their identity, and felt upset and frustrated. Asia reflected:

As far as [my identity] intersecting [with queer/Black/gender identities], it caused a lot of heartache. It caused a lot of crying, a lot of shame. And because, like I said, I thought I was just wrong. And so I dealt that for well over five years and then I finally began, so learn to, um, love that side of myself. There was a lot of internalized damage that had been done and the southern side of me was like, oh baby, you'll be all right. Just pray about it. But the rational realist side of me was like, no, you need to go somewhere and talk about this. You need some professional help. You need to go to therapy. You can't just pray this away.

Asia’s internal journey moves from intense suffering to eventual self-love through the help of therapy. Fostering this shift was the ability to find, as mentioned above, a friend’s accepting ear to help her move past her fears of rejection and discrimination.

Living in a homophobic society presented difficulty for the participants. Psychologically, students noted a range of complex ways of dealing with this pervasive hostility. DD described above how she finds the Black, queer and HBCU status troublesome and psychologically tough. The silencing DD felt due to the homophobic campus environment took a toll. She felt marginalized by the casual homophobic speech,
and it internally weighed heavily on her mind. Max described how she mentally handles homophobic experiences:

This is hard, removing my emotions on the situation, I have to really look at things objectively and strategically a lot of times and that means not letting myself get worked up, which is very difficult, but it also is very helpful.

This suggests that Max adjusts her own emotions, which is a “very difficult” process. The participants are constantly adjusting due to the environment causing them distress. Students require support in psychologically processing their identity development within the HBCU environment.

Fear is another common emotion these students feel. Fear caused Misha to isolate herself: “I really don’t try to go out as much because I’m afraid that somebody will insult me and I just don’t have the time for certain behaviors, and things like that. So, I really just stay to myself.” Again, the participants adjusted their behaviors to remain internally and physically safe from homophobia. DD expressed the fear of even being interviewed when first meeting someone new. They stated: “Fear. Just like the people who can’t come out or like don't, like how it took a lot for me to even respond to your [interview invitation] thing. Just knowing that some people are scared.” They also described what sparked further introspection. DD recounted:

I had an outburst in May. Someone says something transphobic and I went off and I was like, I can't do that anymore. I can't just let this build up on there. Then go off. So that this summer when I was in my program of like, we had seminars every day. That's when I started just like being comfortable with saying like what I have to say.
A trigger event for DD was a conversion event in which they got fed-up. As a result, they worked to make sure that their emotions do not build up to the point of public meltdown again. The summer Black queer immersion experience helped them with their queer identity.

Their pain and mental anguish, rejection and isolation led them inward. Being both Black and queer clashes within homophobic campus atmospheres and influences identity construction. They internally process this dissonance, finding support in learning Black and Black queer history. This education gives them a voice to fight and bring up others who will follow. Faced with being marginalized by their race on their own campuses, they let go of trying to win favor with people, an instead craft their own values and arm themselves with strategies born of dealing with discrimination.

**Education.** The participants were moving from external rules to internal values as they move along their journey. They were mastering emotional competencies and crafting a voice to express their intersecting identities. The educational opportunities available among HBCU resources, regarding Black and Black queer culture, provide immersion experiences that strengthen their narratives and voices. Ann found self-love through what she learned at her HBCU:

I'm equally proud of all of my identities. Really being in an HBCU makes it easier to have pride in my identity as a Black woman and even ethnically in terms of my ethnicity because I'm surrounded by other women of color. And so it helps me to learn about myself and it promotes a lot of self-love.

This indicates the value students find in learning at Black colleges, in particular about their Black identity.
Despite some of the homophobic encounters participants faced at their HBCUs, they felt supported in delving more into their Black identity and for some, like DD, there were opportunities to explore and learn more about being Black and Queer. This type of education helped the students gain confidence and develop their voice.

In discussing the feelings of comfort and self-love the participants noted from their learning at their HBCU, students indicated that they arrived at this point and acquired a better sense of their identity due to learning more about Black queer history and immersing in Black cultural issues. As far as the Nigrescence (coming into Black/African American identity) model discussed in the literature, HBCUs nurture Black pride and are key sites to explore the process of Black identity formation. As students at Black institutions, they are immersing themselves in Black culture, opposing White norms. This aligns with Sector 5 of the Cross and Fahgen-Smith (2001) Nigrescence model. Six participants talked about encountering White racism, which aligns with conversion in the model, where negative encounters with Whites spark a more complex understanding of Black identity. These events caused them to immerse themselves in Black history and culture in response. They delved into their racial identity and began to participate in meaningful activities that address African American concerns. As the participants grew older, they developed strategies for dealing with racism, leading to a complex understanding of Black identity.

Saian, the freshman, talked about a couple of experiences with racism that caused him to distance from Whites:

I've only had like one direct racist experience and it was this guy in a pickup truck and he was driving by. So, I mean I don't, there was nothing I could really do to
him. I wanted to fight him. And he was like, “y'all don't belong in this neighborhood”...for racism it really is just like socially on Twitter where [students from] a PWI, say stuff like slick about an HBCUs....then I don't really communicate with a lot of White people, so they're very, their racism I wouldn't really notice.

Experiences with racism as HBCU students fueled anger and left them feeling indignant. HBCUs teach students to combat racism no matter their particular academic focus. Max was called the n-word at a restaurant:

I was at [the restaurant] and the person in front of me called me the n-word and I was like, oh, oh, y'all are racist. His friends were like, he's drunk whatever. I mean, if you're just the second you get drunk you get racist I don't know.

The fact that six participants talked about racism indicates how common racism is for HBCU students, reflecting the experiences of the larger Black community. DD mentioned how racism made her gravitate towards others who share multiple identities. She has been marginalized by both the Black community and the White queer community, “I had tried being friends with all those White queers and having them be like racist trash like that. Made me …change and adapt and just be more aware. Now I'm very on this like sameness.” The process of African American identity formation is catalyzed by experiencing racist incidents, which cause them to distance from Whites and immerse into knowledge of Black history and culture.

Their education gave them a voice to protect themselves. Ann described her growing feelings of competence:
I’d say that [dealing with being treated differently due to sexual orientation] helps me to develop more of an ability to defend myself and that's not something I've necessarily struggled with, but I think that like each instance you have in which you have to defend yourself kind of makes you a little bit stronger in that sense, a little bit more confident in your ability to do so.

Educating themselves in HBCU environments about Black identity development allowed the participants to also delve into issues related to Black queer existence. Max described how people feel entitled to debate with her simply because she is queer:

Probably one of the most effective things always has been facts in my pocket; pretty much because people will always throw out random numbers and studies at you so you kind of have to be ready. And that's something I practice on, keeping myself abreast of what's going on. So really make sure I have current information to combat the inevitable debates that people feel that they're entitled to. Um, when you express your identity to them. So I think those are the two biggest things, but honestly just being confident in who I am… and not trying to internalize every aggression.

Having a depth of Black queer education arms Max in the face of homophobia and allows her leverage in the recurring debates with others that arise due to the binary gender roles held fast by the Black community.

Educating others was a strategy that participants used to help influence the environment around them. During their time at HBCUs, the participants armed themselves with education to battle oppression, maintain wellbeing, and make life better for those who will come after them.
Kandace exemplifies how being queer has influenced her academic interests. At her HBCU, she has an ability to study her intersectional identity, focusing on helping queer people and improving mental health in the community:

I think it has to do with my interest in what I'm involved with. Like I said, you know, with [our LGBTQ student organization] but um, I think it's also really influenced my academic interest. So like right now I'm in my third year, so I'm starting research and my research is about sexual orientation and mental health and basically how stigmas and all these social issues and these norms that were forced to follow, how that can actually lead to issues with individuals in the community. And so I would say without, if, if I didn't, if that was not my identity, I don't think those would be my interests. So I think that's the biggest way that I discovered that that's the direction that I want to go with it while I'm here and when I leave and I go into grad school…I tried to take classes related to those, those kinds of topics as much as I can.

Using education to tackle queer issues gives students living at the Black, queer and HBCU student identity intersection a unique set of lenses to view the Black community. The participants felt empowered through education to speak against systems of oppression, comforted by knowing that there were people before them in Black history. The HBCU context arms them intellectually to resist not only racism but intra-racial marginalization due to lifestyle.

**Softening to mold.** In African American culture to “soften” refers to being beaten in some way. When a person sheds an old form of themselves and molds into a new form, this refers to the student deconstructing or breaking old identities and crafting
new ones. The second meaning of “softening” brings to mind how clay has to be softened by becoming wet, which when applied to a person represents a metaphor of tears used to soften their experiences and remold an intersected identity. For the participants, HBCU homophobia helped break them to the point where they become soft, compassionate, and altruistic. Participants noted that their suffering was not in vain. They use it to fuel altruistic actions. Out of marginalized existence, students use their developing voices to push back on HBCU structures by developing and acting out, with the purpose to make campuses better for future students. They were actively involved in other campus activities, which, aligning with literature, helps reduce the effect of stigma and loneliness. They exhibit altruism, resisting homophobia by pushing back, or disidentifying with the binary notion of the quintessential HBCU man or woman.

Students reported that the intersection of being Black and queer attending an HBCU is difficult, but that the experience makes them more compassionate, understanding, accepting, and less judgmental. They are more apt to speak out and make themselves visible on campus. They become more visible by speaking out, presenting their authentic self, and by being a role model for other queer students on campus. Yet, DD noted that this caring does not extend to those who are oppressing others. DD stated:

Even if I don't have the same like minority, like the same identity as they do, like if they're oppressed because of their identity. I care at least a little bit unless they're oppressing others. It’s complicated but I just care more about everyone.

As noted above, DD did not extend caring to other queer students when they were transphobic. When participants developed a sense of purpose around their role of caring
for others (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), they were more comfortable with their own identities. For DD, being a multiple minority makes her want to help other minorities.

Saian further describes how his intersection of multiple identities helped in his development:

It just makes me, I felt like all of those combined make me a… I don't know if the word is, a compassionate person because I know what it feels like to be treated some type of a certain type of way just because of something you can’t control. So as such I wouldn't want someone who, someone around me like even a stranger…because you never know what somebody else is going through. Like when someone has [something] on their plate. Like I never want them to feel excluded from anything.

This compassion for others despite the marginalization the participants themselves often felt is important to note because these students did not say that they were returning hate with hate. In fact, they said quite the opposite. Their own adversity makes them more understanding.

According to Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001), Nigrescence recycling occurs when individuals develop a complex understanding of what it means to be Black. The participants noted how they channel hatred to a general caring for the oppressed individual regardless of who they are, to include Black and Queer. According to Max, being a multiple minority also makes her want to understand more:

A lot of stuff ends up applying to me or ends up not applying to me and never applied to me because I'm not afforded the same opportunities as someone that doesn't fall into any minorities. Something's going on all the time and that can be
very frustrating. But I think it also gives me a position to speak from and really trying to understand more because I think if I wasn't in these minorities, what would be the incentive for me to learn these things? I am a lot less accepting of ignorance I think is a big one.

These students developed an evolving perspective and increased acceptance of others given their own intra-racial marginalization. Across institutional contexts, their suffering brought them to a common point of understanding and wanting to help others, indicating a common overarching moral grounding within queer subculture. For example, Ann felt her intersection of identities makes her more accepting and less judgmental:

So I would say that [my multiple identities] make me a lot more, um, accepting a lot less judgmental, people that I encounter and how I interact with other people because I know that there are a lot of layers to my identity and therefore I want to understand other people. And because I'm a member of a marginalized group, like I'm a woman and a woman of color, and a part of the LGBT community and so on and so forth, it makes it a lot harder for me to condone any type of hate towards other people. Um, because I know what that feels like. So I think it would, I would say it makes me a lot more empathetic.

Ann’s reasoning that knowing what it feels like to be marginalized informed how she was kinder to other marginalized people.

A major finding of this study is that participants are showing altruism as a common response to being marginalized. Experiencing discrimination for being Black
and queer at an HBCU makes students want to be more vocal and visible in hopes of helping someone who may be suffering or closeted.

For Max, being at the marginalized intersection of Black, queer, and an HBCU student involved internal changes:

The thing that I like to do is just, you just have to really be vocal about who you are and that will put some people off. But that is a big thing that I do. I'm thinking about well, being Black and queer and everything that I am to try to make at least one other person comfortable with speaking. If you know, someone that falls on those categories, maybe you will be less likely to be negative towards that group. And so I'm try to put myself out there more… back home I worked at a nonprofit that tries to benefit people suffering from HIV and AIDS, uh, that are in underserved communities and a lot of that is a Black and Latino people. Black and brown people are so affected by a lot of queer issues, but unfortunately the face of the LGBTQ community is a lot of times a young White guy and that's just not the case. And I think a lot of times we don't get that representation that we as people that are kind of at the bottom of both barrels. Um, so that's something that I tried to promote just being an intersection and saying, showing how all these issues could really be affecting everybody.

The intersectionality of the participants’ experiences created a unique opportunity in their identity development. Participants, dealing with racism in broader society and intra-racial campus homophobia, became altruistic and understanding of oppression along their journey.
Allies and support structures. Friendships and queer HBCU student groups are important in shielding students from the damages of a pervasive homophobic campus environment. Respondents described how their friends’ love and comforting support them throughout their journey. Friends helped them become open and find themselves. Queer student organizations as well bring some students together, fostering deeper interaction with those who also share intersecting identities. The organizations provided resources like queer sex education, forums to voice marginalized group issues, and knowledge on their culture, history, and multiple identities. For those campuses without a formal LBGTQ organization, instead of benefitting from resources like queer sex education and a formal support base, participants cited a disconnected queer culture and described what they do to fight campus homophobia on their own.

Importance of friends. Each student addressed the benefits of having friends and how these friendships contributed to identity formation. Friends helped instill confidence, comfort, and strength in the participants. Saian, a freshman, noted how he gravitates toward other queer students:

I just surround myself with people that are as queer or more queer than me because they really just helped understand how diverse being queer is. It's like I didn't even know. I didn't know pronouns was a thing before I came here. My best friend here, he wears makeup like. It's just seeing how other people express themselves confidently. If they're confident in themselves helps me find myself as well.

As a freshman, Saian was at the early stages of identity development and his friends helped him process and learn more about what it means to be queer.
The participants mentioned multiple times the value of confidence. They felt they needed confidence to be vocal, open, and visible. Even though this visibility often brings discrimination, the participants commented how they operate out of a desire to be seen by other students who may be closeted or fearful. In the quote Saian offered above, he was on the receiving end of the kindness of friends, and seeing others being confident helped him find confidence in his own identity.

Building and storing confidence is needed in the life-long cycle of coming out to new people in new situations. When initially coming out, accepting friends gave students the strength to feel more confident when they come out in the future to others. Coming out to less accepting friends prolonged their time in the closet, perpetuating a fear of telling others in the future. Friends gave these students love and acceptance, which was often denied within the larger homophobic social environment and on campus.

Friends, particularly queer Black friends, also serve as peer role models with regard to responding to discrimination. Misha described this point:

I have several friends that are part of the community at [HBCU]. And, just seeing how they act when people might look at them in a disgusting manner and stuff like that. And how they like just brush it off. That really helped me be more open with who I am…. my support system, really my friends. And I have a few, um, professors that I can run to when I’m not really, like, feeling like myself. That will give me that boost that I need.

Friends help build a safe space for participants. Before coming out as queer, Tewa described how being around queer friends felt accepting, providing a context in which he felt strong and more stable about his own coming out process:
Once I, I felt better. uh, it influenced this experience because then I met friends who I met a friend that I keep going over to and she's bi... it felt more accepting and put me more at ease. Just because then I was, I was used to being around this type of group even though I hadn't come out yet. But within that group I felt everything felt kind of nice. It seemed just accepting but also very strong, very stable on what it is.

Tewa noted how friends provided an example of a comforting and stable queer HBCU student space. This helped him feel safe from some of the stigma and backlash when coming out in a homophobic world.

Queer students are an at-risk population. Safe, comforting spaces are necessary until they have the confidence to come out or come into their fluid developing identities. In the following quotes, the only freshman, Saian, again emphasized the importance of friendships:

At [campus, being queer] made me find a group, a group of friends really quickly. But actually really quick, ‘cause we have. Are you queer man? Yes. Okay. So like you know how we have like families like again, like if like a friend who's maybe a grade older than you could be like your mom or your aunt or something. So yeah, that'll be fine. A really good amount of people I could like go to parties where that I'll be safe with a maybe the parties that aren't so heteronormative that I go to them with and have more fun.

Saian added:

Um, helping. I would say helping my other friends come out because we had first gotten here. There were two people in my friend group who like, you know,
when people first come out and be like, oh, I'm bisexual. But then like a couple months later they're like, no, I'm gay and I think labels are dumb in the first place. I really don't think you should really the label your sexuality, like it's fluid. You can just jump back and forth. But for my friends we’re like, who are in my friend group now we like started off straight and then they were bi and now they're out and gay. So I think and they've claimed that it was being around me and then my other friend [C] who wears like makeup a skirt who like when we go to Chick-fil-a, like they, they used to feel awkward around us but now they're like confident and we can all laugh about the same stuff. And I really felt good about myself that because I, I don't know, I thought coming out of college was kind of like late, but I guess it's kind of early if you think about it. So just helping [my friends coming out] reach it. At Thanksgiving I didn’t go home, but my friends did. So I’m gonna have to be face timing [my friends] every day to make sure they're still okay with their family and whatnot, and I kind of looked more into it because I want them to be proud and out, but I know I can't rush them, but it's just a good feeling.

This level of bonding among friends serves as a protective factor for student wellbeing. The confidence Saian gained from his friends on campus helped him do the same for others. He was concerned for his friend C, who just came out at college, during the first holiday back home with his family. Saian sought to provide support for C from a distance during what was a stressful time. This type of reciprocity among queer friends on campus helped support the participants, and they in turn helped to pay it forward for others.
**Importance of queer student organizations.** LGBTQ student organizations are vital for HBCU environments. Queer students are an at-risk population vulnerable to often extreme intra-racial discrimination. The student groups provide resources to educate, opportunities for interaction with like peers, and are essential for meeting student needs and leadership opportunities.

HBCUs, despite having homophobia problems, also provide resources to educate the broader society about Black queer issues. Five students (Ann, Kandace, Asia, Saian, and Misha) attended four different campuses that house active queer student groups. Their responses indicate that they have access to more resources than students without a campus group. Queer student organizations, despite not reaching all queer or questioning students, still provide an invaluable resource for HBCU students. Ann described how her campus group helped her find information on her multiple intersecting identities:

> [Campus] support the process by giving us the resources to educate ourselves and be educated on our culture, on our history, on the multiple identities that we identify with from the classroom library; and we have a lot of resources and a lot of connections through [campus], and there are a lot of people that we’re able to talk to and people that were able to mimic, for example, in a professional setting or in a classroom setting. So that's really helpful in terms of support resources to educate.

Ann’s HBCU provided role models and resources that allowed her to envision being a queer Black woman professional.

Organizing to educate is an important labor for participants. Another aspect of having queer student groups, just as important, is interaction with Black queer peers.
beyond friendship groups. Kandace described how interacting with queer Black students in her campus group is not the same as interacting with straight peers:

Yeah, I think being in [LGBT organization] now, I think that that's the first time well, rewind. So the first meeting I went to was I think my spring semester last year. And then I didn't really go consistently to this year, so it started in the fall. But I think this is the first time - that I've had a safe space for queer people that I've been able to interact with other queer people on a large basis like this because I don't have any queer friends. So it's kinda like, you know, I never really had, there's a difference. I mean you can, you know, be supportive, but it's not the same as you actually living that way and being able to support it that way. So I think that's the first place where I can say “Okay, I belong here,” and this is where I could talk to people and hear about people who experience similar things that I do.

Respondents exhibited gravitation towards meeting up with others like themselves who share some of their multiple intersections of identity. In these groups, the participants felt more relaxed and authentic as they did not have to worry about being misunderstood. They also bring programming to service queer student needs.

Saian mentioned important programming available on his campus that delves into queer student issues.

Our [queer campus group] is really active in doing stuff that like national coming out day and they're like, we have sex, uh, uh, the safe sex therapists who just is like, basically reads to us once a month about what we're doing in our lives and how something might be toxic. And what you got to do to get it out. And then he
like goes over labels and how there's still like heteronormative aspects in gay
culture that we should try to get rid of.

Saian’s small all-male campus, located in a large southern city, houses non-
heteronormative convocation and professors, and provides him with comfortable
immersion opportunities. As a freshman, Saian was very interested in helping friends
with their coming out and identity formation, providing a glimpse of the benefits of
LGBTQ student inclusion at an HBCU.

Misha’s report of her student organization and disconnected queer subculture is
unique in that it mirrors the experiences shared by students attending the campus without
LGBTQ a group. She recently revived an organization after a 6-year hiatus. Although
the group is active she notes that the queer students are still disconnected, “I feel like the
LGBT community at [campus], we’re kind of separated a lot. Instead of all coming
together and trying to make a bigger change on our campus.” During the interview, she
spoke about hardships in having her organization fully recognized:

I would like to see more posters being hanged around and having the opportunity
to have a bigger LGBTQ community on campus. Um, but I feel like that’s
something that, everybody won’t be on the train for instead of just like a few, 20,
like a handful of people. We will really need a larger group. And more confident
people to even get that across.

Misha’s experience bridges the experiences of students with and without
institutionalized groups. The organization is new on her campus and she reports that
queer students are disconnected, similar to the reports of students attending the HBCU
without a group. This may persist due to her hardship with administration in posting flyers and maintaining visibility on campus.

Four participants (Hallie, DD, Tewa, and Max) attended the same HBCU, which did not have an official LGBTQ student group. This group was last active during the spring of 2018, but at the time of the interview had gone inactive. The four participants attending this southern university reflected on their leadership roles and the impact of the group’s absence.

Hallie was the former group’s secretary and acknowledges that there were pockets of queer students not involved when the group was officially recognized, but in the past the group did bring some students together. Hallie reflected:

So there's a lot of gay people on campus however, like I feel like because there's not like an organization or like, you know, different organizations that are just like, uh, outright supporting us or even when [the group] was active like, there wasn't really a sense of community among everyone. So I'd say the culture is disconnected. Or the climate, there's a fear of being labeled as Queer. The culture is disconnected, because I know there are a lot when I first got there, there were a lot more queer people on campus than were involved in [the group]. I think there's different spots like the models, artsy peeps,, you got a, let's see. Um, I guess like the, Greeks that are gay. Um, uh, yeah. I think there's pockets spaced out on campus. I feel like [the group] brought some together.

The four students attending this HBCU reported an overall disconnected queer student subculture, indicating that students who are not involved in an active queer group should be studied. Yet, Hallie also noted that the former group’s advisor was keeping the
group room open for student interns and the area was open for queer students. Thus, even though the group was not formally organized, there was a safe physical space on campus for queer students.

DD mentioned, as noted above, how former members of the now inactive group were transphobic and now “[the former campus group members] don’t really have, like, a way of reaching out to people” anymore. Tewa had heard of the campus group and wanted to revive it:

I asked about a LGBT group, I'd heard about this one group called [group name], but this year they aren't recognized as an organization campus or at least semester. So I'm trying to work with a professor to get that started again. Uh, but my time schedule has not been given me the most time to really go to meetings, or safe arranged meetings with [my professor] and the [former group sponsor] but it’s… the feeling varies. Uh, people seem supportive and people seem nice around the school. So I don't think... And there's definitely a fair amount of students that are supportive, but there's also, like I said, a lot of transphobia. Uh, just around the school and sororities and fraternities and things like this.

Tewa reported how it is important to remain visible because some students may be suffering in the closet or scared to face the homophobic campus gauntlet.

Max attends the same HBCU and took a different route. In the absence of a queer student group, she founded a forum on her campus for individuals from different marginalized communities to present their issues to inform the broader society:

I took that “education is available” thing to heart and I actually started a social change organization on campus and [I organize] a monthly panel of people in
communities that are marginalized just get the opportunity to speak and ask questions and really present their issues and their points of view and feelings and allow yourself the time to get educated, and ask these questions and really remove the excuse that you didn't know. So that's something that I do on campus now to really try to deal with that because I realized that I don't think there was a way that it was gonna happen otherwise.

Organizing to educate was an important labor for participants. Across campus contexts they were learning how to deal with homophobic institutional environments and were fighting for visibility. Although not all LGBTQ student organizations bring together a majority of queer students, they provide a necessary resource to alleviate the damages of an intra-racial homophobic environment. Campuses without these groups have a more disconnected queer subculture in which students have to search harder for support. These groups provide interaction with fellow Black queers, important for helping students become comfortable in and develop their intersectional identities. Participants feel that visibility of queer students on campus, which was often promoted by the presence of student groups, helps those in the shadows of homophobia and isolation. These groups serve students by providing support that propels them into self-authorship and the resilience and confidence to become community leaders beyond the queer population.

**Summary**

The findings from this study bring voice to queer HBCU student experiences. Their five-point journey from childhood to the time of interview covered first same sex attractions, the influence of pervasive campus homophobia on identity formation and
development, the effects of homophobia, movement toward self-authorship, and a developing purpose. Friendships provided an overarching protective factor for the participants. Friends provided the emotional support needed to face the often overbearing homophobia faced both on and off-campus. The value of official queer student organizations was another source of support for the students. Groups give students an opportunity to discuss their issues and process the ups and downs they face with people who share their same identity intersections. They give participants a place to relax and to breathe, bolstering resilience and providing a space to develop their voice to push back.

The outcome for participants was the development of a more stable and stronger voice that was being honed on campus to resist and counter all types of oppressions. They used their experience with suffering to help others dealing with intra-racial homophobia and other inequalities. As far as overall results, the analysis of transcripts in this study produced a new model of identity development at the Black, queer and HBCU student intersection. This provides a lens to understand queer student experiences.

Students across contexts found their campuses tolerant but not accepting. They faced a gauntlet of homophobia among various campus settings. This caused undue pain and frustration, hindering positive identity development. They felt unsafe and chose to isolate themselves for fear of harassment or judgment. Out of these struggles, close allies and access to Black queer knowledge served as major protections. Friends and knowledge of Black queer history and culture provided comfort, self-love, and confidence. Maintaining active queer student organizations is important for bringing vital resources and positive role models to queer students. They allow for increased
visibility for queer students and issues. They also provide a foundation for educating the broader community on homophobia and allow for official partnership with other student organizations.

Participants noted that the interview process was positive and helpful. They felt the interview itself will help contribute to the fight to make changes within HBCUs for future LGBT students. Collecting their voices shows that they did not suffer in vain. The interview highlighted the value of their voices and underscored for the participants that there are people wanting to hear and share their experiences to help make HBCUs safer for queer Black students. Across HBCU contexts, students found that suffering from homophobia made them into more compassionate, less judgmental, liberal, and social justice-minded individuals. They developed purpose while immersing themselves in their own history and multiple intersecting identities. They felt they were arming themselves with education to battle oppression, helping others and maintaining their own wellbeing.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Since the 1969 Stonewall riots, U.S. university campuses have been sites of increasing queer visibility, research, and activism (Renn, 2010). HBCUs, as institutions of higher education established with a mission to educate Black Americans prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, provide supportive environments and instill pride in racial identity (Gasman et al., 2014). Many of these schools were founded in the 1800s by White missionaries and Black churches and remain bastions of Christian norms and decorum (Turner et al., 2008). This context provides background for the current research study that explored the relationship between the historically conservative HBCU environment and queer students currently enrolled. According to Oldham (2012), Black students face a battle within their own community in which they are ostracized because of the disapproval by others of their sexual orientation. They are exposed to a gauntlet of environmental structures, such as classroom discussions, negligent campus security, discriminatory administrations and homophobic peers, which results in an often-challenging campus environment. LGBTQ students must internally navigate an ecosystem that denies them the same respect and nurturing benefitted to heterosexual peers.

Research suggests there is not enough data on the influence of binary gender roles on Black college students’ attitudes toward queer students (Oldham, 2012). This study sought to understand the experiences of LGBTQ students attending HBCUs, which reflects perceptions of student attitudes on campus by students from a range of
intersecting gender identities. The data collected help to further thinking about college student development and queer of color theories. The identities of the participants are socially constructed and intersect within each individual in ways that cannot be separated or put in a hierarchy (Marfield, 2012). Participants were no less or more queer than they were African American. Still, several of the participants commented how they felt they had to hide a part of their identity to survive on campus. Though the participants are able to intersect their sexual orientation with their Black identity in various settings, they commonly are forced into splitting their identity for the sake of getting by in certain contexts. For example, choosing what to wear is a daily task to manage; the participants reported that they either face judgment for not dressing cisgendered or feel that they are stifling themselves when they align with the accepted social binary. Because dress codes and professional decorum are a huge part of the Black college experience, there exists a system of rewards and punishments when existing norms are not met (McIntosh, 2011). This climate leaves students feeling afraid, harassed and unwanted at the institution (McIntosh, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to document and explore the experiences of LGBTQ HBCU students. The methodology arose from Black feminist and queer research of the 1980s, in which narratives and qualitative accounts were used to explore the growing visibility of queer students and campus organizations. The use of this methodology was intended to add to the foundation of evidence for change in policy and programming (Renn, 2010).

This qualitative case study narrative analysis featured LGBTQ students attending HBCUs. The two cases compared students attending schools with an active LGBTQ
student group and those without an active group. This comparison helps to bring to light whether having a queer student organization on campus improves the college experience.

In total, nine students participated in an in-depth interview, with five coming from HBCUs with active groups and four coming from the same campus without an active group. Students provided perspectives on their identity formation and experiences with intra-racial homophobia in their majority-Black cultural environment. They also reported how their voice and confidence in their intersected identities emerged due to exploration of their Black identity. As well, access to education on queer history, support groups and friends on campus provided the participants with a range of resources to deal with the challenges they faced.

The findings from this research contribute to the literature on LGBTQ college students and HBCUs, providing implications for practice to inform institutional leaders and staff. This study supports Russell’s (2012) research that highlights how campus environments influence identity development for queer undergraduates of color. The following discussion illustrates how the findings relate to the existing literature base and provides suggestions on how to build an inclusive and responsive HBCU campus environment for LGBTQ students.

**Summary of Findings**

An analysis of the narratives of LGBTQ students attending an HBCU in this study is helpful in understanding queer student issues and helps inform HBCU leadership on ways to support queer students on campus. This research echoes Tyre’s (2009) study that sought to gain insight and understanding of the day-to-day lives of LGBTQ African Americans within the HBCU environment using reflective questions. Through in-depth
interviews, participants provided a picture of their developmental journey, where participants remembered first same-sex attractions in childhood, their coming out process—to themselves and others, recounted homophobia on HBCU campuses, and ultimately recounted how their HBCU education helped them develop an internal voice to deconstruct and resist discriminatory environments. From childhood through the time of the interview, they provided stories of how they navigate their Black, queer, and HBCU identity intersections.

**Discussion**

This study sought to give power to the student voice. Historically, regarding context, LGBTQ students were shunned by institutions of higher education, often referred to psychologists, and denied student groups (D’Emilio, 1990; Renn, 2010). Three students in this study reported the importance of therapy in dealing with the damages of homophobia. All of the participants had grievances with being shunned by administration relative to queer student organizations. The data gathered here aligns extensively with the undergirding theories outlined in the second chapter. Student responses echoed findings in the literature and brought new contributions to the research base.

The literature highlights, and the narratives of participants affirmed, that college students in the U.S. are seeing more students coming out and organizing (K. N. Jones et al., 2014). Participants in this research reflected this trend. They noted how this battle with their administrative leadership and homophobic environments reflects the common African American culture across HBCU campuses. Their frustrations imply a need for campus leadership to further advocate for their safety and inclusion. According to
Rankin (2005), inclusion goes further than programs or interventions, which requires a paradigm shift in mindsets in the way the community sees queer people. In a supportive and inclusive community, people feel free to express themselves as drastically as they want in terms of sexuality, gender, or race; students can be openly and unapologetically transgender, queer, and Black and are still accepted, supported, and nurtured (Russell, 2012).

Astin’s (1999) input-environment-outcome model of college student involvement proved important in understanding the ecological impact of an HBCU campus environment on queer student identity development. As presented in Chapter 1, this model highlights how interactions between the student and college environmental context impact student identity formation. Analyzing the transcribed in-depth interviews produced insights on the participants’ experiences. This study included institutions with an LGBTQ student group and without, with the intention of seeing if a formalized group influenced the students’ reported experiences. The students reported similar experiences across HBCU locations with an organized support group and without a formal group. The findings reported that HBCUs with active student groups house a pervading homophobia similar to the climate of the institution without an organization. This indicates that biases remain across contexts and that students held concerns for their safety.

Having an active group did not automatically shield students against homophobia, yet it did provide a place for students to obtain a range of resources. Students in this study who attended the institution without an active group were still able to find or create Black queer education and immersion experiences. An important difference emerged,
however, in that having an active and recognized group brought more support, visibility, and resources to students. Resources such as queer speakers, events, sex educators, mental health and relationship therapy provided centralized access to supports. For all the participants, a strong Black culture existed at their HBCUs.

Astin’s (1999) input-environment-outcome student involvement model anchored the theoretical framework used to explore student experiences. Regarding inputs and intersectionality, participants grew up in households in which race was highly salient. They shared stories of racism growing up, and how they sought sameness and community when choosing a college. Specifically, they sought a Black college experience. In follow up questions to the nine participants, four responded. Two students indicated they started at other colleges and came to their current HBCUs because they felt they could be more open about their queerness in the HBCU setting.

HBCU environments both hindered and supported the participants’ developing identities. Participants felt supported with learning about Black history and culture, but also felt marginalized and unsafe due to the heteronormative atmosphere and experiences of homophobia on campus. A positive aspect of the HBCU context was the love for Blackness and instilling racial pride (Gasman et al., 2014). The participants felt their leadership was nurtured as they became steeped in Black culture. Still, some negative aspects of HBCUs leave queer students at-risk. A negative climate (e.g., classrooms, chapel, campus security, cafeteria, administration) can damage healthy identity formation. Students faced marginalization and required support during their college years, especially from student affairs and other leadership (Sanlo, 2005).
The outcome for participants is a story of self-authorship and resistance. Facing homophobia and challenges on campus frustrated and hurt them. This pain catalyzed a search for comfort in which students, based on previous experience with oppression, were able to summon resilience (Bowleg et al., 2003).

According to Kulkin (2006), having a positive psychological climate and self-esteem also protect queer students. Accepting friends, allies, and education proved to be important protective factors for the participants that give strength and a voice to confront homophobes and discrimination. Support of friends and allies allow students a safe place to talk about their issues and to maintain stability and positive identity development. Education provides a major protection because it gives students the facts and knowledge to counter homophobic debates and ideologies. They were tired of the constant need to fight others who harass them, and they found comfort in their education and the ability to win debates. At their HBCUs, they were acquiring the tools and strategies necessary to counter multiple oppressions.

This study addressed three research questions. The main question asked how queer students experience the HBCU. The sub-questions were: How does the HBCU environment contribute to LGBTQ student identity formation?; How do queer HBCU students describe campus culture and queer subculture? The two-part in-depth interview was constructed to explore intersectional identity formation and HBCU culture and climates.

**RQ1: The LGBTQ student experience at the HBCU.** The overarching research question in this study focused on the experiences of LGBTQ students on HBCU campuses. The important finding that resonated among most of the participants is that
they feel tolerated, but not accepted. Tewa summarized, “I think [this HBCU is] very
tolerant. I would say on a scale of 1 to 10, probably like an 8. Like it seems very tolerant,
but there’s still some societal structures that are still under play.” As Tewa explained, the
overall sentiment was that things are not all bad for queer students on Black campuses,
but students do not feel fully included, respected, or safe in their campus communities.

This emerging finding coincides with Riddle’s (1994) homophobia scale, in
which a climate of tolerance treats homosexuality as a lower developmental or social
stage than heterosexuality. On Riddle’s scale, acceptance is where heterosexuals use
statements like, “what you do in the bed is your own business, just don’t flaunt it”
(Rasmussen, 2016, p. 110). This study brings new data to Riddle’s model. The
participants took the idea of acceptance further. Participants of this study defined
acceptance as a climate in which they can be open and proud without discrimination.
They can be flamboyant while still being welcomed and accepted by the campus
community like family. They want future queer students comfortable in their skin. The
Riddle (1994) scale also cites nurturance as the highest level of acceptance. Here, the
presence of queer people brings affection and joy to the social environment, and they are
advocated for by the community. Participants experienced nurturing in small pockets on
campus, with friends, and within the campus’s LGBTQ group. Yet, the participants
wanted future queer, questioning, and non-binary students to have broader access to the
nurturing environment that they experienced on a smaller scale.

As a major part of queer HBCU experience, homophobia was a reality across
institutions and contexts, and participant responses indicate that it was difficult to face.
This outcome indicates that students are damaged by being othered and seen by the
community as deviant. Students did find supports that enable a stable, integrated, and positive identity development. Astin (1993) describes involvement as the amount of energy a student devotes to the academic experience. They found participation in campus activities, both queer and not queer, shielded them from some of the damages of discrimination. A major finding was that friends and allies help protect the participants and nurture their development. Housing official queer student groups brings vital resources such as counseling, queer safe sex education, relationship therapy, and so forth to students. These groups allow for the campus community to be educated on Black queer issues through forums and events, provide visible role models to mimic, educational immersion opportunities, allow for partnerships with other student organizations, provide support, nurture activism, and foster interaction between queer students and heterosexuals.

**RQ2: How the HBCU context contributes to the student identity.** HBCUs were founded and exist to nurture Black leaders (M. C. Brown & Freeman, 2004). Because these schools align with the Black church, they support a stricter gender binary and maintain a heteronormative culture. Thus, entering queer students are prone to face hardship in the progress of their multifaceted identity development (McIntosh, 2011). Some suppress their queer identity to navigate less supportive environmental structures, leading to minority stress. This makes it difficult to maintain a stable healthy identity and come out of the closet on campus.

As far as context and intersectional identity formation, attending an HBCU often requires students to split identities, and to downplay queerness to avoid judgment and harassment. For example, both Hallie and DD talked about how they compartmentalize
queerness or adjust their gender performance specifically out of fear of judgment. Students want to be open and proud with their queerness but face homophobic discrimination. The institutions present a daunting power structure to battle as a queer undergraduate. Even though they reported difficulties in being queer Black HBCU students, the participants felt the need to be confident, visible, and vocal to challenge heterosexual norms, so that students who may be fearful, silenced, or closeted suffer less (Rankin, 2005).

The HBCU experience is both positive and negative for participants. These institutions promote empowerment and positive identity development when it comes to race (Tyre, 2009). Having a space that celebrated and supported their Black identity was important as several participants reported trying to fit in with Whites during their K-12 years and failing. They also reported experiencing racism firsthand, including from the White queer community (Oldham, 2012). Participants reported in their interviews how they are distancing themselves from Whites and gravitating toward people who share their race and queerness. By educating themselves on Black history and culture at Black colleges, they were finding self-love and pride in their Blackness. Most participants talked about how they benefit from learning about Black history as HBCU students, finding their place within the history and advancement of the community. Their education provided them a means to grow a more complex way of viewing Blackness and their identity. The participants exhibited Cross and Fhagen-Smith’s (2001) fifth sector, specifically immersion and internalization/commitment. They are immersing themselves in Black culture, opposing White norms, and participating in meaningful activities that benefit Black people and other oppressed groups.
HBCU contexts can hinder positive queer identity development. The student narratives, across individuals and campus contexts, produced a clear picture of the pervasiveness of intra-racial homophobia. They reported that it is more difficult to be queer than Black at an HBCU. They must put sexuality on the back burner to navigate campus environmental structures and to remain stable in certain university settings. Psychologically, the students report feeling unsafe on and off campus, causing them to self-isolate and compartmentalize their sexuality for fear of judgment. Most reported that the homophobia is subtle, but persistent.

Power differentials serve to reinforce dominant culture beliefs, in this case heteronormative power. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory of human development provides a useful framework for analysis. Bronfenbrenner (1979) defines development as a person’s evolving perception of their environment, their relation to it and their growing capacity to alter it. Participants face harsh treatment on Black campuses and are driven to alter their campuses by fighting to end homophobia for future queer students.

Feminist and queer theories posit that gender identity is not biological but influenced by social interaction and power inequality (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). The intersectional paradigm focuses on dimensions through which power operates in human interaction. Student descriptions of social interactions on their HBCU campus reveal strong inequalities. Researchers cite a process in which the majority exercises their power by creating distance and maintaining advantage and degrees of privilege (Mobley & Johnson, 2015; Russell, 2012). The power of heterosexuals that perpetuates the historical “othering” of queer individuals, often using religion, homophobic speech, and
institutional discrimination, requires attention. HBCUs are a site of social reproduction, and the current climate across these institutions is that queer students are damaged by messages of their inferiority and outside status (Oldham, 2012; Tyre, 2009). For example, when students are homophobic in a classroom and the professor fails to correct it, the queer student is subjected to a compounded lack of power and pays a price as far as damaged identity development and a feeling of powerlessness. They are an at-risk student population because they are at the mercy of homophobic peers, faculty, security, administration and society at large daily.

Identity development during college is uniquely influenced by attending an HBCU. These campuses often concurrently empower the Black identity while actively shunning homosexuality. HBCUs and the Black church are two major pillars of African American society that perpetuate a homophobic culture, and participant narratives reflect that their traditionalist administrations are not supporting the homosexual student population. This environment constricts student expression and forces queer students to negotiate on a daily basis their performativity, both fearing judgment and having to choose whether to hide or conform to something that causes internal dissonance or social discomfort. The participants reported being troubled by hearing the casual use of homophobic and transphobic speech by others.

Yet on the positive side, the HBCU provides access to Black queer history and culture. Access to this education fuels resistance and healing among LGBTQ students on campus. HBCUs instill students with a pride in being Black, and the participants in this study reported how they were immersing themselves in Black culture, distancing themselves from Whites, and opposing White norms (Cross & Phagen-Smith, 2001).
Having active and permanent queer student organizations also provided the participants with vital resources that bolstered healthy relationships, sex practices, and identity formation. The major protective factor reported in the interviews was having an accepting and supportive group of close friends, which provide comfort and confidence in who they are. Friends were particularly important as a resource for students on campuses without a formal LGBTQ group. The participants valued the confidence they gained to lift their voices and being strong for one another. Developing strategies of resilience and empowerment are major aspects of their HBCU journey.

Despite intra-racial marginalization, these students found Black queer history and cultural immersion opportunities. Knowledge empowers them in the face of homophobia, helping them advocate for themselves and other queer HBCU students. They were gaining strategies to resist from seeing other queer people, either in person or through media, brush off homophobes and fight back against discrimination and attack. This facilitates healthy development. They have a sense that they will need tools to stay stable in the future, since coming out to others in new situations will require resilience.

**RQ3: The HBCU culture and subcultures.** The HBCU culture and subcultures on campus influenced the level to which students felt included and supported as LGBTQ students. The nature of on-campus support networks, stereotypes, fear, and isolation were environmental factors that strongly influenced students’ ability to feel comfortable in their intersectional identity formation (Tyre, 2009). Across contexts, students experienced a homophobic cultural climate, which makes it difficult to form a stable integrated identity.
As far as subculture, participants reported that instead of LGBTQ student groups comprising a large number of queer students, students on the spectrum were disconnected and siloed in different groups on campus (e.g., Greeks, majors, artists, athletes, friend groups), even despite the presence for many of an active student organization. Ann attends an HBCU with two active LGBTQ student organizations, but she commented on how the queer subculture was still disconnected:

So [Student Organization 1] is the biggest group on campus, but there's also [Student Organization 2], which you think would create more unity because there's more safe spaces, but it created almost a competition in terms of which you were a part of how you identify. Um, and then there's a lot of, because the LGBTQ community is so much smaller than the straight community at [HBCU]. Um, there's a lot of drama within the community because everybody knows each other and everybody knows each other's business, but there's a lot more people who are closeted in my opinion at [HBCU].

A finding that emerged from this study was the mere availability of student groups that target and support queer students on campus was often not enough for queer students to present their full identity, which may be due to a persistent culture of homophobia. Though having an active organization increases visibility, involvement, and contributes much needed resources to the community, there is a pressing need to design structures that reach students who remain closeted for a number of reasons (Renn, 2010). The participating students were all out, but they knew of other students not comfortable enough in their emerging queer identity to come out at the HBCU.
The fact that participants reported across contexts that queer students are disconnected from one another is important. It implies that even with institutional supports, there are many students opting to stay in the closet. The culture and subcultures in place in the HBCU were not reaching closeted students. The coming out process is complex and many students are not self-identified or are in a state of questioning. It is important to note D’Augelli’s (1994) sixth and final stage of LGBTQ development revolves around queer students entering the broader queer community where, instead of a closeted existence, they can find support, a place to fit in and protection. For many of the participant students, this level of development had not occurred.

There are many reasons why an HBCU undergraduate student may remain closeted. Although some institutions are taking initiatives to protect and provide for queer students, many still fear for their safety and may be closeted and less engaged socially and academically overall (Holland et al., 2013). Since the perception of homosexuality in Black culture is very negative, students remain closeted due to the lack of support from peers and the institutional culture (Oldham, 2012; Upchurch, 2014). Queer students who are closeted may exhibit internalized homophobia, staying isolated and denying this important aspect of themselves, which leaves them at risk for self-hatred and a skewed self-identity (Hill, 2006).

Importantly, a subculture of resistance also permeates participant narratives. All participants expressed a purpose to help other current and future queer HBCU students. They are fighting to normalize LGBTQ people in Black culture and on campus. The main strategy that they are acquiring to combat homophobia is education, both for
themselves and for others. Knowing Black queer history and the stories of others comforts them and gives them a place where they experience sameness and belonging, both of which are protective factors. Another element of the queer HBCU subculture is valuing visibility, being vocal, and building confidence. They acquire these valuable strategies from seeing queer role models and others speak out and resist homophobia and other oppressions.

This chapter situates the findings from the study within the larger literature and discusses results and implications for practice. A unique combination of theoretical lenses was used to enrich the construction of the in-depth interview and narrative analysis. According to Abes (2009), it is valid to use multiple theories that give perspective to the multifaceted human experience, letting each theory stand together, accepting contradictions between theories that also arise in life. This study adds nuance to research in the fields of college student development, HBCU culture, queer of color theory, and feminist methodology.

**Implications for Practice**

This study produced useful implications for practice. Much of prior literature addressed student affairs practice regarding queer student inclusion. The first and major recommendation is the creation of a central online LGBTQ HBCU student resource center. It is also important to address the environmental structures mentioned by participants, who in the interview provided advice to campus leadership. Protective factors are also important to highlight; participants found friend groups, student organizations, and education as protective factors bringing students out of the closet.
Queer HBCU students exist and fight on the margins, where in many settings and aspects of campus life they face discrimination. There is a power dynamic in which they are subject to members of the heteronormative majority, experiencing homophobia from higher administration to student peers. Though the participants in this study were learning how to fight back, often through the acquisition and use of education, they could face the homophobic HBCU power structure on their own. Regarding organizing, students attending HBCUs with official groups still struggled to unify and connect the queer subculture on campus. Results indicate that there is a large population of students who may be suffering in the closet with their identity, fearful to come out in homophobic environments. Participants were often working alone to reactivate or maintain their queer campus organizations. Queer students need help in leveraging their purpose and drive to alleviate HBCU homophobia.

**Role of student affairs administrators and leadership.** Research highlights the role of student affairs leaders and professionals in ensuring the inclusivity and wellbeing of LGBTQ students in the campus community (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Coleman, 1982; Kasch & Abes, 2007; Renn, 2010; Sanlo, 2005). Queer students cannot fight homophobic institutions alone. They will expect their institution to advocate for and protect their equal rights (Trammell, 2014). Student affairs practitioners can translate the use of theory and research into strategically designing protections and inclusivity measures. They have the power to normalize queerness as a common aspect of identity and diversity.

Participants in this study cited battles with central administration, particularly when it came to maintaining or starting a queer student organization. The students said
they felt snubbed, threatened, and rendered invisible within the context of their HBCU. The historic culture of HBCUs, which reify conservative religious norms, has been addressing sexuality by condemning, silencing, and rendering queerness invisible (McIntosh, 2011; Mobley & Johnson, 2015).

Ferguson (2008) argued for structural changes in higher education to include acknowledgment of sexuality so that administrators could contribute to normalizing LGBTQ students and experiences. Often LGBTQ faculty members or supporters choose to spearhead changes in the institution’s nondiscrimination policy, to teach an LGBTQ course, or procure funding for LGBTQ centers (Brauer, 2012; Croteau & Lark, 2009; D’Augelli, 2006; Ferguson, 2012), which all contribute to building an inclusive culture. These types of grassroots efforts can help shape changes to institutional policies and procedures. The experiences of the participants in this study help to understand more fully the institutional constraints they experienced. Moving the voices of this population out of the margins and into the center of dialogue to inform change on campus is critical. It is important to find ways to foster the protective factors for LGBTQ students on campus. Student affairs practitioners provide important levers for change and support.

Being a student affairs practitioner in the HBCU context means understanding the qualitative subjectivity and intersectionality of student experience from both a Black and Black queer cultural standpoint, understanding the role of the Black church and the history of the Black community, and understanding how HBCUs exhibit intra-racial homophobia and marginalization. Professional student affairs organizations like the American College Personnel Association and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators are important professional supports in disseminating new
research and knowledge to practitioners and campus leaders. Contributing research to organizations like these inform the practice of their members and give voice to students. Understanding the development of Black queer college students brings their grievances to those who are in power to design measures that foster inclusion and belonging.

Senior student affairs practitioners serve an important role in helping to support change on campus. According to Roper (2005):

The [senior student affairs officer] should demonstrate that she can foster connections among those who might otherwise be isolated, make audible those who might feel voiceless, bring visibility to the invisible, and create space at the center of the institution’s mission for those who might feel marginalized. It is imperative that [senior student affairs officers] commit to building campus communities that embody structural, psychological, emotional, and social support for LGBT students…. As community builders we must use the influence of our roles to remove obstacles, lessen challenges, interrupt threats, and dispel myths that restrict opportunities for success for LGBT students. (p. 86-87)

This study brings the marginal student voice and research on LGBTQ college students to the center of analysis in hopes of facilitating student affairs practice. Participants felt unheard, obstructed, snubbed, and unsafe because of their battles with administration across institutional contexts. In addition to the roles senior student affairs officers play, the LGBTQ HBCU students, who are vulnerable and need positive reinforcements, must also receive support from members of the campus community such as therapists, dorm directors, security officers and other staff (Coleman, 1982).
These suggestions provide a framework for bridging student struggles with student affairs and administrative HBCU leadership practice. More than tolerance, LGBTQ students want acceptance, safety, respect, visibility, and a place for questioning and closeted students to develop their identities without fear and judgment.

**Public versus private institutions.** The institutions sampled differ in that the four private colleges (five participants) had active queer student organizations and the public institution did not (four participants). Across campuses, contexts, and private or public, similar discrimination resulted in similar risks from all levels of the HBCU campus community. Yet, public or private status makes a difference when addressing student organizing.

Public institutions receive funding from federal and state governments. They have to be more transparent to the state than private HBCUs. Because of this funding source, LGBTQ students cannot be denied a group when the institution receives public funding. Because of the first amendment, which protects freedom of speech and free association, the students cannot be prevented from having organizations or holding social events. In this study, the only public HBCU included did not have an active queer student group. Two possible reasons for this fact may be that institutional leaders are taking advantage of a lack of queer student leadership or they are to some degree suppressing queer student organizing, which goes against federal and state mandates. A tool of HBCU heteronormativity is to make queer student groups precarious and ephemeral. For example, participants discussed how it was easy for their institutions to defund or shut down their campus organizations.
Private HBCUs do not have a mandate to protect queer students, potentially leaving students at these institutions more at risk than their public school counterparts. Although they are not required to support these students with dedicated centers, each private school provided more queer student resources than the public campus. This finding was surprising as only 30% of the 105 HBCUs have institutionalized groups. Further study is warranted about why the private campuses in this study are doing more to support LGBTQ students than the public. It is important to know how these campuses go about designing their queer student programming, especially how they craft and express the institutional values that undergird this support. Private institutions can deny queer students the ability to organize; this decision is up to the discretion of leadership. To the credit of the private HBCUs in this study, they each house one or more queer student organizations. Though they provide many resources, they differ in that they bring a different combination of supports. For example, one campus has a safe-sex therapist give a public talk to LGBTQ students and campus members every month. Other HBCUs with active organizations have different combinations of queer student resources.

A recommendation for future practice and research would be to explore the LGBTQ resources available all HBCUs to centralize strategies for inclusion. The purpose of this recommendation is to bring vital resources, such as monthly safe-sex therapy, to every queer or closeted student at all HBCUs. Since private HBCUs do not receive government funding and do not have to protect their queer students, centralizing LGBTQ resources will bring about change sooner, bypassing the politics of heteronormativity.
Creating an online HBCU LGBTQ resource hub. Nearly 30% of HBCU institutions have a queer student group on campus, yet do not always have resource centers (Oldham, 2012; Mobley & Johnson, 2015). Out of more than 100 HBCUs in the U.S., only three have LGBTQ resource centers (Williams, 2013). Due to pervasive politics that marginalize queer students, there is a need to bypass campus leadership and empower students and the Black queer community directly. Queer students cannot wait for campus leadership to respond to their needs and issues. A recommended practice is the building of a central online HBCU LGBTQ resource center to service and connect all HBCU students.

This online hub should not replace campus programming, workshops, health care, forums, education/classes that cover homosexuality and homophobia, or partnering with other student groups. According to Mancini (2011), LGBTQ student groups and involvement in campus activities also serve as protective factors that reduce the effects of stigma. Queer students feel safer when there are physical protective structures such as supportive people, using visual media in courses, visible faculty and staff role models, and interaction between heterosexual and LGBTQ persons in the environment (Plugge-Foust & Strickland, 2000; Poynter & Washington, 2005; Tyre, 2009; Walters, 1994). HBCUs should create inclusive intellectual spaces and expand course curricula on LGBTQ communities (Mobley & Johnson, 2015).

Participants indicated that having an active queer student organization brought support, but they still experienced homophobia. Not having an active group did not mean that the homophobia was worse, as students were able to build informal support structures and strategies despite the lack of a dedicated center. Establishing more active
queer student organizations on Black campuses can provide a mechanism for reaching a wider audience and allow for heightened awareness of specific homophobic or supportive policies and procedures. Creating a central online HBCU LGBTQ resource center or hub catering to Black queer students would provide a resource beyond the context of the campus.

The respondents attending schools with an active LGBTQ student organization reported that the queer subculture was disconnected, thus more than the mere presence of a group is needed to adequately service this at-risk and often closeted population. An online hub could provide every beneficial resource to each student transcendent of campus climate and politics.

In practice, creating this online resource would entail researching existing LGBTQ resource centers as well as Black queer culture in general. In addition to central resources, resources tailored to each HBCU location should provide supports like local healthcare referrals and queer organizations. Particular attention to the needs of transgender and closeted students should occur in designing the hub. Having both anonymity and an option to be open will allow for interacting at one’s comfort level. The hub should feature role models and peer stories, where students can learn from one another and reinforce their bonds as an integrated and cohesive HBCU queer community. Students use social media and technology in everyday life. An online resource center could also feature video chats, YouTube channels, live forums, research materials, referrals to local resources and platforms for cultural expression. Methods to decrease cyber bullying should be prioritized to maintain a healthy atmosphere. Some permanent
form of providing queer HBCU student resources helps avoid issues of transition when student activists graduate or supportive leaders leave the institution.

Building resources for more connections among queer students should be a goal of a resource hub given how the participants reported how queer students feel siloed in different subgroups on campuses. Fostering connections across campuses should provide a sense of belonging, and allies should also be an integral part. This should also be a platform from which students learn from experts on Black queer culture and where they can find responsive emergency staff. Research databases, curriculum aids, and online safe zone training allow for informing the larger HBCU community. Queer sex education, mental health and relationship therapy are important in bolstering positive identity development. In practice, these can be accomplished through the work of qualified consultants and committed staff for maintenance and daily support. It is important that advocates linked to the hub be available both in person for emergencies and to maintain the responsiveness of the site to arising student issues.

**Address homophobic environmental structures.** Participants across contexts experienced homophobia in classrooms, when talking to faculty and administration, in social settings, with campus security, health centers, and so forth. The data highlights how these environmental structures can perpetuate discrimination leaving students in fear, frustrated, hurt, and having to deal with the damage often in isolation. The interview was designed to collect data on the settings and details of campus homophobic incidents because it is important to record student grievances to describe the nature and scope of intra-racial homophobia on Black college campuses.
When asked, the participants in this study provided a great deal of advice to bring about improvements on HBCU campuses. Their struggles helped shape their voices to speak truth to power and resist intra-racial homophobia. They were asked in the interview to provide advice to campus leadership. The following suggestions come directly from the participant interviews and address many of the environmental structures where they faced discrimination. They were also asked about their involvement in student activities and in bringing about change.

**General advice.** The participants provided several overarching comments and thoughts that were critical in general to support their journeys on campus. These include:

- “Just understand you can be Black and queer”
- Research highs and lows of coming out
- Do research. Consider who we hurt, erase
- Therapist/Sex counselor
- “Don’t assume or sound disrespectful when speaking to us”

**Advice for administration.** As noted in the findings and the discussion, participants felt ignored by their administrations and in some cases, actively thwarted. The participants offered the following recommendations.

- People (students) feel safer coming into an environment knowing that there are people who support them
- Administration ignoring the actual issue. Make sure everybody is safe/included instead of throwing out words/emails in place of trying to change their actions
- Priority should be education/our experience, not reputation
• Sit down with us, reach out to LGBTQ students. Have LGBTQ students review things before making decisions. Town Hall to understand LGBTQ needs. Make queer people/history more visible

**Structural/programming.** On campus, there were several organizational issues that participants felt could improve their student experiences.

• Address LGBTQ resources at campus, freshman orientation
• Provide more events and partnering with other organizations.
• Reopen student group
• Open-access group chats
• Need safe zone training including faculty
• Watch homophobic and binary language
• I don’t think that professors should be able to use such binary language, like syllabi
• Hire expert to inform/create culture where we proudly exist
• Do talks at small events; discuss our experiences and the issues
• Visibility
• Conversation/education
• Protest with list of demands like educating faculty on class discussions and educating campus security
• More LGBTQ-centered events
• Panels
• Host more events like national day of silence
**Student roles: Participant involvement.** Several of the participants held formal roles on campus that helped in their identity formation or were actively engaged in work to support others.

- Secretary
- Treasurer
- President of LGBTQ organization
- LGBTQ committee of NAACP
- Being open in talking about my identities
- Teach and educate people
- Conversations with professors about identity, which is taxing
- Create a dialogue which makes it easier to address

Going more in depth than grievances, students are damaged by insults, shaming, outing and humiliation. Noteworthy is the role of the Black church, where religious values were a major contribution to the homophobic behaviors on campus (Tyre, 2009). It is important that HBCU leadership look at the environmental structures where queer students are and are not encountering homophobia.

**Student organizations and administration.** Mobley and Johnson (2015) stated that HBCUs continue to prevent their students from establishing permanent student-run LGBTQ/ally organizations and have failed to facilitate campus-wide programs that highlight LGBTQ issues; progress at many campuses comes from the work of a few activists. Participants in this study can be described as very active and involved both in queer life and non-queer life and noted that being involved in other activities reduces the
personal harm of stigma. Overall students feel unheard. Respondents echoed that their campuses put their reputation over queer student safety.

This study surfaced a short list of barriers the participants faced. It provides a place to start in exploring how to implement and evaluate inclusion measures. It implies that students are facing similar issues across contexts, which provides direction in pinpointing what interventions are called for. HBCUs are slowly becoming more inclusive and responsive. Yet, the interview narratives indicate more progress is needed so all feel safe and accepted. Understanding student experiences and the meanings they attach to these experiences is important in aiding their development and success.

**Classroom/faculty.** Abes (2009) suggested paying increased attention to inequitable power structures that result in the perpetuation of oppressions such as homophobia. A part of decreasing institutional indifference would be to encourage LGBTQ faculty and staff involvement in changing campus climate (D’Augelli, 2006). As participants in institutions of power, faculty and staff are part of systems of relations that can silence those who are not in positions of power (Rankin, 2005). In the classroom, queer students need to have the faculty member, who has the power in the situation, be able to silence or steer homophobic comments. Ann reported:

I was a bit confrontational in some cases, um, because my professor at the time wanted to, she prioritized right of the girls who were being homophobic to speak over the LGBTQ students in the class who didn't feel safe with the things that they were saying. So I just kind of spoke up to that and told them that it wasn't ok.
In the case of classroom discussions, the queer HBCU student must deal with double marginalization. Both the professor and their peers have more power, and when the professor chooses to be silent or support homophobic speech, this compounds the damage to the queer student. They must suffer in silence until they acquire the ability to resist and resolve the psychological damage, which takes a heavy toll. Saian’s professor exemplifies what students want,

Um, I really liked what my relationship teacher does and my English teacher, they both make sure that like the class discussion isn't just, Oh, if you have this girlfriend and um, doesn't assume that everyone in the class identifies as male. They really do try to do. They really go out their way to make sure everyone feels that you could crush on a boy or you could identify as day she whatever you want to identify as. So I don't know, if every teacher could do that. I think that would be great. It's not, it doesn't take a lot.

Having safe and supportive classroom environments in which the faculty members recognize sexual diversity is critical.

Holland et al. (2013) suggest allowing faculty in the social sciences to teach classes on diversity and tolerance in students in other disciplines and inviting LGBTQ students and community leaders to speak about their experiences and even mandating tolerance programs as part of the early socialization of incoming students. According to Blue (2014) it is critical that universities implement pragmatic interventions to educate students and faculty effectively, and that it is vital that administrations and students are able to identify the social constructs that shape negative attitudes in order to effect change.
Campus security. Campus police should be trained to act as the frontline of institutional responses to incidents of harassment, making the campus safe for LGBTQ students (Herek, 1989). Max and Tewa, who attend the same university, reported that during orientation a police officer told them that men cannot get raped. Ann’s college told students they added another police car, but there was actually no security officer in it. Participants were concerned for their physical safety. Building better communication lines between students and campus security should occur.

Health. Universities and colleges must create full acceptance for LGBTQ students, making sure students are not harassed; the power is with governing boards and presidents when it comes to ending this discrimination (Trammell, 2014). LGBTQ students bring distinct experiences to campuses, adding immeasurable diversity. Governing boards and presidents must ensure their universities and colleges institute effective policies against bullying and provide mental-health services for those students who struggle with coming out (Trammell, 2014).

In an online center and on campus, students should have access to healthcare, mental health, and queer relationship therapists, as well as referrals to local campus and hometown resources. Participants exhibited a heavy psychological burden due to a gauntlet-like homophobic climate.

Protective factors. Friends shield students from isolation and its damages. It is important to note that those who have been bullied, especially transgender students, have a difficult time making friends, feel isolated and excluded from activities and encounter abuse while in college (Bradley, 2007; Upchurch, 2014). For queer HBCU students, students remain in the closet because of a lack of support from peers and the overarching
institutional culture (Love, 2009). Supportive peer networks should be institutionalized to combat campus hostility (Marfield, 2012). Friends were reported to be the most salient protective factors for participants. It seems a normal task once on campus to find a group where one can fit in for comfort and to bolster healthy identity development. Making this easier for queer students should produce a safer social climate to come out and feel comfortable in their true gender expression.

HBCUs are important sites in educating at-risk students and preserving culture (M. C. Brown & Freeman, 2004). Considering that closeted students are an invisible at-risk population, it is important to think of them when incorporating inclusion strategies into programming. This population exhibits reluctance to participate in campus activities, often feels uncomfortable or unsafe on campus and reluctant to live in residence halls due to the additional undertaking of expressing sexual identity to roommates, friends and fellow students during the coming out process (Blue, 2014). They may internalize homophobia, believing homophobes and choosing to live in the closet, denying an important aspect of themselves which leads to self-hatred and skewed internal identity (Hill, 2006). Though participants did not exhibit self-hatred, there was a tension between seeing the world as full of hatred and seeing the world as a beautiful and diverse place.

The goal of this study is to bring students from the social margin to the center. They require more than tolerance, demanding acceptance and valuing love. Most dealt with homophobia during childhood, and the respondents report a long journey of isolation and mental anguish. This coming out process seems undeserved and unduly
brutal. This is the basis of the suggestion for campus leadership to provide queer student resources in the absence of a student group or any particular student leader.

Friend groups and campus allies serve as beacons for the invisible. Peer groups significantly influence students’ growth and development during their undergraduate years (Astin, 1993). The main protective factor arising out of the interviews is the role of friends. The support of friends and homosexual professionals in the faculty and staff promoted resiliency (Tyre, 2009). Queer student self-concepts are particularly vulnerable while developing their overall identities and need the nurturing atmosphere enjoyed by heterosexual students. They may require additional support and positive reinforcement by staff, faculty, and campus leadership because of the damages of homophobia and racism that compound to diminish their wellbeing.

Most HBCUs lack an infrastructure of support for their LGBT students; these organizations come and go depending on availability of student leadership (Mobley & Johnson, 2105). Active LGBTQ student organizations are an important protective factor in that they service the various needs of students. This is a key environmental structure that provides a positive influence and supportive peer networks, playing a positive role in academic success (Marfield, 2012; Tyre, 2009; Vigil, 2007). Kasch and Abes (2007) suggested educators should fully accept safe spaces and campus organizations and show heterosexual students how to respect and not harass them. Student organizations need community partnerships and the involvement of campus stakeholders to ensure the viability and perpetuity of queer supports. These students need the opportunity to find comfort and a sense of belonging that fosters retention and success (Kasch & Abes, 2007).
Active LGBTQ student organizations are important in servicing the needs of students. According to Oldham (2012), fostering interaction between queer and straight students is key in changing homophobic attitudes. They suggest having these two groups share personal information about their families, life issues, and specifics related to other identities they have in common to highlight similarities and bridge differences. Other methods of bridging difference facilitated by student organizations include hosting speakers, creating programs and classes (Oldham, 2012).

As far as other recommendations, most research on LGBTQ college students conducted on PWI campuses yields suggestions and interventions also adaptable to the HBCU campus environment (D’Emilio, 1990; Rankin, 2003). Max, who attends the university without an active group, described how she joined a group at a neighboring PWI to find support:

I'm now part of a group at my neighboring PWI because we do not have a, an active LGBT group here, but it's called QTIPOC or Queer Trans, Intersex people of color and having the issues that affect both groups discussed and really just trying to find support for that was so helpful.

The openness of the LGBT group that Max found at a neighboring college serves as another example of how nearby colleges can collaborate and share resources to support LGBTQ students.

A major outcome from this study is that, in addition to friends and queer student organizations, education was a salient protective factor for participants. Participants found comfort in educating themselves on the intersection of their Blackness and queerness, and they used knowledge as a tool to counter homophobic debate and resist
discriminatory climates. Education affects the nature of identity development, providing positive examples from which they can craft a unique self-expression and core personal values (Baxter-Magolda, 2009).

Since all of the participants were out of the closet, the voices of the questioning or most fearful are unheard. According to prior research, HBCUs as educational institutions offer opportunities for students to learn about diversity and foster dialogue and informal interaction among queer and heterosexual students (Oldham, 2012). In addition to validating their multiple intersecting identities and picking and choosing these identities as they go, the impact of the educational process on identity development is core in navigating the HBCU experience (Marfield, 2012). This implies that knowledge acquisition has value in both healing from homophobia and successfully combating its structures. In practice, HBCU leaders should institutionalize and make permanent resources for the LGBTQ population in the absence of a group or student leadership. Coming out week and lavender graduation would bring visibility and increased tolerance to the climate. Participant narratives show that students are silenced, threatened, and snubbed by their administrations. They need advocates able to bring students’ experiences and grievances to leadership and help impact change. According to D’Augelli (2006), getting a critical mass of non-students is required for collective action. An outcome from this study is additional research-informed advice for HBCU leaders.

**Future Research Recommendations**

There is an unending combination of theoretical lenses that can be used to research the experiences of LGBTQ student populations. Using Astin’s (1993) model allowed for an opening of the black box between student inputs, interactions with campus
structures, and effects on identity development and overall campus experience. Abes (2009) posits using multiple theoretical perspectives to challenge inequitable power structures in student development theory. This research highlighted how being Black and queer is a borderland where the student exists at least a double margin; applying a hybrid of multiple theoretical lenses to the same population brings depth and complexity to the data. This proves useful in deconstructing harmful social norms and bringing more nuance to the construction of identity (Marfield, 2012).

A research recommendation is to gather more data in a longitudinal study, allowing students talk about their coming out from childhood through several years post-graduation. It remains to be seen how the HBCU experience affects other outcome variables. Both qualitative and quantitative measures should be used in future research. During the undergraduate years, it is important to begin collecting data on closeted students, and how reported campus atmosphere affects persistence, retention, and transferring to other schools. There may exist a common set of factors that keep them closeted, such as a lack of support from family, peers, and institutional culture (Oldham, 2012).

It is difficult to recruit students who may not be ready to discuss their negative experiences or who are not out of the closet. A challenge arising from this study would address how to design a study that gets to the root of what they need to have positive and stable identity development at HBCUs, whether they would benefit from being out or heterosexual, and addressing the personal and fluid nature of healthy sexuality. In addition to, or as part of a future study, conducting a qualitative meta-analysis would allow for the compilation of more queer of color college student voices and experiences.
Climate studies allow the flow of information needed to design inclusion measures and evaluate change in institutions and their social communities (Renn, 2010). Homophobic structures with which they interact should be analyzed to find strategies to prevent homophobic discussions, administrative threats, and campus security neglect. Power dynamics between queer students and other members of the campus community should be researched in order to highlight how oppression is perpetuated, and how this focus can open doors to address other types of marginalization and inequality. Student belonging, a protective factor fostered by LGBTQ student organizations, is also important to research to inform leadership on how to foster friendship building for isolated students (Mobley & Johnson, 2015; Whiting et al., 2012). It is important to educate heterosexual students on LGBTQ issues. The research base provides some suggestions, but there needs to be more evaluation of strategies to bring understanding and acceptance.

Research of queer college students attending PWIs can be used to design research of HBCU homophobia. Beyond HBCUs, homophobia at colleges in the U.S. manifests in many ways, including harassment, insult, intimidation, physical assault, rape, and murder of those thought to be LGBTQ (Evans & Wall, 1991; Obear, 1991). Campus bullying and harassment against queer students also pervade PWIs, where heteronormativity and heterosexism challenge stable identity development. In these environments, socially sanctioned homophobia highly damages queer students (Obear, 1991). This hinders students from achieving their academic potential and participating fully in the campus community (Rankin et al., 2010).
Research at PWIs found many protective factors that provide a basis for future research for HBCUs. These include (a) supportive people, (b) using visual media in courses, (c) LGBTQ role models including visible LGBTQ faculty, (d) interaction with LGBTQ persons, and (e) liberal sex role attitudes (Ivory, 2005; Marx & Little, 2002; Stotzer, 2009; Szalacha, 2003; Walters, 1994; Wright & Cullen, 2001). Particularly important would be studies of interaction, with allies, friends, role models, as well as with homophobic peers, faculty, and administrators. Also important would be the use of instruments to pre- and post-test whether non queer individuals are able to become less homophobic and more accepting when exposed to history and issues of Black queer people. For example, both use of visual media and fostering interaction between queer and non queer campus community may provide an important avenue to alleviate homophobia. Replicating research from PWIs with HBCU populations would help as a foundation for informing change at HBCUs. It is important to ask whether there is a difference in coming out of the closet for students at PWIs versus HBCUs.

Another focus of research would address how to catch HBCUs up with their PWI counterparts in opening LGBTQ student resource centers. Since participants reported very conservative and traditionalist administrative cultures; my recommendation is to open a central online LGBTQ HBCU student center. This would also work around the fact that HBCUs, as compared to PWIs, may lack the funding to fully staff a resource center. Progress would be for these institutions to house more student groups. An online resource could support on-campus group by bringing much needed resources digitally, like queer sex education, socializing, mental and relationship therapy.
HBCUs need to remain a focus of research because they are critical to Black leadership and cultural values. In addition to addressing queer issues, the participants noted transphobia and misogyny as related and equally salient problems pertaining to the gender norm and binary. On the person-to-person interaction level, these issues can be described as bullying, which is also an open field to study in the Black community. Homophobia is related to misogyny and both call for deconstruction and resolution.

Researching HBCUs presents an important opportunity to eliminate intra-racial marginalization, hatred, and inequality. Changing the norms of the Black community would allow a more present-based unification of the ethnic group and a chance to make positive new and stronger norms and standards for intra-racial interaction. For example, researching and evolving gender norms beyond the historical church-based norms would empower women and queer Black people while amplifying the voice of the group. Un-silencing women and queer people would allow a path for the eradication of rape and violence, which fuel many problems currently faced in the Black community.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the struggles and needs of LGBTQ students attending HBCUs. The first major finding about the student experience, what coming out at this intersection looks like, added data about the queer of color experience from childhood through college years. The various theories presented in chapter two harmonized and coalesced into a unique framework that explored their life journeys at the intersection of being Black, queer and HBCU students. Finally, narratives produced central protective factors (education, friend groups, active student organizations) that protect them in the face of damaging homophobia. The data tells a story of growing up Black and queer, the
heavy toll of battling homophobia on campus, and the resulting sense of purpose to alleviate the various interlocking oppressions of the marginalized.

Several key takeaways emerged from the study. First, a coherent map of the participants’ journeys and experiences occurred. The use of a multifaceted theoretical framework produced a means to view the intersecting Black/queer identity from childhood to college/time of interview. Most students were juniors and seniors, all immersed in Black and queer activism and education. Second, the HBCU context resulted in similar queer student experiences (structures faced, classroom peers, organizing, social and redemptive value of education), which implies that being Black and queer on an HBCU campus contributes to a broader African American queer subculture across campuses. The influence of the Black church remains strong on campus, in particular with unaddressed homophobia and discrimination against queer students. Queer students are an at-risk population in Black campus contexts. Finally, results reveal that suffering from homophobic discrimination at HBCUs, across contexts, catalyzed internal identity development, leading to self-authorship and reliance on an internal voice.

At the time of interview the students, regardless of age or classification, exhibited an altruistic purpose to be visible and to stand up to homophobic campus leadership and peers so that closeted students can come out and that queer students coming behind them feel safe and supported on their campuses in the future.

Queer HBCU students found that their campuses were tolerant but not accepting. Their experiences were similar across contexts. They faced challenges with intra-racial homophobia, but also showed an incredible resilience and desire to make campuses safe
for their children (future queer students). As far as their intersectionality, HBCUs instill Black pride, and participants also found specifically Black queer history and life-changing and comforting immersion opportunities. Yet, they also reported a battle between being Black and queer, and responses indicate this battle has taken a toll on them. Their identity development is challenged when they are insulted, snubbed, and left unprotected.

The students expressed a love for education. The HBCU experience for them involves learning about the history of Black people, and they report this background helps with learning about their multiple identities and promotes self-love. A major finding is that, even though the campus climate is homophobic, HBCUs across contexts do provide basic resources for students who seek to learn more about Black queer history. As participants are exposed both to homophobia and Black queer culture, they strengthen their Black and queer identities. They begin to arm themselves for the lifelong battle against homophobes with education, facts, and the confidence to speak up. Students learn these strategies and craft their identities based on interacting with other queer Black people, visible queer role models, television and social media, especially YouTube videos in which queer people express how they handle homophobia and maintain a healthy queer lifestyle.

The themes found throughout this study indicate that students face a continual battle against homophobia, but friends and allies protect their emotional and identity development. They want to remove the excuse of ignorance and deconstruct the homophobic aspects of their institutional and social environments. It is important to
bridge tolerance with acceptance, increasing the sense of belonging of LGBTQ students on HBCU campuses.
### Appendix A

List of HBCUs with Official LGBTQ Student Organization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College or University</th>
<th>Name of Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama State University</td>
<td>Amplified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlanta Metropolitan College</td>
<td>Advocate Student Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennett College</td>
<td>Bride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethune-Cookman University</td>
<td>Gay Straight Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowie State University</td>
<td>Gay Straight Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central State University</td>
<td>Gays and Lesbians United for Equality (GLUE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City College of New York</td>
<td>LGBT+ Open Alliance and Queer Student Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark Atlanta University</td>
<td>Empty Closet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuyahoga Community College</td>
<td>Lambda Gay-Straight Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth City State University</td>
<td>LGBTQ Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fayetteville State University</td>
<td>Friendly Loving Accepting Multi Sexual Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>Group Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida A&amp;M University</td>
<td>Spectrum LGBTQ + Pride Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hampton University</td>
<td>MOSAIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howard University</td>
<td>Coalition of Activist Students Celebrating the Acceptance of Diversity and Equality (CASCADE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson C Smith University</td>
<td>Sexuality Advocacy For Equality (SAFE) Pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langston University</td>
<td>Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Students and Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LeMoyne-Owens College</td>
<td>Creating Awareness and Reaching for Equality (Care)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meharry Medical College</td>
<td>OUT!Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morehouse College</td>
<td>SafeSpace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morehouse School of Medicine</td>
<td>Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan State University</td>
<td>Students Open to Unique Love (SOUL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norfolk State University</td>
<td>Leading the Education of Gay and Straight Individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Group Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina A&amp;T State University</td>
<td>Acceptance Without Exception Gay-Straight Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina Central University</td>
<td>Creating Open Lives for Real Success (COLORS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina Central University School of Law</td>
<td>Outlaw Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannah State</td>
<td>Gay-Straight Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelman College</td>
<td>Afrekete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee State University</td>
<td>Gay Straight Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tougaloo College</td>
<td>Tougaloo Pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of District of Columbia</td>
<td>The Alliance Group (TAG)-LGBT Support Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Maryland Eastern Shore</td>
<td>Uniquely Defined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of the Virgin Islands</td>
<td>One Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia State University</td>
<td>Rainbow Soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia State University</td>
<td>Gay-Straight Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winston-Salem State University</td>
<td>Prism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier University of Louisiana</td>
<td>Xavier LGBTQ Alliance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Recruitment Flyer

Gathering LGBTQ HBCU Student Experiences

Linking Your Voice to Social and Institutional Change

Historically, HBCUs (historically Black colleges and universities) have provided a nurturing academic and social environment for African American students. Yet according to research, in spite of improvements, homophobia is a major problem affecting LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning) students attending these institutions. As a graduate of two HBCUs, I’ve seen and experienced the damages of homophobic intra-racial marginalization to the social and academic environment, not surprisingly, on both campuses. I’ve witnessed humiliation, violence, and institutionalized discrimination perpetuated among the leadership, and hence, students. This study intends to document and explore LGBTQ student experiences at HBCUs, giving them a “voice” useful in facilitating campus leadership in making our HBCUs more inclusive and responsive to their needs. Our LGBTQ HBCU students deserve the same nurturing environment, chance to maintain a healthy wellbeing, and respect as other students, as well as a safe place to be openly who they are on campus.

My name is Kirstin, a Spelman ’05 and Hampton U ’09 alumna, current doctoral candidate concentrating in higher education administration at the College of William and
Mary in Virginia. The interview for this study focuses on student intersectional identity development and campus climates. Interested participants must be current HBCU undergraduates, identify as LGBTQ, have access to online video-chat, and have time for two interviews (up to 30 minutes duration, or one 60-minute session) and a follow-up. All participants will receive $20 and will be entered for a chance to receive a $50 gift card for the business of their choice, mailed after follow-up. For the follow-up, the transcripts will be emailed to the participants, giving the student an opportunity to provide changes, deletions or additions. To volunteer for the study, please email Kirstin at lgbtqhbcuexp@yahoo.com or kirstinbyrd@yahoo.com

If interested, please email Kirstin for the interview questions, consent and demographics forms. Interviews will be held between now and December of 2018, so email a time you will be available. Feel free to share this study with LGBTQ friends at other HBCUs. Find the study and share online at Twitter/Facebook/Instagram/LinkedIn. (@lgbtqhbcuexp, #lgbt #hbcu) Any Questions???? Contact Kirstin

Kirstin Byrd, Primary Investigator/Doctoral Candidate, College of William and Mary
kirstinbyrd@yahoo.com 757-920-4037
Pamela Eddy, PhD., Dissertation Chair, College of William and Mary
peddy@wm.edu 757-221-2349
Appendix C
Demographics Sheet

Please enter your email address, name, and a pseudonym that you would like used in any reporting out of information.

-------------------------------------------------------------

01 Please list the name of your HBCU

-------------------------------------------------------------

Q22 What is your major?

-------------------------------------------------------------

02 Age

-------------------------------------------------------------

03 Please enter your Race/Ethnicity

-------------------------------------------------------------
04 Please indicate which class year you are currently enrolled

- Circle your choice:
  - Freshman (1)
  - Sophomore (2)
  - Junior (3)
  - Senior (4)

05 Please list the student activities or clubs you are involved with at college and in the community

________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________

06 Please list your hometown and state of residence

________________________________________________________________

07 Please indicate the highest education level of your parent(s) or guardian(s)

________________________________________________________________
08 Parent Socioeconomic Status

- Poverty- below $24,000 (1)
- Middle Income- $30,000 - $100,000 (2)
- Upper Middle Income- $100,000- $350,000 (3)
- Upper Income- above $389,000 (4)

09 Please indicate if you are associated with a religious organization or if you consider yourself spiritual.

10 Preferred Pronoun/Gender used to describe yourself

11 Please indicate how you identify your sexual Orientation
12 Does your campus have an official LGBTQ student group or resource center?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Don’t know (3)

13 List other types of LGBTQ student supports on your campus

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

14 Describe your lived intersection of multiple identities (ex. LGBTQ, HBCU student, religion, activist, athlete artist, hometown, African American, major, etc.). Are any more important than the others?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Appendix D

Research Participation Informed Consent Form

Protocol #: StudentIRB-2018-09-22-13158-pedd
Title: LGBTQ HBCU Student Experiences
Principal Investigators: Kirstin Byrd and Dr. Pamela Eddy

This is to certify that I, ______________________________________, have been given the following information with respect to my participation in this study:

Synopsis: This study explores LGBTQ HBCU undergraduate student experiences via in-depth interviews in order to gain an understanding of how their experiences were influenced by institutional context. The interview is derived from various strands of research addressing a broad range of contributing factors that influence LGBTQ HBCU student identity and the ways in which the campus experience influences identity formation and quality of experience.

1. Purpose of the research: The purpose of this research is to document and explore the experiences of LGBTQ HBCU students in order to provide institutional leaders with information on how to improve the campus environment in becoming more inclusive and responsive to the needs of these students.

2. Procedure to be followed: As a participant in this study, I will be asked to participate in two (approximately 30-45 minute), or one 60-minute in-depth interview and a short member check (participant reviews researcher’s interpretation of interview transcript and checks for agreement). Interviews will occur via internet video-chat, and will be audio-recorded as a backup. I agree to provide the following demographic information prior to selection for this study: Institution, age, race, year, student activities, hometown, socioeconomic status, highest parent/guardian education level, religion/spirituality status, pronoun/gender used to describe self, sexual orientation, you’re your campus have an official LGBTQ student group/resource center, list other types of LGBTQ student supports on your campus, describe your lived intersection of multiple identities (LGBTQ, HBCU student, religion, activist, athlete, artist, hometown, etc.)

3. Discomfort and risks: The interview questions may cover sensitive information about identity that possibly could cause some stress. The researcher will seek to minimize any stress or discomfort. If any concerns arise in the interview, however, you have the right to stop the interview at any time and/or not answer interview questions that cause discomfort. The researcher will have available referral information for support should you desire.

4. Potential benefits. The potential benefits of this study are its contribution to knowledge about LGBTQ HBCU students, and its usefulness in informing student affairs practice with regard to making campuses more inclusive and responsive to this population’s needs. Your participation can provide a time of reflection that helps you understand your own experiences better.

5. Statement of confidentiality: Participant information will be kept anonymous. This includes name and institution. Video chats will be erased after completion of study.
6. **Voluntary participation:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Interviewees are free to withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. I may choose to skip any question or activity.

7. **Incentive for participation.** You will receive $20 and your name will be included for a random drawing of a $50 gift card from Walmart, or business of your choice.

8. I am aware that I must be at least 18 years of age, an HBCU undergraduate student, and identify as LGBTQ to participate in this project.

9. I may obtain a copy of the research results by contacting Kirstin Byrd (kirstinbyrd@yahoo.com or 757-920-4037).

10. **Termination of participation:** Participation may be terminated by the researcher if it is deemed that the participant is unable to perform the tasks presented.

11. Questions or concerns regarding participation in this research should be directed to: Dr. Pamela Eddy at 757-221-2349 peddy@wm.edu.

12. I am aware that I may report dissatisfactions with any aspect of this study to Dr. Thomas Ward, the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, by telephone (757-221-2358) or email (tom.ward@wm.edu).

I agree to participate in this study and have read all the information provided on this form. My signature below confirms that my participation in this project is voluntary and that I have received a copy of this consent form.

__________________________________________________________________

_____
Signature Date

__________________________________________________________________

_____
Witness signature Date
Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Research Questions

RQ1- How do LGBTQ students experience the HBCU?

RQ2- How does the HBCU context contribute to the LGBTQ student identity?

RQ3- How do LGBTQ students describe the HBCU culture and subcultures?

Interview Protocol 1—Identity Formation/Intersectionality/QOC

1. How do you describe who you are and your identity to others?
   a. How do you make sense of being Black, Gendered, Queer?
   b. Do some aspects of your identity take precedence? How does context influence how you present your identity to others?
   c. How strongly do you feel racial pride? Queer pride?

2. Describe when and how you first began to recognize your identity as LGBTQ and Black.
   a. How were you supported at the time?
   b. Describe if different parts of your identity (LGBTQ and Black) developed concurrently or at different stages.
   c. How did this identity development intersect?

3. Describe an event in which you were treated differently because of your identity.
   a. Did you access allies to help you process this event?
   b. What strategies did you do to deal with this?

4. In what ways does your gender, race, sexuality, age, HBCU student status, religion, and other identities influence how you see the world?
   a. What has contributed to your identity formation?
   b. How has this changed over time?
   c. In what ways has being a double or triple minority influenced your views?

5. How does your identity influence your experience at your HBCU? Outside of college?
   a. How have you compartmentalized your sexuality and your racial identity on campus?
b. What strategies have you employed to deal with challenges on campus that emerge due to your identity?

c. How have others influenced how you conceptualize your identity? What has supported your identity development?

6. What strategies have you used to battle against racism or homophobia?
   a. How do these differ or are the same depending on where you are? Home/college/friends/family
   b. How did you begin to learn these strategies?
   c. How did older generations of Black LGBTQ women help in your own identity formation and learning of strategies? Pave the way?

7. Describe your coming out experience (if this has occurred)
   a. Have you been publicly outed? Describe.
   b. How did religion or your spirituality influence this experience?
   c. How did family/friends influence this experience?
   d. How did a sense of belonging to a larger LGBTQ community influence this experience?

8. As I try to understand the complexity of identity formation for HBCU LGBTQ college students, what else should I be thinking about? Anything I missed as critical to your identity formation process?

**Interview Protocol 2—HBCU Culture/Campus Environment**

1. Ask any clarifying questions from the first interview; conduct a short recap of the person’s interview (hand out summary sheet).

2. Today we are going to discuss more about your experiences as a LGBTQ student on an HBCU campus. How would you describe the culture and climate on your campus relative to LGBTQ students?
   a. Describe any sub-cultures on campus.
   b. What types of challenges have you/LGBTQ students faced?
   c. How would you describe the activism on campus in support of LGBTQ students?

3. Describe any discrimination you have faced on campus due to your identity.
   a. How has the institution dealt with instances of discrimination?
b. Is the discrimination overt or subtle/micro?
c. How have students fought back against discrimination on campus?
d. Are the strategies used on campus to combat discrimination the same/different than those in general society you have seen?

4. As a LGBTQ student on campus, what has supported you best in being accepted as who you are? Have you had any particular challenges with different stakeholders on campus? (students, faculty, administration, staff, other/describe)?
   a. Formal offices?
   b. Informal individuals?
   c. Peers?

5. Describe any type of activism occurring on campus regarding the various elements of your identity (Black/LGBTQ)
   a. How has the national dialogue on race and gender influenced your campus environment?
   b. How does activism on campus specifically address issues of homophobia on campus?
   c. Describe how you resist systems of racism/homophobia while an HBCU student.

6. How can the HBCU culture change to be more supportive of LGBTQ students?
   a. What role have you played as a college student on campus to work to change the culture to be more open for the LGBTQ students who will come after you?
   b. Describe if the HBCU supported some aspects of your identity more than others?
   c. How do you perceive the experiences of heterosexuals are on campus?

7. If you came out while in college, how has the HBCU environment helped support/hinder this process?
   a. Allies/safe zones?
   b. Have you experienced or witnessed any homophobia on campus?
   c. Outside of college?
   d. What strategies have you employed to combat homophobia?
   e. How tolerant is your campus towards LGBTQ students?
   f. How included do you feel on campus?

8. As you consider the needs you have as an LGBTQ student on campus, what advice would you give to campus leaders?
   a. Upper administration?
b. Student affairs?
c. Faculty leaders of student groups?
d. What specific actions are needed? Training? Creation of spaces? Curricular support?

9. Is there anything else you would like to add that I might not have covered regarding your experiences on an HBCU campus?
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doi:10.1525/sp.2000.47.1.03x0283w


doi:10.1300/j035v22n01_06
Vita
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Education
College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA
Ed.D. Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership, Higher Education Administration Anticipated graduation May 2020
Hampton University, Hampton, VA
M.A. Counseling, College Student Development August 2009
Spelman College, Atlanta GA
B.A. Social Psychology December 2005

Experience
College of William & Mary
Intern for Center for Student Diversity
June-September 2019
- Researched various higher education diversity sites, adding new resources to W&M context
- Coordinated and hosted LGBTQ+ student reception and transgender speaker
- Supported programming for diverse student populations
- Updated and expanded the Center for Student Diversity website

College of William and Mary
Graduate Proctor for Student Accessibility Services May 2018- present
- Disseminated and collected exams for students with accommodations
- Organized and delivered testing documents, maintaining confidentiality

College of William and Mary
Graduate Assistant
Fall-Spring 2009-2010
- Assisted professor in use of technology
- Assisted in study abroad program preparation

Hampton University
Upward Bound Tutor Counselor
Summer 2009
- Assisted/counseled High School students during summer residential program
- Counseled students with regard to college choice and life skills
- Residential dorm aid, conducted hall meetings, learned from students

Academic
College of William and Mary Social Justice and Diversity Research Fellowship 2017-2018; American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) Holmes Scholars Program 2018-present

Presentations
“Identified Needs and Help-Seeking Behaviors of LGBTQ College Students,” Kirstin Byrd and Clay Martin, Poster session presented at the William and Mary School of Education Research Symposium, March 30, 2018
“LGBTQ HBCU Student Experiences,” Poster session presented at the annual conference of the AACTE, Louisville KY, February 22, 2019