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The Relationship Among Race, Sense Of Belonging, And The Experiences Of Selected Black Students At A Predominately White Institution

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By

Shené V. Owens

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Dedication

A love letter to Black students everywhere,

I pray that this letter finds you well. In moments of challenges that may cause you to question your worth, I want you to know that your presence at your university is valued and necessary. In spaces where diversity may be lacking, your perspectives and achievements enhance the educational environment.

I acknowledge the courage it takes to navigate an environment where microaggressions, racism, colorism, stereotypes, othering, isolation, and loneliness may overshadow your experiences. In a world that does not always recognize your brilliance, I want to remind you of the light that you bring to your institution. Stand proud and bask in your greatness.

I acknowledge that you may face moments of loneliness, but please remember that you are not alone. Your community, both within and beyond your institution, stands beside you in solidarity. Find comfort in the shared experiences of those who have walked similar paths and find strength in the support networks that exist. You have friends and advocates who believe in your potential and are committed to creating a space where you can thrive. I pray you "find your people" and the resources to provide you with a sense of belonging.

I will continue to work towards dismantling the barriers that perpetuate systemic and structural racism. I will continue to elevate your voices and create spaces for you to feel safe, seen, and celebrated. I dedicate this dissertation to you. I want you to know that you are worthy. You are loved. You are enough. Your dreams are valid. Your voice is essential. I hear you and I see you.

With love,

S.V.O

To my parents: I always want to make you proud. Thank you for every prayer, song, GIF, and word of encouragement.

To my brother, cousins, and aunts: Education has always been #1 priority in our family. Thank you for understanding when I needed to miss family functions (or bring my laptop with me).

To my nieces, nephews, and godchildren: You fuel me. I want you to know you can do anything. Work hard and focus on YOUR goals.

To my friends and line sisters: You believe in me on days that I forget to believe in myself. Thank you for making me slow down, take care of myself, and make time for fun.

To the Black women in the United States who hold a PhD: (Less than 5% of the total Ph.D. population) I see you. I thank you for your prayers and covering during this 11.5-year journey.

To my angels: (Those who have passed away throughout this journey) Uncle Larry, Mr. Moon, Dr. Foster, Grandma, Sadé, Pam, Marv, Soror Lewis and Joshua. Our memories kept me going.

Special thanks to Best Friend: Dr. Tieandra L. Cole. In 2008 we said "No English major left behind" and we never wavered from that. From undergrad, to grad school, to PhD we have gone through each journey together. When you finished your doctorate, you stayed by my side and cheered me to the finish line. Thank you for every facetime call, text, and flight that you have taken just to put me at ease.

To all the individuals who have supported me throughout my doctoral journey and in my growth and development as a student, educator, mentor, and advocate. Thank you for your continuous love, support, encouraging words and prayers.

> *"Good Better Best.*
> *Never let it rest.*
> *Until your good is better.*
> *And your better is best."*

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Abstract

This qualitative research used Strayhorn's (2019) theoretical framework to explore the lived experiences of selected Black students at a predominately White institution (PWI). This study sought out to understand the race-related experiences of selected Black students at a PWI, then to understand if those experiences have affected their sense of belonging. Nine undergraduate students were purposively selected to participate in this study. Data collection involved recruitment surveys and two semi-structure interviews. Through an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) lens the following themes emerged from this research study: (a) students' perceptions of Prestigious University, (b) financial aid, (c) the COVID-19 global pandemic, (d) community, (e) physical spaces on campus, and (f) what it means to "be Black" at a PWI. The results of this research study will be used to elevate the voices and narratives of Black undergraduate college students, shedding light on their lived experiences. This research seeks to provide valuable insight for institutions, practitioners and higher education leaders on addressing issues related to race and sense of belonging, to provide support to students on their college campuses.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I am the Black Child
All the world waits my coming
All the world watches with interest
to see what I shall become

Civilization hangs in the balance
What I am, the world of tomorrow will be

I am the Black Child
You have brought me into this world
about which I know nothing
You hold in your hand my destiny
You determine whether I shall succeed or fail

Give me a world where I can walk tall and proud
Train me to love myself and my people
to build and maintain a great nation.

- ([Motivational poem], n.d.)

The hashtag "Black Lives Matter" began a social movement in 2012 after the killing of Trayvon Martin (Thebault, 2022). Trayvon Martin was an unarmed 17-year-old Black boy who was killed while walking home in Florida on February 26, 2012. The man who killed him went unpunished in a jury trial (Baldwin, 2022). The murder of Trayvon Martin may have started the Black Lives Matter movement, but unfortunately, he was one of the many Black men and women killed in the United States (U.S.).

Eric Garner was a 43-year-old Black man killed by police officers on July 17, 2014, in New York, after being put in an illegal chokehold while being arrested. This resulted in him

losing consciousness and later dying (A. Baker et al., 2015). Michael Brown was an unarmed 18-year-old Black man who was killed by a police officer on August 9, 2014, in Missouri. This officer involved shooting ignited both protest and riots in his community (Halpern, 2015). Tamir Rice was a 12-year-old Black boy who was killed by a police officer while playing with a toy gun on November 22, 2014, in Ohio. The U.S. Department found insufficient evidence to support federal changes against the officers (Lynch et al., 2020). Walter Scott was a 50-year-old unarmed Black man who was fatally shot in the back by a police officer on April 4, 2015, in South Carolina. The Police officer was convicted on a federal civil rights charge and sentenced to 20 years in prison. This officer-involved shooting evoked national protest over racially biased policing (Barajas, 2016). Sandra Bland was a 28-year-old Black woman who was taken into custody after a minor traffic violation. Three days later, she was then found dead in her jail cell on July 13, 2015 (Queally, 2015). Alton Sterling was a 37-year-old Black man killed by police officers on July 5, 2016, in Louisiana, after being pinned to the ground during an arrest. An officer claimed Alton was reaching for a gun and then shot him six times at close range (Karousos, 2022). Philando Castile was a 32-year-old Black man killed by a police officer on July 6, 2016, in Minnesota during a traffic stop. The police officer was charged with second-degree manslaughter and two counts of dangerous discharge of a firearm but was later acquitted of all charges (Nelson, 2018). Ahmaud Arbery was a 25-year-old Black man killed after being chased by White residents, while out for a run in his neighborhood on February 23, 2020, in Georgia. The three White men who chased him down and killed him were convicted of murder and federal hate crimes (Andone, 2021). Breonna Taylor was a 26-year-old Black woman who was shot and killed by police during a raid on her apartment on March 13, 2020, in Kentucky. No officer has been charged with her death (Waldrop et al., 2022).

George Floyd was a 46-year-old Black man killed on May 25, 2020, by a White police officer who kneeled on his neck for over 9 minutes. This invoked the largest racial justice protest in the U.S. since the Civil Rights Movement (Silverstein, 2021). In the middle of the COVID-19 global pandemic, countries across the world rallied for Black Lives Matter protest. Following his death, colleges and universities issued statements condemning the murder and vowing to address systemic racism on their campuses (Valandra et al., 2022). After the killing of George Floyd, there was a call to action from college students. They began to highlight systemic racism in higher education and its influence on Black students, faculty, and staff. Students put pressure on their colleges and universities to acknowledge racist histories and discriminatory practices, asked to hire more Black faculty and staff, and highlighted racial inequities on their campuses (Meikle & Morris, 2022). As protests against systemic racism and police brutality continued around the U.S., Black students attending predominately White institutions (PWI) had to overcome many obstacles while navigating their college career (Frazier, 2016). Thoughts are not just on exams and social calendars. There was also a fear, anger, and fatigue associated with the tragic killings of Black people.

Balancing Academia and Racial Injustice

As both a Black student and educator, I understand the motivation for Black college students to lead and support movements focused on racial inequity on and off campus. As the Black Lives Matter movement began to rise, this led to activist protesting throughout the country, leading marches, and using social media to report events in real time, and uniting people through #BlackLivesMatter. Many of the protests and uprisings around the country have involved college students. Students are still demanding that college and universities establish

safe spaces for Students of Color. The student protest of the 2020s echoes those of the 1960s (Dickey, 2016). Within the dual roles of student and educator, I am also a Black woman.

Being Black at a PWI is also to be Black in America. I remember where I was in July 2013, when the man who killed Trayvon Martin was found not guilty of murder. I remember where I was in in 2014 when the news reported that the officer would not be charged for the death of Eric Garner. I remember where I was in 2015 when the news reported that the officer who shot and killed Michael Brown would not be charged with his death. Although I bring forth the names of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, there are countless names that can be included in this list. Some that may not have reached national attention. While processing the loss of these Black men, women, and boys, to which many have gone without penalty to their killers, I then in turn had to help my students as they are processing these losses. While we remain students and a higher education professional, we are first and will always be Black in America. As we mourn the repeated deaths of people to whom we do not know, but remind us of our father, brothers, sisters, and a reflection of ourselves, we try our best to believe the words that we speak, and the hashtag that we use, even though the world tells us differently #BlackLivesMatter. The ages of these victims range from 12 to 50 years old. They deserved to grow old. Their lives matter.

These instances of racial injustice have forced Black students to choose between fully processing their emotions and producing work to succeed academically (Boyd, 2020). I remember avoiding the news or attending protest demanding justice for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in Summer 2020. Throughout the decades of Black men and women being murdered by police, I have been on the frontlines supporting the Black Lives Matter movement

and the fight for racial and social justice. In 2020, in the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic, I felt like I was forced to decide between fully processing my emotions and showing up as an educator and student. My research study focuses on how Black students make meaning of their experiences at their PWI, in the world we live in, in 2023. In this study, I explored perceptions of sense of belonging among selected Black students enrolled at PWI. This study is not just about being Black at a PWI, but to explore if the participants' race has an influence on their sense of belonging at their institution. As I give voice to Black students and give them an opportunity to share their experiences of what it is like to navigate being Black at their PWI, while also navigating being Black in America; I am adding to the literature and history of Black students' experiences in higher education.

For this study, I use the term "Black" instead of "African American" to be more inclusive and acknowledge the diversity within the Black community. Both terms describe people of African descent in the U.S. but carry different connotations. *Black* in this study is used to include individuals from various ethnic backgrounds, such as African, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Latino. The decision to capitalize Black aligns with the American Psychological Association (APA) style guide to use of Black with a capital B when referring to people in a racial, ethnic or cultural context (American Psychological Association, 2022). Although other authors cited within this dissertation may prefer to use the term "African American," I chose to use the term Black to reflect the diversity and complexity of the Black experience.

Throughout this study, I will use the term *PWI* rather than *Historically White Institution*. These terms are often use in reference to institutions of higher education that historically had a majority White student body and faculty. These terms are often used interchangeably, because a Historically White Institution can also be a PWI. A PWI is an institution where most of the

6

student body and faculty are White. The term focuses on the current demographics of the institution. Historically White Institutions have a legacy of being predominately White. They are rooted in exclusionary practices or policies that limited access to certain racial or ethnic groups. These colleges were only open to White students and were not integrated until the late 1960s and 1970s (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2022). This study will focus on the current demographics of the student body in relation to the study participants, which is why the term PWI is appropriate.

The purpose of this research study was to identify how race influences the sense of belonging of selected Black students at a PWI. In addition, this study provided a better understanding of their lived experiences. A sense of belonging refers to feeling valued and accepted as a member of a community (Strayhorn, 2019). A sense of belonging is tied to student success and persistence in college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Students who are active with campus organizations often feel a stronger sense of belonging and connectedness (Garcia, 2010). The results of this research study seek to elevate the voices and lived experiences of participating Black undergraduate college students, and propose how institutions, practitioners and higher education leaders can address race and sense of belonging, to provide support to students on their college campuses.

Statement of the Problem

Although Black students have slowly gained more access to U.S. higher education over the past three centuries, they still experience barriers academically and socially; often feeling they do not belong (Hoffman, 2018). Oftentimes Black students experience lower levels of sense of belonging and feel that they are treated differently based on their race. Students of Color experience racist microaggressions on campus which creates a perception that their college campus is unwelcoming to Students of Color (Harwood et al., 2012). As colleges and

universities increase their diversity, it is also important to acknowledge that different groups of students may view a college campus and belonging differently (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007). Students of Color often find themselves asking "Do I belong?" (Walton & Cohen, 2007, p. 94).

PWIs have grown to be more diverse, but these colleges and universities have not changed the campus climate (Frazier, 2016). According to J. D. Jones and Williams (2006), Black students who attend PWIs have lower retention rates than White students. Black students are expected to be attentive to their studies while dealing with microaggressions throughout their college career (Frazier, 2016). They also encounter race-related experiences when it comes to acceptance, pressure to conform to stereotypes, and unequal treatment by faculty, staff, and their White peers (Grier-Reed, 2010). For this study, I defined race-related experiences as events, interactions, or situations that are influenced by or connected to an individual's racial background.

Many challenges related to race and racism still exist on college campuses. Some of these challenges are overt, such as racial slurs, violence, and racial segregation and discrimination, but other experiences are described as racial microaggressions (Franklin, 2016). Sue et al. (2007) defined racial microaggressions as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to People of Color because they belong to a racial minority group" (p. 273). Experiences of racial microaggressions can lead Black students to feel isolated and unsupported by their campus community (Harwood et al., 2012). The term sense of belonging was introduced by Hurtado and Carter (1997) and defined as an individual's perception of their place in relation to a group or campus community.

Hurtado and Carter's model of sense of belonging emphasizes the importance of social integration and validation. It focuses on the interactions with peers, faculty, and staff. Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that a student's sense of belonging was often tied to their perception of the racial climate on campus. This can be relevant in understanding the influence these relationships have on the sense of belonging of the selected Black students, but through an IPA approach, I want the students to make meaning of their experiences rather than for me to guide them with these relationship constraints. Strayhorn's (2012) work emphasizes intersectionality and recognizes the multiple social identities that each individual has that may influence their experiences. Strayhorn's model takes a holistic approach to understanding sense of belonging that aligned with my study. The following section of this chapter will include a description and discussion of Strayhorn's Model of a Sense of Belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), which serves as the theoretical lens for this study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided this study was Strayhorn's (2019) model for student belonging, in order to understand the influence race has on sense of belonging among selected Black students at a PWI. Strayhorn's research focuses on sense of belonging and experiences of marginalized college students at PWIs. In 2012, he introduced the Model of Sense of Belonging. This model defines belonging as a

> student's perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, or peers. (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 4)

9

His model of sense of belonging consisted of seven core elements, which grew in part from Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs.

Strayhorn's (2012) model consisted of seven core elements of sense of belonging that was used to frame and analyze the study. The seven elements are: (a) A universal, basic human need; (b) Fundamental motive sufficient to drive behavior; (c) Context, time and factors determine importance; (d) It is related to mattering; (e) It is influenced by one's identities; (f) Leads to positive outcome and success; and (g) Must be satisfied as conditions change (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 30).

The first core element states that sense of belonging is a "basic human need" (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 29). College student's need for belonging must be met before their other needs such as knowledge and self-actualization (Strayhorn, 2019). Students need to feel a sense of belonging in order to meet their academic goals (Strayhorn, 2019). If a student does not feel connected to their institution, they will not perform well in the classroom. Strayhorn's model places the concept of belonging in a hierarchy of needs. Drawing from Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, Strayhorn used a pyramid as a visual representation of basic human needs hierarchy (Figure 1). At the top of the pyramid are self-actualization, followed by esteem. Belonging is in the middle of the pyramid, with safety and physiological needs at the bottom. All human needs are organized into a hierarchy from basic physiological needs, such as food, water, sleep, and shelter which appear at the foundation of the pyramid, to higher needs, such as belonging, esteem, and self-actualization that appear at the top (Strayhorn, 2019). Once a student's physiological and safety needs are met, the student will then want to have their social needs met. Strayhorn (2020) designed his model based on the concept that college students also have basic needs that need to be met before other needs can be addressed. The basic needs of food and shelter, which appear at

the bottom of the hierarchy, prevent students from achieving a sense of belonging within their institution. It is important for educators to think about ways to meet the basic needs of students.

Figure 1

Strayhorn's Basic Human Needs Hierarchy
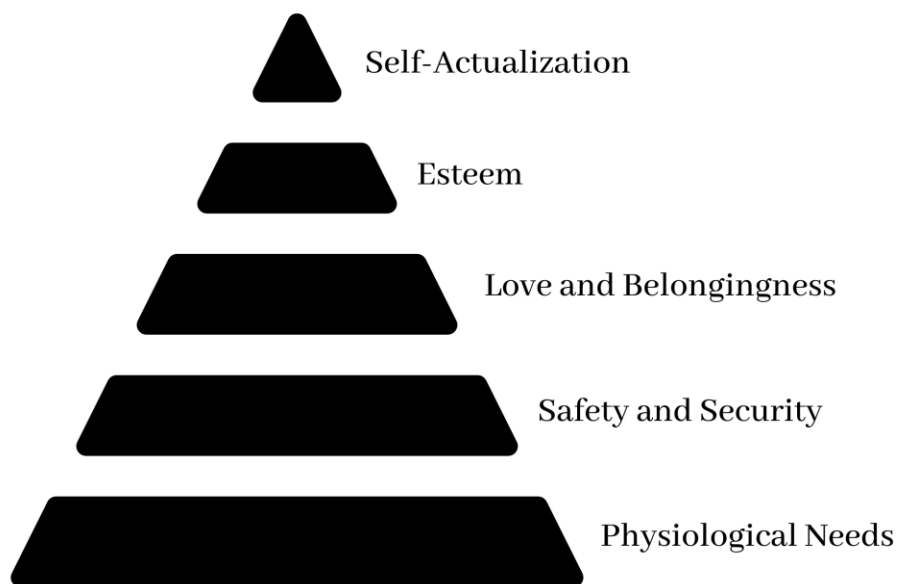
The second core element describes sense of belonging as a "fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior" (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 32). The need to belong can serve as motivation for students to get involved at their institution, joining clubs and organizations. This allows students to gain a connection to the institution. Strayhorn suggests that all people want to feel special, part of something larger, cared about by others, needed, valued, and supported. Within this study, participants are asked about their campus involvement. This is done to determine how or if they have found community within the clubs and organizations that they belong to on campus.

The third core element is based on the feeling of belonging allowing students to feel secure and accepted. Generally, people want to be accepted. On a college campus, students are searching to find their place. As a Black student at a PWI, there is an added layer to that need as it pertains to their race (Strayhorn, 2019). This element speaks to the purpose of this study. The participants are making meaning of the relationship between their race, sense of belonging and experiences.

The fourth core element explains that students need to feel that they matter to their university. To matter means that you are valued or appreciated by others (Cornwall, 2023). Students of Color want to feel as though they are more than a quota that is met for diversity, or a picture in the brochure. Students want to feel as though they matter, and they belong. Black students who feel an affiliation to the university are more likely to feel as though they belong (Booker, 2016).

The fifth core element focuses on intersectionality. The term intersectionality was originally coined by legal race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s. Crenshaw (1989) developed the framework to understand how identities such as race, gender and class intersect in overlapping systems of oppression and discrimination. A student's social identity (race/ethnicity, religion, gender, etc.) can affect their sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). Oftentimes, students struggle with trying to fit in without compromising their own identity. The idea that Black people are all the same is based racial stereotypes and beliefs that all members of the same race share characteristics (Green, 2023). Racial stereotypes in U.S. history have shaped the attitudes towards African American and are still prevalent in 2023.

The sixth core element explains that a student is more likely to develop a connection and commitment to their institution after developing a sense of belonging. For Black students, if they

feel they belong to and supported by an institution in an academic setting, this will in turn show up in their academic achievement (Booker, 2016).

The final core element states that sense of belonging "must be satisfied on a continual basis" (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 39). It emphasizes the fact that addressing the campus climate is important to addressing sense of belonging. Belonging at an institution is not just about an individual, it involves the campus and the culture. Campus climate is defined as a "measure of people's attitudes about, perceptions of, and experiences within a specified environment" (Ryder & Mitchell, 2013, p. 34). Black students' perception of campus climate affect how they connect with others on campus. These perceptions influence students' sense of belonging, campus involvement, and performance (Mills, 2021).

Strayhorn's (2012) model of sense of belonging is appropriate in framing this study because of the emphasis on social identity. Strayhorn emphasizes that a sense of belonging is especially important to Students of Color (Strayhorn, 2019). This study used a phenomenological research approach where participants were interviewed about their race-related experiences as Black students and how that influences their sense of belonging at their PWI. My research questions are centered around belonging and mattering, using Strayhorn's theory as a framework.

Research Questions

I sought to understand the race-related experiences of selected Black students at a PWI, then to understand how those experiences have affected their sense of belonging. This study provided an opportunity for Black students, whose voices are traditionally silenced, to be heard. The research questions that guided the study were:

How do the selected Black students at a PWI make meaning of their lived experiences and sense of belonging on campus?

a. How does race affect the experiences of selected Black students at a PWI?

b. What factors contributed to the sense of belonging of selected Black students at a PWI?

Significance of the Study

In the summer of 2020, in the U.S. and across the world, the streets were filled with people and unified voices demanding justice, police reform and an end of systemic racism (Meikle & Morris, 2022). There was a collective and cultural trauma that took place after the murder of George Floyd. This was not the first time that we, as Black people experienced racial injustice and inequality, but during this time, colleges and universities felt a social responsibility to address the social, environmental, and economic well-being of the communities (Meikle & Morris, 2022). I bring up the summer of 2020 and all the murders of unarmed Black people across the country as a means to speak their names and as a reminder of the repeated instances of violence against Black people in the U.S. As Black students navigate their colleges and universities, they are also navigating a country that is rooted in racism and unfair treatment. As I walk the halls of my college campus as an educated Black woman with multiple degrees, I am mindful of the power and vulnerability of my Blackness. This is more reason why belonging is important for Black students. A lack of sense of belonging can have adverse effects. Without a sense of belonging at a PWI, students can feel disconnected from their campus and feel isolated from their instructors and peers (Yuan, 2017).

In June 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College that college and universities can no longer take race into consideration when granting admission. This will have a direct effect on Black and Latino students. U.S. President Joe Biden stated that he does not agree with this Supreme Court decision

14

and acknowledges that discrimination still exists in the U.S. He advised students to share aspects of their culture in their admissions essays and share how race has affected their life. A student cannot be admitted based on their race, but their experiences as an individual are taken into consideration.

The number of Black and Latino students attending selective colleges in the U.S. is projected to drop (Marken, 2024). This will also make it more difficult to build a diverse population of students at PWIs. Affirmative action gave students who have been systematically excluded from most colleges and universities in the U.S., an opportunity to an education. Despite how much the world around them shows them that they are not on an even playing field with the White majority, the policies that were put in place to grant them opportunities to be considered to enter spaces that have historically excluded them from, has now been taken away. Overturning this affirmative action ruling, sends a message to Black students and other Student of Color that they do not belong at elite institutions.

The phenomenon that I addressed in this study is, Black students at PWI and the influences that the world around them in 2023 has on their sense of belonging. Through this study, I used the voices of the selected Black students at a PWI to carry out change in higher education. This study allowed students to make meaning of their sense of belonging and express what they need. This will be used to inform process and practice in the field of higher education for faculty, staff, administrators, and other students.

Definitions of Terms

This section defines and provides context to the key terms used in this study, as they relate to the relationships among race, sense of belonging, and the experiences of Black students at a PWI.

- *Anti-Blackness.* A specific form of racism, rooted in the history and experience of enslavement, that is targeted against Black people and communities (Dryden & Nnorom, 2021).

- *Black/African American*. Participants of this study self-identified as Black. The terms Black or African American refer to a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (e.g., African American, Caribbean-American, African immigrants living in the U.S.; U.S. (Census Bureau, 2022).

- *Campus climate*. A measure of people's attitudes about, perceptions of, and experiences within a specified environment (Ryder & Mitchell, 2013).

- *Colorism.* A form of discrimination, typically with a racial or ethnic group, favoring people with lighter skin tones over those with darker skin (Cowart, 2021).

- *Othering.* Refers to a social and psychological process that occurs when one group, often the dominant or majority group, defines another group as different based on culture, race, ethnicity, or religion (Khan, 2022).

- *People (Persons) of color.* A term used to describe any person who is not white. It does not solely refer to African Americans; rather, it encompasses all non-white groups and emphasizes the common experiences of systemic racism (Mcleod, 2021).

- *Predominately White Institution*. Abbreviated as PWI; colleges and universities where 50% or more of the overall student population is White (Brown & Dancy, 2010).

- *Race-related experiences*. The term "race-related experiences" in the context of this study, refers to events, interactions, or situations that are influenced by or connected to an individual's racial background. This included social interactions, access to opportunities, and discrimination.

- *Racial battle fatigue.* The psychological, physiological, and behavioral stress responses due to the cumulative impact of racial microaggressions (Franklin, 2016).

- *Racial microaggressions.* This term refers to "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults toward People of Color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). Solórzano et al. (2000) defined racial microaggressions as subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people, often automatically or unconsciously.

- *Racism.* Prejudice or discrimination directed against someone of a different race based on belief that one's own race is superior. This definition emphasizes the prejudice beliefs and behaviors that negatively affect an individual or group of a different race (American Psychological Association, 2022).

- *Sense of belonging.* In terms of college, a sense of belonging refers to students perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers (Strayhorn, 2012).

- *Students of Color.* Those who identify themselves as African American, Asian American, Latino, Native American, bi-racial or multi-racial, also referred to as members of historically underrepresented groups.

- *Historically underrepresented students.* This term refers to groups who have been denied access and/or suffered past institutional discrimination in the U.S. (Emory University, 2023).

Researcher's Positionality

A researcher's positionality describes an individual's world view and the position they take within the research study (Holmes, 2020). My roles as a student, educator and mentor have deepened my understanding of the race-related experiences of Black Students at a PWI. I am a Black woman, serving as an administrator at a PWI. In this role I provide academic, social, and transition support for undergraduate and graduate students from underserved and/or underrepresented populations. I am a Black woman, who is also a doctoral student at a PWI. Wearing the hats of both administrator and student, I experience microaggressions, isolation, additional tax/expectations, often being the only Black person in meetings and the classroom, being the voice of Black people, imposter syndrome, and having my worth questioned (by self and others). I experience these race-related experiences, as an administrator, as a student, and then turn around and help support my students as they manage with these experiences. Working and attending a PWI has been a new experience for me.

Growing up, I lived in diverse communities. I was born in the Bronx, New York, in a neighborhood that was mostly comprised of Puerto Rican and Black families. I then moved to Teaneck, New Jersey, where I spent most of my childhood. Teaneck was once coined the "Model Town" in America (Mark, 2011, p. 12). It was selected by the federal government in 1949 to be showcased as an example of what democracy should look like on the local level, as a model American community. In 1965, Teaneck became the first White majority town in the nation to voluntarily desegregate their school system (Mark, 2011).

My parents intentionally looked for a diverse community in which to raise their children. My parents and I lived on what was called "the Black side" of Teaneck. As a community, we casually labeled sections of the town "the Black side" or "the White side" not fully understand

the history of these labels in connection to redlining in the U.S. Redlining is where banks, finance, and insurance companies intentionally refused Black people mortgages, and direct them towards segregated neighborhoods (Flournoy, 2021). At the time when I lived in Teaneck, there were four elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. Depending on where you lived would determine which elementary or middle school you attend, but eventually, everyone would attend the same high school (unless you opted to attend a private school in a neighboring town). Although I lived in a diverse community, I found myself being the minority in many spaces. There were few Students of Color in my honors classes. There were few Students of Color who also held an office on student council or served as a class officer. My senior year of high school, I served as class president and was asked to attend the board meeting for the Teaneck Board of Education. In these meetings, this was the first time that it was clear to me that I was young, Black, a woman, and if I did not speak up for myself and peers, that my voice may be ignored. I was given a seat at the table, and it was time to use it. This is where I found my voice. My drive for advocating and giving voice to others that might otherwise be heard.

When it was time for me to apply to colleges, I only applied to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Some of my teachers and guidance counselors asked me "why are you choosing these schools, you can go anywhere" but these were the only schools that drew my interest, not just for an education, but for a well-rounded college experience. I come from a legacy of HBCU graduates. My maternal grandmother graduated from Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio. My father attended Bowie State University in Bowie, Maryland. My mother graduated from Howard University in Washington, D.C. My brother

graduated from North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, North Carolina. I graduated

from Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia, with both my bachelor's and master's degrees.

Growing up, the importance of education and the strong traditions of HBCUs were

instilled in me by my maternal grandmother. College never felt optional for me. I always knew

that would be my next step after high school. As a higher education professional, I now realize

how rare it is, that I am a third-generation college graduate. The traditions in my family of

attending a HBCU, shapes me as an educator, student, researcher and as a Black woman at a

PWI. Attending an HBCU allowed me to be in a primarily Black community with peers who

shared that same race, and higher educational and career aspirations that I did. I was able to

explore my interests, goals, and develop into the person and professional that I am today, without

having to question my sense of belonging at my university. I would not know this feeling until

much later.

As a Black woman on the campus of a PWI, I have felt excluded from study groups and

social settings. I assumed that it was because of cultural differences, but it prevented me from

developing a supportive network that would have been beneficial for me both socially and

academically. My experience as a Black doctoral student was not unique and the literature in

Chapter 2 provides insight on Black students not feeling that they are a part of a PWI. My

experiences attending a HBCU for both my bachelor's and master's degrees differed from my

experience attending a PWI for my doctoral degree.

I began my career in higher education working for my alma mater, Hampton University.

As I advanced in my career, I transitioned to working at other institutions that were

predominantly White. I then realized that attending a HBCU was also a part of my privilege as a

Black woman working with undergraduate Students of Color at PWIs. I realized that these

students have to face instances of racism, microaggressions, and imposter syndrome while seeking their degree. These were not the same issues I faced as an undergraduate student.

My experiences as a Black woman, including the area in which I grew up, the type of undergraduate institution I attended, and my career experiences in higher education has informed my interest in understanding how Black student navigate predominantly White campuses. This research study is closely tied to my identity as a Black woman who occupies space within PWIs. As a researcher, I want to make sure that anyone reading the experiences of the participants can understand their journey. I also understand that my identity as a Black woman may affect how my participants respond to me in the interview. Working with this population of students, I understand the use of words and phrases such as "you know what I mean" when referring to Black experiences, so I was intentional to ask participants to elaborate on references that they assume are common knowledge to another Black person. Being Black is also my strength. Participants may find comfort in sharing their experiences with another Black person.

The use of Strayhorn's (2012) Model of Sense of Belonging enhances my study and ability to understand the race-related experiences of selected Black students and how these experiences have affected their sense of belonging at their PWI. This theoretical framework has informed my research questions and research approach. My positionality as the researcher gives insight on who I am, my journey to this study, as well as my point of view. As a Black woman serving as the researcher in this study, I used the word "we" when referring to Black people as a collective, as I too am a part of the Black community. In Chapter 2, my literature review offers a brief history of Black students in U.S. higher education and synthesizes existing literature on the systemic issues Black students face, sense of belonging and the experiences of Black students at PWIs and at HBCUs, and support for Black students at PWIs. Chapter 3 outlines how the data

were generated for this study. In Chapter 4, I explore the university site and the participant

profiles. Chapter 5 provides an overview of the results from this IPA research study. In Chapter

6, I provide a summary of the research findings, answer the research questions, and contextualize

my data with my conceptual framework.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

I am somebody!
I am Black!
Beautiful!
Proud!
I must be respected!
I must be protected!
I am God's Child!
I am somebody!

-Reverend Jesse Jackson, 1968

This chapter provides an overview of relevant literature about how race and race-related issues affect the sense of belonging of Black students at predominately White institutions (PWI). In this chapter, I explore existing research related to this topic to provide context for my current study. This literature review is organized into the following sections: Brief History of Black People in U.S. Higher Education, Systemic Issues Black Students Face, Support for Black Students, and Sense of Belonging and the Experiences of Black Students.

Brief History of Black People in U.S. Higher Education

For most of U.S. history, most of the population of Black people were prohibited from learning to read or write. Anti-literacy laws made it illegal for enslaved and free People of Color to read or write (Hannah-Jones, 2019). Southern slave states enacted anti-literacy laws prohibiting anyone from teaching enslaved and free People of Color to read or write. The pursuit of education in the U.S. dates to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and Black people in America have

had to overcome obstacles that were places in their way to prevent them from gaining a quality education (Hannah-Jones, 2019).

For the first 200 years of higher education in the U.S., the only people who were allowed to teach or attend college were White men. Before the Civil War, Black people living in the South were prohibited from enrolling in college (Linley, 2018). Higher education institutions were not designed with Black students in mind. This conveyed a message that higher education was neither an attainable nor realistic option for Black people or other People of Color (Kane, 2019).

Most slaveholders were opposed to the education of Black people, due to their fear of educated Black population threatening their authority. Although it was against the law for a Black person to attempt to educate themselves, Black people developed strategies to become literate (H. A. Williams, 2005). In 1799, John Chavis became the first Black person on record to attend an American college or university. In 1792, he began his studies at the College of New Jersey, present day Princeton University. He then moved to Virginia was admitted into Washington Academy, present day Washington and Lee University (Titcomb, 2014). Alexander Lucius Twilight is on record as the first Black person to graduate from a college in the U.S. He received a bachelor's degree from Middlebury College in Vermont in 1823 (Titcomb, 2014).

In 1830, when the education of Black people was still prohibited, Oberlin College became the first higher education institution to admit Black students in large numbers (Karkouti, 2016). Cheyney State Training School, present day Cheyney University, was established in 1837, claiming to be the first historically Black institution (Karkouti, 2016). Following the American Civil War (1861-1865) over 30 colleges and universities were established between 1865 and 1880, to educate Black students. The founding of these institutions led to an increase in the

number of Black students both matriculating and graduating from college (Linley, 2018). Black colleges and universities were established by missionaries, abolitionist, and educators.

The Morrill Acts aided in providing higher education to Black people. The first Morrill Act of 1862 provided federal funding to state-level public education. The second Morrill Act of 1890 mandated that federal funding was also provided to institutions that had separate but equal facilities for Black students (Clayton & Peters, 2019). The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1890 expanded the opportunities for Black students, giving them access to educational opportunities at land-grant Universities. Universities, also known as Historically Black Land-Grant Universities. This act mandated that colleges eliminate race-based admission criteria or designate a second land-grand institution for Black Students. The act resulted in the designation of a set of HBCUs as land-grant Universities and allowing them to receive federal funding to support teaching, research and extension intended to serve underserved communities (Clayton & Peters, 2019).

During the 19th century, southern state governments successfully prevented the education of Black people through laws prohibiting Black students from attending higher education institutions (Karkouti, 2016). The 20th century brought about access for Black people with the decision of *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954 and the Civil Rights Movement (1955-1968). In the 1954 Supreme Court ruling (*Brown v. Board of Education*), it was declared that racial segregation in education was unconstitutional. It was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that federal legislation prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

President John F. Kennedy introduced the term affirmative action and signed Executive Order 10925 in March 1961 to ensure equal hiring and promotion practices (Karkouti, 2016). Aguirre and Martinez (2003) define affirmative action as:

"measures or practices that seek to terminate discriminatory practices by promoting the consideration of race, ethnicity, sex, or national origin in the availability of opportunity for a class of qualified individuals that have been the victims of historical, actual, or recurring discrimination" (p. 138).

The affirmative action practices of the 1960s increased the enrollment rates of Black students at PWIs (S. Harper et al., 2009).

Despite it being nearly 60 years since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Black students still experience isolation, racism, and racial microaggressions on college campuses, especially at PWIs (S. R. Harper, 2013). Access and opportunities for Black students did not eliminate racism or racist ideologies on college campuses (Franklin, 2016). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 resulted in access to education and an increased attendance of Black students at PWIs but succeeding in college is not limited to one's academic achievement; a student's sense of belonging is tied into the collegiate experience and their ability to succeed (Davis et al., 2019).

Colleges and universities must be willing to address their history of racism (L. D. Patton, 2016). Colleges and universities have begun to investigate their historic ties to the slave trade and address the fact that enslaved people were made to build college campuses and served faculty and students (S. Smith & Ellis, 2017). Brown University was among the first higher education institution to address their ties to slavery. In 2003, Brown's president Ruth Simmons, appointed a commission to investigate its historical relationship to racial slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. In 2006, Brown released a report from the steering committee on slavery and justice (Brown University, 2021). The University of Virginia acknowledged its past as an institution that enslaved 4,000 people. In 2010, a group of students raised awareness about the history of slavery at the university. As a result, the university built a Memorial to Enslaved

Laborers. Former University of Virginia President Teresa Sullivan founded a Commission on Slavery and the University. The commission began working in 2014 with the specific goal of examining the school's relationship with slavery in preparation for its bicentennial. In 2018, William & Mary put forth a resolution apologizing for its part in slavery and segregation. The resolution was presented during a time the university commemorated the 50th anniversary of the first three African American students in residence on campus (M. P. Williams, 2018).

Systemic Issues Black Students Face

This brief overview of the history of Black people in higher education in the previous section shows the long history of racism in the U.S. It outlined how Black people were limited the educational opportunities and decisions to increase diversity at PWIs. Although PWIs have become more diverse, they have done little to change their campus climate, experiences of racial microaggressions, and providing spaces where Black students feel welcomed (Harwood et al., 2012). By addressing negative racial campus climates, PWIs can than create a more inclusive campus community that supports Black students and provides them with a sense of belonging (Harwood et al., 2012). To address these systemic issues, educational leaders must seek an understanding of and acknowledge the race-related experiences of Black students (S. R. Harper, 2012). At PWIs, Black students face challenges such as feelings of isolation, marginalized, and exclusion (L. D. Patton et al., 2011). Some of the systemic issues that Black students face at PWI that I will address in this chapter are campus climate, microaggressions and racial battle fatigue.

Campus Climate

Campus cultures at PWIs can be challenging for Students of Color. As higher education leaders at PWIs work to address the race-related experiences of Black students, they must also seek to understand the experiences of isolation and racial microaggressions on the college

campus (S. R. Harper, 2013). Being the only or one of few Black students can be psychologically destressing and lead to feel pressure to dispel negative stereotypes and the need to represent all Black people (Griffith et al., 2019). Due to hostile and racial campus climate, the path to degree completion for Students of Color is often interrupted (S. R. Harper, 2012). Black students encounter discrimination, alienation, invisibility, and invalidation based on race (Nadal et al., 2014). Strayhorn (2019) described how feeling alienated or disconnected at PWIs negatively influences sense of belonging for Students of Color. While addressing campus climate, PWIs must also provide Students of Color with support and a sense of belonging (Kane, 2019).

A. E. Lewis et al. (2000) interviewed 75 African American, Asian American, Latina/o, and Native American students at a PWI and concluded that the participants were marginalized and faced pressures to represent their race and assimilate to the majority culture of their campus. Participants also reported feeling excluded from campus social networks and to which their White peers had access. Hurtado et al. (1998) noted the importance of understanding racial differences in perceptions of campus climate while developing policies and programs. Negative perception of campus racial climate can be detrimental to Students of Color as they adjust to the college campus (Thelamour et al., 2019).

Microaggressions

PWIs have not done enough to change their campus climate, resulting in a negative experience for Black students. The experiences for Black students at PWI are compounded by other elements that influence their campus community and ability to succeed (Hoffman, 2018). Harwood et al. (2012) explained that racial microaggressions occur on college campuses in residential, academic, and social settings. Whether intended or not, racial microaggressions send messages to historically underrepresented and marginalized groups that they are not welcome on

28

college campuses (Franklin, 2016). Constantine (2007) defined racial microaggressions as the "subtle and commonplace exchanges that somehow convey insulting or demeaning messages to People of Color" (p. 2).

Microaggressions are a part of the daily college experience of Students of Color (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015). To effectively address and understand the experience of Black students at PWIs, colleges and universities have to first understand race and racial microaggressions (Franklin, 2016). According to Sue et al. (2007), there are three forms of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are overt and intentionally harmful behaviors. Microassaults can be both verbal and nonverbal. Microassaults were once overtly everyday expressions in the U.S. but are no longer acceptable. These acts are conscious and deliberate with intentions to harm persons. Examples of microassaults include discriminating against someone and using racial slurs. Unfortunately, microassaults still occur on college campuses. In November 2022, a White student at the University of Kentucky was seen in a viral video assaulting two Black student in a resident hall. The video captured the Black students being physically attacked while racial slurs were being screamed at them (Reilly & Chavez, 2022). In February 2023, a racial slur was written on the dorm room door of two Black students attending Middle Tennessee State University. Someone wrote the "N-word" on a whiteboard below a large Black History Month banner over their bedroom door (Shores, 2023). These incidents are examples of conscious behaviors intended to hurt those who were targeted using both nonverbal and verbal attacks. Other forms of microaggressions are not as clearly identifiable.

Microinsults are insensitive and demeaning communications that demean the heritage, culture, or identity of People of Color. Microinsults can also occur nonverbally (Sue et al., 2007).

29

An example of microinsults is when a White teacher chooses not to acknowledge Students of Color in the classroom. Microinsults are hard to identify because they may occur consciously or unconsciously. Microinvalidations include communications that exclude or negate the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiences of a Person of Color (Sue et al., 2007). Examples of microinvalidation include phrases directed to People of Color: "When I look at you, I don't see color" or "All Lives Matter." These phrases typically do not have malicious intent; however, they negate the experiences of People of Color.

Racial microaggressions can be interpersonal or environmental (Mills, 2020). Interpersonal racial microaggressions occur between two or more people. Environmental racial microaggressions are systemic (Sue et al., 2007). Examples of environmental microaggressions include social isolation, not seeing People of Color in prominent positions, and represented in film, libraries, or course curricula (Mills, 2020). Solórzano et al. (2000) found that African American students reported unequal policing by campus police at events and social functions for Black students. McCabe (2009) found that Black men reported more surveillance, being perceived as threatening, being ignored, and assumption of criminality by university employees.

Mills (2020) examined where Black students attending a PWI experience environmental racial microaggressions. She identified six environmental racial microaggressions that Black college students attending PWIs face: segregation, lack of representation, campus response to criminality, cultural bias in course, tokenism, and pressure to conform. The burden is often put on Black students to educate the offending party (Morales, 2021). Racism and racial microaggressions have been shown to negatively impact the academic performance of Students of Color. Black students who have encountered racial microaggressions from their professors are less likely to attend faculty office hours and seek academic (J. A. Lewis et al., 2021). Black

students face pressures to disprove stereotypes of being academically inferior to their peers. Research suggests that assumptions about the academic abilities of Black students may hinder those students' engagement in learning (Museus, 2008). Racial microaggressions are associated with dropping classes, changing majors, or leaving the university (Solórzano et al., 2000). Recent studies have begun examining how Black students respond to racial microaggressions. Foste and Ng (2021) made an observation across studies on microaggressions in American higher education that a consistent threat across the studies resulted in Students of Color questioning their place on their college campus as a result of microaggressions.

Daily experiences of racial microaggressions have a long-lasting effect on Black students and their college experience (Harwood et al., 2012). Racial microaggressions can lead to issues such as anxiety, depression, and increased blood pressure (Morales, 2021). These stresses can result in racial battle fatigue (RBF). RBF is the psychological, physiological, and behavioral stress responses due to the growing impact of racial microaggressions (Franklin, 2016). Black students experienced exhaustion from encountering racial microaggressions throughout their time at PWIs (Morales, 2021).

RBF

People of Color are physically and emotionally exhausted as a result of preparing against everyday racial microaggression (W. A. Smith, 2004). Rather than having the ability to solely focus on academics, Students of Color also have to cope with the stress responses caused by racial microaggressions (Franklin, 2016). RBF has been described as the "social-psychological stress responses (e.g., frustration, anger, exhaustion, physical avoidance, psychological or emotional withdrawal, escapism, acceptance of racist attributions)" associated with being a Person of Color and being the repeated target of systemic racial oppression (W. A. Smith et al.,

31

2007, p. 552). W. A. Smith (2004) first introduced RBF in the field of higher education as a conceptual framework for understanding the stress from encountering daily racism on the college campus. Based on this way of thinking, People of Color must devote their time and energy to cope with the stresses of overt discrimination, as well as covert forms through everyday racial microaggressions that are described as: "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward People of Color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). Over time, the collective effects of racial microaggressions can result in RBF.

Many Black students may cope with racial microaggressions by confronting aggressors and sharing their experiences (Franklin, 2016). As a result, Black students are then labeled by aggressors as "angry" and "combative". Black students may often cope by trying to avoid situations that can lead to increased racial stress, and their avoidance may lead to social isolation, missed leadership opportunities and other academic and work opportunities (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015; Sue, 2013).

Race Related Stressors

Exposure to race related stressors such as discrimination, stereotypes, and microaggressions can have a lasting effect on Black students attending PWIs (Griffifth et al., 2019). Over time, Black students begin to create coping responses during their time at a PWI (Hoggard et al., 2012). Being a minority at a PWI can make Black students feel isolated (S. R. Harper 2013). The compounding effects of racism on college campuses, disproportionate incidence of COVID-19, and violence against Black people in the U.S. can negatively affect the health and well-being of Black people (Francois et al., 2023). The murder of George Floyd in 2020 and ongoing murders of Black people ignited students to protest and demand colleges and

universities to confront systemic and structural racism. Students want to increase faculty and

staff of Color and more Students of Color as a means to make the college campus more equitable

and welcoming to Students of Color (Francois et al., 2023).

Support for Black Students

C. N. Baker (2013) asserted that the support from the college environment is key in the

academic success of minority college students. The success of Black students at PWIs is often

hindered by feelings of invisibility and discrimination (C. N. Baker, 2013). Prior to attending

college, family is often an important source of support for Black students in encouraging their

academic success (Cheng & Starks, 2002). Once they attend college the environment changes,

but that support is still needed. In this section, I will discuss literature focused on support from

faculty, staff, and administration, peer support, safe spaces, involvement in student

organizations, and membership in Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLO).

Faculty/Staff/Administrators

Although students often find support among their peers, the experience and knowledge of

university faculty, staff and administrators are often looked at as even more important (C. N.

Baker, 2013). Black college students seek out mentors for support and advice. Having a Black

mentor provides Black students with a familial relationship (Griffith et al., 2019). Having a

shared experience with university faculty, staff, or administrators diminishes the racial distress

Black college students experience in spaces not made for them (Udeh, 2022).

Luedke (2017) suggests that a trusting relationship with faculty and staff provide

Students of Color with ways to overcome obstacles and provide a positive, supportive, and

nurturing environment. Having diversity among faculty, staff, and administrators allows Students

of Color to see themselves within the campus community. This helps to eliminate feelings of

isolation and alienation (S. R. Harper, 2013). Faculty support is important to the overall success for Black college students (Luedke, 2017).

Faculty and staff of color, particularly women of any ethnicity, struggle to balance demands for mentorship and service work (June, 2015). Faculty and staff of color have an additional burden to create an inclusive learning environment and to keep students enrolled at the institutions (Joseph & Hirshfield, 2011). This is known as invisible labor and cultural taxation. Amado M. Padilla (1994) coined the term *cultural taxation* as the pressure faculty members of color feel to serve as role models, mentors, even surrogate parents to minority students, and to meet every institutional need for ethnic representation.

According to McDougal et al. (2018), many Black students find social and academic support in Africana Studies departments and programs. Africana Studies department provide students with social support, racial socialization, cultural pride, and culturally responsive activities and services. These approaches towards teaching and learning within Africana Studies have been associated with positive racial identity development, increased self-esteem, and increased degree completion (Marie, 2016).

Peer Support

Receiving support from a peer of the same race validates the experiences of Students of Color (Barber et al., 2020). It helps to affirm the students' place and belonging on campus (S. R. Harper, 2013). In Foxx's (2021) study of cultivating a sense of belonging, the participants mentioned the importance of having peers who support, understand, and accept them in a safe environment. Connections with other minority students provides social support and solidarity to help navigate the college environment (Nagasawa & Wong, 1999).

Safe Spaces

The relationships that students build with faculty and staff create safe spaces for Black students within the campus community. McClain and Perry (2017) explain that these safe spaces improve the sense of belonging of Black students and contribute to their academic success. Safe spaces have been created for Black students at PWIs to combat negative campus climate and increase their sense of belonging (Foxx, 2021). These spaces work to build community (Strayhorn, 2019). Safe spaces are not specific to physical environments; the people and groups of people make of these spaces (Foxx, 2021). This supports the research that shows that students who are involved in on-campus activities, such as clubs and organizations, have an increased sense of connection and belonging to their institution.

Solórzano et al. (2000) found that Black students reported feeling uncomfortable or unwelcomed in spaces on campus such as department buildings and libraries. Within this study there is some indication that social isolation may be voluntary by the Black students as a result of experiencing racial microaggressions. In response to experiences racial microaggressions, students have created counter spaces with other Students of Color. This isolation limited the opportunities that Black students have to form connection with peers of other racial groups (Mills, 2020).

Student Organizations

Student organizations offer experiences that cannot be found in the classroom. Student organization offers the opportunity to grow, both personally and professionally and give students the opportunity to network with other students of similar interests (B. Patterson, 2012). For Students of Color who experience barriers as a result of campus climate at their PWI, student organizations can be essential to finding membership on their campuses (Kuh & Love, 2000).

Minority students choose nontraditional settings, such as ethnic organizations as their primary place for involvement at PWIs (Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001).

Guiffrida (2003) conducted a qualitative study interviewing 88 African American undergraduate students as a means to understand the role of African American student organizations in facilitating social integration at PWIs. Guiffrida found that regardless of mission or type, these organizations worked to facilitate the social involvement of African American students at PWIs. The participants in Guiffrida's study also reported that the most important reason for participating in those organizations were the opportunity to establish connections with faculty members, giving back to the African American community and connecting with African American peers.

Museus (2008) conducted a study that focused on understanding the role of ethnic student organizations in fostering minority students' adjustment to and membership in the cultures of a PWI. The results of the study highlighted the fact that ethnic organizations provide a setting for students to connect with peers from similar cultural backgrounds. These shared backgrounds allowed participants and their peers with the student organization to understand each other's experiences and connect on a deeper level. Ethnic student organizations created campus subcultures where students felt accepted by their racial/ethnic minority peers. The results of this study expressed the view of students and how their ethnic student organizations aid in maintaining strong ties to the cultural heritage while also connecting them to their PWI (Museus, 2008).

BGLO

Fraternities and sororities can be traced back to 1776 when the first Greek-letter named social fraternity, Phi Beta Kappa, was established at the College of William & Mary (T.

Patterson, 2018). Kappa Alpha Society is the oldest college fraternity in the U.S. The first Greek-letter organization for women, Kappa Alpha Theta in 1870. Students joined these organizations as a means to build instant friendships (T. Patterson, 2018). Although in the 1900s African American/Black students began to attend college on predominantly White campuses, they were not allowed to join fraternities and sororities (Da Rocha, 2021). This led to the establishment of separate BGLOs.

BGLOs date back to the early 1900s in response to the racial climate at PWIs (Ross, 2000). Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc was founded by seven Black male students on the campus of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, in 1906. This fraternity was founded based on a need for Black men to support one another through the racism and segregation they experienced on campus (Bradley, 2008). Its primary purpose was to provide support to members to help minimize feelings of isolation (T. L. Jones, 2013). Since 1906, eight other national Black fraternities and sororities have been established at PWIs and HBCUs across the U.S. (Ross, 2000). Involvement in a BGLO can be a means to establish connections with other Students of Color and create bonds and support networks while adjusting to the college environment (T. L. Jones, 2013).

Two of the nine organizations were founded on predominantly White campuses. These organizations were a means of creating safe spaces for Black students to further their efforts to cope with the world around them (Solomon & Lee, 2011). Black students felt the need to band together under the pressures of racism and isolation (Ross, 2000). Common goals among these organizations included enhancing the overall collegiate experience for Black students and addressing political and social issues facing the African American community (Solomon & Lee 2011).

Since their inception, BGLOs have attempted to position themselves as agents of academic and social integration for Black undergraduates through the creation of academic support groups, multiple social networking opportunities, civic engagement, and community service (Kimbrough, 2003; Whaley, 2009). Through initiation into a BGLO, Black students develop a sense of pride and connectedness to a legacy of leadership and success shaped by earlier members of these organizations (S. R. Harper et al., 2015). These organizations share an overarching theme of providing service through community engagement and leadership development opportunities for their members (Rosch & Stephens, 2017). Membership in BGLOs provides students opportunities to increase their social opportunities, avenues to gain leadership roles, increase campus involvement, leadership development (Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998). The sections to follow reviews the literature on college students' sense of belonging in an effort to better understand the influence it has on college success for Black students.

Sense of Belonging and the Experiences of Black Students

Based on Strayhorn's (2012) theory belonging is a psychological need and comes after the physiological needs such as food, water, shelter, and safety. Fostering a sense of belonging among students is essential to student achievement and success. Vaccaro and Newman (2016) found that sense of belonging among minoritized students is affected by college environment, social relationships, and campus involvement. This study explored students' definitions of a sense of belonging during their first year of college. Although they offered a variety of definitions, two common themes emerged: being comfortable and fitting in. The most common word that emerged from all student definitions of belonging was "comfortable". Belonging was described as a feeling of comfort with others and in one's surroundings (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016, p. 931).

Universities must be intentional about getting Students of Color on campus but have not focused on making sure Students of Color stay and feel welcome (Franklin, 2016). According to Strayhorn (2019), a sense of belonging is feeling as if one has a rightful place in a community. Students face challenges with sense of belonging because they feel isolated and alienated within their campus communities (Kane, 2019). Black students' experiences on college campuses differ from their White counterparts. Inclusive and diverse environments provide Black students spaces where they can engage with others and feel protected (McGee & Stovall, 2015).

Feeling safe and respected are important aspects for Black students to feel a sense of belonging (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Strayhorn (2019) described that by creating classroom environments that are welcoming and inclusive, faculty enhances minority students' sense of belonging. These feelings of inclusion and acceptance allow Students of Color to focus of their academic success rather than their overall safety on campus (Kane, 2019). To address the challenges minority students face, about sense of belonging, colleges and universities have to creates a more inclusive campus climate for students, specifically Black students (Griffith et al., 2019).

PWIs have a history of exclusionary practices and limited access for Students of Color (Karkouti, 2016). Black students' experiences on campus and sense of belonging are affected by their physical environment and spaces on campus (Strange & Banning, 2015). There are building and statues on some college campuses that honor Confederate figures and supporters of White supremacy. As Black college students, faculty, staff, and visitors pass by these structures, it reinforces messages that the institution to not build for them (Anderson, 2020a). Strange and Banning (2015) explains that building names, flags, and locations are key to inclusion and

belonging, however buildings named after racist and White supremacists are the exact opposite to a welcoming environment for Black students.

African American/Black Students' Experiences at PWIs and HBCUs

The Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, granted all Americans to equal access to education. Since this ruling, there has been significant advancement for Black people in the educational pursuit. U.S. Census Bureau shows that in October 2020, there were 2,591,000 African Americans enrolled in U.S. higher education. At that time there were 17,674,000 students of all racial and ethnic groups enrolled in higher education (An urgent need to focus on retention programs for African Americans in higher education, 2021).

Many universities in the south did not integrate until after civil rights legislation mandated desegregation in the 1960s. In many states, there were incidents of rioting, violence, and deaths as Black students began to enroll and attend classes (Clayton & Peters, 2019). It was not until 1961 that U.S. District Court Judge William Bootle the immediate admission of two African American students—Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter—into the University of Georgia, ending 160 years of segregation at the school and being the first institution in the state to integrate (Clayton & Peters, 2019). In 1962 James Meredith became the first African American student to attend the University of Mississippi was escorted to class by National guardsmen due to riot and racial slurs (Clayton & Peters, 2019). A riot broke out on campus as local White community members confronted U.S. marshals stationed on campus to protect Meredith. The crowd assaulted the marshals with bricks and bullets, two bystanders died in the confrontation, 206 marshals and soldiers were wounded, and 200 individuals were arrested (Clayton & Peters, 2019).

These historical instances of societal bias and discrimination, ignite concerns for Black students about being socially rejected and establishing a sense of belonging at a PWI. Prior to the 1950s, Black people were exclusively educated at HBCUs (Allen et al., 2007). The *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court case in 1954 decision resulted in more African American students being able to attend HBCUs and being able to attend institutions of higher education that were exclusively for White students. By 1975, approximately three quarters of African American students attending colleges or universities across the country attended a PWI.

HBCUs were established to serve the educational needs of Black students with the intention of using education to further uplift Black people economically and socially (Edmonson, 2023). HBCUs provide African Americans with access to education and scholarship that was previously denied to us during slavery and continued to be denied after the Civil War through racial segregation laws (Edmonson, 2023). Experiences of Black students at HBCUs differ from those who attend PWIs; traditionally, these institutions have provided Black students with a strong academic foundation while sheltering them from negative images of Black people, instilling a sense of pride in the Black culture (B. Harper, 2007). HBCUs have proven to provide positive social and psychological environments for Black students (McDougal et al., 2018). Unlike other universities, HBCUs create a campus climate that is inclusive and aware of Black students' culture and needs (Shappie & Debb, 2017). Compared to experiences of those who attended PWIs, Black students at HBCUs were provided with a safe, supportive, nurturing educational environment (Bridges et al., 2005).

Black students continue to deal with many challenges while attending PWIs. While exploring the experiences of Black students are PWIs, it is important to also look at the barriers that affect their success. According to The American Council on Education (2012), four factors

add to attrition rates of African American Students in higher education: (a) sense of belonging, (b) inadequate K-12 education, (c) lack of family support, and (d) finances. While adjusting to the academics and social culture of the college campus, Black students often feel isolated, marginalized, and excluded at PWIs (L. D. Patton et al., 2011). McClain and Perry (2017) explained that PWIs struggle retaining Students of Color due to racial microaggressions. These exchanges cause Students of Color to feel vulnerable and struggle with their identity at PWIs (Franklin, 2016; Johnston-Guerrero, 2016).

According to Shahid et al. (2017), Black students who attend PWIs often lack the social outlets that are available to their White counterparts. Black Students who attend HBCUs are said to have fewer challenges and find ways to fit in or for connections with others (T. L. Jones, 2013). Oftentimes, institutions fail to recognize the transition to PWIs differ for Black students. They are left with the responsibility of navigating and sometimes assimilating to the dominant culture (Woldoff et al., 2011). Black students often turn to Black Student organizations, cultural centers, and BGLO to seek support and familiarity (Guiffrida, 2005; L. D. Patton et al., 2011). These organizations have been beneficial to Black student success and engagement (L. D. Patton et al., 2011).

Although all students, across racial backgrounds, face challenges on college campuses, the challenges that Black students face at PWIs are unique. Black students typically do not feel welcome and wanted at university events (Hunn, 2014). This is seen in the form of wanting to create a sense of invisibility by showing up on campus often with their head down to avoid eye contact with others (Grier-Reed et al., 2011). Research has shown us that an active and involved student on campus will equate to a successful student. When students are integrated into their institution, both academically and socially, they form positive attitudes, which influences their

persistence (Eakins & Eakins, 2017). Once educational leaders understand how race and microaggressions affect the experiences of Black students at PWIs, they can understand how developing a sense of belonging is challenging for students from minoritized social groups (Kane, 2019).

Higher education professionals must consider how the people, campus climate, and values of their PWI influence their students. This chapter highlighted the history of Black people in U.S. higher education, system issue Black students face, support for Black students, and sense of belonging and the experiences of Black students. Understanding how these factors contribute to the experiences of Black students supports the relevance of this study. Chapter 3 outlines the procedural elements for the study. The chapter focuses on a description on why an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach for this study was used, how the data was generated, trustworthiness and credibility, data analysis and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

"I am invisible, simply because people refuse to see me."

-Ralph Ellison, 1952

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is to understand how race-related experiences influence the sense of belonging of selected Black students at a predominately White institution (PWI). This chapter focuses on the procedural elements for the study and begins with a description of why an IPA approach is appropriate for this study. The chapter then outlines how the data will be generated, trustworthiness and credibility, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

Qualitative Research Approach

To examine how Black students make meaning of their race, sense of belonging and experiences at a PWI, I used an IPA method. IPA is a research approach committed to "the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 7). It involves a detailed examination of the participants' "life world" and attempts to explore their perceptions of their experiences (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2003 p. 53).

IPA is a qualitative approach informed by the philosophies of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Love et al., 2020). It was developed within the field of psychology and is increasingly used in cognitive disciplines in human, social, and health sciences (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). A phenomenological study describes the common meanings of the lived experiences of individuals in relation to a specific concept or phenomenon (Creswell,

2013). Hermeneutics is a theory based on how an experience is interpreted from language and text (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). An idiographic approach focuses on a person's lived experience of a particular topic (Love et al., 2020). IPA also draws upon ideography in that each case is fully analyzed and processed before moving on to the next (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Rooted in all three philosophies of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography, IPA is a qualitative research approach focused on how people make sense of their life experiences (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). IPA is a "participant-oriented" approach that allows the research participant to express themselves and their lived experiences (Alase, 2017, p. 9). Considering the focus of my research seeks to elevate the voices and lived experiences of Black undergraduate college students and propose how institutions, practitioners and higher education leaders can address race and sense of belonging to provide support to students on their college campuses, it is appropriate to use phenomenology. An IPA approach gives researchers the opportunity to understand what the experience is like for the participants and what sense they are making of what is happening to them (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). IPA allows participants to be asked generally about their college experience and how they have made meaning of their time on campus as a Black student.

Through a double hermeneutic, IPA acknowledges that researchers are influenced by their backgrounds and that data is interpreted through their vantage point (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA emphasizes that the researcher has an active role in the process (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA researchers engage in double hermeneutics in an attempt to try to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). In IPA, meaning making is applied in two distinct ways. First, the participants make meaning of their experiences, and attempt to give them voice. Second, the researcher attempts to interpret the words of the participants, accepting the fact that participants often struggle to

45

articulate their thoughts and feelings. By engaging in double hermeneutic, the researcher assumes the role in analysis and interpretating the participant's experience (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). IPA is an approach that will allow me to both interpret and amplify the lived experiences of the research participants.

According to Alase (2017), for the stories of the participants to make sense interpretively, I must have a "true and deep" understanding of the participants' lived experience by putting myself in the shoes of the participant (p. 12). I chose IPA for this study because of my role as the researcher. As I expressed in my researcher's positionality statement in Chapter 1, I have the experience of being both a Black woman who is an administrator at a PWI, and a Black woman who is also a student at a PWI. I work directly with college students to help foster and support their social and identity development as they make meaning of their college experience. As a Black student and administrator, I recognize my research positionality. For this reason, it is important to me to choose a method that allows me to use the role of the researcher in an active and intentional way.

In other phenomenological studies, researchers bracket their perspectives. Bracketing refers to suspending assumptions and belief (Tufford & Newman, 2012). It requires researchers to purposefully put aside their own views about the phenomenon or what they already know about the subject prior to and throughout the phenomenological inquiry (Chan et al., 2013). In an IPA study, the researcher's point of view is acknowledged and is used in the interpretation of data. IPA acknowledges the perspective of the researcher and uses their lens to build a relationship between the participant and researcher and to create rich data through meaningful interactions (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). My aim in conducting this research was to understand the race-related experiences of selected Black students at a PWI, then to understand if those

experiences have affected their sense of belonging. The research questions that guided the research were:

How do the selected Black students at a PWI make meaning of their lived experiences and sense of belonging on campus?

    a. How does race affect the experiences of selected Black students at a PWI?

    b. What factors contributed to the sense of belonging of selected Black students at a PWI?

IPA methodology does not ask the participants directly, rather the questions are formulated toward "meaning" (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 47). The main research question focused on participants making meaning of their sense of belonging, but an IPA method allows participants to be asked generally about their college experiences. The research sub-questions are used to explore or engage with the theory (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

Sample

Participants in an IPA study are selected based on their ability to speak from personal experiences (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The target population for this study was undergraduate students who identify as Black and attend a selected PWI. The selected PWI for this research study is a highly selective, mid-size, public, 4-year, liberal arts, research institution in the Mid-Atlantic region, known by the pseudonym Prestigious University. In the fall semester of 2022, the total number of undergraduate degree-seeking students was over 6,700. From that number, there are less than 400 student who identify as Black or African American (from the website of the study's PWI). In Chapter 4, I describe the university further to provide context of the lived experiences of the participants.

I used purposeful sampling to select the participants. This approach is based on participants being selected that allows the researcher to gain an understanding of issues pertaining to the purpose of the study (M. Q. Patton, 2015). I used criterion-based selection to recruit students who meet the following criteria: (a) self-identify as Black; (b) attend the selected PWI; (c) classified as a sophomore, junior, or senior; and (d) at least 18 years old.

Transfer students were excluded from the study because the experiences of students who matriculate at one institution may be different than from the experiences of someone who has had experiences at multiple institutions of higher education. First-year students were excluded from the study because of the need to bring forth data about how the individuals are perceiving their experiences on campus, and how they are making meaning of their sense of belonging. As a first-year student, they have not experienced life on that college campus for an extended amount of time yet. Including only students who have been enrolled at least 1 year, participants can give responses that draw from more experience at their institution. The age requirement is so that all participants are legal adults and do not need parental permission to be included in the study.

To recruit participants, digital fliers (Appendix A) were shared with students at the selected PWI. Participants were recruited with the help of the college's Diversity Center (a center that provides services to underrepresented students). With the help of the Diversity Center staff, I sent email invitations (Appendix B) to select students who they identified as meeting the criteria of the study. If needed, I was willing to use snowball sampling to help recruit more participants for the study. Snowball sampling is a type of sampling that uses current participants, who fits the criteria for the study, to help recruit other participants for the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I did not need to use snowball sampling for this study.

In both the digital flier and the email message, I shared my contact information, the purpose of the study, and invited students to complete the participant recruitment survey (Appendix C) to determine their eligibility for the study. Prior to participating in their first interview of the study, all participants were required to sign an informed consent form (Appendix D). The purpose of informed consent is to protect the participant throughout the research process, by outlining the purpose and risk involved in participating in the study. (Mandal & Parija, 2014).

Participants

According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), the main concern with IPA studies is to "give full appreciation to each participant's account" with the "aim of providing an in-depth examination of a certain phenomenon" (p. 9). IPA studies generally use smaller sample sizes, to allow for more engagement with participants (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2003). The number of participants in an IPA is typically less than ten to enable a detailed analysis of the participant's account of the phenomenon (Peat et al., 2019). For this study I was willing to include 6–10 participants. IPA studies use a small number of participants in order to highlight the experiences of each of the individuals in the study (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The most important component of selecting participants in an IPA study is ensuring that each participant experienced a similar phenomenon based on the focus of the study (Alase, 2017).

Within the "Call for Participants" email used to recruit participants, I indicated a date to complete the participant recruitment survey in order to be considered for this study. At the designed date, I had at least ten eligible participants, and I closed the survey form. From the students who completed the participant recruitment survey, I selected participants using the following criteria: class status, gender, and campus involvement (Table 1). To find diversity in

49

perspectives, participants included students representing the differences within each level. This included participants from each academic class, representation from more than one gender, and range of campus involvement; including students who might not be involved and those who might be in various aspects of campus life.

Table 1

Selection Criteria for Participants

Level	Criteria	Classification
1	Class Status	Sophomore, Junior, or Senior (Only undergraduate students were selected. Not including first-year and transfer students)
2	Gender	Men, Women, Transgender, Non-binary, or Other (Representation of more than one gender)
3	Campus Involvement	Engagement in student organizations or employment on Campus

Data Generation

To gain an understanding of how participants make meaning of their experiences at a selected PWI, this study occurred in two phases. Phase 1 consisted of a participant recruitment survey (Appendix C). Phase 2 consisted of two semi-structured interviews. The use of multiple data types strengthened my understanding of the participants' experiences. All information was stored in a secure location on a computer encrypted with password-protection to protect the privacy of participant information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once the research participants were selected, they each chose their own pseudonyms to protect their individual identities. In addition to the use of pseudonyms, identifying information of participants was changed to preserve

confidentiality in all documentation. The master list with the chosen pseudonym for each participant and the participant's real name was saved on a spreadsheet in an electronic folder that is separate from the rest of the collected data and password protected. Considering the sensitivity of these topics and sharing experiences associated with someone's identity, privacy and confidentiality are crucial.

Phase 1: Participant Recruitment Surveys

Potential participants for this study received an email (Appendix B) informing them of the study and inviting them to participate. Within the email inviting students to participate in the research study, there was a link to the participant recruitment survey (Appendix C). The questions included demographic and academic questions. Participant recruitment surveys were used to determine which students to include in the next phases of the study. The questions asked were used to determine if the student met the criteria of the sample. I then reviewed all the surveys and chose which participants to move forward with, based on the demographic information provided (criteria provided in Table 1).

Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interviews

I then invited selected participants (determined by criteria provided in Table 1) via email to participate in semi-structured interviews. Smith et al. (2009) described qualitative research as "a conversation with a purpose" (p. 57). I used open-ended questions within semi-structured interviews to generate data from participants (Ponterotto, 2005). Semi-structured interviews are designed in a way that allows the participants and me to engage in meaningful dialogue based on set questions that can be modified based on the way the participant responds (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2003). In IPA, interviews are designed to approach the research questions "sideways" (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 58). A sideways approach means that the interviewer does not directly

ask the participants about the phenomenon they are looking to examine; instead, they ask the participants about other experiences to "make meaning" of the events (p. 36). Individual interviews allow the researcher to build a relationship with the participant (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). J. A. Smith et al. (2009) stated that it is most important to establish a rapport was the participant at the beginning of the interview. They need to feel comfortable to build trust with the interviewer and discuss their experiences freely.

Semi-structured interviews allowed me to use open-ended questions and include probing questions to get a better understanding of the participants experiences. The advantage of semi-structured interviews for an IPA study is that, as the researcher, I was able to follow-up with the participant during the interview (J. A. Smith, 2004). For this study, the questions guided participants to examine their experiences as Black students at a selected PWI to make meaning of their sense of belonging on campus. Informed by the research questions, I facilitated the conversation in a manner that allowed the participants to tell their own stories.

I began the interviews by reminding the participants about the research study, the ethical considerations, how the interview would proceed, and that they can stop the interview at any point (Daniel & Harland, 2018). This was also an opportunity to remind the participants that their involvement in the research study is valued. I conducted all interviews through the virtual meeting software, Zoom. It is important that interviews take place in a setting that is comfortable for the participants, safe, quiet, and free from interruption (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). With the consent of the participants, interviews were recorded to ensure the accuracy of the transcript. After each interview is transcribed, I provided each participant with a written transcript of their interview as a means of member checking to verify the accuracy of their responses (Birt et al., 2016). Participants were invited to submit any corrections to the transcript or any additional

52

comments that may be relevant. Member checking is a way to validate data by checking the researcher's understanding of the participant and what they've expressed (Saldaña, 2016). It is used to ensure that the researcher understands the data collected.

The individual semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended questions (Appendix E) and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. The questions allowed participants the opportunity to share information about their background and identity and describe their experiences as a Black student at their PWI as it relates to sense of belonging. Semi-structured interviews should include follow-up questions to clarify student experiences. Following the individual semi-structured interview, participants were asked to review the transcript within one week of their individual interview.

Following the first round of individual interviews, participants were asked to participate in a 30–45-minute follow-up interview. The follow-up interview included clarifying questions from the first interview as well as questions focused on community as related to sense of belonging on campus (Appendix F). After the follow-up interviews were transcribed and sent to the participants, I sent them an electronic form to both gathering their information for their compensation and allow them to write out any reflections they may have after both interviews (Appendix G).

There are both advantages and disadvantages of virtual individual semi-structured interviews. Advantages include comfort and convenience for participants (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). As the researcher, I was constrained by the physical distance between myself and the participants. With the use of video recording, I was able to review and explore the non-verbal expressions from the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Disadvantages of virtual interviews

included complications with technology, and the possibility of confidentiality being compromised.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Qualitative researchers are encouraged to achieve trustworthiness throughout the research process (Daniel & Harland, 2018). Trustworthiness enhances the readers understanding and interpretation of the findings (Daniel & Harland, 2018). To ensure trustworthiness, I used three different methods. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested the use of "rich and thick" descriptions, triangulation, and member checking (p. 263). "Rich and thick" descriptions of the lived experiences of the research participants allow readers to make decisions about transferability (Erlandson et al., 1993). Second, triangulation is achieved through using multiple sources of data to cross-check data generation at different times or in different phases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This strategy is used to increase the credibility of the research study. Finally, another strategy to ensure credibility is member checking. Throughout each step of the data generation process, I was able to build trust with the participants in order to adequately give voice to their experiences. Each participant had an opportunity to review and correct the written transcript.

Data Analysis

With phenomenological research, researchers search for common patterns and themes that emerge from participants' experiences (Reiners, 2012). This coding process allows the researcher to identify words and phrases that are repeated in the participants' responses (Alase, 2017). Saldaña (2016) suggested that coding is a method of connecting the themes to the data and the data back to the themes. Each transcript was analyzed individually to bracket the findings and initial thought from previous interviews (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Bracketing is done in this phase in an attempt to consider each case on an individual basis (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2003).

J. A. Smith et al. (2009) outlined the data analysis process: (a) reading and re-reading transcript data to allow the researcher to immerse themselves in the original data; (b) initial noting content of interest by highlighting important text and annotating why it was important; (c) developing emergent themes through careful analysis of the initial notes; (d) searching for connections across emergent themes; (e) repeating the process for each participant; and (f) looking for patterns across the data gathered from each interview (pp. 82-101).

The first step in the data analysis of this study was to have the transcripts professionally transcribed using an online service Otter.ai. Once the data analysis was completed, I read the interview transcript while listening to the interview audio recordings multiple times. The first read-through is done to familiar myself with the data, and ensure accuracy with the recording, the second read-through was done to highlight phrases that I believed to be important and to reflect the participants' responses. This is done to ensure that the participants become the focus of my analysis (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

Steps one and two merge as I read the transcript a third time, while making notes, describing the content, language, and conceptual ideas. Within this step, I identified categories, themes, and patterns across participants. I used the computer-based qualitative data management software Dedoose to assist me in my analysis. Dedoose allowed me to organize and analyze research data, code, and memo to make notes to myself. I then exported the codes into a separate Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. This allowed me to extract the codes and quotations into a more convenient method of viewing and sorting through the data.

The aim in this second step was to produce a comprehensive and detailed set of notes. This allowed me to look and listen to the language that the participants use and identify ways to make sense of any patterns (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). In taking exploratory notes, I was able to

55

comment on similarities, differences, patterns, and contradictions in what the participant is saying throughout the interview.

The third step is to develop emergent themes. This allowed me to code the data into small parts. The process of coding involves organizing data into groups (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I started with the a priori codes, that is, predetermined codes, based on Strayhorn's theoretical framework. Table 2 outlines a list of a priori codes and their meaning as it relates to this study. Through the data analysis process, more emergent codes were added to the list. J. A. Smith et al. (2009) emphasized the importance of exploring how each participant describes the phenomenon.

Table 2

A Priori Codes

Code	Meaning
Belonging	Any mentions of belonging or sense of belonging
Perceived Social Support	Perceived social support refers to how individuals perceive friends, family members and others as sources available to provide material, psychological and overall support during times of need (Ioannou et al., 2019).
Connectedness	A feeling of belonging to or having affinity with a particular person or group
Mattering	To be needed and wanted by others. To feel significant and important to others who are significant to them (Amundson, 1993)
Accepted	Believed or recognized to be valid
Cared About	To be interested in or concerned about
Respected	Admired because of their ability or achievement
Valued	Considered important or beneficial

Once coding was conducted and initial themes were identified in each individual transcript, I then moved on to step four and looked for connections between themes within a single transcript as well as connections across transcripts. I created a matrix to help visualize the themes and how they tie back to the research questions. This table allowed me to capture specific quotes, as well as my initial analysis. This table is used to illustrate how that data links back to the research questions, as each row represents questions from the interview protocol as well as emergent themes.

Step 5 called for me to repeat the entire process of Steps 1–4 for each participant, while attempting to bracket the emergent ideas from the previous participants (J. A. Smith et al., 2009 p. 100). Step 6 required that I look for patterns across cases. Although IPA focuses on the uniqueness of individual life experiences, the approach also focused on how the experiences are either similar or different, not just shared themes (Loo, 2012).

Throughout the data collection and data analysis stages, I used a journal to record my thoughts throughout the process. I scheduled 30 minutes after each participant interview to journal my reflections on what the participant shared in the interview and my initial interpretations of what was said. Reflexive journaling is a qualitative research method used to document researchers' reflections, thoughts, and insight during the research process (Creswell, 2013). This allowed me to document my personal reactions, biases, and evolving themes. Considering the range of experiences and diversity of the participants involved, I kept the intersectionality of the participants in mind when analyzing the data. Through journaling, I noted how or if the multiple dimensions of their identities intersect and influence the participant's experience. I also took note of how or if my identities as a Black woman and higher education profession influence my interpretation of the data.

Ethical Considerations

All research fell within the guidelines established by the university's Education Institutional Review Committee (ED-IRC) and data collection did not occur until approved. Considering the sensitivity of these topics and sharing experiences associated with someone's identity, privacy and confidentiality is important. Informed consent explains what to expect from the individual interviews. It included the types of topics being covered and the schedule of the study. Informed consent was revisited orally during the individual interviews and focus group. Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were bound to participate in the study and had the right to withdraw their participation in the study.

Summary

I sought to understand the race-related experiences of selected Black students at a PWI, then to understand if those experiences have affected their sense of belonging. The IPA methodology chosen for this study allowed both the participants and me to make meaning of the participant's experiences. My experiences as a Black woman, including the area in which I grew up, the type of undergraduate institution I attended, and my career experiences in higher education has informed my interest in understanding how Black student navigate predominantly White campuses. Elevating the voices of Black students at a PWI; understanding what it is like to navigate a global pandemic and process the realities of multiple Black people being killed around the U.S. has informed my study.

The existing literature of the history of Black people in higher education, systemic issues Black students face, support for Black students, and sense of belonging and experiences and the experiences of Black students highlights the significance of this study. Often, Black students

experience lower levels of sense of belonging and feel that they are treated differently based on their race. I conducted participant recruitment surveys, individual semi-structured interviews, and follow-up interviews with participants as a means to contribute to the literature on Black students attending PWIs as well as research focused on sense of belonging.

CHAPTER 4

SITE AND PARTICIPANT PROFILES

"Most people write me off when they see me.
They do not know my story.
They say I am just an African.
They judge me before they get to know me.
What they do not know is
The pride I have in the blood that runs through my veins;
The pride I have in my rich culture and the history of my people;
The pride I have in my strong family ties and the deep connection to my community;
The pride I have in the African music, African art, and African dance;
The pride I have in my name and the meaning behind it.
Just as my name has meaning, I too will live my life with meaning.
So you think I am nothing?
Don't worry about what I am now,
For what I will be, I am gradually becoming.
I will raise my head high wherever I go
Because of my African pride,
And nobody will take that away from me."
— Idowu Koyenikan, 2014

This chapter explores the university site and the participant profiles within the context of a predominantly White institution (PWI). The purpose of this chapter is to understand the unique experiences and perspectives of Black students. Using a comprehensive profile of the participants in this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) study provides an analysis of the lived experiences of the selected Black students at the PWI.

I chose to add a separate chapter to highlight each participant and capture their individual experiences. Participant profiles provide a detailed snapshot of each participant involved in the study, providing a holistic view of their background and individual experiences. Understanding participants' backgrounds, roles, and lived experiences within their PWI helps provide diverse

60

perspectives and contextual understanding to the study (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). This information includes demographic details as well as relevant background information that may influence the interpretation of their experiences as a Black student at a PWI. IPA emphasizes the exploration of individual experiences and perspectives. Participant profiles align with IPA by allowing me to focus on the uniqueness of each participant's narrative and how it contributes to the overall understanding of the phenomenon (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

As described in Chapter 3, pseudonyms were used to protect the participants individual identities. In addition to pseudonyms being used in place of participants' real names, they were also used to mask the university, student organizations and other identifying information to preserve confidentiality. I chose the pseudonym "Prestigious University" as the name of the institution where each of the participants attend as undergraduate students. Describing the site in an IPA study provides context for understanding the lived experiences of the participants. The physical and social environment that the university embodies influences these experiences. The site description serves as the foundation for an analytical framework to interpret the participants' narratives.

Prestigious University is a mid-sized, highly selective, public institution withing the Mid-Atlantic region. Renowned for academic achievements, this university is known for its academic rigor, attracting high-achieving students. The university prides itself on having a student to faculty ratio of 13:1, with almost 80% of students participating in undergraduate research with faculty members by senior year. More than 60% of undergraduate students live on campus in residence halls and living learning communities as well as fraternity and sorority housing. Campus housing ranges from freshmen residence halls, upperclassmen residence, gender-inclusive housing, special interest housing, and living-learning communities.

Prestigious University offers a range of undergraduate majors, minors, graduate and professional programs, and graduate certificate programs. In each of these programs, the university offers a small class size and direct interaction with the faculty of each respective school. Prestigious University enrolls students from across the U.S., the U.S. territories, and over 60 countries. Of the 9,600 undergraduate and graduate students, 32% identify as Students of Color. Just under 60% of the undergraduate student body identify as female and over 40% as male. It is a PWI.

Participant Summaries

For this study, I interviewed nine individuals who are currently enrolled at Prestigious University. To understand the experiences of the selected Black students and the relationship among their race, sense of belonging at a PWI, I chose a sample of individuals from different academic levels and varying campus involvement (See Table 1 in Chapter 3). Participants completed a demographic survey, two individual semi-structured interviews, and were sent a follow-up survey to add any reflective thoughts or additional information (Appendix G). Table 3 provides an overview of the demographic make-up of the participants. This table include class status, gender, first generation college students, participation in a pre-orientation program for underrepresented student populations, membership in a fraternity or sorority, student athlete, live on-campus, and student organization involvement.

Table 3

Participant Profile

Participant	Class	Gender	FGCS	Pre-Orientation Program	Fraternity or Sorority	Athlete	Live On Campus
Lia	Sophomore	Woman	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Lewis	Junior	Man	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Jordan	Junior	Woman	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Danielle	Junior	Woman	No	No	No	No	Yes
Cinna	Senior	Man	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Sabrina	Senior	Woman	No	No	No	No	No
Lawrence	Junior	Man	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Julia	Sophomore	Woman	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Ethel	Senior	Woman	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

Note. FGCS = First Generation College Student

In the following sections, I will provide a summary of each participant. Participants had the opportunity to select their pseudonym. The profiles were created by compiling their responses to the demographic survey and the interviews.

Participant 1: Lia

Lia, a sophomore English and Government double major at Prestigious University, identified as a Black woman. She is from a predominately Black area and often joked that she's been "going to historically Black schools since the womb" but chose to attend a PWI instead of a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) when choosing her college. Lia went on to explain that race-related experiences in elementary, middle, and high school influenced her

decision to attend a PWI. She experienced colorism and was subject to jokes by other Black

students. She described her complexion as "incredibly pale" and stated that when she was

younger, she passed as White. White passing refers to be perceived as or to pass for being White

(Nadal & Crouch, 2014). As she entered college, she did not want to attend a HBCU and enroll

in another predominately Black space, based on the discrimination she encountered within her

own race.

Lia participated in the university's Pre-Orientation Program for Underrepresented

Students. This was where she met most of her friend group. She describes her core friend group

as "the poster for the Diversity Center." They are all different races but are still People of Color

and share similar experiences on campus. This allowed them to find comfort and support within

each other when experiencing microaggressions. She said without the Pre-orientation Program

for Underrepresented Students and the Diversity Center, she would be miserable at Prestigious

University.

On campus, Lia served as an employee at the Diversity Center and participated in

research on campus. She was also involved in various student organizations, both academic and

social. The organizations that she chose, speaks to who she is as a Black woman and how she

viewed her university. She was a member of the Organization for Black Students, African

Cultural Organization, Minority Association for Pre-Law Students, served as a facilitator for the

Diversity Center's initiative for Women of Color, a tour guide for the Admissions office, a

counselor for the university's Pre-Orientation Program for Underrepresented Students, and was

active with the University Scholars Program. When she first arrived at the university, she joined

the International Relations Club, based on her involvement in a similar club in high school, but

she did not find community within this club at Prestigious University. She was confronted with

the fact that most of the students within the International Relations Club came from rich backgrounds, attended more conferences than she had the opportunity to attend, and talked about travels internationally. She could not relate to her peers and was faced with this reality every week during meetings. She instead chose organizations that were welcoming and affirmed her identities. As a campus tour guide, she was able to share her love for Prestigious University as well as add diversity to this role to allow perspective Black students to see a Black person when they visit campus. Representation matters when choosing a university. As she showed how she has found a sense of belonging while on campus, she shared this feeling with others through her memberships in student organizations and positions on campus.

Lia lived on campus but has expressed that her experiences within the residence hall at Prestigious University made her feel like she did not belong. Despite her experiences within the residence hall, Lia was able to find support and a sense of belonging within the organizations and programs that she participated in.

Participant 2: Lewis

Lewis, a junior sociology major on the Pre-Law track at Prestigious University, identified as a Black man. His identity and physical stature a tall, athletic built Black man affected his experience at a PWI. Because of the lack of Black men on campus, he was judged by stereotypes and his White peers become uncomfortable around him. He was often mistaken for a student athlete, assuming that he was chosen to attend the university because of an athletic scholarship rather than an academic scholarship. He was faced with these stereotypes on a daily basis. This caused him to retreat to Black spaces on campus as a means to make his White peers feel comfortable. Lewis was a first-generation, low-income college student. According to Lewis, being Black, first-generation, and low income put him at a disadvantage at Prestigious

University. Without the guidance of his parents, he had to "blaze his own path" and figure out the various aspects of transitioning into college. Lewis participated in the university's Pre-Orientation Program for Underrepresented Students. Lewis served as an employee at the Diversity Center and participated in research on campus. He was also involved in various student organizations; both academic and social. His main involvement includes the Organization for Black Men and the Organization for Black Poets. Both organizations provide space for Black students to convene and connect with one another. He was also involved in the African Cultural Organization, Organization for Black Students, and the Skateboard Club.

Lewis lived on campus in the Black Affinity House. He lived in this space since his sophomore year. Living here allowed him to feel connected to other Black students and to create a community for other Black students. This is a space where he slept, socialized, hosted executive board meetings for his student organizations and found support.

Participant 3: Jordan

Jordan, a junior Neuroscience/Biochemistry major on the Pre-Med track at Prestigious University, identified as a Black woman. She also identified herself as multiracial: Her mother is both Indian and White, and her father is Black. She grew up in a predominately White, rural area that she described as a "Republican area" with her mother. She attributed the fact that she grew up around White people, the reason why it was easy for her to attend a PWI. When she first arrived at college, she was closer to White students on campus, because that was who she was surrounded by in her residence hall and classes, and this dynamic was not any different than what she was used to growing up. Growing up, she did not live with her father, who is Black, and did not spend much time around the Black people in her family. When she started to spend time with the People of Color on campus, she felt more connected; both to the institution and to

66

her peers. She felt better and enjoyed her time more on campus. It was not until she began spending time with other People of Color that she felt a difference in her experience at Prestigious University.

Jordan enjoyed playing sports and was active with various student organizations, both academic and social. Jordan is the only student athlete that participated in this study. She did not feel that her involvement in her sport provided her with a sense of belonging, but she was intentional about recruiting other minorities and Black students to diversify the sport.

Jordan lived on campus in the Black Affinity House. Living in the Black Affinity House has had an influence on her sense of belonging. It was different from her first 2 years at the university, as it allowed her to be around Black people and other minorities. She described her first 2 years living in the residence hall as unwelcoming. She never felt like she had to explain what she was in Black spaces. Although she is also White and South Indian, she does not "present" as White or South Indian, so she did not feel comfortable explaining whether she should be allowed in those spaces. She grapples with the fact that she is multiracial and did not grow up around Black people. While on campus she found comfort and acceptance from other Black students.

Participant 4: Danielle

Danielle, a junior Sociology major and Management and Organizational Leadership minor at Prestigious University, identified as a Black woman. Danielle did not participate in the university's Pre-Orientation Program for Underrepresented Students but is a Posse Scholar. As a Posse Scholar, she had a pre-orientation through the Posse Scholars Foundation before coming to school freshman year and engaged within her cohort throughout the year.

67

On campus, she was an active and engaged student, dedicating her time to the Organization for Black Students. Danielle grew up in a predominately White area. Being at Prestigious University, allowed her to have" more Black friends than she has ever had growing up." Being at a PWI has allowed her to discover her own sense of "Blackness" and sense of identity as a Black woman at a PWI. Danielle talked about her identity growing up in a Caribbean household. Growing up, her family, who are Jamaican, were her only interactions with Black people. She talked about the cultural difference between Black people from Jamaica and Black people from the U.S.

Danielle lived on campus. She felt that living on campus provides her with a sense of belonging as it gives her access to resources, but she has had a range of experiences within the residence halls. She did not have a great experience living on campus during her freshman year but lived in the Black Affinity House during her sophomore year. During the time of her interview, she served as a Resident Assistant. Her role as a Resident Assistant exposed her to people and resources that she was not familiar with during her first 2 years. As a junior, she is discovering the university from a different lens.

Participant 5: Cinna

Cinna, a senior finance major at Prestigious University, identified as a Black man. He is a first-generation college student. He is the youngest of two. He grew up in a single-parent household with his mother, but also had a good relationship with his father. Cinna participated in the university's Pre-Orientation Program for Underrepresented Students which allowed him to meet other classmates entering college and helped him in his transition into college as a first-generation college student. Cinna served as a research fellow, a member of the Organization for Black Men, University Magazine for Marginalized Experiences, National Pan-Hellenic Council,

68

and is the only participant who is a member of a BGLO. The organizations that he is a member of are all communities that helped him feel a sense of belonging as an incoming freshman transition from a predominately Black and Brown high school to a PWI.

Cinna currently lived off campus in his senior year. Cinna talked about living at home during his first year of college due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. He entered the university in Fall 2020 during a time that he describes "when there were a lot of...I'll argue that the country's at the heat of you know, national turmoil, when it came to race relations between Black and White Americans." Because he was not on campus his first year, he was skeptical about coming to campus based on racialized experiences he heard about from friends who were on campus.

Throughout his two interviews, he talked about the impact that upperclassmen students had on him as a freshman. For this reason, he decided to give back to first-year students to help them navigate college. Cinna will leave a lasting impact on campus through his academic achievements and his dedication to fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for his peers.

Participant 6: Sabrina

Sabrina, a senior Africana Studies, and Kinesiology double major with a concentration in pre-med at Prestigious University, identified as a Black woman. She has a younger sister, and both her parents work at universities, so she is familiar with university settings. Sabrina participated in research and is an active member of various student organizations; both academic and social. She is a member of the Minority Association for Pre-Medical Students, Organization for Women of Color, Organization for Black Poets, and Academic Scholars Program.

Sabrina lived off campus during her senior year. She talked about living at home her first semester of college (Fall 2020) due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. When she arrived at the university in the Spring 2021, she was the only Black woman in her residence hall. As a freshman, moving on the campus a semester after her classmates, during a global pandemic, she was disconnected from the Black community on campus. She did not know any other Black students in her academic class, because her classes were virtual. She did not know about the Diversity Center which also means she did not have an opportunity to meet upperclassmen students to help guide her. It was not until her junior year that she began to feel connected to other people, organizations, and spaces on campus.

Participant 7: Lawrence

Lawrence, a junior Chemistry major with a minor in Biochemistry at Prestigious University, identified as a Black man. He also identified himself as bi-racial. He grew up with this father and grandparents who identify as White and Native American. Although he did not grow up around the Black side of his family, he has discovered himself and his identity as a Black man during this time at Prestigious University. As a Chemistry major, he is one of five People of Color within his classes. This empowered him to be active and participate in organizations across campus.

Lawrence participated in the university's Pre-Orientation Program for Underrepresented Students. Lawrence is a well-rounded individual dedicated to academic success, community building, and advocacy within the university. He served as a research assistant and mentor. He actively engaged in various student organizations; both academic and social. He also serves as a member of student government, Campus-wide programming Organization, National Organization for the Professional Advancement of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers and

70

served as a mentor within a Living learning Community.

Lawrence shared his experiences as a first-generation, low-income student at a university that he describes as a "legacy" school, with students who have parents who also attended the university or have family members who have gone to another institution of higher education. He felt that being a first-generation, low-income college student sets up a barrier for him.

Participant 8: Julia

Julia, a sophomore Anthropology major with a minor in History at Prestigious University, identified as a Black woman. She is a first-generation, low-income college student. She considered it an honor to be a first-generation college student. Other members of her family had had the opportunity to attend college, but various obstacles got in their way of attending. This fueled her in her pursuit towards her degree.

Julia participated in the university's Pre-Orientation Program for Underrepresented Students. Julia is a member of the University's Magazine for Marginalized Experiences, Organization for Black Students, and the Organization for Black Poets. Throughout her interview, Julia was clear that she felt isolated on campus. She did not feel supported by administration and felt the added burden that Black students and other Students of Color have on them to support one another. If given the opportunity to make a different decision, she would not have enrolled at Prestigious University. Julia stated,

> If I could change it over, I probably would not be here… I feel like you can't really reach your full potential here, because there's always going to be somebody knocking you down, or somebody judging you or somebody thinking that they're better than you because of that elitist culture that we have on campus.

71

Although she felt stifled by the university, she found support and safety within the Diversity Center. She felt a sense of freedom to be herself and speak freely in this space.

Julia lived on campus and experienced racism in her residence hall her first year as one of three Black people on her hall. These experiences caused her to retreat home to her family to escape campus. She expressed that her experiences at Prestigious University have gotten better now that she is a sophomore and has found a community of people she can relate with.

Participant 9: Ethel

Ethel, a senior English, and Sociology double major at Prestigious University, identified as a Black woman. She is a first-generation college student. She is the youngest of three, growing up in a house with her mother, two older sisters, and her two nephews. She chose a university close to home so that she can be close to her family. She wanted to stay home during her freshman year (2020-2021) of college due to the global pandemic but was informed that if she did not move into the residence hall there would be a reduction in her financial aid package. As a first-generation, low-income college student, she was not willing to give up her scholarship money.

She described her college experience in two halves. She did not enjoy her first 2 years of college due to the restrictions that the university imposed due to the global pandemic. By her junior year, she was able to find support through her friends, supervisor at her campus job, and her therapist on campus. Throughout her interviews, Ethel shares the influence therapy has had on her experience as a Black student at a PWI. It allowed her to process her experiences as a student entering college during a global pandemic, as well as navigating her identities as a Black woman.

On campus, Ethel served as a research fellow, and a member of student government, Organization for Women of Color, Organization for Black Poets, Minority Pre-Law Association, University Scholars Program, Legal Scholars, and served as a Legal Scholars Fellow and English Honors Research Fellow. Ethel is the only participant who is a member of a BGLO and lives in a sorority house on campus. When asked how or if being a member of her sorority influenced her sense of belonging as a Black student at a PWI, she stated "It's probably the most important thing that influences my belonging on campus." Ethel has lived within her sorority house during her junior and senior years and has expressed that this change in her environment has made it easier to "just be a student and handle the regular stressors of assignments, versus having to worry about the cleanliness and comfort in your own home."

Summary

The participants in this study each added a diversity in perspectives and represented varying levels within the selection criteria for participants: class status, gender, and campus involvement. Including participant profiles is appropriate and a beneficial addition to this IPA study. It provides a detailed and contextualized understanding of each participant to help grasp the background, experiences, and perspectives of the participants; allowing the reader to connect with the individual (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Participant profiles humanize the research and give a backstory to the data. This aligns with the purpose of this research, to understand the race-related experiences of Black students at a selected PWI, then to understand how those experiences have affected their sense of belonging. The profiles capture a broad range of voices.

As a Black woman and a Black higher education practitioner, I found myself empathizing with the participants as they recounted their experiences. I wanted to take the burden that they shared off them. Some of the experiences of racism, microaggressions, and isolation that these

participants felt at ages 18-22, I did not have to experience until much later in life. For this reason, I sat with each participant after each interview, and gave them an opportunity to express how they felt after the questions that I asked. This gave them an opportunity to reflect on their immediate feelings and exhale after the interview without being recorded. For some participants they were able to speak freely without the internal pressure of trying to answer the questions the questions "correctly." This also gave some participants the opportunity to sit in their feels before going back into the environment that did not always provide them with the safety and comfort to freely express themselves.

I was also intentional about giving myself time in between participant interviews. I did not schedule more than two interviews per day and gave myself at least an hour in between interviews. After each interview, I journaled my reflections on the discussion and initial thoughts and feelings towards what the participant shared with me. Oftentimes, I needed to leave my house to take a drive or go on a run to allow myself to physically release the heaviness of the topic. This research study to an emotional, mental and physical toll on my body.

Chapter 5 will provide an overview of the results from this IPA research study at Prestigious University. This chapter will both present and interpret the results of the study. The chapter will provide a detailed account of the significant themes and patterns that capture the essence of the participants' narratives. The chapter will address how the identified themes and patterns contribute to answering the research questions.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

You're not too much, you are enough
Never shrink back, always speak up
Head tilted high, one fist to the sky
Don't doubt your worth
Always add tax, know yourself first.

- Maverick City Music (2021)

This chapter provides an overview of the results from this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) research study at Prestigious University. Participants in this study took part in two semi-structured individual interviews to describe their experiences as Black students at Prestigious University. This research study captured the experiences of nine selected students; these experiences highlight and provide insight to what it means to be Black student at a predominantly White institution (PWI) in relation to their race and sense of belonging. The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of the research study as it relates to the research questions:

How do the selected Black students at a PWI make meaning of their lived experiences and sense of belonging on campus?

a. How does race affect the experiences of selected Black students at a PWI?

b. What factors contributed to the sense of belonging of selected Black students at a PWI?

This chapter focuses on the themes and patterns that emerged from the data collected through the demographic survey and interviews. This chapter provides a detailed exploration of the participants' experiences and perspectives. The following six themes emerged from this research study: (a) students' perceptions of Prestigious University, (b) financial aid, (c) the COVID-19 global pandemic, (d) community, (e) physical spaces on campus, and (f) what it means to "be Black" at a PWI.

Students' Perceptions of Prestigious University

As I begin to explore the themes across interviews, it is important to also understand how the participants perceive the environment where they live and learn. When I asked the participants to describe Prestigious University, they used the following terms to describe their university: beautiful, small, old, rich, White, affluent, historic, racist, quirky, fun, segregated, holds a lot of traditions, holds on to racist values, sense of community, academic rigor, a campus of nerds of geeks, legacy students, and one of the best institutions in the country. These descriptors also emerged in how the participants described the campus culture and their experiences as Black students at their PWI as related to their sense of belonging.

Feeling of Othering

Othering is a process where individuals and groups are treated differently from the dominant social group (Rohleder, 2014). Participants shared feelings of isolation, exclusion, and othering. Throughout the study, participants described the "average" Prestigious University student in a "us" versus "them" manner. Lia expressed that although she feels she fits in at the university, she feels she lives a different experience from the "average" Prestigious University student because they do not need the spaces and resources such as the Diversity Center and Pre-orientation Program for Underrepresented Students to feel like they belong. She stated, "I know

if those places would disappear, I would not feel like I belong here on this campus, I know that I would feel like an outsider."

When I asked what she meant when she said, "average student" and who she is referring to, Lia was clear that when she referred to the "average" Prestigious University student, she was not necessarily referring to White students. When she referred to the "average" Prestigious University student, she is referring to students who have White privilege, rich privilege, legacy and who seem to fit in at the university. She does not assume that the other students who are White, rich, and legacy have an easier life, but from her point of view, they seem to fit in at the university because they have things in common with the majority demographic of the university. I use quotations when I write "average" Prestigious University student, because the term is used based on participants perception of their peers, but I choose not to assert that the predominate White, rich, legacy students as the average student. This furthers the practice of exclusion and othering of Black students.

I asked each of the participants their thoughts of being considered a "average" Prestigious University student; in relation to the university traditions and what they would describe as the "typical" Prestigious University student. Lewis stated that he never talked to another person of color at the university who considered themselves an "average" Prestigious University student. He feels that the label of being a "average" Prestigious University student does not culturally apply to everyone. He used the example of Homecoming and the fact that he did not see a lot of Black Alumni returning to campus, unless they were a member of a BGLO and came back for their fraternity/sorority chapter or live in the area. As an alum of a historically Black university (HBCU), Lewis' account of his experience and observations were much different from my experience as both an undergraduate student and as an alumna of my university returning back

77

from homecoming. I have always looked forward to returning for homecoming. To reconnect with my college friends and give back to the university that nurtured me and started my career.

Both Jordan and Cinna stated that they never wanted to be labeled as an "average" Prestigious University student, specifically as Black students. Cinna emphasized that he wanted to stay rooted in his identity rather than trying to adapt or force himself into a box. He did not want to fit into any stereotypes of the university. Danielle stated that she feels like it's easier for White people to fit into a box of being an "average" Prestigious University student because the Black population of students is so diverse with varying experiences and different perspectives of the university. Even though there is a shared passion for learning and getting involved in clubs and organizations, Danielle feels that it is harder to fit into a category of being an "average" Prestigious University student as a Black student or person of color because they may not "fit as neatly into certain categories." Ethel expressed the concept of being an "average" Prestigious University student is othering. When she describes her feelings of othering, she is clear that it's not a feeling of wanting to be a part of or known as an "average" Prestigious University student. Although she acknowledges that she holds the qualities that she would characterize as an "average" Prestigious University student; nerdy, a little weird, and involved in a lot of extracurricular activities, it's not a title she's ever heard given to Black students and stated that although she is a Prestigious University student, because of her race, she is not an "average" Prestigious University student.

Academic Rigor/Stress and Grind Culture

"The academic rigor is killing me." Lia expressed that she is too stressed academically to think too deeply about how the academic rigor affects her as a Black student. Blackburn (2008) defined rigor as "creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high

levels" (p. 16). The academic rigor and stress are a part of the campus culture that all students experience, so she was not able to differentiate the implications it has on her as a Black student because everyone across races complain about the rigor. She did not negate the added responsibilities of being Black. "I know that I'm Black, I'm woman, I don't have the ability to not have the best résumé." As a Black woman she feels she needs to do her best which adds an added layer of stress. She recognizes that the added layer of stress being a Black woman comes from the world not the university. She was told her entire life

> "People are going to discount you because you're Black. They're going to discount you because you're a woman. If you're going to do it, you need to be the best and prove that you deserve to be here just as much as everybody else."

She admits that this way of thinking is stressful and as much as she may want to change her mindset, she recognizes that it is a fact of life, and it has gotten her this far in life, so she has learned to accept it. As she talked through this reality that she lives with every day she stated, "as I say it out loud, it is kind of horrifying, but the facts of life."

Lewis acknowledged that there is a stress and grind culture that exists within the university, because so many people say that it does, but it has not affected him as much. He accepted the fact that he is surrounded by students who came from high achieving high schools and in turn set their sights on high achieving careers. He chooses not to stress over the academic rigor, but acknowledges as a Black person, "I've only known stress and grind my whole life, so it just seems to be normal to me." He says that the stress and grind culture on campus as a Black person comes from trying to achieve academically, while leading clubs and organizations and not having the support and funding that White organizations have. For him, this inequity with support brings on stress and anger, not academic success. He referenced the financial support

79

that predominately White fraternities, sororities and student organizations receive from White alumni of the university.

Jordan finds herself questioning if she is just being "dramatic or weak" when dealing with the academic rigor at the university. She has felt a level of stress that she has never felt before and for extended amounts of time. She recognizes that the global pandemic brought about a different type of stress due to the uncertainty of what it would lead to, but as a junior she has felt constant stress for 3 years. She chose to attend the university because she wanted to be challenged academically, but she feels she is constantly trying to perform well. Being Black has added an additional barrier as she does not feel comfortable talking to anyone about her academic challenges. She deals with the feeling of not being good enough and then having to go the extra mile of finding people she feels comfortable talking to and knowing that she's been heard and supported. As a Black person at her PWI, she feels the weight of having to "push another mile when I'm already gassed."

Danielle tries to distance herself from the "stress culture" on campus. Hearing other people talk about it causes her to question herself and if she is doing enough. For this reason, she is conscious of who she surrounds herself with and how they make her feel. Based on the way participants describe the academic rigor, it is apparent that the stress culture that they experience is embedded into the campus culture. The students were all aware that college would be academically rigorous, but they also experience stress within their students' organizations, and question their own abilities based on how they compare to other students.

Being a First-Generation College Student

Lewis, Cinna, Lawrence, Julia, and Ethel all identify as first-generation college students. A first-generation college student is an individual whose parents have not completed a bachelor's

degree (Ishitani, 2006). Being a first-generation college student at a PWI can influence a student's educational experience in various ways. First-generation college students face challenges navigating college, financial pressures, and lack of family guidance due to their parents not having college experience. For Black students who are first-generation college students at a PWI, the challenges may intersect with their other challenges related to racial and cultural identity (Strayhorn, 2012).

As a first-generation, low-income, Black student, Lewis feels he is at a "complete disadvantage." He feels as though he did not have a point of reference being that his parents did not go to college and his older sister did not attend a 4-year institution. It was difficult navigating living on campus, academics, food, and how to stay in touch with friends and family back at home. His family does not have a lot of money to give him and sometimes he uses his own money to help provide for them while he is away at college.

Being a first-generation college student influenced Cinna's sense of belonging negatively as a freshman entering the college. He did not have a sense of what to expect or how to navigate college. He participated in the university's Pre-Orientation Program for Underrepresented Students and stated the program had the biggest influence on his sense of belonging as both a first-generation and Black student. The program took place at a time when he was feeling most unsure, and having thoughts of, "okay, what am I supposed to be doing right now? ," but then going into the program allowed him to build connections that helped him get acclimated to the school and what to expect in college life. The pre-orientation program helped him feel like he belongs, and that there is a space for him at his school. He said as he has gotten older and has developed more connection within the university and with peers, he feels like his sense of belonging "caught up" to others around him who are not first-generation.

Lawrence reflected on being a first-generation college student; sharing that his father barely passed high school and not being sure if his grandparents, who helped raise him, finished high school. He is now in an environment interacting with students who are legacy to the University, meaning their parents or grandparents attended Prestigious University, or they have family members who have gone to other institutions. This brings a lot of pressure for him. It does not diminish his sense of belonging, because he is secure in the fact that he belongs at Prestigious University but feels like it sets up a barrier. He questions whether he will get opportunities in his career because he lacks experience or having a family member who went to college. He often feels bad for having questions, but since he does not have a family member who has gone through this experience prior, he is doing everything on his own.

Julia acknowledges that being a first-generation college student makes her "want it even more. I think it's such an honor to be a first gen student." She mentioned that for other family members, there have been opportunities to go to college, but it was not an option due to pregnancies and financial concerns, so the fact that she is the first in her family to have the opportunity to attend college, that fuels her to succeed.

Ethel is sometimes shocked by the differing experiences that she has from her classmates who are not first-generation college students. "I know for me being first-generation, there was no savings to go to college. So, it was dependent on a scholarship. But I learned quickly that a lot of families like they'll send, like allowances to their children in college." She noticed that her classmates have families that are more involved, and she believes that is because they know more about what is going on. Being that she took care of her own college applications, financial aid, and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA) on her own, she assumed everyone in

college supported themselves. She later realized that a lot of other students received financial support and guidance from their parents as they navigated college.

Financial Aid

Students choose their college or universities for various reasons, including academic reputation, program and majors, career outcomes/job opportunities, location, reputation of faculty, size of institution, feeling of fit, and cost (Wyllie, 2018). Across all of the interviews in this study, the participants expressed that finances were the determining factor for them attending their institution.

Both Lia and Lewis were exposed to the university after visiting in high school for a conference. They were not impressed with the campus during their first visit. Lia stated that Prestigious University was not her top choice, but the university provided her with the best financial aid package, completely waiving her tuition. Lewis reflected on his time in high school applying to colleges. As a first-generation college student, coming from an immigrant family, he did not know much about the college process. He applied to in-state schools, and Prestigious University gave him the most money.

Sabrina also toured the university and shared that it "didn't stand out to me." She stated that it was not her top choice, but as a "2020 Senior" graduating high school during a global pandemic, there was "a lot going on." She received a scholarship from the university, coupled with outside scholarships that would allow her to graduate debt-free.

Jordan was not familiar with Prestigious University and only applied because her older sister also applied. She also received a full tuition scholarship. Coming from a low-income household, Jordan felt that after receiving a full tuition scholarship to attend Prestigious University, there was no comparison with another school who did not give her that same financial

aid package. Cinna also recognized that by being awarded with a full academic scholarship, Prestigious University provided him the best opportunity to attend college compared to other offers he was given coming out of high school. Julia stated that she decided to attend Prestigious University because the institution had the best financial aid package of the universities she applied to, receiving a scholarship that covers her tuition fees. She said she did not pay attention to the academic rigor of the university and that did not matter to her. Her priority when choosing her university was having the least amount of debt when she was done with college.

Danielle was selected as a Posse Scholar. The Posse Scholars Program is a college access and leadership development initiative (Posse Foundation, 2024). They provide high school students from diverse backgrounds with full-tuition scholarships to attend partner colleges and universities. Each Posse is paired with a partner college or university that has agreed to provide a full-tuition scholarship. Danielle explained that Prestigious University was not her top choice of schools but through the Posse Scholars Program, she was chosen to attend Prestigious University. She states.

> So, I am here because I got selected to be here. In terms of my actual wanting to be here, I
> knew when selecting my colleges that Prestigious University was definitely my top
> choice as an in-state college, just based on my options, and like where I wanted to apply,
> but I know that I wanted to go out of state, and I didn't want to stay in-state… I got
> selected for Posse, so I came here.

While she is grateful for the financial aid that she received and the opportunity to be a Posse Scholar, she acknowledged that Prestigious University is not the university that she would have chosen if finances were not a factor in her decision.

Lawrence first visited Prestigious University in the eighth grade and was impressed with the size, feel and landscape of the university. He was told that the university takes care of individuals who are lower income and who are first-generation college students, giving them resources and financial aid funding. He applied to the institution "on a whim" as an Early Decision applicant, and later learned that Prestigious University is nationally ranked in terms of academics.

As a first-generation college student, Ethel was not familiar with Prestigious University. She did not want to go to college, but wanted a job, so she knew that college was the best option for her to get a job. She applied, received a full tuition scholarship, and that overshadowed the other acceptances she received to other institutions. She really wanted to go to an HBCU, but the fact that she was touring college campuses during the global pandemic, she realized that aside from Prestigious University giving her money, it was the best option for her.

The COVID-19 Global Pandemic

The COVID-19 global pandemic had a significant influence on college students in various aspects of their academic and social lives. Many colleges and universities had to abruptly transition to remote learning and vacate their campus housing. This shift was challenging for students who struggled with the virtual format, had difficulties adjusting to the lack of social interactions with others, and those who lacked access to the necessary technology. Not all students had equal access to technology, internet connectivity, or a home environment that is conducive to learning.

Participants referred to the 2020-2021 academic year as "The COVID Year." Colleges and universities implemented various rules to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and support measures to increase mental health services, financial aid, flexible grading policies, and

assistance navigating these challenges. The influence of COVID-19 varied for different students depending on the socioeconomic status, access to resources, and the institution that they attended. Cinna, Sabrina, and Ethel entered college during "The COVID Year." They graduated high school as the class of 2020, which means they graduated in the height of the global pandemic, and then started college in the height of the global pandemic.

Cinna spent his entire first year (2020-2021) at home due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. He can now reflect on this as a senior, seeing incoming first-year students have opportunities he did not have. He missed out on a lot of traditional first-year experiences and activities. In his second year (2021-2022), there were still limitations due to COVID-19. There was still a fear of catching the virus, causing the university to mandate COVID-19 vaccinations, and limited in-person events and activities.

> The fact that I'm a graduating senior now. Like it feels like I've had like two and a half years on this campus, really. And I'm already about to leave. So, I guess it leaves me wondering, a lot. like, what would life have been like, had I had everything from the beginning?

Sabrina stated that "the COVID-19 global pandemic took away my freshman year for the most part." She stayed at home the first semester of her first year (Fall 2020). Although everything was on Zoom, she felt like she could not meet people as much as she could have had she been on campus. In her second semester, even though she was on campus, she spent most of her time in her room. When she returned to campus as a sophomore, she felt like a first-year student again, because she was still learning how to get around and meeting people for the first time. As a senior, she reflected on the fact that she did not know where the library was her first year, and that is the place where she spent a lot of her time in her last year.

Ethel feels that Black students coming into college now probably have a slightly easier time because they did not graduate high school and going into college during the global pandemic. Growing up, she was always told "you have to get your degree, you have to go to school, you have to do this. And you have to do it straight through it like doing K-12 immediately go into college." Her main goal was to allow her mother to see her walk the stage at her high school graduation, because no one in her family has graduated. This was a big accomplishment for her, but due to the global pandemic, her high school graduation was canceled.

> After those dreams actively being crushed, and then having to immediately go into college, there was no time to gather myself, and then come into college, I did not get an orientation, or convocation or any of that…Going into college, I had no idea what was going on whatsoever. No one in my family had ever done it. I was basically like, exploring the jungle on my own, trying to figure out what I was even doing. And thankfully, I landed on my feet very quickly, because I was in that survival mode…So, I'd say, the pandemic has failed a lot of us.

Isolation, uncertainty, and challenges adapting to new learning formats took a toll on students' mental health. The social aspects of college life were impacted due to social distancing measures. Students missed out on university traditions, social events, extracurricular activities, and the overall college experience.

Danielle reflected on the influence that COVID-19 had on her college experience. Although she was not "a complete COVID class," meaning she did not enter college during "The COVID Year," she still had restrictions during her first year (2021-2022), making it difficult navigating and socializing with people, because she did not want to get COVID. Although she

found the Organization for Black Students and enjoyed the organization and the people, she wished she got involved in more clubs.

> I kind of just like settled on that one thing. And like, there's nothing wrong with that... I think that by potentially being in more clubs, that maybe weren't centered around the Black identity, I'd be able to do that a little bit more. And just like learn about different spaces on campus in general, like there's just like having a more holistic view of campus.

The global pandemic affected her in her ability to "find spaces that were meant for me on campus." The global pandemic delayed a lot of processes that "the typical college student would go through" because of the restrictions on campus. As a junior, Danielle branched out to spaces on campus that she did not have the opportunity to explore in her first 2 years of college. She felt that due to the global pandemic and the time that she entered college in 2021, she was not exposed to the full college campus and all the opportunities afforded to her. Oftentimes, students explore the different opportunities that the college has to offer and then choose the organizations that best fit them. In Danielle's case, she entered college and only focused on the Organization for Black Students and did not have the opportunity to try out other organizations that may also interest her.

The global pandemic affected many students and their families' financial stability. With the economic fallout and job losses, it made it difficult for some students to cover tuition, housing, and other expenses. Lawrence discussed how COVID-19 had an indirect impact on his education. His father lost his job during the global pandemic. This affected his father's financial situation, which in turn affected his financial status with the university, causing him to be in debt. The financial burden that the global pandemic caused his father carried over to him. Although he did not have to worry about the financial cost of college in his first year, his family's financial

88

circumstance changed in his second year of college. This altered his financial aid and consumed his thoughts about money and debt. This is compounded with the everyday challenges of being a first-generation, Black, male student studying chemistry at a nationally ranked PWI.

Community

Finding community is important for all college students, but it is specifically significant for Black students attending a PWI (Strayhorn, 2019). Establishing a sense of community contributes to a positive college experience. Finding community at a PWI helps Black students to navigate challenges they may face, celebrate their cultural identity, and establish a support system. This is essential to their overall well-being, affirms their identity and helps combat feelings of isolation.

Black students attending a PWI often share common experiences such as microaggressions, stereotypes, and isolation (Mills, 2020). Having a community and a space to discuss and address these shared experiences and foster support and understanding is important to a student's sense of belonging. As it relates to community, there were a few patterns across the participant interviews. Many of the participants expressed the importance of having people at the university who support them and their campus involvement as a means to foster a sense of belonging at their university. They expressed the importance of "finding your people" and feeling safe on campus.

"Find Your People"

All nine of the participants referenced the importance of "finding your people." Participants define "finding your people" as finding a support system to navigate through all the stressors of college life. This was discussed in the context for how they found community, sense

of belonging, and advice they would share with other Black students entering Prestigious University based on their experience. Ethel shared,

> Find your people... find your clique, I guess, find your best friends, I found my best friends, the people that you want to continue to do life with…Meet the people who you can rely on for the late-night study sessions. And going out to eat, going out, you know, the people who will give you a shoulder to cry on, but also will help you, you know, get through the academics. And so, because college is a full life experiences you have to live and study and just like interact, it's a social and academic environment. I'd say find the people that you can be extremely close with and rely on throughout all of those different dynamics.

Ethel speaks to the fact that college is a well-rounded experience. Students not only attend classes at their university, but they live, study, build friendships, and process life outside of the college bubble while on campus. Having a community of people who you trust and who will to be by you throughout these aspects of life is important to a students' sense of belonging and to college success.

"Find your people, because you are going to need them." Lia talks about the culture shock she felt while being at a PWI. Although she was used to being around White people, she realized there was a difference being around "rich White people." For Lia, the cultural shock was not just about race, but also socioeconomic status. When asked what she meant by the phrase "find your people" she explained that college can be "kind of lonely and extremely hard," so you need people that you can go to breakfast with, cry with, and watch TV to get through the weeks.

"Find your people quick." Jordan reflects on the fall semester of her first year (Fall 2021) and remembers crying every week. "And I'm not even a crier." She had difficulty getting

acclimated to the school and to the people. She found herself feeling the need to prove herself in every room. When she used the phrase "find your people," to her that means to find people that make you feel safe and supported on days you do not feel good enough. Sabrina says that "finding your people" allows you to find a community of people to let you know that if you are struggling, you are not the only one.

Safety

Safety refers to the state of being protected from harm, danger, or risk. It encompasses physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. Strayhorn's (2012) model encompasses the need for psychological safety. Creating environments where students feel psychologically safe encourages open communication and engagement. The word "safety" or "feeling safe" was brought up throughout the study. Jordan talks about feeling safe throughout both of her interviews. When she defines belonging, she refers to safety in spaces and with people. She feels safe within her circle of friends, but when she leaves her circle, that often means she is not around People of Color. Leaving that comfort puts her in a situation where people don't have the same struggles that she has due to race. This causes her to revert into needing to prove herself and that she deserves to be at Prestigious University. She has moments where she does not feel connected anywhere on campus because there are not a lot of people who look like her. But she feels safe when she is around other minoritized people and in the Diversity Center. When asked to clarify what safety means to her, she feels free to be herself. Jordan shared that for her, being safe means:

> I don't feel like I have to prove that I'm smart and deserve to be here. I feel like I can say whatever, and openly have questions. I feel very supported in the sense of like, if I don't

know something, it's not judged... I don't necessarily feel that way outside of that community. And so I feel like when I'm in it, like I feel like I'm free to be myself.

When Cinna and Julia talk about safety, they are talking about both physical and emotional safety. Julia states "If it weren't for the other students, I probably wouldn't feel like this is a safe place for me to go, I probably wouldn't have been here." Cinna entered college in 2020 and described the climate based on the "racial awakening" in the U.S. of America. He reflected on his first year and his appreciation for upperclassmen who made sure that the Black incoming first-year students felt welcomed and knew that this was a place that they belong; especially because it's a PWI. He remembered not being sure what kind of climate he was going into, given the state of the world and the upcoming 2020 U.S. Presidential election and the racial implications that were tied to the election. The upperclassmen helped reassure him that Prestigious University was a place that as a Black man, he could succeed, take up space, and feel secure. In turn, Cinna wanted to make sure that the students coming after him had the same experience, where they can feel like Prestigious University is "a safe place for them".

Black students at a PWI seek out support and a community of people with shared experience and a shared understanding of the experiences. "Finding your people" is essential for any student entering into college, but for Black students navigating an environment that lacks cultural diversity, community serves as a refuge. Fostering community allows Black students to find and create spaces where they feel safe to freely express themselves.

Physical Spaces on Campus

Creating safe spaces for Black students at a PWI is essential to fostering a sense of belonging, support and community (Ferguson, 2019). This allows Black students to feel valued. Participants reference physical spaces on campus that they turn to for support and safety. They

referenced the Black Affinity House, Sorority House, and the Diversity Center. Participants also described spaces on campus that did not provide a sense of belonging for them.

First-Year Residence Hall

Transitioning into a residence hall during the first year of college can pose various challenges, including homesickness, adjusting to a new living space, independence, and conflict resolution. If you are a Black student attending a PWI, moving into a residence hall can also be a culture shock. A few of the participants shared their experiences within the residence hall during their first year of college. They shared experiences of microaggressions, colorism, isolation, and othering.

Lia talked about experiences of isolation she experienced in her residence hall during her first year. She was one of two Black women who lived in the hall, and even then, they did not speak to each other until second semester. There was not any particular reason why they didn't speak, but they also did not feel the need to seek each other out because they were both Black. She recalls a time during her first year watching her hallmates talking, laughing, and connecting, and it was a realization that these were not her friends, and she was not connected with any of them. Hearing the connections that other people were having with each other while she felt isolated caused her to have a panic attack and want to go home.

When asked if there was anything she would do differently during her college experience, Lia mentioned that she would choose to live in a different residence hall. She would choose to live with her friends that she met during the pre-orientation program. "I would have felt a lot of the belonging in the community and the freshman friendships that everybody else feels that I don't have and can't speak to." She feels that if she stayed in a different residence hall her first year, it would have made a difference in her experience. The only times she felt lonely or that she

did not belong were when she was in her residence hall during her first year. "But when I was not in the dorm, I was fine. I was with my community. I was with my people." When Lia was not in class, she stayed in the Diversity Center; often staying after the Center closed.

After staying home her first semester due to the global pandemic, when Sabrina arrived on campus second semester her freshman year (Spring 2021), she was shocked to realize that she was the only Black woman in her residence hall. She felt like she did not belong while living in her first-year residence hall. She found herself in group situations where she felt left out and forgotten. This stood out to her as the only Black person within the residence. She described the residence hall experiences as being "cliquey" and because she moved into the residence hall halfway through the year, she felt like she could not be friends with any of her hallmates because they already had their established friends. She was also told by White upperclassmen students that you find your friends for life freshmen year. They advised that the friendships you make the first year, you will stick with them your entire 4 years. Sabrina was confused by this because she ended her first year and did not have any friends. She eventually found out that that "rule" was not the same for Black students at Prestigious University and that allowed her to have an attitude shift going into her junior year. She learned that as a Black student a Prestigious University, it takes longer to find spaces and people that provide a sense of belonging. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, Sabrina had to social-distance herself from other students for own safety. As the only Black person in her residence hall, she was also disconnected from the Black community on campus. Sabrina did not have the guidance from upperclassmen students in her first year to help her navigate campus or connect her with other Black people.

Julia was one of three Black women on her floor within her first-year residence hall. She describes this as "the most uncomfortable experience because it was such a social and racial

94

disconnect." Racist jokes were made but were considered to be funny to the majority of the women who lived in the residence hall. There were cultural differences in things that are important to her in the upkeep of her household. She felt like if she needed to complain about cleanliness in the shared bathrooms, it was perceived as her being "angry and ghetto" when she was just trying to have a conversation. Julia's experiences as she described them go beyond microaggressions. She experienced racism and lived in a hostile environment. She explained,

> Because I'm strong and talk and like able to communicate what I'm feeling, but they've never had a Person of Color talk to them that way or to be surrounded by a Person of Color who is able to be on the same level as them, it just seems like I was coming off as too strong.

She never felt comfortable within the residence hall, and being that she lived close to campus, this caused her to go home often.

Jordan talked about feeling othered in her residence hall in her first year. She recalled times when her hallmates hosted karaoke nights and they sang songs that everyone seemed to know except her. She eventually found the Diversity Center and found other students with commonalities. The Center felt more like home to her because of "little things like when music comes on" and everyone, including her, knows the song. While the residence hall met Jordan's physiological needs for shelter according to Strayhorn's (2012) Model of Sense of belonging, the Diversity Center met her belonging needs.

Ethel talked about the fact that the Black students in her residence hall first year formed a group chat. Living in one of the larger first-year residence halls, among 200-300 students, Ethel lived among what would be considered a "big population of Black people" with about 20 people in the residence hall. This group chat would allow them to connect with one another and plan

95

time to meet up. She mentioned that the group chat did not really "click" because they were not similar in personalities, they were only holding on to the commonality of being Black.

Black Affinity House

Some universities offer special interest housing that focus on cultural and affinity groups. At a PWI, affinity housing serves as a counter space to cultural centers and other non-residential settings. These spaces allow Black students to experience a home-like and familiar setting that allows them to feel a sense of belonging and mattering (Volpe & Jones, 2023). Participants referenced living in a Black Affinity House which is a living learning community that allows Black students to live together and form community. In 2023-2024 academic year, the Black Affinity House was limited to 42 students. To live in an affinity house, students must be sophomores, juniors, or seniors, and they must complete an application in addition to the traditional housing lottery. Lewis has lived in the Black Affinity House on campus for the past 2 years. He noted that there are twice as many residences as there was the previous years. Although he knows everyone who lives within the house, he still feels disconnected from the Black community on campus because of the number of residences in the house. Despite this feeling of disconnect, living within this house makes him feel like he belongs more at the university. Living on campus keeps him connected. A lot of executive board members of the organizations that he belongs to live in the Black Affinity House, so they can knock on each other's door, ask questions, or socialize.

After having a non-Black roommate her first year, Danielle chose to live in the Black Affinity House her sophomore year. She felt this was beneficial to her because it was a shared living environment where there was a general understanding about what it is like to be Black on campus and the struggles that they each experienced on a day-to-day basis. There was also a

community that was built where if someone needed gel for their hair or food, people were willing to share what they had, to make a more comfortable living environment on campus. Cinna also referenced during his time living in the Black Affinity House that you did not have to go anywhere to find community in the Black Affinity House, it was just there every day when you wake up and walk outside your room.

Julia feels that now that she is living in a place that she is surrounded by "a lot of people who look like me" it has made her experience living on campus much easier. She explains that there is a common understanding of how everyone lives together that you don't get when you are the only Black person in a predominately White residence hall. She wanted it to be clear that she does not feel that the campus or residence halls should be segregated but stressed the importance of diversity and everyone feeling comfortable and not singled out; especially in the place where they live.

Sorority House

There was one participant who is a member of a sorority that also has their own sorority house on campus. There are over 20 fraternity and sorority houses at Prestigious University. Among those houses, only one house has been designated for a Black Greek-letter Organization (BGLO). There are six active BGLOs at Prestigious University.

Ethel talks about the people and places that have given her a sense of belonging at Prestigious University. She referenced the fact that she is a member of a BGLO and has lived within her sorority's house during her junior and senior year. She finds comfort in the fact that they share the same culture. "I live with women who are not only my sorority sisters, but my best friends. And they're also Black women who are very like-minded." Her roommate is also her line

97

sister (someone who joined the sorority at the same) and her best friend. She also lives with her other two best friends.

Ethel talks about the cultural differences she encountered when she had a White roommate freshman year compared to living in the sorority house with Black roommates.

> It's so much easier to just be a student and handle the regular stressors of assignments, versus having to worry about the cleanliness and comfort in your own home... It makes it like safe and comfortable. This is my safe space, this is something I can come back to that I'm very, very grateful for, which I haven't always had outside of the sorority, outside of living with other Black women.

This has given her a sense of belonging with her home. As a BGLO with a sorority house at a PWI, they are able to invite other friends who are not members of their sorority to provide another space community to other Black students on campus.

Cinna is also a member of a BGLO. He talks about the influence that being a member of his fraternity has had on his sense of belonging. Being a part of a fraternity allowed him to get involved, be a leader on campus, and help other people feel like they belong as well. "The brotherhood that I've formed with the men I'm in the fraternity with, it's something that's like, unmatched and really made me feel like I found my home." Although his fraternity does not have a house on campus, he said that he has lived with every member of his chapter at some point, whether it was during the school year or over the summer. He and his fraternity brothers created spaces for themselves to foster community.

Diversity Center

Across all the first set of interviews, participants referenced the Diversity Center as a resource and source of support for them as a Black student at Prestigious University. The

98

Diversity Center is not specifically for Black students, but this space serves as a resource, and core for community building. Through education and event planning, the Diversity Center provides students with a space to highlight the many identities represented within the Prestigious University community. Having a diversity center for students on campus provides a dedicated physical space where students can gather, connect, and engage in cultural activities. Each participant described the influence that the Center had on their sense of belonging as a Black student at Prestigious University.

Lia described the Diversity Center as home. It is a place that she goes to knowing that she will see her friends, talk with the administrators, and staff who manage the space, and hear music that she grew up listening to. The Diversity Center provides her with a space where she feels comfortable talking to other people. She compared the feeling she felt in her first-year residence hall to being in the Diversity Center. In her residence hall there were often inside jokes that she did not understand, but in the Diversity Center she felt included in the inside jokes from being in the Center or from events hosted by the Diversity Center. Being in the Center gave her the experiences she felt she should have gotten in her first-year residence hall. When describing the influence that the Center had on her sense of belonging, she realized that it is not so much the physical space or its name, it is the community that has been built within this space. She said that she needs the people and community that the Diversity Center provides. If she did not have those things, life on campus would be a lot harder and lonelier and she would consider graduating early.

Lewis served as a student employee within the Diversity Center. He credited the Center as giving him a head start towards making connections with people in college. After being at home in his house for a year and a half due to the global pandemic, then transitioning to college

99

in Spring 2021, the Diversity Center was a place for him to meet new people from shared backgrounds, cultures and created a space for conversations. Without it, he feels he would have struggled a lot more in the beginning of college. He described the Center as a place on campus that brings togetherness and solidarity across intersectionality's of students on campus. He expressed being annoyed by the fact that it is the only place on campus that provides a diversity of students occupying one space. Lewis also describes the Diversity Center as a home away from home. He sees the Diversity Center as a "pillar in the community" and a place for people to go who may feel "forgotten about" by the greater campus.

Jordan credited the Diversity Center as the place where she found most of her support as a Black student at a PWI. She said if she does not go to the Diversity Center enough in a week, she can feel the difference. She can feel when she has not seen her friends. For her it is not about having deep conversations with everyone in the Center, rather it is seeing people that look like her in one space. She also describes this feeling as a form of home. 'It just gives me a place to be free and not really like feel like I need to put on like a facade or anything." The Diversity Center has helped her to feel a sense of belonging at Prestigious University, when often she does not feel like she does or does not feel good enough. It allows her to be more comfortable on campus. The people in the Center remind her that she is loved and that she is doing her best.

Danielle and Cinna describe the Diversity Center as being integral to the beginning of their college experience and transition. For Danielle, it is a space she went to daily. This allowed her to spend time with others, study, attend events, and has given her an opportunity to meet faculty and staff of color. College can be overwhelming for a first-year student, so having a space that helps facilitate these connections can be a great resource to students.

Cinna and Ethel both stated that the Diversity Center gives them a sense of community. Coming from classes where you may be one or two other Black students or pass them by around campus, but the Center allowed them to see how large or how strong the community is. It provided Cinna with a space to exist as a Black man on a predominately White campus and get to know other people who share similar experiences and identities as him. For him, it was a space where he found support within a group of people who were willing to uplift and celebrate him. Ethel referred to the Center as a place that is "very special to me." The staff provided students with food and resources to aid in every aspect of their life as college students.

As Sabrina reflects on her time in college and offers advice to perspective Black students, she tells them to find the Diversity Center. As a student entering college during "The COVID Year" (2020-2021), she was not aware of the Diversity Center and did not have it as a resource or source of support. She stated that the first time she walked into the Diversity Center, was the first time she saw more than one of two Black people in a room together while on campus. For Sabrina, the Diversity Center represents not being alone. She is now able to relax. She does not feel the need to be conscious of how "Black" she is presenting when she is among other Students of Color in the Center.

For Lawrence, the Diversity Center helped him discover his identity as a Black man. Not just as a Black man at a PWI, but how his multiple identities show up more broadly in this world. He met people in The Center who affirmed him and embraced him as a Black man, although prior to coming to college, he did not have any examples of what it meant to "be Black." He describes the Center as a haven for those with varying backgrounds, ethnicities, races, and identities to talk with one another. A space for those who feel ostracized from campus.

Julia describes the Diversity Center as "one of the safest places for me on campus." She uses the word "safe" because it is a place where she feels supported by the staff and is able to fully be herself as a Black woman without judgement. "I don't have the like mask or put on a front or act like something that I'm not when I am in there."

In the context of being a Black student at a PWI, participants sought refuge and a sense of belonging in specific physical spaces on campus, The Black Affinity House, Sorority House, and Diversity Center serve as sanctuary spaces where Black students can connect with their Black identity, shared experiences and foster a sense of community. These spaces serve as more than just physical structures, they represent a sense of belonging and solidarity. However, there are also spaces like first-year residence halls lack a sense of belonging and highlighted the challenges that Black students face at a PWI.

Being Black at a PWI

Throughout the interviews, I heard participants use the phrase "being Black" in the context of "being Black enough," "being too Black," or having their own or an imposed view of what it means to "be Black." There is no one way to "be Black" or set of characteristics that applies to all Black people. "Being Black" encompasses a complex set of experiences, identities, and cultural nuances. This section will highlight patterns that came up across interviews that is unique to being Black at a PWI. Participants wrestled with their identity, were encountered with stereotypes and microaggressions, dealt with feelings of isolation and were influenced by racial injustice in the U.S. of America.

Black Identity

Black identity encompasses a range of cultures, languages, and traditions. Black identity intersects with other aspects of identity such as gender, sexuality, class, and nationality.

Intersectionality between identities shapes a person's lived experiences (Stueven, 2021). As few of the participants discuss how they tapped into their Black identity, learned more about themselves, and stood taller as a Black individual since attending their PWI.

Danielle feels as though she has discovered her own "sense of Blackness" and own sense of identity as a person of color since arriving at Prestigious University. Her high school was predominantly White, so she did not have a lot of Black friends. She comes from a Jamaican background and did not know a lot of Black friends outside of her family, so coming to college, she was able to educate herself on Black American culture in general because the perspective of Black people she had previously was specific to Caribbean culture. Coming to college, Danielle was then able to form her own view of herself as a Black woman in society outside of her home environment. She was also able to gain understanding of being Black in the U.S. versus being Black in Jamaica.

As a Black woman at a PWI, Ethel felt the pressure to choose between identifying as Black or identifying as a woman. As marginalized communities at a PWI, she explained that people like to "stick together": women, Black people, People of Color and other communities. She tried to "separate" herself but found herself in Black spaces that promoted sexist behavior, or women-centered spaces that were focused on White women. Now that she lives within her sorority house, she can be supported by other Black women, and not have to abandon any of her identities. She has the freedom to be her full self as both Black and woman.

Cinna grew up in schools with majority Black and Brown classmates and did not have to think about or attach himself to being Black, but coming here he felt the need to "embrace that Blackness" and remain rooted in his identity. He sought out spaces and tried to make sure he did not lose his identity. He shared how having the support of Black upperclassmen students helped

him to be secure within his racial identity and shaped his experience and what he chose to get involved in throughout his 4 years.

Lawrence shared that throughout his time at Prestigious University he went through an identity crisis. He explained,

I feel like at times, I'm, you know, not Black enough at times, I feel like I'm too Black. For some individuals on campus, just being like, multicultural. I feel like it's like this whole identity crisis. But I would say that when I started hanging out, and listening, and really just immersing myself in what it means to be Black on campus... Going to the Organization for Black Students meeting, or African Cultural Organization meeting, you know, attend just seeing what it's like to be Black on campus and then realizing like, that's my identity. I'm living out what it is that they stand for. And I realized that I'm not just a minority on campus, a Black person on campus, I'm a Black man on campus.

Being raised by his White grandmother, Lawrence had unclear views of what it means to "be Black." Some of his thinking was based on stereotypes that were projected onto him, causing him to question if he was "Black enough." He often felt as though he was "too White for the Black people on campus" and then be reminded that he was not White either. He states that he felt "caught between two worlds…A tug between two or more identities." Lawrence refutes the notion that Black people may feel alienated at a PWI. Based on his experience "I know a lot of people feel the Blackest they ever felt being on this campus." He credits this feeling to having people and resources to help him figure out his identity.

Stereotypes and Microaggressions

In high school, Lia dealt with colorism and being questioned if she was truly Black. Her mother reminded her that things would be different now that she is attending a PWI. She told Lia

"even though you're pale, you're still Black. The world is going to see you as Black." As a Black student at a PWI, she was then faced with racism and microaggressions within her residence hall. She was able to separate the actions of people from her daily life and did not let it affect her sense of belonging to the university. She accepted that a lot of her hallmates were good people, but they just did not click and she in turn did not feel comfortable in a place she was told was her home. This caused her to feel lonely in this space, but not when she was with her community.

Sabrina has created a defense for herself when around her White classmates. She grew up in a household with parents with both northern and southern accents and a combination of their accents comes out when she speaks. She is comfortable using African American Vernacular English when she is home but is conscious of how she speaks when she is on campus. She has created a "neutral" accent for herself where people are not able to tell where she is from. She feels that if she speaks with some of her accents or as comfortably as she does while she is home, people will view her as being unintelligent. She acknowledges that there is a stereotype that Black people are less intelligent than White people and other non-Black People of Color, so she has tried to present herself in a certain way so that "the only thing that is stereotypically Black about me is just my appearance." This mindset of changing herself by masking her accent is something that she wants to change because she is aware that there are many ways to show up as a Black person, but these stereotypes are engrained in many people and for Sabrina speaking with an accent or using African American Vernacular English is considered being "too Black." Although Sabrina did not use the term codeswitching in her description of how she chose to present herself on campus, this is how I interpreted her actions. I write further about codeswitching in my reflections of Sabrina in Chapter 6.

Lawrence also uses phrases such as "not Black enough" or being "too Black." He uses adjectives such as anger, aggressive, loud, passion, and unprofessional when he and his White counterparts describe him as "being Black" and he may need to "tone it down." I asked when he uses these adjectives, is it based on others perception of "being Black" or his perception. He stated that it was initially other people's perception, but throughout his two interviews these words came up frequently as he described himself and how he shows up as a Black man. He describes it as "turning it up" and "turning it down."

Lewis is faced with stereotypes placed on him as a tall, Black, man attending a PWI. Although he wishes that he branched out into different spaces on campus and talked to different people within his first 2 years of college, he found that to be difficult because of his physical stature. People assume he is a football player or assume his scholarship is an athletic scholarship rather than an academic. He has had experience of people looking at him "crazy" for simply going up to them to talk. He feels that people are intimidated by his physical presence as a Black man. He acknowledges that there are not many Black men on his campus, but despite how much people claim not to be racist, he can tell there is a feeling that goes over people when they see him or especially if he approaches them to speak. As a Black man, he feels he has to "walk around with others view of you as a ticking time bomb." He acknowledges how stressful this has been for him and chooses not to go outside of the Black community due to those experiences.

Racial Injustice in the U.S.

Lia recalls comments in class about race riots being over and that racism has died down. This allowed her to realize the difference in experiences and how blind people are to what happened and continues to happen within the U.S. when it comes to race. Although she was not in college at the time, she recalls racial protest after a man was killed in the streets a few years

106

ago, or days ago when a 16-year-old boy was murdered for no other reason than being Black. She did not name the man or boy killed, and as I shared in Chapter 1, there are many, so I do not want to assume to know which racial protest or murder she was referring to. She expressed nervousness going into the 2024 U.S. Presidential election, and the divide that the election might cause on campus.

Sabrina feels that racial injustice in the U.S. has made her hyper aware of her day-to-day interactions with people. Jordan came to the realization during the global pandemic and Black Lives Movement of 2020 that she changed how she wanted to show up in this world as a Black person. "I kind of switched from being like, whispering on Black to like being like, Yes, I'm Black and like, what? If that makes you uncomfortable? I'm not sorry. This is how I was born." She began to celebrate the fact that she is Black. She is not ashamed of being Black and is able to walk confidently into rooms as a Black woman. In high school, she walked into spaces with the hope that no one would notice that she was Black. As a Black woman at a PWI, she is now more confident and more appreciative of her culture and her appearance.

Danielle acknowledged that on campus it is easy to put yourself in a bubble, and some students choose not to watch the news while they are on campus. She chooses to have private conversations with close friends when instances of racial injustice happen in the news or even on campus. This allows them to talk about it and process how they feel about the issue. This allows her to remain informed of issues and reflect on how she views herself as a Black individual.

Julia is vocal about injustice. She feels that this is something that she has to do, because no one else will talk about it. She wishes the Black community had more support from the university, when racial injustices occur within the U.S. Saying "what happened was horrible" is not enough for her. Both Julia and Lawrence stated that they would want the university to show

107

solidarity to the Black community when Black people are affected by injustice within the U.S., rather than trying to please everyone else.

Cinna described experiences in class when professors brought up current events of racial injustice within the U.S. and him being the only Black person in class. He is faced with the decision of whether he wants to express his view on the topic or if he would prefer to

protect my peace and not force myself to have to engage in this conversation with a group of people who, I feel like there's no way they're going to understand what I'm feeling what I'm going through, no matter what I say.

As a Black student at a PWI, Cinna talks about trying to exist peacefully, but to do so, he has found that he has to resort back to certain spaces and have conversations among people that he's comfortable with.

Summary

In this chapter, I explored the participants' experiences and perspectives according to the themes and patterns that emerged from the data. Their experiences on campus were tied to the history and campus culture of Prestigious University and influenced the participants' sense of belonging. Financial aid emerged as a theme, shedding light on the influence finances had on participants' decision to choose their institution. The influence of the COVID-19 global pandemic on the participants, and how its impact varied across academic classes. Community emerged as a factor contributing to the sense of belonging for the participants. Physical spaces on campus provided safety and support systems. Through the study, the concept of "being Black" at a PWI unveiled the varied experiences and perspectives of each participant related to their race and identity. This exploration of the themes and patterns, further address the research questions posed in this study:

How do the selected Black students at a PWI make meaning of their lived experiences and sense of belonging on campus?

a. How does race affect the experiences of selected Black students at a PWI?

b. What factors contributed to the sense of belonging of selected Black students at a PWI?

In Chapter 6, I provide a summary of the research findings, answer the research questions, and contextualize my data with my conceptual framework, Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging. I discuss the implications for policy and practice. In addition, I discuss limitations and recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 6

RECOMMENDATIONS

"Persevere."

- Ketanji Brown Jackson, 2022

The purpose of this research study was to understand the race-related experiences of selected Black students at a predominately White Institution (PWI), then to understand if those experiences have affected their sense of belonging. By elevating the voices of these students, this study provides a better understanding of their lived experiences, and informs institutions, practitioners and higher education leaders on how to address race and sense of belonging, to provide support to students on their college campuses.

Using Strayhorn's (2012) Sense of Belonging as a theoretical framework, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine Black undergraduate students enrolled at Prestigious University. The research questions that guided the study were:

How do the selected Black students at a PWI make meaning of their lived experiences and sense of belonging on campus?

   a. How does race affect the experiences of selected Black students at a PWI?

   b. What factors contributed to the sense of belonging of selected Black students at a PWI?

Results of the study highlighted six major themes: (a) students' perceptions of Prestigious University, (b) financial aid, (c) the COVID-19 global pandemic, (d) community, (e) physical

spaces on campus, and (f) what it means to "be Black" at a PWI. This chapter will review the major findings of this study and their implications for theory, research, and practice.

In this chapter, I discuss my study findings, answer my research questions, make recommendations for higher education practitioners, and address implications for policy and practice. I will also discuss the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, followed by concluding remarks. The following sections review the major findings of this study as they relate to the research questions. I begin with my interpretation of each participants' experiences as a Black student a Prestigious university to address how the participants make meaning of their lived experiences individually. This aligns with my research method. In interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), meaning making is applied in two distinct ways. In Chapter 4, I gave voice to the participants and highlighted how they make meaning of their experiences, in this chapter, I interpreted the words of the participants as the researcher. By engaging in double hermeneutics, I assumed the role in analysis and interpretation of the participant's experience (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

Black Students Making Meaning of Their Lived Experiences

Through semi-structured interviews with open-ended discussions, the participants showed the range in ways in which they made meaning of their time at their PWI. This study sought to understand the race-related experiences and explore the academic, social, and institutional dimensions of their PWI. Participants bravely shared their perspectives of how race influenced their interactions, academics, and perception of the campus climate. The findings of this study provide an understanding of the lived experiences of Black students at Prestigious University; offering insight into the relationships among race and the factors that influence their sense of

belonging within their PWI. In this section of the chapter, I will share my reflections on each participant.

I have included an extended Participant Profile table (Table 4). Within the IPA data analysis process outlined in Chapter 2, I identified categories, themes, and patterns across participants. Table 4 provides a visual of some of the most important patterns that emerged. This table includes first-generation status, why students chose Prestigious University, who was enrolled in college during "The COVID Year" (2020-2021), who has lived within the Black Affinity House, and who felt a sense a belonging at Prestigious University based on Strayhorn's (2019) definition of sense of belonging.

Table 4

Participant Profile (extended)

Participant	FGCS	Why	2020-2021	Affinity House	Belonging
Lia	No	PWI	No	No	Yes
		Financial Aid			
Lewis	Yes	Financial Aid	No	Yes	No
Jordan	No	Financial Aid	No	Yes	Yes
Danielle	No	Financial Aid	No	Yes	Yes
Cinna	Yes	Financial Aid	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sabrina	No	Financial Aid	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lawrence	Yes	Financial Aid	No	No	Yes
Julia	Yes	Financial Aid	No	Yes	No
Ethel	Yes	Financial Aid	Yes	No	Yes

Note. FGCS = First Generation College Student. 2020-2021 = Attended college during "The COVID Year". PWI = Predominately White Institution

Participant 1: Lia

Lia was a sophomore English and Government double major at Prestigious University. Lia's responses reminded me that she was a sophomore. She only had 1 year of experience at the university at the time of our conversations, therefore, her experiences at Prestigious University were limited to her first year. Based on her arrival at the university in Fall 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic and racial injustice in the U.S. did not have as much of an influence on her experience as they did on students just a few years older. She was consistent in her answers in that she felt a

sense of belonging to the university. This sense of belonging was mainly tied to the people and organizations, but overall, she enjoyed her experience.

As she described her experiences as a Black student at a PWI, her race-related experiences took place within the classroom and residence hall. She experienced microaggressions, being one of two Black people in different spaces on campus, isolation and feeling alone. When asked to describe her university, she quickly said "I wouldn't describe it as racist." The fact that that racist was her first thought led me to think that there is some association in her mind between her university and racism or assumed that I felt that way based on the University's reputation. She went on to say that she can separate the university and its traditions and racist values, from the people. Historically, PWIs were built to support White men (Linley, 2018). Lia believes that there are racist people within the student body, but overall, she would not call the university or the student body as a whole racist.

Lia repeatedly stated that Prestigious University is the college where she was meant to be and that she "can't imagine myself someplace else." She found community through the student organizations of which she is a member, the preorientation program she took part in the summer before her freshman year, and the Diversity Center. During the interview, Lia was not a member of a sorority but later became a member of a BGLO in her sophomore year. In her follow up survey, she expressed that prior to attending Prestigious University, she was not interested in "Greek life," but her sorority

> gives me a place where I feel like I belong and can engage in work that means a lot to me. I do think I would be okay here without [BGLO] however I would feel like a part of me was missing.

In the final question when asked if there was anything else that she would like to share as it related to sense of belonging at a PWI, she wanted to highlight how attending a PWI affected her feelings within her "Blackness." Based on her experiences of colorism in her predominately Black K-12 schools, she stated that being at a PWI has made her more secure in the fact that she is Black. No one at Prestigious University has questioned the fact that she is Black. She felt seen and supported as a Black woman at Prestigious University. This has been a lifelong search for acceptance as a Black woman, versus being described as "White passing." This is part of the reason she chose Prestigious University over attending an HBCU. She felt like an outcast and had her "Blackness" questioned in predominately Black institutions throughout her life and did not want to experience that in college.

Participant 2: Lewis

Lewis was a junior sociology major on the Pre-Law track at Prestigious University. Listening to Lewis' responses to my questions made me want to hug him and then cry. The experiences that he shared as a Black man at a PWI were a reminder of why this research is so important. My goal with this research and throughout my career in higher education has been to elevate the voices of students. Lewis has been subject to racial stereotypes based on his physical appearance. Although he chooses to give off the appearance of having a great experience at Prestigious University, he is aware of how his height and "Blackness" is perceived by others.

When asked to describe how race affects his experience at Prestigious University, he described the looks he receives while on campus. He stated that people "just stare like you're not even there or like human. Like you're just an animal type thing." He says he felt othered on campus, because although he is open to meeting new people, he felt that as a Black individual, it is hard to make friends who are not Black.

115

Within his first interview he stated, "Being Black is just so difficult." While I agree with this statement, this was not a reality that I had to face as a college-aged student. As much I can empathize with his experiences, I will never understand what it is like to be a 20-year-old Black man who is tall, darkskin, and attending a PWI. Although Lewis felt he did not belong at Prestigious University as a Black student at a PWI, he stated "I'm here regardless." Although he navigates campus masking his feeling to make others feel comfortable in his presence, he was clear, that he is here regardless of how other people feel about him. As he shared his race-related experiences on campus, there were times when he would stop himself saying he was giving me "the short answer" assuming I did not want to hear the full story. In these moments I encouraged him to share as much of his story as he was comfortable sharing. There were also times that he would say he was being too negative, so he tried to find positive accounts to add to his experiences.

Participant 3: Jordan

Jordan was a junior Neuroscience/Biochemistry major on the Pre-Med track at Prestigious University. The words that stood out to me throughout Jordan's two interviews were segregated, safe, and her questioning herself and her abilities while at Prestigious University. Jordan describes her university as segregated. She truly believes that people within the campus have tried to make it a campus that is accepting and welcoming to People of Color, but she observed that People of Color and the predominate White community have both shut each other out and have segregated themselves from each other. She questions if this is done out of protection or if it was done without having a choice. This segregation on campus is something that she is conscious of in her every day.

Jordan discussed finding safety among her friends. She felt safe around other Student of Color. She describes this safety as a freedom to be herself. To be in spaces and with people where she does not have to prove herself as smart or deserving to be at Prestigious University. As a multiracial woman, she identifies as Asian, Black, and White. At Prestigious University, she questions where she belongs. She does not present as White or South Indian, so she does not feel connected to those groups on campus. Growing up, she did not spend much time with the Black side of her family but has found community with the Black students on campus.

Coming from a rural area, the transition to a PWI was not as "drastic" as she has heard other students describe their transition to Prestigious University. She was used to being in predominately White spaces before coming to college. In her first year at Prestigious University, she found herself in White spaces because that environment was familiar to her. She also describes her first year as having a tough time filled with tears every week. As she described her experiences at Prestigious University, she contrasted her first year versus when she found "her people" later. In her first year, she spent her time with her White peers. This was familiar to her based on her experiences growing up in a predominantly White area, but she did not feel connected to them or to the University. By her sophomore year, she began spending time with other Black Students and was finally able to express herself, her experiences as a Black student, and felt safe to be herself.

Jordan expressed how much she enjoyed the process of being a part of this study. Being asked the interview questions allowed her to reflect on her experiences at Prestigious University. She did express feeling sadness while thinking about her experiences, but she was grateful to have the space to do it. Overall, Jordan, felt she does not belong at Prestigious University as a

Black student at a PWI, but knows the people and places to go feel supported on campus at Prestigious University.

Participant 4: Danielle

Danielle was a junior Sociology major and Management & Organizational Leadership minor at Prestigious University. Danielle expressed how she "found herself" at Prestigious University. Being at a PWI allowed her to discover her identity as a Black woman. This was her first time being around Black people outside of her family. To that same point, she spoke about her background as a Caribbean American and the difference in the "Black" experiences. As a Black student at a PWI, she has been exposed to the varying experiences of "being Black." She noted Black cultural references to television shows, movies, and music that she was not familiar with, but all her friends seem to all know about. Danielle added a different perspective to this study as a Caribbean American. Her views of what it means to "be Black" are shaped by her family members who are Jamaican, and Danielle is now learning and discovering new cultures within the Black community.

Danielle felt that since she grew up in a predominately White area, she was more prepared to attend a PWI. Although she felt prepared for college, as a junior she began classes within her minor. She is now a student in the Business school. This brought up feelings of isolation and highlighted the effect that her race and gender have on her in the classroom. Taking classes in the Business school, she is in spaces that surrounds her with White, male students and professionals. She has felt silent and invisible in these spaces.

Overall, Danielle, felt she belongs at Prestigious University as a Black student at a PWI due to the support system and the community that she has built while on campus. She acknowledges that her experiences as a Black person at her PWI differs from some of her

118

friends. She brought up the concept of colorism. She believes that her experiences would be worse if she was darkskin. This belief is based on race-related experiences that her friends have shared with her and the treatment they received as darkskin women.

Participant 5: Cinna

Cinna was a senior finance major at Prestigious University. Cinna's college experience was influenced not just by the COVID-19 global pandemic, but by racial injustice in the U.S., racial injustice on his college campus, and being a Black man in the U.S. Although he stayed home and was a remote student during his first year (2020-2021), he had friendships with classmates he met during the pre-orientation program for underrepresented students. There were times when his friends shared with him accounts of racism with other students, faculty, and campus police during a time in 2020 when Black men were being racially profiled and killed for being Black. This caused him to feel even more isolated while at home away from campus and anxious about whether he and his identity as a Black man would belong at a PWI. The global pandemic shaped Cinna's college experience, his view of the university, and being Black in the U.S.

Cinna affirmed one of my motivations to conduct this study, to highlight the influence of racial injustice in the U.S. and how Black students at a PWI have to face challenges of not only being Black at a PWI, but also being Black in the U.S. His interview highlighted the range in experiences across academic years. His experiences are unique to the time that he entered college.

Overall, Cinna felt he belongs at Prestigious University as a Black student at a PWI, based on Strayhorn's definition, but with a caveat. He felt he belongs within factions of the

campus; being accepted by his faculty and administrators, but it is hard to tell in other spaces if he and other Black students are "just here to fill some quota."

Participant 6: Sabrina

Sabrina was a senior Africana Studies, and Kinesiology double major with a concentration in pre-med at Prestigious University. Sabrina found herself trying to find the "perfect" words to express herself during the first interview. She was able to reflect on this with me after the interview. After reading the transcript of the first interview and entering the second, she relaxed and spoke freely in her second interview. She noted that she navigates her life at a PWI being over prepared and conscious of how she presents to others. She mentioned that she changes the way she speaks depending on who she is around. Codeswitching is not uncommon among Black people. Code-switching refers to the ability to alter your communication style or language based on your audience. In the context of being a Black student at a PWI, code-switching often involves adapting speech, behavior, and cultural expression when navigating predominately Black spaces and predominately White spaces (McCluney et al., 2021). Sabrina talks about the use of African American Vernacular English among her family at home but creating a different voice and accent while at school. She wants to assure that she does not appear "too Black". When she said that she wants to ensure that the only aspect of being Black that she presents is her physical appearance, my heart sank. She is aware of the stereotypes that are placed on Black people, referencing that African American Vernacular English is equated with being uneducated. To place this amount of pressure on herself while navigating all the nuances of being a college student must be exhausting.

It is essential for higher educational institutions to create environments that acknowledge and celebrate diversity, providing support for students to express their authentic selves while

fostering a sense of belonging. I wish that Sabrina had the support of other people and resources during her first year of college, but I am grateful that Sabrina found support and community within the Diversity Center. She is able to be more relaxed in this space and exist without a feeling of judgement and having to "present" herself. Overall, Sabrina, felt that she belongs at Prestigious University as a Black student at a PWI, because she found communities that have accepted her and share beliefs and thoughts.

Participant 7: Lawrence

Lawrence was a junior Chemistry major with a minor in Biochemistry at Prestigious University. There were two takeaways from Lawrence's interviews. He loves his university and has made it his mission to create a sense of belonging for other students. He has a balance of both loving his university and accepts the fact that the University has work to do to make it a better more inclusive place for all students.

Another take away was listening to him process his identity as a biracial man, although he was not raised by Black people. Lawrence was raised in a predominately White household with his White father and grandparents. He states that a lot of his speech and mannerisms come from being around his White grandmother. Based on how he was raised, his view of what it means to be Black: is something that he questions. He admits that he has experienced an identity crisis while on his PWI. Based on his account of his experiences as a Black student at a PWI, his views on Black identity are based on racial stereotypes. He associated being Black with being aggressive. When I questioned if this is his view of Black people, or what others have projected on him. Museus (2008) described how Students of Color who attend PWIs choose to either acclimate to the dominant culture on campus and separate from their identity or they find racial subcultures. Lawrence has been able to acclimate to the dominant culture at Prestigious

121

University and is now trying to find ways to also "fit" into "Black spaces" on campus as he discovers his Black identity.

His interviews opened my eyes to the range of Black experiences and how students may feel a need to "fit" into a mold or have an idea of what it is to "be Black." His viewpoint of himself and other Black people are influence by his upbringing. Throughout his interview it felt like he was seeking validation due to our shared identity of being Black. He used phrases such as "you know what I mean" as a means of seeking assurance that he was not alone in his experiences or feelings.

Overall, Lawrence felt he belongs at Prestigious University as a Black student at a PWI. He felt he belongs because he created an environment around himself that allowed him to feel a sense of belonging. He has found students organizations, friend groups and support to help him discover his identity as a Black man, and to explore Black cultures beyond his own assumptions and stereotypes.

Participant 8: Julia

Julia was a sophomore Anthropology major with a minor in History at Prestigious University. Julia was clear in both interviews that Prestigious University is flawed, and she does not have the support that she needs to thrive. She was the only participant that expressed that they would not choose this institution if they had an option to do things differently. She felt overwhelmed by the work she has to do to speak out about racial injustice in the U.S. and on campus. She speaks out against the administration due to the lack of support she felt when it comes to diversity. She stated that all administration at Prestigious University do not support her and her sense of belonging. She later stated that the staff in the Diversity Center are a part of her support system and allows her to feel safe. This made me question who she considers

122

administration, but she also stated that "they're all guilty." She felt that "people" do not stand against the way administration treats Students of Color on campus. She is not clear on who these "people" are but felt that if you are on the side of administration who are not making changes, then you do not support Students of Color. O'Keeffe (2013) explained that students can experience a sense of connection to their institution if the student is able to develop a relationship with one key person. This can also have a significant influence on a student's decision to remain with the institution. Although Julia did not feel support from the administration, the support she felt from the staff at the Diversity Center may be what she needs to stay at Prestigious University.

I walked away from Julia's interviews worried about her. I hope she has the support she needs to navigate her college experience as a Black student. Her views towards administration may prevent her from seeking the support and resources that she needs to navigate the institution as a Black student attending a PWI. Overall, Julia, felt she does not belong at Prestigious University as a Black student at a PWI. She felt support from her peers, but she does not feel support from faculty and administration.

Participant 9: Ethel

Ethel was a senior English, and Sociology double major at Prestigious University. Ethel was clear that the global pandemic had a negative influence on her senior year of high school (2019-2020) and her first 2 years of college (2020-2022). As a senior, she spoke about the influence of the pandemic on her as a first-generation college student. She now feels like she belongs at Prestigious University as a Black student at a PWI. She did not feel that sense of belonging her first 2 years at the university.

Ethel made a conscious decision to remove herself from the general (White) community. As much as possible, she chooses to only be in "Black spaces" or spaces for Students of Color. She finds comfort, support and a sense of belonging in these spaces. Outside of her classes, she spends time in the Diversity Center, lives in her Sorority house and is a member of organizations that affirm her as a Black woman. Her identity as Black woman is important to her. She does not choose to be Black or woman. She has found support within her sorority, her supervisor on campus, and her therapist. These are all Black women who affirm and her experiences her as a Black woman,

When choosing Prestigious University, her decision was based on the financial aid package she was presented with. She spoke about the importance of being close to home and the ability to go home to be comforted by her mother. Although no one in her household went to college, her mother, sisters, and nephews provided her with the support she needs to get through college. She can leave campus and drive home whenever she needs the comfort and reassurance that only her family can provide her.

The nine participants in this study reflect the range of perspectives and experiences. Unlike the other participants, the three seniors have distinctive views of their college experience. Sabrina and Ethel both stated that it was in their junior year that they finally began to feel a connection to the university. Junior year was when they "found their people" and became more comfortable with themselves. This affirmed the advice that Sabrina received from upperclassmen students that Black students at Prestigious University "it gets better once you get to your junior year". For all three students, they felt as though they missed out on their college experience. They are now seniors and have started to feel a connection to the university as it is time for them

to graduate. They also acknowledge the college experiences and university traditions that they missed out on their first 2 years due to the global pandemic.

Two of the nine participants expressed a love for their university. Both Lia and Lawrence have found their place at Prestigious University. Lia was strategic about choosing Prestigious University. She grew up in predominantly Black spaces her entire life and experienced discrimination within the Black race. She chose to attend a PWI to escape colorism and was faced with racism and microaggressions. Despite these experiences at Prestigious University, she has found a community of people that allow her to find a sense of belonging at her university. Lawrence was not familiar with Prestigious University, but quickly fell in love with the feeling he felt when he toured the campus. He quickly became active across campus; occupying spaces that are not traditionally "Black spaces." Through his friendships, he learned more about himself and his identity as a Black man. He credits his university for his growth and reaches back to help other students to know that they belong as well.

In contrast, another two of the nine participants think it is laughable to think that they belong to the institution where they are seeking a degree. Lewis and Julia have a heightened awareness of their race and how it has affected their experiences at Prestigious University. They both have been subject to racism and stereotypes. They continue to persevere through their college experience. They know that they belong at Prestigious University because of the hard work that it took to earn their acceptance, but they do not feel that they belong or have a sense of connection to the university. Based on the responses to the questions that I asked and the experiences that they shared with me throughout both interviews, I was not surprised that Lewis not Julia felt as though they belong at Prestigious University. Their experiences were important

125

to highlight, as it showed the range of experiences as well as the various outlook on these experiences.

The remaining five participants have found a sense of belonging but are clear that is contingent upon people, spaces and the additional resources and organizations that have been specifically created or facilitated by Black students at the university. All the students highlighted the importance of "finding your people" and spaces that allow them to feel safe to be themselves. This study offers varied perspectives of experiences across academic years. All these race-related experiences influence the participants' experiences at their PWI.

Effects of Race on Student Experiences

The following section addresses the first sub-question: How does race affect the experiences of selected Black students at a PWI? The participants share their experience being Black at a PWI. Race has significantly affected the experiences of the selected Black students at Prestigious University. These experiences are shaped by various factors including systemic racism, cultural differences, and privilege.

As the only or one of two Black students in many spaces at their PWI, some participants felt isolated, and this influenced their sense of belonging and their ability to connect with peers. They then found or created spaces that acknowledge, celebrate, and support their identity as a Black person. Dealing with microaggressions, stereotypes, isolation, and discrimination on campus can contribute to stress and mental health challenges for Black students.

Lia and Sabrina's experiences of isolation within their residence hall and having to be a voice for the entire Black community in their academic classes. They both were in spaces where she was the only or one of two Black students. Lia does not believe that these experiences have affected her sense of belonging, but also acknowledges that she may have "tricked" herself into

126

thinking that it has not influenced her. She chooses to separate her experiences in the residence hall from her daily life on campus. Even though she lives on campus. Sabrina expressed that these experiences of being the "only" has caused her to feel disconnected from her faculty and peers.

Lewis acknowledges that race affects his everyday life and experience at the University. He receives "strange looks," or people may cross to the opposite of the street when they see him, a Black man, simply walking across campus to class or to the Diversity Center. He has tried to forge conversations with his White peers, but they have not been receptive to him. For this reason, he felt like he has "fell in" to Black spaces, because he feels "safe in those spaces."

Danielle and Cinna expressed that race has had a positive effect on her experience at Prestigious University. They have been able to discover themselves and their own Black identities. Within her business classes for her minor, Danielle is in spaces that are dominated by White men. She is uncomfortable in these spaces, but she has become more confident in herself as a Black woman. Cinna wanted to make sure that he aligned with the Black culture on campus. He sought out spaces that affirmed his identity as a Black man, and to make sure he did not lose himself within a PWI.

Julia stated, "I feel like sometimes the Students of Color here, are here for show, because they don't really support the Students of Color here." She expressed that as Black student, she has to work hard to make her presence know, the people in position of power do not support the Black initiatives and student organizations. She worries about the students that come after her. Despite how hard she works, because of the lack of support and infostructure to support Black students, there have been and will be generations of Black students having to work hard to be heard and seen at the University.

127

PWIs can actively work towards creating an environment where Black students feel valued, supported, and a sense of belonging, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable educational experience. Although participants express the importance of physical spaces on campus, the necessary changes that need to occur cannot take place until the systemic issues of institutional racism are addressed. Implementing and enforcing anti-racist policies at the institutional level will be the start of the change. It is important for Black students that the administration addresses discrimination, bias, and microaggression and the effect on Black students.

Factors Contributing to Students' Sense of Belonging

The following section address the second sub-question: What factors contributed to the sense of belonging of selected Black students at a PWI? The COVID-19 global pandemic, the need for community, and physical spaces on campus were common factors that contributed to the participants' sense of belonging at Prestigious University.

The COVID-19 Global Pandemic and Sense of Belonging

As the participants addressed "The COVID Year" and the influence that the COVID-19 global pandemic has had on their college experience, this addressed the research sub-question asking what factors contributed to the sense of belonging of selected Black students at a PWI? For the three seniors, they feel that the pandemic took away half of their college experience. As seniors, they are discovering campus traditions and experiences for the first time through the eyes of the first-year students that they help support.

When I proposed this study, I assumed that the global pandemic had more of an influence on students currently enrolled in college. The juniors who participated in the study shared that the global pandemic influenced their social aspect of college. They had trouble adjusting after

128

spending the last year and a half of college in their house separated from their friends. The sophomores in the study both addressed the COVID-19 from a health standpoint, but it did not affect them specifically as a college student.

Community and Sense of Belonging

Community was a reoccurring theme for all the participants. This theme addressees two of the research sub-questions: How does race affect the experiences of selected Black students at a PWI? What factors contributed to the sense of belonging of selected Black students at a PWI? Community plays a key role in the overall well-being of students, specifically those from underrepresented groups (Strayhorn, 2019). Strayhorn's Model for Sense of Belonging framework emphasizes the importance of foster connections and creating environments where Black student feel seen, heard, and valued within the university community. Participants felt excluded by the institution and their White peers on campus. The participants in this study share how vital the support from their peers plays in their sense of belonging. Having a network of peers who share similar experiences and challenges allowed the participants to feel safe and validated their feelings and experiences. Safety, both physical and psychological, is a fundamental need for Black students to thrive in their academic pursuits (Strayhorn, 2019). All the participants in this study expressed the importance and influence of community on their sense of belonging as a Black student at a PWI. They shared how as Black students at a PWI their number one advise to others would be to "Find your people". They also shared the influence of having a Diversity Center that they can go to and freely be themselves. These factors contribute to the sense of belonging of Black students at a PWI.

Physical Spaces and Sense of Belonging

Participants experienced being the only or one of two Black students in classes and residence hall, but they found other physical spaces that have provided them with a sense of belonging. This theme addressees two of the research sub-questions: how race affects the experiences of selected Black students at a PWI? and what factors contributed to the sense of belonging of selected Black students at a PWI?

First-year residence halls are often the first physical spaces where students experience "college life." For Black students, having a supportive and inclusive environment within the residence hall can have a significance impact on their college experiences. Participants did not associate their first-year residence hall as their home. They felt othered while also experiences microaggressions, racism and were stereotyped, and this had a negative impact on their college experience. These experiences affected the experiences of the students. They felt isolated in a place they were supposed to call home, because of racism and lack of diversity within the residence halls. The purpose of residential living is to establish a sense of community among students and contribute to a positive sense of belonging and connectedness to the university. For many of the participants, they did not have this experience during their first year and chose to move into the Black Affinity house as an upperclassmen student.

Six of the nine participants shared that they have lived in the Black Affinity House at some point in their college career. Having a designated Black Affinity House provides a space where Black students can connect with their cultural identity and share space with peers who have similar backgrounds. This space has served as a safe haven for the participants where they feel a sense of belonging, free to express themselves without judgement. Living in the Black Affinity House contributed to the sense of belonging for Black students. This space allows

students to have a home on campus that promotes community building and supports and celebrates their culture.

Although only one student shared that they live in a sorority house, she expressed how this house affirmed her as a Black woman on campus. For a Black student who is a member of a BGLO, having a sorority house becomes a place where they can foster sisterhood, build meaningful connections, and share common experiences. For Ethel, this was a major factor that contributed to her sense of belonging at Prestigious University. After expressing how she felt disconnected to her university her first 2 years, she was able to move into her sorority house her junior and senior year and for the first time feel a sense of belonging within the space where she lives while on campus. Means and Pyne's (2017) study concluded that spaces on campus that are created for Students of Color allow students to feel comfortable to be themselves and increase their sense of belonging.

In the first interview, all the participants shared that the Diversity Center serves as an inclusive space and support for Students of Color and other marginalized groups of students. The Center provides resources, mentorship, cultural programming, and safe space that contributes to their sense of belonging. Participants felt comfort and empowered by this space. Strayhorn's (2019) framework emphasizes the importance of spaces, programming and policies to enhance the overall sense of belonging for Black students at a PWI.

Implications for Research

This interpretive phenomenological analysis used Strayhorn's (2019) theoretical framework to explore the lived experiences of selected Black students at a PWI. As outlined in Chapter 1, Strayhorn's 2012 Model of Sense of Belonging defines belonging as a "student's perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience

131

of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, or peers" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 4). The findings of this study reveal that although most students felt a sense of belonging at the institution, that sense of belonging was not provided by Prestigious University.

The seven elements of the Model of Sense of Belonging are: (a) a universal, basic human need; (b) fundamental motive sufficient to drive behavior; (c) context, time and factors determine importance; (d) it is related to mattering, and it is influenced by one's identities; (f) leads to positive outcome and success; and (g) must be satisfied as conditions change (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 30).

Prestigious University provided students with the basic needs of food, shelter, and financial aid to attend their institution. This allowed the participants to feel secure enough to enroll at the university. According to basic human needs hierarchy in Chapter 1 (Figure 1) once a student's physiological and safety needs are met, the student will then want to have their social needs met. All the participants shared that they enrolled at Prestigious University because of the financial aid package that they received, which provided them with the basic needs of shelter and food. For a student faced with a major decision that will affect their life and future, having their basic needs met gives them comfort and security.

Within Prestigious University, participants found a sense of belonging within the clubs and organizations that they are involved in. This was done to feel a part of a community within their university. Most of the student organizations that the participants were involved in were specific to their racial identity or their academic major, such as the Organization for Black Students, African Cultural Organization, Organization for Black Men, Organization for Women of Color, the Organization for Black Poets, BGLO, and Minority Pre-Law Association, and

132

Minority Association for Pre-Medical Students. These organizations provide participants with the fundamental motive to proceed in college. These organization provide both social and academic support to help Black students navigate their career at Prestigious University.

Each of the participants share the commonality of being Black students attending Prestigious University, but they each had their own individual experience. Although they all were enrolled at the same institution in the Fall 2023, based on the time they arrived at the university, their background, and the spaces and activities they engage in, they all had different experiences at Prestigious University. The three participants who entered Prestigious University during "The COVID Year" (2020-2021) were shaped by the global pandemic. Their college career began in isolation, and they missed out on traditional college experiences. They are not graduating senior experiences university traditions for the first time. The two participants who are sophomores and entered into the university in the Fall 2022 had drastically different experiences. Lia "found her people" during the Pre-orientation Program for Underrepresented Students and cannot imagine herself at another institution. Julia also attended the Pre-orientation Program for Underrepresented Students but feels stifled by the institution. They both attend the same institution, participant in the same programs and student organizations, but have had drastically different experiences.

The feeling of sense of belonging allows students to feel accepted and feel a sense of mattering to the university. Most of the participants did not feel accepted or that they matter to their university. They have sought out support and an affiliation to the organizations they belong to, but not to the university. For example, Julia was consistent throughout both interviews that the university did not support her as a Black woman, and she felt the emotional labor to advocate for racial injustice within the U.S. without the university taking a definitive stance in support or

Black people and she felt attacked and isolated within her residence hall. For this reason, she felt the university only spoke about diversity, but did not create an inclusive environment that would allow Black students to feel a sense of belonging and to thrive.

Participants spoke about the intersectionality of their identities, and how they are perceived on campus. Black women having to choose spaces that are dominated by Black men or White women. Black men having to be hyper aware of the stereotypes that are placed on them in society. All of the participants found safety and community within the Diversity Center. Ethel expressed the influence that her sorority house had on her sense of belonging. This space affirmed both her gender and racial identities.

The participants in this study are committed to the people and spaces that have provided safety to them, but most of the participants are not necessarily committed to the university. Lia and Lawrence were the only participants who found a love for their institution. The remaining participants are clear that their only connections to the university or any aspect of sense of belonging are through the friendships that they have formed, the Diversity Center and the organizations that they belong to. This puts additional labor on Black students at Prestigious University to not only seek out organizations that affirm them as a Black student at a PWI, but often times, lead or create organizations and spaces for other students.

Black students at PWI deserve to be safe and comfortable in every space on their campus. Unfortunately, this was not the experiences of the participants at Prestigious University. There are too many race-related experiences that were brought forth in this 2023 study that mirrored experiences of college students in the 1960s. Although significant progress has been made since the 1960s in terms of civil rights and racial equality in the U.S., Black students at Prestigious University still experience microaggressions, stereotyping, isolation, tokenism, and unequal

access to resources and support. To cultivate an environment that fosters a sense of belonging, institutions have to deal with the systemic issues within the institution (Strayhorn, 2020).

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, the following sections of this chapter will discuss implications for policy and practice. Although the study focused on the nine participants selected from Prestigious University and the findings cannot be generalized to other institutions, the results of the study provide important insights to inform institutions, practitioners and higher education leaders on how to address race and sense of belonging in order to provide better support to Black students at a PWI. Understanding and addressing race-related experiences is crucial for creating inclusive and supportive environments where individuals of all racial backgrounds feel a strong sense of belonging. Institutions can play a key role in fostering a culture that values diversity, equity, and inclusion by creating spaces and supporting resources that are specific to Black students.

Recommendation 1: Build Affinity Spaces Specifically for Black Students

All of the participants shared experiences within physical spaces on campus that either caused them to question their sense of belonging, or spaces they retreated to as a means to find community and safety. After countless Black Lives Matter protest and the COVID-19 global pandemic, Black students need a safe space on campus where they can express themselves freely, engage in open dialogue about their experiences, and find comfort in the presence of other people who look like them and share cultural similarities.

Sabrina talked about the fact that Black students and student organizations often support the organizations lead by other Students of Color, but she does not feel that other Students of Color on campus return that same support to Black student organizations. This highlights the fact

that People of Color cannot be lumped together. Our experiences and views are not the same because we are all marginalized. Although many PWIs have Multicultural and Diversity Centers that focus on all aspects of diversity, it would be beneficial to Black students to have a dedicated space and resources allocated to creating a culture on campus that focuses on their sense of belonging.

Based on the results of this research study, I propose that Prestigious University provide a safe space that is specific to Black students. This will be a space for Black students to gather, share ideas, network, support each other, have access to a resources, counselors, and mentors on campus that are specific to Black students on campus. The first Black Cultural Centers were founded in the 1960s at PWIs in an effort to create safe spaces for Black students (Stevenson, 2024). Keels (2019) interviewed students about safe spaces on their historically White campuses. Within this study, all the participants agreed that having a cultural space on campus is critical for the sense of belonging on campus, allowing Black students the space to discuss and connect with others from similar backgrounds. The Black Cultural Center will serve as an advisor to student organizations that are centered around Black identity. This will include the Organization for Black Students, African Cultural Organization, Organization for Black Men, Organization for Black Women, the Organization for Black Poets, and BGLOs. Participants noted the additional labor that they take on to lead these organizations without the same support and resources that some of the White fraternities, sororities and organizations receive. Lewis noted the differences between the support that White alumni give to current students verses that what Black students receive. During homecoming he noticed that Black alumni do not attend Homecoming as regularly, unless they are a member of a BGLO. Based on his experiences as a Black student at a Prestigious University, he understands why Black alumni choose not to return. The Black

Cultural Center will work with the Black Alumni Association to provide a pipeline of resources and mentorship between current Black students and Black Alumni.

This space will have a designated student affairs administrator, whose role is solely dedicated to the support and development of Black students on campus. This person will provide workshops and resources that are focused on the experiences of Black students at a PWI and within the U.S., understand how race affects the experiences of Black students, and the factors that contribute to their sense of belonging. This person is responsible for the daily operations of the Black Cultural Center and contributes to student retention efforts and the overall strategic plan of the university as it relates to diversity and inclusion.

This position will be positioned within the division of Students Affairs and will be a resource for the development of Black students and other underrepresented populations on campus. Prestigious University has an existing Diversity Center that serves Students of Color and underrepresented populations. The purpose of having an additional center, designated for Black students is to empower students in their identity and build community within a PWI. The Black Cultural Center will work with the Diversity Center to provide programs and services to promote the holistic success and wellbeing of Black students. These centers are open to all students regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, ability, ethnic or national origin, sexual orientation, or gender identity. The Black Cultural Center will center Black identity, culture, and empower Black students to have and use their voice at Prestigious University and will provide a safe space for them to be themselves.

The need for a Black Cultural Center goes beyond meeting the needs of the Black students at Prestigious University. There is a need for this space at other PWIs. While some of

the experiences that the participants shared are specific to Prestigious University and the campus culture, the findings within this study provide guidance across PWIs.

Recommendation 2: Provide Special Interest Housing to First-Year Students

Prestigious University provides a Black Affinity House for Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors to apply to live in. It is limited to 42 residents. Although students within this study have found community within this space, Lewis talked about improvements that could be made to better support the house.

I propose a Black Affinity House that is also available to first-year students. All of the women in this study shared race-related experiences in freshman residence hall that caused them to seek out community and support. Starting college with experiences of isolation, microaggressions, racism and othering does not provide a welcoming environment to first-year students, but this is an unfortunate reality for many of the Black students at Prestigious University who participated in this study.

A Black Affinity House within a PWI should be a stand-alone building to help foster community, personal well-being, sense of belonging, and a safe environment for open dialogue. This space will allow first-year students to connect with Black upperclassmen students, connect with Black faculty and staff on campus, and other campus resources. A requirement for living in the Black Affinity House, students will attend community programming, attend trips, and participate in dialogue centered around the Black experience, to make this a full living-learning experience.

The Black Affinity House should work in conjunction with a Black Cultural Center in programming, advisement, and resources. Although the Black Affinity House is a residence hall and will follow the rules and housing application policy of Residence Life, there should be

additional administrative support provided by the Student Affairs Staff within the Black Cultural Center. This should be a space that is separate from the Black Cultural Center. As separate space will allow non-residents use the space and know that the center is available for them to use as well.

Sabrina was the only Black woman in her freshman residence hall in 2020 and did not know or meet any other Black people during her first year of college due restrictions in place by the university as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Julia endured racism within her freshman residence hall in 2022 and chose to go home on the weekend to be with her family as a means of support and avoidance. Having a Black Affinity House option that is available to first-year students will allow incoming students to apply for housing in an environment that supports and affirms them and their Black identity. This would provide an option that is not currently available to first-year students.

Providing first-years students with the option to apply to live in a Black Affinity house will not meet the needs of all Black students for various reasons. The capacity of the house will not allow for Black students who apply to be selected. The Black Affinity house does not meet the needs of all Black students. Lia expressed that she chose not to live in the Black Affinity house despite her experiences within her first-year residence hall. For as many students who may not have chosen a PWI for any other reason than the financial aid package, there are students like Lia and Lawrence who wanted to be at Prestigious University and have enjoyed their experiences. There will be Black students who choose not to be surrounded by other Black students in a residence hall. A Black Affinity house provides an option for Black students who want and oftentimes need a physical space to provide safety and a sense of belonging at their PWI.

139

Recommendation 3: Provide Culturally Responsive Mental Health Counseling

Black students at PWI experience emotional scars from racism, which can lead to increased anxiety and depressions (Anderson, 2020b). Although Black students experience a variety of race-related stressors, many do not seek support from their university. Black college students are less likely than their White peers to seek mental health (Udeh, 2022).

Black people within the U.S. have a history of bias and discrimination within the health care system. This also contributes to a stigma with the Black community that causes Black people to use mental health services less that other populations. Black college students are prone to seek help from clergy, non-mental health professionals, family, and friends (Barksdale & Molock, 2008).

Black students who seek out counseling services may be placed with mental health professionals who are not familiar with the influence that race and culture have on mental health. According to the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (2021) Annual Survey, 11.1% of staff members working at college counseling centers were Black or African American.

Students of Color who engage in activism and lead student organizations on campus, often prioritize the fight for racial justice on their campus over their own mental health needs (Anderson, 2020b). They take on the burden of representing their entire race and fighting again injustice on campus and within the U.S., rather than being a "typical" college student. Black college students have to not only prove themselves in predominately White spaces but to represent all Black people (Udeh, 2022).

Participants in this study spoke about the pressures of having to prove themselves or questioning their abilities. They did not have Faculty of Color within their department to talk to

about these pressures and turned to their peers or staff within the Diversity Center for support. Dealing with the emotional toll of racism, microaggressions, isolation, and othering, Black students need mental health support to process their race related experiences at their PWI.

Ethel talked about the influence having a Black woman therapist had on her sense of belonging at Prestigious University. She explained that focusing on her mental health within her junior year was pivotal to the shift in how she was able to show up as a Black woman at a PWI and how she made meaning of her race-related experiences on campus and how the COVID-19 global pandemic affected her mental health. She recommended that all students seeks mental health counseling at the university.

Based on the results of this study, I recommend that PWIs prioritize mental health for Black students by providing culturally responsive mental health counselors. The availability of Black mental health professionals creates an additional safe space for Black students at PWI. This will allow Black students to share their experiences in a therapeutic space with shared cultural experiences, without judgment. Counseling centers at colleges and universities should not only provide culturally responsive mental health care, but also be able to recommend books, films, and podcasts to further support students and their wellness.

Black students at PWI find ways to cope and support one another, but the university should be providing support and resources for students. Universities need to meet the holistic needs of Black students and acknowledge the cultural differences and honor the diversity of their experiences. This can be done through safe spaces that are created, funded, and supported by the university.

Implications for Policy

Although the data collected within this study are specific to the selected Black students and their experiences at Prestigious University, the findings are relevant and applicable to other PWIs with similar demographics and institutional cultures. The demographics of the participants in the study provides a diversity in academic class, academic discipline, campus involvement and family background. The study also identified specific challenges faced by Black students at their PWI and proposes effective strategies and interventions to address these challenges. Access to a Black cultural center, having the option to live in a Black affinity house as a first-year student, and providing culturally responsive mental health counseling goes beyond Prestigious University. These recommendations can be brought forth to any PWI.

PWIs have a history of systemic racism that permeates throughout the policies and practices of the university. This creates an environment where Black students feel excluded and a lack of belonging. To transform this campus climate and create a sense of belonging for Black students, PWIs must confront and actively address their history of systemic racism in order to cultivate a campus climate where Black students feel valued, respected, and a sense of belonging. PWIs need to acknowledge the ways in which their institutional history, culture, and practices have perpetuated racial inequalities.

In support Black students and their sense of belonging at a PWI, the responsibility should not lie solely on the students to seek out support from their peers or to create their own avenues to provide support for themselves and others. Higher education practitioners must combat anti-deficit thinking. The systems and structures within higher education are set up to support White students and disenfranchise Students of Color (Hubain et al., 2016). It is the responsibility of

student affairs professionals, senior administrators, faculty and all the employees of the college to create a safe environment for Black students.

PWIs must commit to implementing initiative focused on dismantling systemic barriers and fostering a sense of belonging among Black students. Until institutions address the history of systemic racism at PWIs and foster a culture of inclusion to ensure that Black students and all members of the campus community feel empowered, valued, and supported in their pursuit of higher education, we will continue isolate students with segregated spaces rather than fixing the structural issues within higher education.

Limitations

The participants in this study were recruited with the help of the university's Diversity Center. Almost all participants were identified with the help of the Center's staff. This limits the study in that the students identified by the Center's staff have a connection with the Diversity Center and seemingly have support in their sense of belonging. Although the flier was also shared with students beyond the scope of the Diversity Center, there may have been students that were not captured in this study because they were not referred to me by the Diversity Center staff.

Another limitation to this study was the fact that the interviews were conducted via Zoom video conferencing. During her second interview, Lia had connection issues. This took away from the interview flow. There were times when her sound went out, I had to ask her to repeat answers, which makes me wonder if that affected her thought process in her answers. Another issue that I faced with the interviews being conducted via zoom was participants having the camera off. Being that I did not indicate in the interview protocol that the participants camera had to be on, I did not press the issues. Julia had her camera off. As a facilitator, I found myself more

disconnected from the first interview. I was not able to see their facial expressions and reactions. She was on camera for the second interview, and she appeared to be more comfortable. Lewis was sick during his second interview and asked to be off camera. Although I offered to reschedule to a time when he was feeling better, he decided that he wanted to continue as scheduled, as long as he could be off camera. He apologized at times for not being "clear-headed" due to being sick.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building upon my research study addressing the relationships among race, sense of belonging and the experiences of Black students at a selected PWI, there are areas for future research that can expand the understanding of sense of belonging. In this section, I suggest future research: (a) sense of belonging and Black students who attend PWIs, (b) sense of belonging and Students of Color who attend a PWI, (c) sense of belonging and Black students who are first-generation attending a PWI, (d) Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) and Black Students at a PWI.

Recommendation 1: Sense of Belonging and Black Students who Attend PWIs

The findings of the study are specific to the experience of the Black students of the selected PWI, rather than being able to generalize the results to Black students at any PWI. To increase the generalization of the results, a new study can be conducted to include multiple institutions within the Mid-Atlantic region or throughout the U.S. As shared in Chapter 5, the institution that the participants attended had a significant influence on their sense of belonging. Different institutions have different values and offer varying resources that could have an influence on the lived experiences of the Black students who attend and their sense of belonging.

Recommendation 2: Sense of Belonging and Students of Color who Attend a PWI

The participants in this research study all identified as Black. Through their experiences on campus, they referenced other Students of Color in the context of both similarities and differences in experiences. Exploring how different cultural identities influence a sense of belonging for Students of Color can allow for a comparison of belonging experiences. The findings of the study will inform institutional practices and interventions to promote a more inclusive and supportive environment for Students of Color.

Recommendation 3: First-Generation Black Students who Attend a PWI

The participants in this study who are first-generation college students have experiences that are unique to their identity of being first generation. They described it as being an added barrier beyond being Black at a PWI. Conducting a study that focuses specifically on Black students who identify as first-generation college students and their sense of belonging at a PWI would allow the researcher to focus specifically on support and resources available and needed for this population of students.

Recommendation 4: RBF and Black Students who Attend a PWI

This study focused used Strayhorn's (2012) Model of Sense of Belonging to understand the lived experiences of the Black students for a selected PWI. Approaching the same demographic of participants from a RBF framework with allow higher education practitioners to understand how racial stressors influence the sense of belonging, academic success, and overall well-being of Black students (Hargons et al., 2022). The findings will inform the interventions and policies to support Black students.

Reflection on the Research Process

This research study took a toll on me as a Black woman who is also a higher education administrator. I wanted to be the person who the participants shared that they needed. I wanted to shield them from their feelings of race-related experiences of microaggression, racism, colorism, othering, unworthiness, isolation, and loneliness. It took me longer than I originally anticipated to transcribe the data. I found myself feeling "heavy" with emotions after each interview. I had to take many breaks due to physical and mental fatigue. There were days that I did not have the physical or mental capacity to review the data. I gave myself grace while transcribing data, coding data, and preparing for the second round of interviews. I had to remember not to rush the process, so I could fully honor the words of the participants. Although I wish I was able to be of more support to these participants, participants expressed gratitude for the research and having the opportunity to process their feelings and experiences as a Black student at a PWI. I now have the data to provide to practitioners who can better support them.

As I anticipated and expressed in Chapter 1, the participants felt a connection to me based on race. As they struggled to find the words to describe certain experiences, they used phrases such as "you know what I mean." I interpreted this phrase as a means of saying "you're Black, you get it" or to seek validation or acceptance after being vulnerable. Some of the participants felt a need to be perfect or present the "right" answer during the first interview but were more related in the second interview after having time to reflect on this experience and the questions being asked of them. All the participants expressed that they have never been asked these types or kinds of questions about their sense of belonging as it relates to the identity as a Black student at a PWI. They were both saddened by their realties and grateful for the study.

The fact that the students described their university as segregated and are still the only or one of two Black people in their classes and residence hall in 2023 is concerning. Many of the race-related experiences described in this interview, you would think we were still within the civil rights in the 1950s. As a Black woman, I understand the feelings of microaggressions, othering and isolation in predominately White spaces, but I can never truly understand what it is like being a Black undergraduate student attending a PWI in the United States of America in 2023. For this, I am grateful to my participants for sharing their stories and trusting me to elevate their voices.

Conclusion

This qualitative research study highlighted nine Black undergraduates to understand their race-related experience at their PWI, then to understand if those experiences have affected their sense of belonging. The study found that the Black students as Prestigious University experienced microaggression, racism, colorism, othering, unworthiness, isolation and loneliness within their residence halls and classrooms, but were able to find spaces on campus to form community and gain support.

This study highlights the commonalities between the participants and the differences in their experiences. PWIs hold a responsibility to the students that they serve. It is important to understand the experiences of Black students at their institution and in turn provide support that is specific to their cultural needs. This study contributes to the field of higher education, calling attention to the fact that racism, racial microaggressions, still exist in 2023 and these factors contribute to the sense of belonging of selected Black students at a PWI.

All Black students are not the same.

All Black students who attend a PWI are not the same.

All Black students who attend the same PWI do not have the same college experience or point of view.

All Black students who attend a PWI deserve the safety and freedom to be themselves in any space on their campus.

All Black students who attend a PWI deserve an environment that affirms and supports them, their identities, and fosters a sense of belonging.

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APPENDIX A

DIGITAL FLIER

APPENDIX B

EMAIL INVITATION FOR ONLINE SURVEY

Dear

My name is Shené V. Owens, and I am a doctoral student at the School of Education at William & Mary. I would like to invite you to participate in my dissertation study to discuss your experience(s) as a Black student at your university. This study will seek to understand the race-related experiences of Black students at predominately White institutions (PWI), then to understand how those experiences have affected their sense of belonging. I am seeking participants who meet the following criteria:

1) Self-identify as Black
2) Attend the selected PWI
3) Completed all college course work at the research site (Transfer students are excluded)
4) Be classified as a sophomore, junior, or senior
5) Be at least 18 years old.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete a participant recruitment SURVEY which will collect general demographic information regarding you as a student.

Please complete the participant recruitment survey by Sunday, September 10th to be considered for this study.

If selected to participate in this study, you will receive an email from me to schedule a time to meet with me for an individual semi-structured interview lasting 45-60 minutes, followed by a second semi-structure interview lasting 45-60 minutes. During the interviews, I will ask about your experience on campus as it relates to race and belonging. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, with no consequences for choosing not to participate. You can withdraw at any time.

Upon completion of both interviews, each participant in this study will receive a $10 Amazon gift card and a free copy of the book *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* by Austin Channing Brown.

If you have any questions, please contact me at 201-838-1993 or svowens@wm.edu or my advisor, Dr. James Barber at 757-221-6208 or jpbarber@wm.edu Thank you for your consideration,

Shené V. Owens

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT SURVEY

Please complete the survey below for consideration into this research study regarding the relationships among race, sense of belonging, and the experiences of selected Black students at a predominately White institution (PWI). Participants eligible for this study must identify as Black, and currently enrolled at a selected PWI.

PARTICIPATION CRITERIA SCREENING
1. Do you identify as Black (Having racial and ethnic origins in the African diaspora (e.g., African American, Caribbean American, African immigrants living in the US))?
   Yes
   No
2. What is your class status?
   Freshmen
   Sophomore
   Junior
   Senior
   Graduate Student
3. Which college/university are you currently enrolled?
4. Are you a transfer student?
   Yes
   No

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
5. Full name:
6. Pronouns:
7. University email:
8. Mobile number:
9. Are you 18 years of age or older?
   Yes
   No
10. What gender do you identify?
    Man
    Woman
    Transgender
    Non-binary
    Other
11. Are you a first-generation college student?
    Yes
    No

CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT

    12. Did you participate in the university's pre-orientation program for underrepresented student populations?

        Yes

        No

    13. Are you a member of a fraternity or sorority?

        Yes

        No

    14. Are you a student athlete (participates in a competitive athletic program offered by the school)?

        Yes

        No

    15. Please list any student organizations that you are a part of on campus:

    16. What is your major(s)/minor?

    17. Do you live on campus?

        Yes

        No

NEXT STEPS

    18. Are you willing to share your experiences in two individual semi-structured interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes?

        Yes

        No

    19. Do you have access to Zoom video conferencing platform?

        Yes

        No

    20. Do you have access to a private space and personal computer to participate in a virtual meeting?

        Yes

        No

RESEARCH PARTICIPATION INFORMED CONSENT FORM

TITE:
The Relationships Among Race, Sense of Belonging, and the Experiences of Selected Black Students at a Predominately White Institution

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:
Shené V. Owens (svowens@wm.edu 201-838-1993)
Faculty Advisor: James Barber (jpbarber@wm.edu, 757-221-6208)

SOURCE OF SUPPORT:
This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership degree with a concentration in Higher Education Administration from the School of Education at William & Mary.

STUDY OVERVIEW:
This research study will utilize Terrell Strayhorn's framework on college students' sense of belonging to identify how race affects the sense of belonging of Black students at a predominantly White institution (PWI). This research study will first seek to understand the race-related experiences of selected Black students at a predominately White institution (PWI), then to understand if those experiences have affected their sense of belonging.

PURPOSE:
You are being asked to participate in a research project that is investigating the relationships among race, sense of belonging, and the experiences of selected Black students at a PWI.
This research study will first seek to understand the race-related experiences of Black students at PWIs, then to understand how those experiences have affected their sense of belonging.
In order to qualify for participation, you must:
6) Self-identify as Black
7) Attend the selected PWI
8) Completed all college course work at the research site (Transfer students are excluded)
9) Be classified as a sophomore, junior, or senior
10) Be at least 18 years old.

PARTICIPANT PROCEDURES:
Once six-ten participants meeting the study criteria are chosen, the principal investigator will contact these participants and request they schedule a time for an individual semi-structured interview. For the purpose of this study, participants will participate in two individual. interview. Prior to completing any/all interviews' participants will complete a consent form and release of information form.

178

The interviews will be conducted through the virtual meeting software, Zoom video conferencing platform. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed with your permission. Participants may withdraw from participation during any step of this study.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study. Benefits of completing this study may include: Contribution to the current research on Black students attending PWIs as well as research focused on sense of belonging.

COMPENSATION:

Every participant in this will receive a $10 Amazon gift card and a free copy of the book *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* by Austin Channing Brown at the conclusion of the second interview. There is no cost to participate in this research study.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- The confidentiality of your information will be protected.
- Your name and other identifiable information will be known only to the researcher through the information that you provide.
- Neither your name nor any other personally identifiable information will be used in any presentation or published work without prior written consent.
- The recordings of the interviews described above will be erased after the study is complete.
- You may refuse to answer any questions during the interview if you so choose.
- You may terminate your participation in the study at any time. (To do so, simply inform the interviewer of your intention.)

VOLUNTARY CONSENT:

I have read this informed consent form and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, for any reason without any consequences. Based on this, I certify I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that if I have any questions about my participation in this study, I may contact Shené V. Owens at svowens@wm.edu. Questions or concerns regarding participation in this research should be directed to Dr. James Barber at 757-221- 6208, jpbarber@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

_____

Researchers Signature Date

APPENDIX E

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Opening Statement:

Thank you for allowing me to interview you. As you know I am a doctoral student in the Educational, Policy, Planning, and Leadership program at William & Mary's School of Education, working on my dissertation. Through this study, I hope to understand the relationships among race, sense of belonging, and the experiences of selected Black students at a predominately White institution.

This interview should last 45-60 minutes. With your permission, I will start the recording. Throughout the interview, I will also take notes.

Questions:
1) Tell me about yourself.
2) What are you involved in on campus?
3) Tell me why you decided to attend Prestigious University?
4) How would you describe your overall experience as a student a Prestigious University?
5) In what ways, if at all, has race affected your experience at Prestigious University?
6) How would you describe Prestigious University?
7) How would you describe the campus culture?
8) In terms of college contexts, Strayhorn (2019) defines sense of belonging as "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers" (p. 4). Given this definition, what does belonging in a university community mean to you?
9) Tell me about an experience at Prestigious University that made you feel you belong as a Black student?
    a. Where did it take place?
    b. Who was involved?
    c. Are there specific experiences that you remember more than others (with peers, faculty, and/or staff)?
10) Tell me about an experience at Prestigious University that made you feel you didn't belong as a Black student?
    a. Where did it take place?
    b. Who was involved?
    c. Are there specific experiences that you remember more than others (with peers, faculty, and/or staff)?
11) What forms of support exist to help develop a sense of belonging for Black students at Prestigious University?
12) As a Black student at a PWI, what advice would you share with other Black students entering into your university, based on your experiences as it relates to belonging?
    a. Is there anything you would do differently?

13) Is there anything else you would like to share that we haven't talked about?

Closing Statement:
This concludes our first interview. Do you have any questions for me? You will receive an email with a transcript of this interview. I ask that you take one week to review and let me know if you have any questions, comments, or corrections on the transcript. Thank you for participating. I will be in touch to schedule our second interview.

FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Opening Statement:

Thank you for allowing me to interview you. As you know I am a doctoral student in the Educational, Policy, Planning, and Leadership program at William & Mary's School of Education, working on my dissertation. Through this study, I hope to understand the relationships among race, sense of belonging, and the experiences of selected Black students at a predominately White institution.

This interview should last 45-60 minutes. With your permission, I will start the recording. Throughout the interview, I will also take notes.

Reflection Question:
1. Are there any thoughts, feelings, or reflections that you would like to share after the first interview and reviewing the interview transcript?

Questions based on demographic survey
1. Are you a first-generation college student?
   a. (yes) What influence, if at all, does being a first-generation college student have on your sense of belonging as a Black student at a PWI?

2. Did you participate in the university's pre-orientation program for underrepresented student populations?
   a. (yes) What influence, if at all, does being participate in the university's pre-orientation program for underrepresented student populations have on your sense of belonging as a Black student at a PWI?

3. Are you a member of a fraternity or sorority?
   a. (yes) What influence, if at all, does being a member of a fraternity/sorority have on your sense of belonging as a Black student at a PWI?

4. Are you a student athlete (participates in a competitive athletic program offered by the school)?
   a. (yes) What influence, if at all, does being a student athlete have on your sense of belonging as a Black student at a PWI?

5. Do you live on campus?
   a. (yes) What influence, if at all, does living on campus have on your sense of belonging as a Black student at a PWI?
   b. (no) What influence, if at all, does living off campus have on your sense of belonging as a Black student at a PWI?

Member checking from first interview:

Questions for all participants:

1. When asked how you would describe the campus culture, a few participants mentioned the "stress / grind culture" and academic rigor of Prestigious University:
    a. What influence, if at all, does the campus stress / grind culture and academic rigor have on your sense of belonging as a Black student at a PWI?

2. Across some of the interviews, participants referenced Prestigious University traditions and the concept of being a "average student:
    a. How, if at all do these transitions or the idea of fitting into a "box" influence you as a Black student at a PWI?

3. Across all the interviews, participants referenced the DIVERSITY CENTER as a resource and source of support. What does the DIVERSITY CENTER mean to you?
    a. How, if at all has it influenced your sense of belonging as a Black student at a PWI?

4. What influence, if at all, does your campus involvement (name organizations/involvement) have on your sense of belonging as a Black student at a PWI?

5. How, if at all, has the Covid-19 pandemic influenced your college experience?

6. How, if at all, has racial injustice within the United States influenced on your college experience as a Black student?

7. What does sense of belonging mean to you? How would you define a sense of belonging?

8. What does community mean to you?

9. Strayhorn (2012) defines sense of belonging as "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers" (p.4).
    a. Given Strayhorn's definition of sense of belonging, do you feel you belong at UNIVERSITY, as a Black student at a predominately White institution?
    (yes) What contributes to that feeling?
    (no) What are some factors that make you feel like you don't belong?

10. Is there anything else you would like to share that we haven't talked about?

Closing Statement:
This concludes our second and final interview. Do you have any questions for me? You will receive an email with a transcript of this interview. I ask that you take one week to review and let me know if you have any questions, comments, or corrections on the transcript. Thank you for participating. I will be in touch to get you your $10 Amazon gift card and a free copy of the book *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* by Austin Channing Brown.

PARTICIPANT FOLLOW-UP

Thank you for participating in my research study regarding the relationships among race, sense of belonging, and the experiences of selected Black students at a predominately White institution (PWI).

Every participant will receive a $10 Amazon gift card and a copy of the book "I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness" by Austin Channing Brown

CONTACT INFORMATION
1. Full name
2. Mailing address: (for gift card and book)

REFLECTIONS
3. Are there any thoughts, feelings, or reflections that you would like to share after the second interview and reviewing the interview transcript?
4. Is there anything else you would like to share as it relates to sense of belonging as a Black student at a PWI?

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Education

Doctoral Degree:
- Degree: PhD
- Field of Study: Education Policy Planning and leadership
- Concentration: Higher Education Administration
- University: William & Mary
- Graduation Date: May 2024

Master's Degree:
- Degree: MA
- Field of Study: Counseling
- Concentration: College Student Development
- University: Hampton University
- Graduation Date: December 2011

Bachelor's Degree:
- Degree: BA
- Field of Study: English
- University: Hampton University
- Graduation Date: May 2008

Professional Experience:

Director of Student Affairs
- University of Virginia: School of Education and Human Development
- October 2023 – Present

Associate Director, Center for Student Diversity
- William & Mary
- July 2019 – October 2023

Assistant Director, Center for Student Diversity
- William & Mary
- October 2016 – July 2019

Event Coordinator
- Sarah Lawrence College
  August 2014 – September 2016

Director, Information Resource Center
- Hampton University: College of Virginia Beach
- August 2008 – August 2014