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RACE, SENSE OF BELONGING, AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT
EXPERIENCE AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Education

By

Anthony Kane Jr.

December 2019

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Anthony Kane Jr.

2019

RACE, SENSE OF BELONGING, AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT
EXPERIENCE AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

By

Anthony Kane Jr.

Approved October 16, 2019

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ABSTRACT

RACE, SENSE OF BELONGING, AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT EXPERIENCE AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

By

Anthony Kane Jr.

December 2019

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Darius Prier

This research study utilized a critical race theoretical framework and methodology to explore the lived experiences of African American students at a predominantly White institution. The purpose of this study was to identify how race impacts the sense of belonging of African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). This study highlighted the racialized experiences of African American students at a predominantly White institution and how these experiences impacted their sense of belonging. Additionally, this study sought to understand the type of support African Americans students preferred and needed in order to develop a positive sense of belonging.

Six African American undergraduate students from Citytown University (pseudonym) were selected to participate in this study using criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews and analyzed through

interpretative and descriptive coding (Bazeley, 2013). Primary findings suggest that 1. The select group of African American students interviewed feel isolated or alone at their PWI, 2. Racialized experiences can negatively impact African American students' sense of belonging, and 3. Intentional and culturally relevant support from faculty, staff, and administrators engender a positive experience and sense of belonging for African American students.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the individuals who have supported me in my growth and development as a practitioner, scholar, and social justice advocate. Without your continuous love and support, I would not be the man I am today.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my parents for continuously encouraging me and pushing me to make a difference in my community and the lives of others. From a young age, my parents motivated and inspired me to help others, to be a man of good character, and to live a life filled with respect and integrity. As I recall hearing several times, in life there are no do-overs, so make sure you get it right the first time! To my siblings, thank you for always supporting me through my shortcomings and celebrating my accomplishments. Your love and support is priceless.

Dr. Darius Prier, thank you for challenging me to think bigger about the world and my impact within it! Your intellectual and intentional words of advice have inspired me to do things I never thought I was capable of doing. To my committee Dr. Chris Meidl and Dr. Gretchen Generett, thank you for believing in me and my work. Your support and uplifting spirits have helped enhance my work and opened the doors to so many possibilities.

To my friends, colleagues, and supervisors, sorry I have not always been there for you and thank you for understanding. You all have continued to support and encourage me to do great work. To my “TEAM,” thank you for always helping me to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Your words of encouragement and random stories have helped me remain #focused. Special thanks to Alydia and Chase for your unwavering support as you worked toward your own degrees.

Growing up my dad would always say, “Behind every great man, is an even greater woman.” Truer words have never existed. To my future wife I appreciate you and admire

your selflessness and commitment to me during this entire process. You have made some of the greatest sacrifices for me during this journey and not a day goes by where I do not love you unconditionally for your support. I pray that the Holy Spirit continues to watch over us, so that we always remember who we are meant to be.

Lastly, I would like to give all glory to God because without him, none of this would be possible.

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1 RATIONALE FOR STUDY

Although it has been nearly six decades since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, African American students on college campuses, specifically predominantly White institutions (PWIs) still experience isolation, racism, and racial microaggressions (Harper, 2013). As Strayhorn (2012) described, these racialized experiences can contribute to a low sense of belonging and lack of academic success among African American students. Furthermore, the racialized experiences of African American students also contribute to consistent racial disparities in educational attainment between them and their White counterparts (Museus & Neville, 2012). Thus, as educational leaders and university administrators seek to improve the academic and social experiences of African American students at a PWI they must authentically understand how their experiences have been impacted (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010).

As an educational leader at a PWI in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, I believe my experience as an African American student and administrator have contributed to my understanding of the racialized experiences of African American students at PWIs. This understanding has been the motivation of this research study, where I seek to investigate the resources and types of support African American students need to develop a sense of belonging and achieve academic success. The resources and types of support explored will also acknowledge the work many colleges and universities have done to improve the African American student experience. Specifically, these institutions work to improve the recruitment, retention, and academic success of African American students. Improving these resources and types of support will not only develop sense of belonging and enhance academic success, but it will also improve campus climate.

In an effort to fulfill the anticipated results of this research study, a critical race theory (CRT) lens will be used to hear the untold stories of African American students at PWIs. More importantly, these stories will give a voice to those previously silenced while highlighting and validating the students' experiences with race, racism, and microaggressions. Through this process, I will be able to understand the various ways faculty, staff, and administrators have neglected to support African American students who have racialized experiences. Understanding where others have neglected to support these students will provide stakeholders' and I the data needed to develop new policies and resources to holistically support African American students at PWIs.

This study seeks to help one understand the kind of experiences that might inform the resources and support needed for African American students' sense of belonging at PWIs. In addition, the data contributes to improvement research for the field of education. More specifically, it is my hope that the findings of this research study be used to add scholarly contributions to critical studies of race and student experience in higher education institutions. By understanding the findings and implications of this research study, educational leaders and university administrators will be able to use a social justice lens to support minority students in accordance with their strategic diversity initiatives. As Baker (2013), Harper (2013), Hunn (2014), and Strayhorn (2012) explained, when faculty/staff/administrators support minority and African American students they improve their student experience, sense of belonging, and overall academic success, which benefits both the student and university.

Social, Cultural, and Historical Perspectives

Scholars and educational researchers have argued that the student experience for African Americans at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are much different from the experiences of their White counterparts (Franklin, 2016; Harper, 2012; Hunn, 2014). Harper (2012) suggested that these experiences might differ due in part to universities and university leaders being unwilling to address or acknowledge racial differences on college campuses.

McGee and Stovall (2015) explained that encountering racism or racial campus climates can limit academic opportunities and affect the growth and development of African American students. McGee and Stovall also pinpointed racialized experiences as a major reason that African American students become overwhelmed, which ultimately leads to those students being further marginalized.

Many scholars and educational researchers are working to acknowledge and address racial disparities, as they currently exist. However, emphasizing the impact of race, racism, and racial inequality that have always existed in the United States system of higher education is also essential (Harper, 2013; Linley, 2018; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Patton, 2016). Harper (2013) explained that prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many colleges and universities excluded or resisted African American students from admittance.

Linley (2018) expanded on this notion, indicating that for the first 200 years of their existence, institutions of higher education were led by and intended for Whites, specifically for White men. However, a wide range of challenges relating to race and racism on college campuses still exist. While many of the issues surrounding race focus on overt

racism, where a clear message of racial superiority exists, other racialized encounters and experiences are described as “racial microaggressions” (Franklin, 2016, p. 44).

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). Furthermore, racial microaggressions—whether subtle or obvious—affect the African American student experience at PWIs (Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012). More specifically, Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, and Lewis described how these racialized experiences could lead to African American students feeling unsupported and isolated within their campus communities. Additionally, Johnston-Guerro (2016) and Vaccaro and Newman (2016) agreed that experiencing racial microaggressions and other race related issues affect the identity and sense of belonging of African American students at PWIs.

The feeling of not belonging or being unwelcome on their college campuses are outcomes of the racialized experiences and encounters African American students at PWIs face (Hurtado & Alvarado, 2015; Strayhorn, 2012). Moreover, these encounters cause African American students to feel like outsiders where they negatively perceive their place of belonging within their campus community (Harwood et al., 2012; Johnston-Guerro, 2016). These negative perceptions of their belonging are a result of feeling vulnerable or threatened in their classrooms, residence halls, and other community spaces across campus (Johnston-Guerro, 2016).

Strayhorn (2012) described sense of belonging as a feeling of being in one’s rightful place in a community and/or space. Furthermore, Strayhorn explained that ensuring minority students felt respected and valued within their campus community could result in

a positive sense of belonging for those minority students. Additionally, Tinto (2015) purported that increasing diversity among faculty, staff, and administrators can promote a sense of belonging among minority students at PWIs.

Unlike Tinto, Strayhorn (2012) suggested that White faculty, staff, and administrators appropriately developing positive relationships with minority students would assist them in feeling a positive sense of belonging. Similarly, Luedke (2017) explains that positive relationships between faculty, staff, and students occur when students feel supported and empowered by faculty and staff.

When educational leaders look at sense of belonging, racial issues, and African American student experience at PWIs, it is important to acknowledge the importance of effectively addressing hostile campus climates and the risk of not doing so (Franklin, 2016; Griffith, Hurd, & Hussain, 2017). Harwood et al. (2012) explained that minimizing minority students' racialized experiences and encounters with racial microaggressions results in the students feeling not respected and a low sense of belonging. Minimizing student experiences and a lack of diversity among those who can provide support causes minority students to isolate themselves from their peer groups and become disengaged in their classes (Hunn, 2014; Tinto, 2015). Classroom isolation and academic disengagement results in minority students struggling academically, which can have lasting effects in relation to their academic success and retention (Schreiner, 2013).

While enhancing sense of belonging and academic success for minority students, educational leaders must ensure that when addressing issues of race and racism, the experiences of the effected students are validated (Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015). In addition to validating their experiences, educational leaders must also understand

that the support they provide must be holistic, authentic, and caring in a manner that builds trust and confidence (Baker, 2013; Luedke, 2017; Museus & Neville, 2012). In regard to the racialized experiences of African American students specifically, Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) explained that on-campus involvement and discussing their experiences with faculty, staff, and administrators help them overcome race and race-related issues.

McClain and Perry (2017), indicated that addressing the experiences of African American students makes them feel part of the campus community and aides them in developing a sense of belonging. In terms of addressing student experiences, universities can provide access to mentors (Baber, 2012; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010), create safe spaces for students to engage with peers (McClain & Perry, 2017; McGee & Stovall, 2015), and educate all students on how to report race issues and where to find support (Harper, 2012; Linley, 2018).

Local Contextual Perspectives

Since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, African American students have been striving for equity and inclusion on college campus and in college classrooms (Harper, 2013). Research shows that despite these efforts' minority students, specifically African Americans suffer from noticeable racial disparities in higher education attainment (Museus & Neville, 2012). Understanding the struggles that African American students have always faced, educational leaders must seek out these students on their college campus to provide them access to the resources and support services available on campus.

These resources and supports should be geared to address the following concerns, at minimum. Experiences that result in African American students at PWIs feeling isolated or alienated due to race, and understanding these experiences can be perceived or

systematic (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014; McClain & Perry, 2017). Another concern to be addressed is how encounters with racism and/or racial microaggression within the campus community affects African American students' classroom performance (Van Dyke & Tester, 2014). Finally, yet importantly, resources and support for African American students at PWIs should address how these students often are blamed for their lack of success (Harper, Smith, & Davis, 2016). This narrative along with the others, leads to African American students questioning their belonging, value, and ability to succeed on these racialized campuses.

Despite understanding the holistic need of support for African American students at PWIs, on many college campuses' these resources are limited to the office on campus geared toward serving multicultural students (Patton, 2016). As Patton (2016) explained, these offices are often expected to address the diverse students' issues, while maintaining the idea that the campus community is welcoming and friendly. Key university administrators at the research site, in this study, used hegemonic language when discussing the purpose and mission of the Office of Equity and Inclusion. Similar to other PWIs, the lack of support, racialized experiences, and encounters with racial microaggression at this research site lead to African American students questioning their belonging and value in this study.

A key resource available at this research site, influencing the African American student experience is the approximately twelve minority student organizations, five of which serve African American students. These organizations work individually and collaboratively to facilitate and execute educational and social activities to support diversity and shed light on existing issues or concerns students are facing. However,

through my advisement and interactions with these African American student-serving organizations, I found that despite their involvement on campus many of these students did not feel respected or valued. Students explained these feelings were a result of administration and staff; undermining their programs by reducing funds or limiting how they promote their events on campus.

The aforementioned interactions led me to inquire with other students whom I serve about their overall experiences at the research site. It was through casual conversations geared around specific events that occurred on campus. I discovered that many of the students I spoke with, who were not involved in these minority-serving organizations, had similar experiences to those who were involved in such organizations. The experiences with certain administrators and staff were described by students in the same manner that Sue et al. (2007) described racial microaggressions.

According to Sue et al. (2007), racial microaggressions are defined as brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group. Therefore, when the experiences of African American students involved in minority-serving organizations were juxtaposed with those who were not, I discovered that there were systemic, systematic, and cultural issues that must be addressed at this research site to improve their experiences and belonging.

Leadership Perspective

As educational leaders and university administrators, we must continuously remind ourselves of the history of isolation and alienation on college campuses for minorities, specifically African Americans. For example, as Linley (2018) explained, for the first 200 years of higher education, the only people attending or teaching (college) were White men.

Additionally, Harper (2013) described how several colleges and universities in the United States were created without any attention to Black students' needs and interests. This includes but is not limited to postsecondary institutions that were segregated prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Harper, 2013).

Given the history of racial disparities in education, university faculty, staff, and administrators must be intentional in supporting African American students and promoting their academic success. As stated by several researchers, the following types of support and resources would be effective. Faculty can promote diverse learning environments where minority students feel included and compelled to succeed (Hurtado & Alvarado, 2015). Administrators and staff should address the issues and concerns students bring forth regarding their racialized experiences or lack of belonging (Nadal et al., 2014). Lastly and most importantly, university communities as a whole should engage students of color in a positive manner that will make them feel accepted and valued (Harper, 2013). Although these recommendations are broad, they can be used as a framework for establishing positive experiences, sense of belonging, and academic success for African American students at PWIs.

Despite these and other recommendations from relevant researchers and scholars, I have engaged with several educational leaders within my sphere of influence whose practices consistently do not have the interest of African American students in mind. This conclusion is a result of committee work and meetings I have participated in that were geared toward the success and experiences of students. However, in these settings, specific items related to African American or minority student experiences and success were deemed not relevant or worthy of discussion.

According to several of my colleagues, all students are given what they need to succeed and it is not necessary to have specialized services for certain groups of students. For example, in a meeting regarding student retention, it was suggested that a program be developed specifically to track African American student retention. Even with data and statistics to support the need of this program, several committee members deemed the program unnecessary because student retention efforts should be consistent across all groups. In addition, several individuals were unwilling to provide support and resources to the office(s) that would be managing and maintaining the projected program.

Unfortunately, the lack of attention given to African American students makes them question their value, belonging, and ability to succeed in the campus community, while also contributing to negative stereotypes regarding African American student success. For example, during new student orientation week, students are discouraged from visiting neighboring communities with diverse and increased African American populations. Additionally, in various student conduct consultations regarding African American students, these students are often labeled as angry, disconnected, or unstable. However, if some conduct officers took the time to speak with these students, they would understand these students are in need of support to cope with previous life and traumatic experiences both on and off campus.

Lastly and as previously stated, the lack of support and funding provided to programs and initiatives for African American students has been noted by several students and organizations. Lack of support and funding sends a message to students that their programs are not as important as others. This is particularly concerning as Linley (2018)

explained the importance of university leaders working with minority student leaders to raise diversity awareness through programs and other initiatives.

As an educational leader who works closely with many of the individuals involved in the examples above, I must state that I do not believe their actions or lack thereof are ill intentioned or intentional. However, I do believe that their actions and responses are related to a lack of understanding their role in supporting the experience, belonging, and success of African American students. Thus, as I complete this research study, I will work to help faculty, staff, and administrators alike better understand how they can provide support to African American students in a manner that influences positive experiences, sense of belonging, and academic success.

Problem within Sphere of Influence

Much like many institutions of higher education, the retention and graduation rates of students play a key role in how this study's research site defines its success and value as a university. Therefore, when looking at the sense of belonging of African American students, one of my main objectives is to provide key administrators with information that can create conditions in which the retention of African American students can flourish. In turn these conditions might enhance the overall university retention rate. The recommendations of this study will focus primarily on how faculty, staff, and administrators can improve the experiences of African American students at a PWI. This focus is most practical as the Office of Student Affairs is currently facing budget cuts and restructuring. These are matters too time intensive for the purpose of this study.

Examining the racialized experiences of African American students through a critical race theory lens, along with substantial research on African American student

experiences and sense of belonging, I anticipated the following implications would result from this study. First, I anticipated that African American students may want to see the research site improve its diversity among faculty, staff, and administrators. Harper, Smith, and Davis (2016) as well as Tinto (2015) explained, having diverse faculty, staff, and administrators allows students to not feel so alone. This is significant because they see themselves represented in the higher ranks of the campus community. Additionally, it also allows the potential for African American students to have mentors or role models who identify with them (Griffith, Hurd, & Hussain, 2017).

In order to validate student experiences and make them feel supported Nadal et al. (2014) suggested that universities be aware and combat stereotypes and racial microaggressions by positively affirming students of color. Furthermore, Hurtado, Alvarado & Guillermo-Wann (2015) described how validating students' experiences make them feel heard and reduce lingering effects of those racialized experiences.

Additionally, this study seeks to improve the sense of belonging of African American students, which in turn may create conditions to enhance campus climate. Luedke (2017) suggested that trusting relationships with faculty and staff provide students of color the opportunity to identify areas of need and strategize ways to overcome these obstacles in a supportive and nurturing environment. Therefore, by improving relationships between African American students and faculty, staff, and administrators, educational leaders at this research site will have a better understanding of those student's needs.

These positive and trusting relationships could also create safe spaces within the campus community where African American students no longer feel alienated or isolated. McClain and Perry (2017) explained that these safe spaces would improve the sense of

belonging of African American students while also contributing to academic success efforts. More importantly, educational leaders and university administrators will be able to provide proactive support to African American students by conveying the message that the university is invested in their success. As the experiences of African American students' shifts from being racialized to positive and welcoming, these students will begin to feel more support, respected, and valued by their institutions.

Hunn (2014) explained, when universities remove existing racial barriers and educate the campus community on its diversity and inclusion efforts, they promote sense of belonging and positive experiences for students of color. Therefore, as a result of this study within my sphere of influence, it is my hope that diversity and inclusion awareness and programing become the norm at this research site. More specifically, it is my goal that PWIs will support African American students and other minority student populations in a manner that reminds them, that they do matter.

Data to Support Intervention

The following data describes the national education attainment rates for minorities as well as the retention and graduation rates at my specific research site.

Ryan and Bauman (2016) explained that despite efforts to lessen the racial disparities, educational attainment still varies by race and ethnic background. Using data reported in the 2015 United States Census, they report that as of 2015, only 22.5% of African Americans age 25 and older have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. Whereas, 36.2% of non-Hispanic Whites age 25 and older have obtained at least a bachelor's degree. Hurtado and Alvarado (2015) described these disparities are a result of the discrimination and bias minority students face on college campuses. Meanwhile, a study by Luedke (2017)

found that minority students are retained and perform better when they are holistically supported by faculty, staff, and administrators.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2017), the total undergraduate student population at my research site is just under 6,000. A closer review of this population shows that of the approximately 6,000 undergraduate students 80% identify as white, while only 5% identify as African American. Hunn (2014) explained that African American students tend to feel isolated and alienated at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The underrepresentation of students of color can contribute to the disparities in retention and graduation rates. In regard to my research site, the U.S. Department of Education (2017) reported the 6-year graduation (FA 11'-FA 17') for White students as 80% and 62% for African American students. While the cause of these disparities was not explicitly outlined, these disparities show a need to address educational attainment for African American students.

Furthermore, the disparity in educational attainment highlights a need for additional support and resources for African American students. This is a crucial social justice issue that needs to be investigated and addressed. In an effort to better understand the cause of this disparity at my research site and other racial disparities in education this study will utilize critical race theory (CRT) to understand the experiences of African American students (Patton, Haynes, Harris, & Ivery 2014). Additionally, the use of CRT will expose racial campus climates and transform how PWIs support African American student learning (McClain & Perry, 2017; Patton, Haynes, Harris, & Ivery 2014).

Recommendations from Relevant Scholars

Although data is important in making decisions to improve student learning, Harper, Smith, and Davis (2016) explained that to understand why African American students are not succeeding you must talk to them. Therefore, this section will review recommendations from relevant scholars whose work is focused on African American student experience, racial campus climates, and sense of belonging.

Patton (2016) discussed the history of racism in higher education and stated, “higher education, from its genesis has been a primary force in persistent inequities” (p. 318). She proposed that in order to address racial campus climates and enhance African American student experience universities must be willing to address their history as it relates to racism. However, Hurtado, Alvarado & Guillermo-Wann (2015) outlined how educators should work to educate the campus community in an effort to diminish bias and discrimination. They explained that doing so could develop resilient and empowered students whom are able to overcome racialized experiences. While both of these approaches are student centered, the importance of storytelling is key in understanding the firsthand experiences of African American students at PWIs (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

As higher education leaders at PWIs work to address the racialized experiences of African American students, they must seek to understand why these students still experience isolation and racial microaggressions within their campus community (Harper, 2013). Furthermore, they must work with African American students to understand the magnitude of their racialized experiences before they can develop and implement diversity initiatives and awareness programs (Linley, 2018).

Understanding the magnitude of these racialized experiences refers to: psychological wellbeing (Franklin, 2016), academic stressors (Griffith, Hurd, & Hussain, 2017), sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), and low self-esteem (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014). Having this critical information allows higher education administrators to create more inclusive campus environments, while promoting sense of belonging and fostering academic excellence for African American students (Griffith, Hurd, & Hussain, 2017). These inclusive campus environments would assure African American students that there were safe spaces available for them to learn and grow within their campus communities (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014).

Being aware of the national and local data regarding racial disparities in education and using key recommendation from relevant scholars, I utilized a qualitative, critical race theory (CRT) methodology to better understand the experiences of African American students at PWIs. This study incorporated semi-structured interviews to gather the stories and counternarratives of African American students as they relate to their racialized experiences, sense of belonging and success. These semi-structured interviews followed the Rubin and Rubin (2005) interview protocol, which suggest interviews include main questions, probes, and follow-up questions. The findings of this study used CRT to describe how race impacts the experiences and sense of belonging of African American students at PWIs.

Research Questions

This study will provide an avenue for traditionally silenced voices to be heard and will gain valuable data to support the voices of marginalized students at PWIs. The following qualitative research questions have been generated to guide this study:

1. How does race affect the experiences of African American students at PWIs?
2. How have the racialized experiences of African American students at PWIs contributed to their sense of belonging?
3. What type of support is needed to help develop sense of belonging for African American students at PWIs?

Definitions

This section will define and provide context to the key terms used in this study, as they relate to the African American student experience and sense of belonging at predominantly White institutions.

African American/Black: Ethnically and racially identifying terms can be difficult to define and use, due to concerns of being politically correct and non-offensive to members of the marginalized groups (Newport, 2007). Therefore, in the context of this study the terms *African American* and *Black* will be used interchangeably to describe the participants of the study and the students intended to benefit from the study. Participants of this study will self-report themselves as being *African American* or *Black*, with the understanding that those terms refer to having African descent or ancestry (Ghee, 1990).

Sense of Belonging: Several definitions for the terms sense of belonging and sense of community have been used regularly in higher education and other professions. For this study the definition of sense of belonging will be as Strayhorn (2012) described as feeling respected, accepted, and part of a group setting. More specifically this definition is commonly used to describe minority student sense of belonging on college campuses or within the campus community.

Predominantly White Institution: Abbreviated as PWI or PWIs, predominantly White institutions are colleges and universities where 50% or more of the overall student population is White (Brown & Dancy, 2010).

Academic Success: This term refers to student success, as it relates to retention and graduation rates. These statistics are often used as indicators of institutional performance and can reflect how well integrated students are into campus life (Voigt & Hundrieser, 2008).

2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of relevant literature that outlines how race and race-related issues affect the sense of belonging and academic success of African American students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Additionally, this chapter will describe the types of on-campus support African American students at PWIs need to achieve academic success. The overall purpose of this chapter is to use a critical race theory approach to discuss how race and race-related issues affect the sense of belonging and academic success of African American students at PWIs. More specifically, I use the experiences of African American students at PWIs to examine how race, race-related issues and sense of belonging determine the type of support African American students at PWIs need to be successful.

Overview of Critical Race Theory and Education

Delgado and Stefancic (2017), defined critical race theory (CRT) as “a progressive legal movement that seeks to transform the relationship among race, racism, and power” (p.171). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explained that by using CRT, educational leaders would be able to better understand and address educational inequities. Additionally, research by Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) discussed how the five major themes or elements of CRT can be used to examine racial microaggressions and the African American student experience at PWIs. The first theme is the centrality of race and racism in society, which asserts that racism is embedded in American life and culture. The second theme is the challenge to dominant ideology that critiques the idea of white privilege and the ideologies that are embedded within that mindset (i.e. colorblindness, equal opportunity, meritocracy, etc.). The third theme is the commitment to social justice with the agenda of

eliminating the subordination of certain people. Fourth, is the theme of experiential knowledge, which draws on the experiences of people of color to better understand their narratives. The last theme is the transdisciplinary perspective, which calls for civil-rights laws to be reimagined (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical race theory was initially constructed as a mechanism for critiquing and addressing racism within the legal system. However, the transdisciplinary nature of this work lead to its application to education contexts.

When outlining CRTs role in education, Ladson-Billing (1998) explained that discussions regarding race in education make people uncomfortable. Furthermore, she explained that to appropriately apply CRT as an educational framework, educational leaders must expose racism and race issues in education. Additionally, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) stated, that while CRT may expose race issues in education, it is most valuable as a tool to understand racial inequality in education. For instance, McGee and Stovall (2015) described how applying CRT to education will allow educational leaders to analyze practices and ideologies through a race-conscious lens.

More specifically for this study, Patton (2016) explained that while most CRT in education research is focused on K-12, educational leaders must understand that higher education institutions are not immune to the effects of race and race issues in education. She further explained that CRT can and should be used to take a social justice approach to transforming higher education. This social justice approach can help higher education staff and administrators use CRT to better understand and address race related issues on their campuses (Linley, 2018). Ladson-Billings (1998) explained that racism is a normal part of

American society, and while CRT doesn't fix racism, it helps us understand and address its impact (Patton, Haynes, Harris, & Ivery, 2014).

Brief History of Race and Race Related Issues

While many colleges and universities today celebrate and promote diversity, educational leaders must be willing to address the history of racism and discrimination that is deeply rooted in many of these same institutions (Harper, 2012; McClain & Perry, 2017). Linley (2018) explained, that for the first 200 years of its existence the only people attending or teaching at higher education institutions in the United States were Whites, more specifically White men. Furthermore, Harper (2013) explained that many of these colleges and universities were created with no attention to the needs or interest of African American students.

Harper also described how these colleges and universities have excluded and resisted African American students, while presenting challenges to their assimilation and matriculation to campus. Thus, colleges and universities must be willing to address their history of racism, especially as it relates to their founding and past presidents (Patton, 2016). They must do so while also understanding how their history of exclusion was detrimental to the success and retention of African American students past and present (McClain & Perry, 2017).

Additionally, the historical trend of all White males at colleges and universities, conveyed a message that higher education was not attainable nor a realistic option for African Americans and other minorities. According to Harper (2013), it was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that legislation to desegregate schools and postsecondary institutions was implemented. Although this legislation provided educational

opportunities, it could not guarantee African Americans received equitable access to higher education, nor ensure that institutions participated in inclusive education practices.

This uncertainty for racial inclusion presented many barriers to African American students, which caused them to continuously feel unwelcomed at these institutions. As Harper described, for decades since the Civil Rights Act, minoritized students have been striving for equity and inclusion at colleges and universities. These efforts to provide equitable spaces for African American students have contributed to the improvement of racial diversity at colleges and universities. Still, some researchers indicate there's more work to be done (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Museus & Neville, 2012; Ryan & Bauman, 2016).

For instance, Ryan & Bauman (2016) explained that there are still consistent attainment gaps between ethnic and racial groups, despite increases in educational attainment and the demographics of higher education institutions. In addition, Museus and Neville (2012) stated, "Racial minority students continue to suffer from noticeable racial disparities in baccalaureate degree attainment" (p.436). Furthermore, Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) explicitly explained that although African Americans are more likely than ever to attend college, they are still far less likely than their White counterparts to earn college degrees. Many factors contribute to the low attainment and completion rates of African Americans; however, educational leaders must acknowledge that race, experiences with race, and racism at a systematic level are key contributors (McClain & Perry, 2017).

Systematic Issues African American Students Face

As colleges and universities work to address attainment disparities, they must do so in the midst of a renewed focus on racial dynamics in higher education and the broader

society (Johnston-Guerrero, 2016). This renewed focus is largely a result of the aforementioned 1964 Civil Rights Act (Harper, 2013), race issues on college campuses (Linley, 2018), and systematic views that have negative effects on students of color (McClain & Perry, 2017). Furthermore, Harper (2012) explained that students of color's paths to degree completion and/or attainment is consistently interrupted due to experiencing hostile and racial campus climates. These hostile and racial campus climates can be a result of encountering discrimination, alienation, invisibility, and invalidation based on race (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014).

Baber (2012) described, that racial encounters affect all students of color; yet African American students are most likely to be alienated, isolated, and feel disconnected at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). While experiencing isolation and racial hostility on college campuses is detrimental to campus climate, Strayhorn (2012) explained that the greatest effects are often seen in retention and academic success. Strayhorn further described how feeling alienated or disconnected at PWIs negatively influences sense of belonging for students of color, which ultimately has a negative effect on their academic success and retention. Therefore, as colleges and universities strive to increase diversity, retention, and improve success for students of color, they must understand that a hostile and racial campus climate works against their efforts (Van Dyke & Tester, 2014).

Harper, Smith, and Davis (2016) explained that despite efforts to increase college access, African American students remain at the bottom of most statistical metrics of success in higher education, such as retention and grade point average. Meanwhile, Harper (2012) explained that when attempting to understand African American student success, educators tend to focus on what students' lack, instead of examining how race and racist

institutional structures can undermine their efforts. In addition, Harper et al. (2016) outlined how African American students are often blamed for their lack of academic success; with educators citing lack of effort and under-preparedness as key causes.

While the challenges related to student success for African Americans could be a result of many factors, McClain and Perry (2017) explained that racial campus climates negatively affect retention and academic success for students of color. Furthermore, Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, & Lewis (2012) stated that although predominantly White institutions (PWIs) have become more diverse, they have done little to change their campus climates. As educators work to address racial campus climates and the lack of academic success for students of color, they must understand that these students experience racial hostility in both academic and social settings (Baber, 2012; Griffith, Hurd, & Hussain, 2017).

Racial hostility contributes to existing perceptions of racial campus climates (Baber, 2012), while presenting the campus climate as unwelcoming for students of color (Van Dyke & Tester, 2014). By addressing these negative racial campus climates, universities, specifically PWIs will remove one of the more significant barriers in retaining African American students (Hunn, 2014). In addition to addressing campus climate, PWIs must also create more inclusive campus communities that support students of color and provide them a sense of belonging. As Hunn (2014) explained, isolation and lack of diversity among faculty, staff, and students are additional barriers PWIs face in retaining African American students.

Harper (2013) also provided support for the need of inclusive campus communities when he reported that in 2010, the average percent of African American students enrolled

at the twenty largest public institutions was 5.3%. In addition to this lack of diversity, cultural biases may lead White students at PWIs to assume that their college campus is a white space (Van Dyke & Tester, 2014). Thus, the belief that college campuses are white spaces may result in students of color, specifically African American students having college experiences that differ from that of their White peers.

Additionally, as Franklin (2016) explained, students of color at PWIs also experience racial microaggressions, which result in them having to justify their identity and presence on campus. 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). Racial microaggression, whether subtle or unsubtle have lasting effects on the African American student experience and how these students perceive their college environment (Harwood et al., 2012). In an effort to effectively address these systematic issues, educational leaders must understand the racialized experiences of students of color and acknowledge that these experiences are multifaceted, not one dimensional (Harper, 2012; Franklin, 2016).

Race, Microaggressions, and Campus Climate at PWIs

Despite university efforts to increase diversity and inclusion, discussing race and racist campus environments on college campuses is considered taboo (Harper, 2012). As Ladson-Billings (1998) explained, talking about race in education makes people uncomfortable. However, those uncomfortable conversations must happen, and educational leaders must understand how students view race as a social construct (Johnston-Guerrero, 2016).

In addition, important to note is the idea that race contributes to the educational inequities' African American students' face, while also restricting their academic opportunities (McGee & Stovall, 2015). Effectively addressing these inequities, requires educational leaders to first understand how race, more specifically racial microaggressions, affect the college experience of African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Franklin, 2016).

As educational leaders work to address educational inequities by understanding African American student experiences (Baber, 2012), they must understand how racial microaggressions affect those experiences as well as academic success (Harper et al., 2016). For instance, McClain and Perry (2017) explained that despite appearing diverse on the surface, predominantly White institutions (PWIs) struggle retaining students of color due to racial microaggressions. Furthermore, Harwood et al. (2012) described that PWIs have done little to change their campus culture and climate; citing that racial microaggressions occur on these college campuses in residential, academic, and social settings. These exchanges cause students of color to feel vulnerable and struggle with their identity at PWIs (Franklin, 2016; Johnston-Guerrero, 2016).

Experiences with racial microaggressions also cause students of color to feel unwelcome at PWIs (Harwood et al., 2012); which Hurtado, Alvarado and Guillermo-Wann (2015) claimed to be part of the daily college experience for students of color. Additionally, Griffith et al. (2017) explained that African American students at PWIs frequently experience stereotypes and discrimination due to race. However, although some of these experiences are unsubtle, they still have negative effects on how students perceive their campus climates (Harwood et al., 2012).

When addressing differences in the African American student experience, specifically because of racial microaggression, educational leaders must understand how these experiences contribute to lower college completion rates and retention rates (Van Dyke & Tester, 2014). For example, Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) explained that African American college students experience higher attrition rates than their White counterparts. They further explained, racial campus climates and lack of diversity among faculty were contributing factors to these disparities. Access to a diverse faculty at PWIs, allows African American students to feel welcomed and a sense of belonging on their campuses (Harper, 2013). In addition, the increased diversity at PWIs helps students of color feel welcomed and have a sense of belonging, while also preparing White students and faculty to live in a multicultural society (Linley, 2018).

Therefore, as educational leaders continue to foster academic success for students of color (Museus & Neville, 2012), they must keep in mind the effects of race, systemic issues, and student experience because they shape student success. More importantly, they must understand the role faculty, staff, and administrators play in shaping student experiences (Museus & Neville, 2012) and creating sense of belonging, which is key in retaining students of color (McClain & Perry, 2017).

Understanding Sense of Belonging

According to Strayhorn (2012), having a sense of belonging is feeling as if one has a rightful place in a community. More specifically, Hurtado et al. (2015) described sense of belonging as a feeling of attachment and place within the campus community. Hunn (2014) described that the experiences of African American students result in them struggling more than their White counterparts to develop a sense of belonging. Thus, once

educational leaders understand how race and microaggressions effect the experiences of African American students at PWIs (Harwood et al., 2012; Griffith et al., 2017), they can understand how developing a sense of belonging is challenging for students from minoritized social groups (Strayhorn, 2012; Hurtado & Alvarado, 2015).

Students challenges in sense of belonging were a result of them feeling isolated and alienated within their campus communities due to their minority status. Additionally, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) explained, feeling safe and respected are key factors in minority students feeling a sense of belonging. They further explained, that feeling judged and unable to be their authentic self at PWIs, resulted in a low sense of belonging for these minority students.

Meanwhile, Schreiner (2013) explained how of sense of belonging or lack thereof, was associated with academic success and thriving. In addition, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) found that student sense of belonging is directly related to academic achievement and outcomes, as well as a predictor for minority student retention. In an effort to address the challenges and risk minority students' face in regard to sense of belonging, universities must create more inclusive campus environments for minority students, specifically African American students (Griffith et al., 2017).

Additionally, Harper et al. (2016) explained that to increase sense of belonging for students of color, universities must ensure their campus communities reflect their students and the city in which the university is located. Tinto (2015) explained, that universities can promote minority student sense of belonging by ensuring that administrators, faculty, and staff are reasonably representative of all students. He also described how having an

adequate number of students with similar backgrounds, allows universities to promote sense of belonging among minority students.

Faculty, staff, and administrative diversity allows students of color to see themselves within the campus community, which can eliminate feelings of isolation and alienation. Furthermore, by increasing minority representation, universities can address their racial campus climates, which in turn will make their campuses more welcoming for students of color (Strayhorn, 2012). In addition to increasing minority representation, universities must understand how welcoming campus climates and positive relationships positively affect sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; Schreiner, 2013).

Developing Sense of Belonging for African American Students

A study by Vaccaro and Newman (2016), found that minoritized student sense of belonging is affected by college environment, social relationships, and campus involvement. Additionally, Hurtado and Alvarado (2015) explained that PWIs must develop inclusive, diverse learning environments and actively create conditions to foster student success. They further described how these welcoming and inclusive environments, provide students of color an opportunity to feel a sense of belonging, by addressing some of the discrimination they often face.

McGee and Stovall (2015), explained how inclusive and diverse environments provide African American students a space where they can engage collectively with others and feel protected. In addition to creating safe spaces and opportunities for students of color (Nadal et al., 2014), universities must also ensure their publications reflect the university's efforts to be more inclusive and affirming (Harper et al., 2016). While the aforementioned efforts contribute to promoting minority student sense of belonging, educators must not

forget the important role they play in creating sense of belonging for minority students (Hurtado et al., 2015).

The experiences and sense of belonging of minority students at PWIs are greatly influenced by institutional agents such as faculty, staff, and administrators (Museus & Neville, 2012; Baker, 2013). Strayhorn (2012) described that faculty enhance minority student sense of belonging by creating classroom environments that are welcoming and foster more inclusive campus environments. Whereas Nadal et al. (2014) explained that staff and administrators must be aware and address issues and concerns students of color face to prevent these students from feeling alone or isolated. More specifically, they explained how to combat stereotypes and microaggressions, while providing positive affirmation could result in students of color feeling more included and accepted.

These feelings of inclusion and acceptance allow students of color to focus more on their academic and social success rather than questioning if their campus community is safe. Additionally, by addressing and validating these experiences, institutional agents can decrease the effects of these experiences and promote minority student sense of belonging (Hurtado et al., 2015). Furthermore, these positive encounters with institutional agents prepare minority students to use their experiences to teach other minority students how to appropriately navigate and get support at PWIs (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Harper, 2013).

As Baber (2012) explained, receiving positive same-race peer support validates the experiences of students of color, particularly African American students at PWIs. Additionally, these encounters develop and enhance African American student sense of belonging. Harper (2013) also described how same-race peer relationships are beneficial for students of color, because they affirm the students place and belonging on campus. In

addition, a study by Griffith et al. (2017) found that students who serve as mentors and role models, enhance sense of belonging by using their similar identities and experiences to help students of color cope with their own experiences.

Meanwhile, research by Linley (2018) discussed how universities can promote these same-race peer relationships by utilizing students of color within socialization programs to promote a positive sense of belonging for prospective and new students. She further explained, that in order to effectively promote sense of belonging, peer socialization programs must work to fully understand how the experiences of minority students effect their sense of belonging.

Sense of Belonging and the African American Student Experience

As previously stated, the college experiences of students of color, mostly African American students differs from that of their White counterparts. More specifically, Franklin (2016) explained that experiences with racial microaggressions are a key factor in why their experiences differ. In addition, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) described how lack of belonging contributes to these differences, as students of color are often judged or treated differently because of their minority status. While working to address the experiences of African American students, universities must understand the importance of sense of belonging both academically and socially (Tinto, 2015). Furthermore, they must understand that campus environments that engender feelings of belonging are key to addressing the racialized experiences and academic concerns of African American students at PWIs (Strayhorn, 2012; Franklin, 2016).

Additionally, to address the racialized experiences of African American students and promote sense of belonging, universities and educational leaders must create spaces

where these students feel welcomed and included. Griffith et al. (2017) explained lack of inclusive spaces and environments results in African American students at PWIs questioning who they can trust and where their safe space is. Providing these safe spaces allows students of color to have experiences that positively influence academic success (Schreiner, 2013), while also resulting in an enhanced sense of belonging (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016; Schreiner, 2013).

Feeling welcomed allows students of color to focus on their academics while eliminating questions, regarding if they have a rightful place within the campus community. This is key because as Tinto (2015) stated, “Enhancing students’ belief in their ability to succeed in college is one thing. Developing a sense of belonging is another” (p.261). Therefore, as educational leaders work to understand the importance of promoting sense of belonging (Schreiner, 2013; Tinto, 2015), they must also acknowledge the racialized experiences of minority students (Franklin, 2016; Johnston-Guerrero, 2016). In addition, they must also remove existing race-related barriers and educate the campus community by increasing diversity and inclusion efforts (Hunn, 2014).

Barriers to Developing a Sense of Belonging

Although sense of belonging is key to student success and retention (McClain & Perry, 2017), Harwood et al. (2012) explained that students of color often find their campuses unwelcoming and unfriendly. Hunn (2014), described that many of these perceptions were a result of unwelcoming messages from faculty, staff and students. She further explained that these messages were typically in the form of racial discrimination, prejudice, and microaggressions. Additionally, Franklin (2016) examined how these experiences resulted in students of color feeling as if they need to justify their identity and

presence on the campuses of PWIs. Whereas, Strayhorn (2012) explicitly explained how these hostile and toxic campus environments negatively influences sense of belonging for students of color.

According to Griffith et al. (2017), exposure to racial campus climates and microaggressions can have negative effects on African American students both academically and socially. These experiences cause African American students to feel isolated and unsafe (Johnston-Guerrero, 2016; Griffith et al., 2017), while also changing how they identify themselves within the campus community. As Vaccaro and Newman (2016) explained, minority students at PWIs develop a greater sense of belonging when they were able to be their authentic self in their college environment. Therefore, universities must understand how minority students perceive their campus environments, and how those perceptions influence sense of belonging, student success, and retention (Tinto, 2015).

Additionally, universities and educational leaders must appropriately handle racial incidents and microaggressions on campus to ensure students of color feel welcomed and supported (Harwood et al., 2012). More specifically, Hurtado and Alvarado (2015) described how given the challenging racial context, universities must deal more proactively with race and race-related issues. Thus, to help minority students overcome barriers to developing a sense of belonging and be successful, universities and educational leaders must support these students (Baker, 2013), and invite them to discuss their experiences and how they have affected them (Harper, 2012; Harper et al., 2016).

Student Support for African Americans

As universities and educational leaders work to support minority students, they must understand how positive on campus support can increase sense of belonging and academic success (Baker, 2013). Additionally, Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) explained that faculty, staff, and administrators can provide support and systemic change that will assist in the success of African American students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). A study by Baker (2013), found that support from the college environment is key in the academic success of minority students, as it eliminates many of the academic barriers associated with race. For example, the study found that minority students who receive on campus support feel more connected and welcomed, which leads to them having more confidence to succeed academically (p. 646).

Tinto (2015), also discussed how on campus support can assist students in managing many of the tasks and responsibilities related to navigating and succeeding on college campuses. This support while crucial, is most effective when provided by faculty and staff who can relate to the students and develop trusting relationships (Luedke, 2017).

In an effort to provide effective support for students of color, Franklin (2016) found that PWIs should focus on hiring more faculty, staff, and administrators from historically underrepresented groups. Representation of minorities among administrators will not only address racial campus climates (Franklin, 2016), but also provide minority students with the resources to discuss their experiences and strategize for success (Hunn, 2014). Patton (2016), explained that although many PWIs have offices to support multicultural students the burden placed on these offices is sometimes overwhelming. Furthermore, she explained

that these offices are often expected to address all the issues minority students face while also making their campuses appear more diversity friendly.

However, Linley (2018) suggested that the university as a whole is responsible for supporting minority students and addressing the issues they face. More specifically, she explained how staff can raise awareness and confront race related issues, while developing effective student leaders. Additionally, Baker (2013) discussed how crucial support from faculty of color is to students of color at PWIs. She explained, “faculty of color present on college campuses may provide the knowledge and support that can make an impact on students of color” (p.646).

Furthermore, Harper (2013) specifically highlighted how faculty of color who engage students of color at PWIs, help those students develop a sense of belonging to their campus communities. Thus, while providing support is essential, PWIs need to recognize the benefits of supporting minority students and promoting it among its faculty, staff, and administrators (Franklin, 2016).

Benefits of Supporting African American Students

While scholars rarely debate the positive outcomes of support, literature suggests that this support should be based on student needs and wants. For example, when specifically noting support for African American students, Baber (2012) explained how diverse sources of support are key factors in enhancing the African American student experience. Several other researchers (Griffith et al., 2017; Hunn, 2014) described how support from mentors and role models who share similar identities to students can be beneficial in helping students cope with race-related stressors. Despite these differences in

support, Baker (2013) highlights how crucial this support is to assisting African American students in developing a positive sense of belonging within their campus community.

Furthermore, a study by Luedke (2017) found that students of color respond best to support from individuals who make themselves more available to them. Additionally, she explained how this type of support helped develop trusting relationships that both empowered students and helped them overcome their negative experiences associated with race. In an effort to ensure minority students are benefitting from the support provided, Museus and Neville (2012) discussed how universities should proactively share information regarding support services available. They further explained how doing so conveys the message that the university is invested in their success and experiences as students.

3 METHODOLOGY

The primary purpose of this research study is to identify how race impacts the sense of belonging of African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). In addition, this study will provide a better understanding of what types of support is needed to promote a positive sense of belonging for African American students at PWIs.

Purpose of the Study

Much of the existing literature highlights how race affects the experiences and sense of belonging of African American students at PWIs. This study will utilize critical race theory (CRT) to apply a race conscious lens to the lived experiences of African American students at PWIs. In addition, this study will use CRT to allow the researcher to hear the silenced voices of African American students and understand how their experiences with racial microaggressions have affected their sense of belonging and academic success.

The purpose of this research study was to identify how race impacts the sense of belonging of African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). In addition, this study provides a better understanding of what types of support are needed to promote a positive sense of belonging for African American students at PWIs. In an effort to ensure that responses are authentically from this perspective, participants of this study includes African American students at a PWI who are currently living the racialized experiences that many African American students face. Findings of this study also seek to improve the campus climate of the research site and establish more relevant and meaningful support services for minority students, specifically African American students.

As an African American male whose previous education and current work experience is at a PWI, I have a firsthand understanding of the campus climate and issues regarding race and microaggressions. Within the context of my position, I have engaged with students who faculty, staff, and students were victimized due to their race or the basis of how they look. These instances are not rare and unfortunately all too common for African American students as they work toward their degree progress at PWIs. As an educational leader and university administrator, it is my duty and responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of all students. Thus, this research study was designed to provide myself and my colleagues with the data needed to improve the experiences and sense of belonging for African American students at PWIs.

Through completing this research study, it is my hope that I will have a better understanding of how race is affecting the experiences and sense of belonging of African American students within my sphere at my institution. Additionally, using the stories and counter narratives of the research participants will allow me to work closely with my colleagues and key stakeholders to identify ways to provide better support to our students. In my role at my university, supporting students and serving as a liaison between them and other university officials, gives me the opportunity to serve as a bridge from what they may need to what they will receive. Therefore, understanding how students' experiences and sense of belonging are influenced by race at this research site will provide information and highlight the key problems students are facing. On the other hand, hearing the stories of students whose encounters with racism and microaggressions have been mismanaged or not validated, provides a framework for how support and resources for students could be implemented going forward.

My experiences as an African American student and professional have provided first-hand knowledge to inform context of research findings. The use of storytelling and counter narratives were key parts of this research study and were utilized to “hear silenced voices” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48) of African American students who have encountered racism or racial microaggression at the research site. Therefore, the findings, in regards to sense of belonging in relation to race, were as follows: African American students do not feel valued, there are no safe spaces for African American students, and African American students do not belong in the classrooms of PWIs.

The aforementioned findings highlight issues regarding the student experience, race, and lack of sense of belonging. However, this study additionally sought to make recommendations for the types of support African American students need to feel as if they belong and achieve academic success. Thus, through my own experiences and research, it is important to acknowledge and validate the racialized experiences of African American students. This helps them feel valued and welcomed. African American students seek the support and mentorship from faculty, staff, and administrators who look like them. This mentorship and support provides students’ safe spaces, even if only momentarily. Lastly, African American students seek classrooms that are more diverse, classrooms that will allow the students to feel as if they belong in their particular major or program of study. Additionally, classrooms that are more diverse would result in more peer-to-peer engagement and mentorship.

As an educational leader and the principal investigator in this research study, it is important to acknowledge how my previous experiences have influenced my desire to do this work. Despite my previous racialized experiences at PWIs, many researchers and

education scholars alike have agreed that it is important to understand the racialized experiences of African American students. Additionally, they agreed that it is also important to investigate and address how those experiences affect sense of belonging and academic success.

Through doing this work, I use critical race theory and methodology to improve the experiences and belonging of African American students at PWIs. The following research questions will guide my study from a social justice perspective.

Research Questions

Based on Ladson-Billings' (1998) research discussing how the use of critical race theory (CRT) in educational research should give participants a "voice" and allow individuals to "name their own reality" (p.13), qualitative research questions have been generated for this study. Supporting the development of these research questions is Creswell's (2013) explanation of qualitative research, which indicates that questions should seek to "hear silenced voices" (p.48). Furthermore, as Bogdan and Biklen (2007) described, qualitative research is descriptive and will aid the researcher in considering the experiences and stories from the perspectives of their participants.

This study provided an avenue for traditionally silenced voices to be heard and obtained valuable data to support the voices of marginalized students at PWIs. The following qualitative research questions have been generated to guide this study:

1. How does race effect the experiences of African American students at PWIs?
2. How have the racialized experiences of African American students at PWIs contributed to their sense of belonging?

3. What type of support is needed to help develop sense of belonging for African American students at PWIs?

In addition to utilizing qualitative research questions, a critical race theory methodology will be used as to collect, analyze, and interpret data through a race-based lens as suggested in Mertens (2015). Using a qualitative critical race theory methodology, I will be able to hear the stories of African American students and explore how these experiences have impacted their sense of belonging.

Instrumental Case Study

This research study will utilize an instrumental case study, interviewing six African American students to study the phenomenon or condition of sense of belonging they experience at PWIs. That is, my intent is to study particular experiences of how African American students perceive their sense of belonging — to generalize understandings about race, discriminatory treatment, and exclusion at PWIs. While this is a small sample size, the particularity of these experiences may help us gather valuable information of how we understand the everyday ordinariness of racial exclusion on predominantly White college campuses.

As Stake (2003) explained, utilizing an instrumental case study will allow me to understand and analyze the lived experiences of the six African American participants in this study. For this case study, semi-structured interviews will be used to ask thematic and broad questions regarding African American student experiences and sense of belonging. These questions will provide participants with the opportunity to describe their experiences using storytelling and counter narratives (Stake, 2003). Understanding these stories in

relation to relevant research, I will be able to generalize the racialized experiences of African American students at PWIs.

Given the racialized experiences of African American students at PWIs, this instrumental case study will provide researchers with data to address those experiences and improve sense of belonging. Therefore, as a result of this case study, predominantly White institutions will better understand the African American student experience and proactively provide support to improve those experiences.

Theoretical Framework

While working to understand how race impacts the sense of belonging and academic success of African American students at PWIs, a critical race lens will be used as a theoretical framework to support the research methodology. Research by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) discussed how critical race theory (CRT) can be used as a tool to understand racial inequity in education. Ladson-Billings (1998) adds, that CRT in educational research adds context to the experiences of marginalized and silenced people. Despite most CRT research in education being K-12 focused (Patton, Haynes, Harris, & Ivery, 2014), Patton (2016) described how scholars within higher education can use CRT to “expose inequities” (p.316).

Furthermore, the use of CRT offers researchers a framework to situate problems associated with race, and a language to explain how racism effects educational opportunities for students (Patton et al., 2014). McGee and Stovall (2015) on the other hand, explained how CRT research in education can allow educators to “analyze practices and ideologies through a race-conscious lens” (p.494). This critical race understanding allows higher education administrators to better understand racial issues on their campuses

(Linley, 2018), and work with key stakeholders to address these race and race related issues. Ultimately, the use of a CRT framework for this study will expand the understanding of the African American student experience (Patton et al., 2014), while providing information to help promote a positive sense of belonging for African American students at PWIs (Strayhorn, 2012).

Critical Race Theory Methodology

Ladson-Billings (1998) described critical race theory as a tool that could be utilized to provide students a voice and allow them to name their own reality. More specifically, she explained how the use of storytelling was a key component of critical race theory and critical race research. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), critical race theory methodology allows research to be conducted and presented with an understanding of the experiences and knowledge of people of color. In terms of this study the use of qualitative, critical race methodology will allow me to “focus on the experiences of students of color” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24). Additionally, by highlighting issues of race and racism during the research process, critical race methodology can empower students to continue sharing their realities’.

As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggested, critical race theory has influenced qualitative research due to its use of storytelling and counter-narratives which is supported by qualitative research’s descriptive nature. Therefore, the use of critical race theory methodology in this study will allow me to gather data regarding the experiences of African American students at PWIs. In addition, I will work to understand how those experiences contributed to their sense of belonging or lack thereof. The use of critical race methodology will expose, analyze, and challenge stories regarding privilege (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002),

while enabling marginalized students to counter narratives that inaccurately depict their experiences (Mertens, 2015). More importantly, the results of this study are to be used to improve sense of belonging for African American students at PWIs. Subsequently, it is important to understand and hear the voices of those students to provide them what they need.

Data Collection

Donnor and Ladson-Billings (2018) explained how important counternarratives are as a qualitative research strategy in critical race theory methodology. More specifically they stated, “Critical race theory should help the researcher understand the relationship between race, public policy, and inequity” (p. 207). Bernal (2002) furthers this claim by outlining the importance of storytelling and counter storytelling in education, especially regarding changes to education as it relates to social justice. For this study, semi-structured interviews will be utilized to allow the participants an opportunity to describe their experiences as African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The semi-structured interviews in this study were one-on-one interviews that lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and included general, probing, and follow-up questions.

Semi-structured interviews provide participants the opportunity to use stories to describe their experiences and evoke change (Brinkman, 2018; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) described semi-structure interviews as interviews where the same general questions are used for each participant. In this study, participants were asked general questions regarding their experiences at on-campus events, the effects of minority representation in classrooms, and if they felt a part of the larger campus community or

isolated. These general questions will assist the researcher in establishing a flow and pattern for each interview.

Brinkman (2018) explained how researchers control flow of semi-structured interview, whereas Trochim (2006) described that effective interviews provide an atmosphere where participants feel heard not forced. Despite these slight differences, both researchers (Brinkman, 2018; Trochim, 2006) agreed that semi-structured interviews should include follow-up and clarifying questions to support student's voices and experiences. Validating those voices and experiences align with Donnor and Ladson-Billings (2018) argument that critical race theory research provides of voice to the previously muted and exposes how race still matters.

In regard to this study, the semi-structured interviews followed the Rubin and Rubin (2005) interview protocol, that suggest interviews include main questions, probes, and follow-up questions. This interview structure was chosen due to the importance of narratives and counternarratives in critical race theory research and how open-ended and in-depth questions will allow participants to expand on their stories using their own words. Participants will be asked to describe their experiences both positive and negative, the location on campus where these experiences occurred, and how these experiences relate to race at Citytown University. As participants described their experiences, the researcher sought to have them expand on how those experiences have contributed to a sense of belonging or lack thereof.

Although sense of belonging is the primary purpose of this study, questions regarding sense of belonging will be used as probing questions intended to gain additional information and clarity. Once the participants described their experiences and level of sense

of belonging, follow-up questions were utilized to allow students to describe the type of support they want and need. As Rubin and Rubin (2005) explained, follow-up questions allow participants to elaborate on what has been discussed and researchers the opportunity to explore implications in depth. This process will allow participants to explicitly describe what Citytown University faculty, staff, and administrators can do to better support African American students.

Interviews for this study were recorded via a recording device and later transcribed for data analysis. In order to maintain participant confidentiality, identifying information regarding participants was kept in a secure location and interview recordings/transcriptions only contained pseudonyms. Following transcription of the interviews, data was analyzed and reviewed to ensure the data transcribed appropriately matches the data received.

Researcher Positionality

The overall goal of this research study is to collect relevant data to improve the African American student experience and sense of belonging at my research site and other predominantly White institutions (PWIs). This study is important because, improvement of the African American student experience and sense of belonging could result in educational leaders and universities seeing holistic increases in retention and graduation rates for African American students. Thus, the motivation to do this work has developed from reviewing relevant literature, my experiences as an African American student at a PWI, and my experiences as an administrator at a PWI.

According to Prier (2015), as an African American researching African American students from a critical race perspective my experiences do not permit me to separate myself from those whom I am studying. However, as Milner (2007) explained it is

imperative that I do not allow my interest or voice to outweigh that of the participants. Thus, as the researcher I must be aware of my experiences as an African American while allowing the participants to share their stories and experiences as they occurred. Understanding the participants' experiences in relation to my positionality will assist me in transforming the campus climate and enhance the sense of belonging of African American students at the research site (Parker, 2002). Therefore, despite sharing similar experiences to the participants my positionality is unique to me and must not influence data analysis.

As a student, I received both my bachelor's and master's degree from a mid-size rural public university about 40 miles from my hometown. As an African American student at this PWI, encounters with racism or racist remarks on campus or in the surrounding communities became the "norm" by my senior year of college. Despite having an Office for Multicultural Affairs, members of the campus community seemed unaware or unwilling to address the racial microaggressions African American students faced in classrooms, dining areas, and their residence halls.

Additionally, the university had many distinguished faculty of color and Frederick Douglass Institute Scholars. Although these individuals could have been a great resource for my peers and I, they often were not made available as a support service for us. These continuous issues that plagued African American students along with the lack of support services available, encouraged the newly appointed Social Equity Director to change the culture through working with key stakeholders.

In an effort to change the campus culture and create a more inclusive campus environment, the Social Equity Director worked with interested faculty, staff, and

administrators to create two organizations focused on supporting the success of minority men and women on campus. These organizations were promoted, advised, and supported through the Office of Equity and Equality and had a focus on retention and student development. While the organizations were student focused, mentorship from faculty, staff, and administrators was a key component and often used as a tool to inspire and guide our decision-making.

Many of my positive experiences from undergraduate and graduate school are a result of my involvement in these organizations and the courageous conversation they produced. Furthermore, the now lifelong mentors and role models I received through my participation within these organizations ignited my passion to work with underrepresented students in higher education.

Fast-forward to my current role, I serve as the Assistant Director of Residence Life at a private midsize religious-affiliated PWI. Being an African American, I believe that this role affords me the opportunity to use my previous experiences and research to evoke change in a campus community that struggles at times supporting minority students. My background in student development and success, allows me to understand the difference between my students having a bad day and not having a sense of belonging.

This knowledge and understanding results in being responsible for the safety and wellbeing of over 3,000 resident students throughout my career thus far. There are 250 students of whom I am currently working with to provide support and contribute to their positive experiences on campus. These experiences have given me a high awareness of knowing when a student is having just a “bad day” and when a student is having a tough day as a result of a negative experience throughout the day on campus. Therefore,

understanding my role in addressing the needs and concerns of students within my sphere of influence, has allowed me to serve as an ally and give my students a voice in meetings where they often would not have one.

According to Nadal et al., (2014), it is important that Student Affairs practitioners are aware of the race-related issues their students face and provide those students with appropriate positive affirmation. In my role, I am committed to providing safe spaces for students to discuss their experiences, both in an individual and group setting, while also affirming the necessary validation that who he or she is, is good enough. Additionally, these safe spaces can foster and promote positive sense of belonging, as students begin to relate to and trust one another. My previous experiences contribute to the development of sense of belonging as I can appropriately use my experiences to validate and help my students navigate their experiences (Luedke, 2017; Strayhorn, 2012).

While these initiatives have become professional goals and expectations for me as an administrator, I use them to continue to inspire my research and influence systematic change. More importantly, as I continue to grow as an educational leader at a PWI, I aspire to improve the quality of support and resources for African American students. Furthermore, as support and resources improve, universities and university leaders will make it the norm to provide excellent resources to holistically promote diversity and enrich the student experience for all students. Thus, results of this study will be shared with stakeholders at my research site in an effort to start the change within.

Participants

In order to ensure data from this study is relevant and can be used to improve the African American student experience at Citytown University and other predominantly

White institutions (PWIs), participants will be recruited through the Office of Inclusion and Equity (pseudonym). The Office of Inclusion and Equity at Citytown University works closely with minority students to provide resources and services key to their academic success. In addition, the Office of Inclusion and Equity has an established relationship with African American students, one that should validate the trustworthiness of the study and researcher.

This study consists of 6 African American students (3 male and 3 female) enrolled full-time in undergraduate courses at Citytown University. In order to gain the most relevant information related to the African American student experience at Citytown University, participants must be enrolled as sophomores or juniors (30-89 credits). Additionally, all participants will have been enrolled at Citytown University for the entirety of their higher education career to ensure data is consistent with the experiences of students at Citytown. This method of sampling is defined by Patton (2002) as criterion sampling. Therefore, students chosen for this research study will meet the “predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 2002, p.238) that was previously established by the researcher.

Potential participants for this study will receive an email (Appendix A) notifying them of the study and inviting them to participate. As students declare their interest in participating in the study, they will be provided a questionnaire (Appendix C) which will include demographic and academic questions relevant to the study to determine student eligibility. Although the questionnaire did not require students to disclose their names, an identifier was used to match students with their questionnaires based of the criteria required. The Citytown University Office of Inclusion and Equity will provide contact

information for all potential participants. Once the research participants are selected, they will be given pseudonyms to protect their individual identities.

Data collection will occur based off participants schedules and will take place in the Office of Inclusion and Equity. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) stated, “interviews should occur in a setting where students feel comfortable” (p.188). Thus, that is why the Office of Inclusion and Equity was chosen as the specific data collection site for this study.

Data Analysis

According to Brinkman (2018), analysis of qualitative interviews should seek to hear the voices of participants and tell their stories from their point of view. Therefore, as I begin the data analysis process, I will collectively review the interview transcripts to interpret the data and gain a preliminary understanding of the participants stories. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) described, data interpretation is a key part of data analysis because it allows researchers to develop ideas about their findings and relate them to theory and literature.

While interpreting the data, I also wrote observer’s comments that will be related to my personal experiences and my experiences with the participants. Additionally, these observer comments will allow me to keep track of my thoughts regarding the data and “stimulate critical thinking” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p.163) around what I have interpreted from the data. Once I completed my interpretation of the entire dataset, I analyzed the individual interview transcripts for each participant individually. This analysis looked for relevant patterns, themes, and codes within the data (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007).

During data analysis, Bazeley (2013) explained that analysis of interview transcripts should include relevant descriptive and interpretive codes along with emergent themes and concepts. In addition, Saldaña (2013) explained, coding data helps the researcher identify repetitive patterns in the data. Once these relevant and repetitive patterns, codes, and themes were identified they were narrowed based on how they relate to the research questions and the overall purpose of the study. Additionally, codes will be grouped into larger categories based how they inform the research study and fit into the stories of the other participants.

As recommended by Rosenthal (2016), I utilized a coding software to assist with the coding process and identifying themes. The software supported my review of the data based on codes I have selected and highlighted during my interpretation. More specifically, this coding software supported my analysis of the findings and relationships that exist within data for both individual participants and the group as a whole.

Once data analysis was completed, I reviewed the codes, patterns, and themes from each individual interview with the participant involved to ensure that my analysis is a true reflection of their stories. This step will ensure that the findings reported were accurate and free of researcher bias. Additionally, I reviewed my data analysis with my committee to receive any necessary feedback in regard to gaps or holes in my findings. Upon incorporating feedback from participants and my committee, I wrote up the findings of my study and any implications for future research.

Research Site

For this study, research will be conducted at a relatively large, private, religious affiliated predominantly White institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The

research site, referred to by the pseudonym Citytown University, is located in an urban neighborhood in the center of a Mid-Atlantic city. In addition to its urban location, this research was chosen for the following reasons:

1. According to the Citytown University's Fact Books, the African American student population has been steadily increasing over the past five academic years.
2. Citytown University is a predominantly White institution, where African American students have discussed feeling unwelcomed and isolated.
3. Citytown University provides easy access to African American students through its Office of Inclusion and Equity.

Full-time undergraduate student enrollment at Citytown University as listed in Citytown University's 2018-2019 Fact Book was 5,896. In the context of this study, full-time undergraduate minority student enrollment was 20.3%, while only 5.2% of the total undergraduate population identified as African American. Despite the university's mission statement and founding being centered around diversity and inclusion, the demographic information above highlights the reasons minority students, specifically African American students need additional on-campus support.

The demographic information for the city in which Citytown is located is as follows: 66.3% White and 24.3% Black/African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The demographic information for the county is 80.3% White and 13.4% Black/African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). This information provides context that not only are African American students at Citytown University exposed to a predominantly White campus, they are also living in a city/county that lacks racial diversity. Thus, the lack of

racial diversity on and surrounding Citytown University makes this research site, and its African American students extremely valuable to this research study.

Stakeholders

Establishing and maintaining a positive relationship with stakeholders is crucial in successfully collecting data to improve the experiences of African American students at predominantly White institutions. For this research study, I have identified several stakeholder groups who will be directly impacted, and assist in the implementation of my theoretical framework and research methods. Key stakeholders identified were university administrators, staff, and African American students. These stakeholders are important to this study as they play a pivotal role in supporting and enhancing African American student sense of belonging on PWI campuses.

In this research study, university administrators are Vice Presidents, Associate/Assistant Vice Presidents, and Directors at the university. These individuals have important decision-making roles and a great influence on the campus community, as their support can validate and add credibility to the research outcomes. In addition, university administrators also Chair/Co-Chair various university committees that can raise awareness on diversity and inclusion across the various sectors of the university such as Student Life, Academic Affairs, Faculty Senate, and the Staff Advisory Council. Data from this research study will provide useful information to this stakeholder group regarding the on-campus experiences of African American students and campus climate. Additionally, the findings of this study may impact the realignment of equitable distribution of resources geared toward diversity and inclusion efforts.

The stakeholder group in my dissertation of practice identified as staff consist of the following: Resident Directors, Assistant Resident Directors, and other full-time non-faculty employees at the university. These individuals are responsible for developing a campus community that fosters academic and personal growth for all students. Furthermore, Resident Directors and Assistant Resident Directors specifically are responsible for addressing issues and concerns that can influence campus climate, which can impact student experience and sense of belonging.

While this research study may expand the responsibilities and workload for these stakeholders, their support and involvement is necessary. Data from this research study informed future recommendations for programs and initiatives and allow this stakeholder group to better serve the students in their respective areas. Most importantly, these key staff members will have access to African American students who will be the most critical stakeholders, and the primary focus of this research study.

Support and involvement by African American students will be crucial to the successful completion of this research study. Since African American students are the target population of this research study, their support was needed to ensure the data collected is accurate and provides an example of the African American student experience at PWIs. Through their participation in this research study, African American students discussed their experiences on-campus and described services and programs that could enhance those experiences.

Furthermore, providing African American students with an opportunity to express their concerns and feel supported made staff appear more relatable, which supports findings from Baker (2013). Although this research study can lead to African American students

feeling “targeted” by others due to their concerns, the positive implications of this study will ensure resources are being used appropriately to support them.

4 RESULTS

This chapter will provide an overview of the results from this critical race research study at Citytown University. Data for this study were gathered and analyzed through a critical race and social justice lens for the purpose of research improvement. Participants in this study used storytelling as suggested by critical race theory (CRT) to describe their experiences as African American students at Citytown University. Although this research study only captured the experiences of six students, these experiences highlight and provide insight to what it means to be an African American student at a predominantly White institution (PWI). The goal of this chapter is to provide a better understanding of the African American experience at PWIs. Through this better understanding, one will have perspectives from students to inform the kind of support and resources needed to develop a sense of belonging for African American students.

Upon completion of data analysis, the following themes emerged from this research study: 1. Isolation and Alienation, 2. Affirming Identity and Purpose, and 3. Intentional Support and Culturally Relevant Resources. Participants described their experiences with isolation and alienation as not fitting in with peers and feeling like an outsider in various settings. Results related to affirming identity and purpose are consistent with Delgado and Stefancic's (2017) claims that no person or race has a single, easily stated, unitary identity. Furthermore, they explained every person has potentially conflicting and overlapping identities which have been influenced by their experiences. Intentional support and culturally relevant resources refer to faculty, staff, and administrators understanding student needs and providing support to address those needs effectively.

Results and findings from this research study supports educational research and provides practitioners with key information to enhance the African American student experience at PWIs. Additionally, this research study will highlight ways in which faculty, staff, and administrators at Citytown University can create a more inclusive campus environment that engenders a positive sense of belonging. Most importantly, as a result of this research study, scholars and practitioners will better understand the support and resources African American students at PWIs need to overcome their racialized experiences.

Participant Introductions

Information to briefly describe the participants in this study is summarized below. This information includes their program of study, class status, why they chose Citytown University, and self-selected personality traits.

Clark is a junior male studying health management systems (HMS). Despite being a HMS major now, Clark originally chose to attend Citytown University because of their Pharmacy program. Additionally, Clark's biggest reason for choosing Citytown University was the financial assistance he received. Clark described himself as curious, friendly, and slightly introverted.

Honey is a junior female majoring in health management systems (HMS). She participated in the university's Minority Student Orientation program entering her freshmen year. Honey chose to attend Citytown University because of the school size and her previously intended major (physical therapy). Honey described herself as determined, compassionate, and strong-willed.

David is a junior Biology major who chose to attend Citytown University because an African American faculty member had recruited him to attend. In addition, David chose Citytown University due to a large academic scholarship he received from the university. David described himself as outgoing, focused, and an innovative leader.

Malcolm is a junior studying economics and business management. He participated in the university's Minority Student Orientation program during his freshmen year. Malcolm chose Citytown University because of the "very small" class sizes and the financial assistance he received. Malcolm described himself as motivated, observant, and hardworking.

Thurgood is a sophomore political science major and African studies minor. He participated in the university's Minority Student Orientation program during his freshmen year. Thurgood chose to attend Citytown University because it was close to where he grew up and the amount of financial assistance he received. Thurgood described himself as observant, patient, and diligent.

Fatima is a sophomore studying supply chain management. She participated in the university's Minority Student Orientation program during her freshmen year. Fatima chose Citytown University because it was a "smaller" school and because of the financial assistance she received. Fatima described herself as creative, caring, and calm.

Relevant Themes

Upon analyzing and summarizing the stories and lived experiences of African American students at PWIs, the following three major themes emerged, as defined in Table 1. Isolation and Alienation, 2. Affirming Identity and Purpose, and 3. Intentional Support and Culturally Relevant Resources.

Table 1. Themes and Definitions

Isolation and Alienation	The feeling of being separated from the others due to racialized physical differences (such as; hair texture, melanin, and facial features) or perceived cultural superiority from individuals in the dominant culture.
Affirming Identity and Purpose	Explaining the intersectionality of “Blackness” to combat and address racial stereotypes.
Intentional Support and Culturally Relevant Resources	Outreach that is meant to address the specific concerns/needs of African American students and students of color at PWIs.

Isolation and Alienation

Participants described experiences where they felt isolated and alienated on campus. These experiences were a result of the lack of diversity, not fitting in or feeling like an outsider, and being singled out or not feeling welcomed due to their race and ethnicity. According to the data, isolation and alienation refers to the feeling of being separated from others due to racialized physical differences (such as; hair texture, melanin, and facial features) or perceived cultural superiority.

Lack of Diversity

As anticipated, each participant had their own experiences in regards to being an African American student at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Many of the participants described that when choosing Citytown University, they were aware that it would lack diversity and was a predominantly White campus. Both Thurgood and Malcolm discussed how the anticipated lack of diversity at Citytown University caused them to

hesitate when deciding to enroll. Additionally, Clark described how being one of few African American students living in his residence hall made it difficult to feel welcomed. Clark stated, “They come from similar backgrounds and that thing is a uniting factor and you just coming in and you don't have the same experiences as them” (Clark, personal communication, July 1, 2019).

Similarly, Fatima shared how she didn't fit in with her two White roommates and their friend group during freshmen year as she was the only Black girl. She further explained that although her roommates never said or did anything specific, she could tell that she was not “one of them” when she was around them. These experiences described by Clark and Fatima are similar to David, as he felt limited in who he could hang out with because of the severe lack of Black students on campus. These experiences showed how the lack of diversity among college students can be discouraging to their student experience.

While describing her experiences at Citytown University, Honey shared how when preparing to arrive on campus she had already known and accepted the fact that she was probably not going to see a lot of Black people. This lack of diversity has resulted in her having a mostly White friend group and in many cases being her “White friends” first or only Black friend.

Many of the participants in this study shared concerns similar to Honey, being the only African American student in a mostly White setting or friend group. For example, Clark says of his mostly White residence hall, “When talking to an actual black person, they just look at them from afar more than actually interacting” (Clark, personal communication, July 1, 2019). This experience was unique for Clark as he had described

how many of his White peers emulated what appeared to be Black culture, while at the same time not engaging with Black students.

David described how hard it was to simply find people he could relate too. While Malcolm's experiences were similar to both David's and Clark's, he varied in his attributions between Blacks and White contributions toward Blacks feelings of isolation. Malcolm said, "I feel like there's still that...there's them and there's us kind of feel. I feel like we haven't really bridged that gap in any way" (Malcolm, personal communication, July 6, 2019). For him these feelings contributed to him questioning his place and belonging at Citytown University.

In regards to his relationship with his White peers, Malcolm explained there was a continuous feeling that this is "our side" and that is "their side". These feelings existed in various settings. Malcolm explained how he and his friend group could tell when things were not the same as when they first met their White peers.

Fatima, Thurgood, and David all described how they felt alone and unwelcomed in their respective academic schools. These feelings of being unwelcomed caused participants to fear exploitation by the faculty, staff, and students within their academic spaces. David described how he had to adjust and get used to being the only Black biology major in all of his classes. Almost verbatim, Thurgood and Fatima described how they have always been the only Black person in their classrooms and felt out of place.

Fatima described her experiences by saying, "I don't really have friends in the business school, which is weird, because everybody else is friends with each other" (Fatima, personal communication, July 5, 2019). Thurgood however explained that despite knowing Citytown University was a PWI, being the only Black person in his classrooms

was an adjustment that he never could have prepared for. For Thurgood he was unaware that being at a PWI meant having to affirm the beliefs and understanding of his classmates and professors in regard to the African American experience. Thus, not being prepared for these predominantly White classrooms resulted in Thurgood and other participants feeling like outsiders who did not belong at Citytown University.

Feeling Like an Outsider

Participants of this study described various incidents and encounters in which they felt their race contributed to them feeling like they were outsiders, didn't fit in, or were not being holistically seen on Citytown University's campus. David described feeling isolated or like he was in a bubble from the moment he arrived at Citytown University in the summer prior to his freshmen year. Both Malcolm and Clark described feeling lost or like outsiders during their time at Citytown University. For Clark he felt that due to his race, professors and his advisor did not expect him to succeed which resulted in a lack of support during his freshmen and sophomore year. Clark stated, "I had to figure things out on my own...my advisor gave me no help or anything like that" (Clark, personal communication, July 1, 2019).

Malcolm on the other hand described how he felt lost whenever he had faculty or professors who did not address him in the classroom. He explained how his few Black professors made him feel like he was part of the class. However, his non-Black professors would hardly address him unless he engaged them first (Malcolm, personal communication, July 6, 2019). Clark and Malcolm's experiences highlight the value they placed on being supported and addressed by faculty, specifically those who share similar backgrounds.

In other areas across campus, participants described not being able to communicate with their White peers without being judged or stereotyped. Thurgood described how discussions around societal issues would often make him feel as if he and his White peers were from two completely different worlds. He stated, “It's just so hard to cross communicate to someone that physically and emotionally cannot understand where you come from because they don't know that, that world exists” (Thurgood, personal communication, July 7, 2019).

Clark explains this notion of coming from two different worlds:

Once you tell them certain things, everything else just falls back into rear view. It's just like you have to fit certain requirements to either be friends with them or they want you ... It's like it's like a certain fit you have to be in their group or anything like that. And it's just like if you don't fit it, you're labeled different (Clark, personal communication, July 1, 2019).

These encounters highlight how Clark and Thurgood had to constantly be careful of their actions and words in the presence of their White colleagues, due to the fear of becoming further isolated or not fitting in. In addition, Clark and Thurgood did not want to unintentionally perpetuate any of the stereotypes put forth by their White peers.

As Fatima explained, not fitting in with her classmates and feeling like an outsider amongst her White peers made her at times wish she would have chosen an institution other than Citytown University. Similarly, Honey described a time when she did not want to talk to any of her friends whom were mostly White, because of struggles she was experiencing. She stated, “My friends in that type of situation, they didn't really help because they

couldn't really relate to how I was struggling” (Honey, personal communication, July 2, 2019).

These experiences as explained by Honey and Fatima were common among the participants in this study. Their experiences often resulted in them becoming isolated or as Clark stated “Going into default mode, where you just sit down, stay quiet, just observe” (Clark, personal communication, July 1, 2019). Responses similar to these were the result of participants not feeling as if they had a space on campus to discuss their experiences.

Although many of the participants’ experiences were related to lack of diversity and support, David added a unique perspective. David explained how his Black friends leaving the university for academic, financial, or conduct reasons affected him personally. He described how all of his White friends from freshmen year were still students. Meanwhile, it seemed like all the Black students he talked to regularly had left the university. These sentiments by David not only showcase the importance of peer socialization among these students but also how African American student attrition impacts African American students’ sense of belonging.

Not Feeling Welcomed

As aforementioned, lack of diversity and feeling like an outsider at PWIs can have negative effects on the African American student experience. These experiences cause students to question if they are welcomed and at times can contribute to them feeling as if they are being singled out.

From the moment he had first arrived at Citytown University Malcolm questioned where he would fit in and if he belonged there. He explained how being an African

American student at Citytown University meant you had to work harder to find resources or likeminded people to hang around (Malcolm, personal communication, July 6, 2019).

Thurgood shared similar sentiments but stated that for him it felt like he had to go find Black people on-campus, which at times caused him to become distracted or discouraged. When discussing his experiences, he said, “It's [looking for Black people] definitely going to pull me away from focusing on studies. It's definitely going to pull me away from being comfortable in any of my lectures” (Thurgood, personal communication, July 7, 2019).

These experiences for both Malcolm and Thurgood, expanded on previous experiences, in which participants felt like there was an obvious disconnect between Black and White students. This disconnect caused participants to feel unwelcomed at Citytown University, and as if the differences between the different cultures that exist on campus was too great to overcome. The experienced differences shared by the participants were due to a lack of cultural responsiveness and understanding by their White peers.

Both Fatima and Honey shared experiences where they were singled out because of their appearance, specifically their hairstyles. Fatima explained how on several occasions she would change her hair color or style as a way of “switching things up”. Fatima shared two specific incidents that occurred. The first incident occurred when a White student she once considered a friend exclaimed to her, “Oh my gosh, I didn't recognize it was you” as she took her seat in a crowded classroom. The other incident was while she was studying abroad and changed her hair color. She described how her White peers made her uncomfortable by being infatuated with her new color hair as if she had become a new person.

Honey on the other hand described an uncomfortable experience where a professor in the middle of class, stopped his lecture to point out her new hairstyle. In all of these incidents, the participants affected were not only singled out because of how they looked but they were also made uncomfortable.

Both Honey and Fatima explained that it was weird, how obsessed their White classmates and professors were with their hairstyle and how often it changed. This obsession with their appearance caused them to question, why White people were more concerned with how they looked than who they were as individuals. Additionally, both African American female participants described how their hair was an extension of who they were, and should not be used to identify them.

Similarly, to Fatima and Honey, Clark shared how his facial hair has caused him unwanted attention and, on several occasions, led to White people on campus questioning his place within the dominant culture. He explained that due to the texture and size of his beard, many of his White classmates and professors at times emphasized his physical appearance, in ways that made him uncomfortable. Clark described one encounter where a professor said to him, “You are so articulate.” This was extremely discouraging because Clark felt his physical appearance was what led to this comment. Despite being comfortable in their skin, participants of this study did not enjoy being acknowledged or singled out due to their physical traits.

Given he and his friends experiences as African American students at Citytown University, Thurgood felt he needed to be cautious of whom he was around and interacted with. He described how on several occasions he encountered racist behavior or was made aware of racist behavior on Citytown University’s campus. He explained, not knowing

who the perpetrators were in some of these incidents made him feel unwelcomed at times on campus (Thurgood, personal communication, July 7, 2019). More importantly, he explained that these encounters made it difficult for him to feel welcomed at Citytown University.

One experience Thurgood mentioned several times, was attending Greek Life events on or off campus and “feeling out of place” or as if he was not was permitted to be there. Thurgood explained that while attending a Greek mixer, he was made uncomfortable by the looks and comments made by others in attendance who did not look like him. He raised the question, “Why are they intentionally embracing the idea of keeping themselves separated from others?” when reflecting on how these events appeared to be for White students only.

However, David described the pressure associated with being the only Black student in his major. He explained how he felt like he needed to maintain good attendance and grades, because if he didn’t his professors would know who he was because there was no one else like him. Additionally, he felt as if his professor were more aware of his academic status, as there were no other students in that class that looked like him.

For both David and Thurgood, being aware of themselves and their environment was a key part of their experiences as students. While David discussed feeling singled out and Thurgood described feeling unwelcomed, they both understood their situations and what they needed to prevent them from becoming increasingly worse.

For several of the participants in this study, they felt the experiences that led to them being singled out or feeling unwelcomed may not have been intentional, but due to a lack of cultural understanding and responsiveness. However, some participants had

experiences that were a direct result of racism or racist behavior. Clark described an experience during his freshmen year where he was in his room on campus and someone yelled, “Nigger” loudly in the hallway. He explained that when he exited his room to confront the individual he noticed the individual was in the restroom located directly next to his [Clark’s] room.

Thurgood had a similar experience during his freshmen year in another residence hall, where his neighbors across the hall used an electronic device to repeatedly say, “Nigger” at approximately 2:30 in the morning. Thurgood explained that these individuals used this device for almost 20 minutes until he confronted them about it. In both situations, the racist behavior continued until the African American student confronted the perpetrator(s). These experiences with racist behavior not only were discouraging to the participants involved but caused them to feel unwelcomed in their residential community.

Although Honey did not experience blatant racism like Thurgood and Clark, she did explain how on two different occasions she was made uncomfortable by her professors when discussing slavery and civil rights. In both occasions, Honey described how when those topics were brought up in her classes, the professors would become awkward and “very careful with their words.” She further explained how the professors would focus their attention on her which made her feel weird because she was the only Black student in the entire class. While these encounters may not have been as severe as those experienced by Thurgood and Clark, they too still perpetuated a feeling of being singled out or not welcomed at Citytown University. These are feelings, which over time, could result in a negative sense of belonging for the participants.

Affirming Identity and Purpose

In addition to feeling isolated and alienated at Citytown University, participants shared that they often felt as if they needed to affirm who they were. This affirmation, came in the form of representing black realities, being true-to-themselves and combatting stereotypes, and finding their people. According to the data, affirming identity and purpose refers to having to prove and explain the intersectionality of “Blackness.”

Representing Black Realities

African American students’ experiences at PWIs differ from those of their White peers. As Honey explained there are obvious cultural differences that exist among these students that have contributed to African American students at times feeling as if they have to represent what it means to be Black. For instance, Honey described a time when she had to confront her White friends because they were making racist jokes about Black people. According to Honey, she did not believe these jokes were intended to be racist or insensitive. However, she explained that these insensitive jokes perpetuated stereotypes about African American behaviors, language, and physical traits.

In each of these experiences, Honey not only had to confront her friends’ racial microaggressions, but she also had to explain to them how what they said was insensitive from an African American point of view. Experiences similar to those of Honey’s contribute to a lack of belonging or feelings of being unwelcomed for African American students at PWIs.

Similarly, to Honey, Clark described experiences with his White peers in which he was facing stereotypes because of his background and where he was from. Clark explained that from the time he arrived to Citytown University, many of his classmates and

floormates found him exotic due to his family being of African descent and them expecting all people of African descent to look and behave a certain way (Clark, personal communication, July 1, 2019).

When asked to describe what being “exotic” to his White peers meant Clark stated, “They lean into these stereotypes. They just wanted to know ... They ask you about where you come from, if you've seen something bad and stuff like that” (Clark, personal communication, July 1, 2019). For Clark, he believed that his White peers tried to fit him into what they believed about African Americans, instead of trying to understand him as an individual.

Thurgood and David on the other hand, described academic experiences in which they did not face stereotypes but were the go-to person for all things related to African Americans. Being a political science major, Thurgood anticipated discussing difficult topics in his classes. However, he recounted several incidents where topics such as social justice and police brutality were being discussed and his classmates or professors looked at him to validate or expand on the topics. Thurgood explained how challenging these encounters were when he said:

Trying to build a rapport with teachers and having your professors look at you as possibly being the one face to save your entire race or being the one voice to have a voice for a whole community of people, it's hard. It's very pressurized (Thurgood, personal communication, July 7, 2019).

David’s experience, while similar to Thurgood’s, differed as David noted his professors were trying to utilize him as their go-to resource for all race related topics. David had good grades and was the only African American student in his classes. Consequently,

his professors and classmates look for him to be an active participant in any lectures related to race.

Both David and Thurgood acknowledge that while these experiences allowed them to celebrate their blackness, they also caused them discomfort and resulted in unwanted attention for being Black. Being the go-to resource for all things related to Black people, made them feel as if they had to affirm the beliefs and understanding of their classmates and professors in regard to the African American experience.

Being the representative for their entire race or culture was something many of the participants expressed when describing their experiences as African American students at Citytown University. These experiences caused the participants to affirm their identity and explain why their type of “Black” was different than what their peers had perceived. More importantly, these experiences caused the participants to become more self-aware in a manner that made them more comfortable being themselves at Citytown University.

Being True to Yourself

College is described as a time when students can find themselves and determine who they are, and what type of person they want to become. This remains true for African American students and the participants of this study. However, many of the participants described experiences where they were challenged about who they were, remained firm in who they were, or were able to be themselves. While these experiences only represent some of those described, they highlight the importance of developing a positive sense of belonging and feeling welcomed in a campus community.

Clark was aware of how some of his White peers viewed African Americans and made it clear that he was unwilling to change who he was to fit in with them. An example

Clark gave was in regards to how his White peers used pop culture and the media to engage in conversations with African American students. While describing his peers' actions Clark stated, "They watch the basketball. They keep up with all LeBron James does. They want to dress like him. They get all the shoes. They know about all the rappers and stuff like that" (Clark, personal communication, July 1, 2019).

Despite them emulating what they believed to be Black culture, in an attempt to fit in with Clark, Clark had very little interest in engaging with them because they never attempted to get to know him and his interest. As Clark described he was comfortable being who he was, whereas his peers wanted him to be something he wasn't. Although these experiences were challenging for Clark, he remained true to what it was that made him who he was which at times provided him a positive sense of belonging.

Though Clark faced challenges due to his White peers trying to emulate Black culture, Honey had experiences where she needed her Black friends to confirm certain things about herself or culture. Honey described a time where she and her White friends were discussing the difference in religious ceremonies for Black churches and White churches. Honey stated, that during this conversation, one of her White friends got upset and accused her of making fun of Christianity. According to Honey, despite explaining that the Black religious practices she was describing were those of her own Christian churches, she could not get her White friend to believe she was not making fun of the religion. After some time, Honey said she contacted one of her Black friends for reassurance that what she had described was realistic to the experiences she had at church. Honey explained that, that experience was not the first time she had to utilize her Black friends to reassure something she had described or discussed in regards to being African American.

David described how he struggled at times to be his true self at Citytown University, due to the amount of pressure he faced by being one of the only students of color in his major. David explained that when he arrived at Citytown University, he was aware of how his race could provide him opportunities to stand out in his field. However, in describing his first few semesters at Citytown University, David said “I never felt like I could cut loose, cut loose. I was just like on a leash sometimes, bro. It was frustrating.” (David, personal communication, July 3, 2019). This experience referred to how David was not able to engage and socialize with his friends [Black], because he feared that he would be judged for not being himself. For David, it was not until he realized the importance of spending time with people who understood his experiences that he began to embrace who he was and how these experiences could help him succeed academically (David, personal communication, July 3, 2019).

Fatima faced challenges much like David and Clark. Her experiences required her to hold her ground and be willing to speak up for what she believed in as an African American student. As one of few African American females in the academic school, Fatima discussed an experience where she had been denied entry to a primarily White student organization. Fatima described that during the interview process when asked what she could bring to the organization she said, “I am a part of these different organizations in the Office of Equity and Inclusion (pseudonym). I can do that. So, I can bring connections to that to those organizations” (Fatima, personal communication, July 5, 2019). Fatima believes she was denied entry due to her desires to increase diversity and partner with those diverse student organizations.

Fatima explained that although the organization had little signs of inclusivity, she felt adding diversity would improve the organization and cause more diverse students to apply for it. However, since her desires for diversity and inclusion were not accepted, Fatima stated she worked with her Black classmates to create an organization that supports and provides networking for African American students in her academic school. This commitment to her race and identity not only allowed Fatima to create a more inclusive environment but it also gave her a sense of belonging in her academic space.

Whereas the aforementioned experiences highlight challenges and hurdles participants faced in being true to themselves, both Honey and Thurgood had experiences where they felt empowered to be themselves. These experiences which were the result of interactions with faculty and staff, gave these participants a voice to name their own realities, while supporting who they were and who they wanted to be as African American students.

For example, Honey describes a time in which a professor supported her writing a paper on a controversial topic, significant to the African American community. He/she approved of her writing a historical analysis on the use of the N-word over time. Honey described the professor's reaction as very supportive and explained it was the first time any professor had ever allowed her to voice her opinion the way she wanted too. For Honey, having her professor embrace her critical perspective of the dominant culture made her feel supported and validated.

While describing his experiences Thurgood said, "My skin color has determined a path for me upon coming to this university" (Thurgood, personal communication, July 7, 2019). Thurgood stated that he loves being Black and that during his time at Citytown

University, he feels he has been proudly able to do so and embrace who he is. He explained that the few times he has had Black professors were moments where he felt most comfortable and proud, because he felt like he had enhanced his community of African Americans on campus. For both these students, inclusive environments and faculty contributed to their comfort and willingness to be true to who they were as African Americans students.

Finding and Utilizing Your People

Participants described how having people who they could relate to available on campus helped them acclimate to Citytown University and provided them opportunities to affirm who they were as African American students. While the participants have had varying experiences, it was made very clear how important a diverse student body is, in helping students overcome obstacles and feel welcomed. In addition to having peers whom they could relate too, several participants discussed the impact these positive peer relationships have had on their experience as African American students.

David described the importance of having African American friends and peers, as he explained how many of his positive experiences on campus have resulted from having “good guys” who look like him to talk too. He discussed how older students served as guides or mentors for him, from the moment he arrived on campus and would provide support to him whenever he was struggling.

For David, having these African American peer mentors was so important, that as some of them faced their own struggles and left the university, he began to negatively be affected by their departures. David stated, “The amount of people that I saw who were black just leave....that really fucked with my head because freshman year, I had all these

friends, and then slowly but surely people would have to leave” (David, personal communication, July 3, 2019). David described how having all these friends who abruptly departed made him question the university’s commitment to supporting African American students.

Additionally, he explained how these sudden departures made him question if he would be next or if Citytown University was the place for him. These sentiments by David showcased how often many of the participants relied on their African American peers in their times of need.

When asked about his experience at Citytown University, David described it as a college where there were a lot of people who did not look anything like himself. He explained how the lack of African American students was something he knew would make it hard for him to acclimate and find his place at the university. Furthermore, Honey discussed how early on in her time at Citytown University she had to work hard to find people who looked like her.

For both Thurgood and Honey, engaging with their African American peers not only made them feel more welcomed but helped them overcome obstacles they had faced. Thurgood explained how engaging with students of color in the Office of Equity and Inclusion (pseudonym) or in his classrooms had provided him opportunities to feel like himself. For Thurgood, this engagement allowed him to be his authentic self without fear of being judged or criticized.

The Office of Equity and Inclusion was described as a space that allowed Thurgood to discuss sensitive topics such as politics, race, and police brutality, while being supported and uplifted by people who could relate to his experiences. Thurgood described how

engaging with African American students in his classrooms eliminated feelings of isolation and made him feel as if there was greater access to African American students across campus.

Honey explained that when seeking out people like her, she found that getting involved in minority student organizations was a helpful tool that provided access to people like her. She describes how despite her immediate friend group being mostly White, all of her African American friends have been introduced to her through the organizations in which she has joined. She discussed how although she had to make an effort to get involved in those organizations, she felt once she became a member the opportunities to engage with people who shared her experiences became easier.

The benefits of developing relationships within these minority student organizations was highlighted when she described how two of her friends provided support for her while she was struggling academically. For Honey having these friends whom she met through her involvement on campus, allowed her to receive the support she needed and empowered her to continue to work hard to achieve her goals.

Clark described how the first time he spent time with people he felt safe around made him feel as if he belonged at Citytown University. In addition to sharing similar experiences as Clark, he shared these friends did not have ulterior motives for spending time with him. These authentic and positive peer connections made him feel like he was a valued member of the campus community. These experiences and gatherings were simple things that Clark referred to as them, “Just having fun as friends” nothing structured or no other intentions.

Malcolm shared similar experiences as it related to the academic spaces on campus. He believed that within the academic schools' relationships should be developed between African American students. These relationships he explained could help students become more aware of the resources available for them. An example of a resource he described was an organization in his academic school that is for minority students and provides them with opportunities to connect and mentor each other.

In addition, the organization also provides students an opportunity to collaborate and work together toward a common goal or outcome. Through these collaborations and positive relationships, Clark and Malcolm were able to highlight moments when they felt a greater sense of belonging at Citytown University.

Culturally Relevant Resources and Intentional Support

Understanding the experiences of African American students is important in developing their sense of belonging. It is equally important to understand the support they need to overcome obstacles and barriers that may negatively impact their sense of belonging at PWIs. Participants shared that the support and resources needed to improve their experiences at Citytown University should be culturally relevant and intentional. According to the data, culturally relevant resources and intentional support is outreach that is meant to address the specific concerns/needs of the student in question.

Culturally Relevant Resources

Thurgood stated, "It's going to take more than a fried chicken Wednesday to make black people happy here" (Thurgood, personal communication, July 7, 2019). This comment made by Thurgood, highlighted how some of the efforts at Citytown University were less about celebrating students' culture and more about feeling a required diversity

program. Many of the participants found that the Office of Equity and Inclusion provided them more authentic and relevant experiences. Clark discussed that when he first began visiting the Office of Equity and Inclusion, he began to feel a sense of belonging at Citytown University. He explained, that the office provided a comfortable environment that allowed him to relax and engage with other people of color, specifically students and staff.

Much like Clark, both Fatima and Thurgood shared how the Office of Equity and Inclusion provided a safe space for them as African American students, while also providing them access to the support and resources they needed. Additionally, they discussed how some personnel within the Office of Residence Life provided a similar supportive and inclusive environment. While these offices were marked “safe spaces” by the participants, it was evident through hearing their stories that they needed more than safe spaces to feel welcomed and supported at Citytown University.

For Malcolm, he discussed the need for more offices willing to listen and support African American students in the way the Office of Equity and Inclusion has. He explained how offices geared toward providing academic and mental health support would be ideal for him and several of his African American peers. According to Malcolm, discussing his concerns with someone who actually understands his experiences, would make him feel as if he was being heard and that he would be taken care of.

Similarly, Clark described how he would like to see Citytown University strive to raise more awareness and address health and mental health concerns for African American students. He stated that one-way Citytown University could accomplish this is by, “Hiring staff that would help with coping, and better advisers for minority students, who understand

where they're coming from” (Clark, personal communication, July 1, 2019). David shared that if administrators and staff communicated better with African American students and student leaders, they would better understand their needs and concerns. The experiences shared by these participants display how being unheard or silenced by staff and administrators has contributed to the lack of support needed for them to succeed and feel welcomed at Citytown University.

In addition to support services, Honey and Thurgood explained how programs and events that celebrated Black culture were key in making them feel as if the university welcomed them and were interested in their experiences. While describing when she felt the most welcomed at Citytown University, Honey said, “When I go to the Divine Nine (Black Greek Life) events, I feel a little bit closer to the culture. . . I love going to the step shows and stuff like that” (Honey, personal communication, July 2, 2019). These events provided Honey access to Black culture in a place she did not expect to find it, due to the lack of diversity within the student body.

Thurgood on the other hand shared how attending these cultural events made it easier for him to connect with his African American peers, while providing him access to faculty, staff, or administrators of color who he could connect with (Thurgood, personal communication, July 7, 2019). These connections were key to Thurgood, as he knew that these individuals would understand his experiences as an African American student at Citytown University. More importantly for both participants, they were able to celebrate who they were without having to justify or defend their identities and interest.

Fatima and Honey described how participating in the Minority Student Orientation (MSO) program at Citytown University provided them with opportunities early on to feel

welcomed. Honey explained that despite having a mostly White friend group, she met all of her Black friends through the MSO program, friends whom have supported her during some of her most difficult times. However, Fatima described how participating in the MSO program allowed her to engage with older students who shared their experiences and provided insight to what being at Citytown University was like.

This mentorship experience allowed Fatima to get firsthand information from other African American students, that would help her navigate some of the challenges she faced during her time at Citytown University (Fatima, personal communication, July 5, 2019). Malcolm and Thurgood discussed similar experiences with the MSO program, especially as it related to creating a feeling of inclusiveness. Both participants, highlighted how the program was intentional in providing them support and access to individuals on-campus that were committed to their success and growth.

Intentional Support

"What does the university value in order to bring or make African Americans comfortable?" was a question asked by several participants in the study. This question refers to the lack of concern students felt administrators had for Black students. Participants felt burdened by administrators who did not make an effort to recognize or acknowledge their presence. Honey's comment speaks to this sentiment, "I think I needed someone to kind of personally notice that I was struggling and to . . . come up to me and explain to me like, "Hey, you should really go see this person" (Honey, personal communication, July 2, 2019).

Malcolm clearly expressed the need to have intentional contact from administrators in order to fill a void. He shared how he rarely is approached by administrators unless they

are requesting help from him (or his peers), and how it would be nice if administrators showed interest in addressing African American student needs (Malcolm, personal communication, July 6, 2019). Based on this statement, and others, it appears many participants also shared the idea that administrators could not relate to their needs and thus, did and could not support them.

Fatima described how on several occasions, White students or faculty have unsuccessfully tried to relate to her. She explained that numerous times her White peers have made comments about wanting hair like hers or a specific hairstyle that she is wearing, although it is not realistic for them. Another example she provided was when a faculty member discussed visiting an area close to where she was from, despite that area not being within driving distance to her home. In both these incidents, Fatima stated she felt weird and uncomfortable with them trying so hard to relate to her. Additionally, she shared how these encounters made her question the authenticity and true intentions of their actions and comments.

Contrary to Fatima's experiences, Malcolm described an experience in an academic setting where a Black professor intentionally engaged him in class. Malcolm describe how having that professor provided him a level of comfort he had never experienced in any of his classes that were taught by White professors. This experience not only allowed him to develop a sense of belonging in this class, but contributed to his desire to perform well academically. The differing outcomes in Fatima and Malcolm's experiences with faculty relating to them, highlights how important it is for the participants to feel understood and heard.

For Clark, Honey, and David they each shared experiences where they sought out help from faculty or staff and did not feel as if the support they received was adequate or appropriate. Honey shared an experience when she requested academic support for her chemistry class and the professor was unwilling to give her the support she was requesting. Honey described, how the professor “forgot” about their first scheduled appointment and showed up late to their second scheduled appointment. Once finally meeting with the professor, Honey explained how the professor seemed disinterested by “holding her head in her hand” or questioning why she needed help. This experience caused Honey to resist seeking help from other professors or tutors because she did not believe they would provide her the support she needed. Honey needed unbiased support and critical feedback from her professor but instead she was given resistance and belittled.

David and Clark’s experiences while different from Honey’s, resulted in them having similar hesitations seeking out further support from faculty, staff, and administration at Citytown University. David discussed how in a meeting with his academic chair and mentor, he felt he was not being listened too and that the individual was not hearing his concerns or needs. David described how he was seeking to change his major, but instead of assisting him the individual gave him reasons to stick with his current major although he was unhappy. David explained that his academic chair seemed to have a plan for his future as a Black scientist, ones that did not align with David’s plans for himself. For example, David changing his major would result in the academic program lacking African American student representation.

Almost verbatim, Clark shared how his academic advisor refused to provide him information on other majors within his academic school or related to his interest. Clark

explained that even after he found information on his own, his advisor would say they weren't sure it was a "good fit" or tell him they were not aware of the major he was interested in. In both of these situations, the participants needed advice and someone to talk to openly about important decisions. Although their "support persons" were available, they were not provided the support needed.

Whereas the other participants shared specific experiences in which they were not supported or provided resources, Thurgood described how he preferred to be supported by faculty, staff, and administrators. Thurgood explained that he never sought out support or guidance from anyone other than the few individuals he knew would provide him the support he needed. These individuals were described by Thurgood as people who were willing to help him put together an action plan, on how to correct the issue(s) so that these issues don't happen over and over again (Thurgood, personal communication, July 7, 2019).

According to Thurgood, these trusting relationships were developed over time as a result of positive interactions and engagement. When asked how he developed this trust in those individuals he stated that they were intentional in getting to know him and understand his experiences and how he preferred being supported. Additionally, he shared that these select individuals had similar relationships with his peers because they showed a commitment to improving faculty-student relationships. Thurgood's positive experiences being supported, provided insight into how faculty, staff, and administrators could provide intentional support and resources to the participants.

Peer Support

Despite all the types of support suggested and described by the participants, the importance of peer support was the most impactful for many of the participants. Participants discussed how their African American peers served as mentors and role models, while providing realistic and relevant support for them in their times of need. Clark described how when he was having a difficult time receiving help from his advisor it was a few of his close friends who helped him remain positive to overcome obstacles. He explained that his friends helped him become more involved on-campus and introduced him to the Office of Equity and Inclusion. Whether it was planning events for a student organization he was involved in or hanging out together and talking, Clark believed his friends were the primary reason why he was enjoying his time at Citytown University.

While discussing the importance of their friends, Malcolm and Fatima shared how they valued African American peer support in their academic settings. Both described how they were one of few African Americans students in their major. However, being able to engage with those other students helped them feel a greater sense of belonging.

Malcolm described how he and his peers would help each other with homework and studying for exams. This commitment to their academics, created a culture where Malcolm and his peers could hold one another accountable for their academic success. On the other hand, Fatima, explained how she noticed a lack of engagement amongst the African American students in her major. Subsequently she created an organization to provide structure to support their engagement. She shared that forming these positive and trusting relationships have provided her the opportunity to discuss difficult experiences with her friends. Furthermore, she explained that having these relationships allows her to

share them as resources with incoming students within the Office of Equity and Inclusion or the Minority Student Orientation program.

David described his relationships with his peers in a manner that highlighted how important they were to his academic success, social interest, and overall sense of belonging at Citytown University. Academically, David discussed how he would often find himself caught up studying and missing out on time with friends. Since his academics were important to him, David stated that he created a student organization that would allow him time to study, while also time with his friends. Despite this organization being specific to his major, David explained how his friends would attend the study sessions and utilize the scheduled time to prepare for exams and complete homework.

According to David, creating a culture where he and his friends could socialize and study contributed to him feeling welcomed and valued at Citytown University. However, despite providing a positive environment for he and his peers to study, David opened up about how several of his closest friends still withdrew or were dismissed from the university.

David stated he was, “pissed off” at how many of his African American friends had left the university because of grades, finances, or other undisclosed reasons. He explained that in many situations his friends seemed to be thriving academically and socially, so he could not comprehend why they were leaving (David, personal communication, July 3, 2019).

As a self-proclaimed student leader, David described how seeing so many of his close friends leave effected his mental health and wellbeing. David said that losing so many people his freshmen and sophomore years caused him to question if he was next or if

Citytown University was the place for him. While describing this difficult time he said, “I didn't talk to my friends. I didn't talk to people like mentors or people I knew I should've been talking to. I was just kind of on my own” (David personal communication, July 3, 2019).

However, it was a close friend of color that provided support and positive feedback to David that helped him overcome this difficult time. He shared that in addition to talking to this close friend, he also took advantage of opportunities to get involved in things happening across campus. As evident in David and the other participant's stories, support from African American peers was key in helping them overcome obstacles that could negatively impact their sense of belonging.

Critical Reflection

Although Citytown University states it has an increasing minority student population, the stories and experiences of the six African American participants in this study explained the university still had work to do, in regards to supporting them. Areas of improvement encompassed in the participants' stories included but were not limited to financial aid, academic advising, and counseling services. Participants also explained how race and racial microaggressions have contributed to many of them having racialized experiences which negatively impacted their sense of belonging.

Furthermore, participants shared that Citytown University lacked the culturally relevant resources and faculty, staff, and administrators who were committed to provide intentional and authentic support (Malcolm, personal communication, July 6, 2019; Thurgood, personal communication, July 7, 2019). Therefore, using a critical race theory lens to analyze the experiences of these participants will allow the university to create more

inclusive campus environments that engender a positive sense of belonging. This critical race approach will allow administrators to enhance policies, procedures, and student engagement in a manner that supports the success of all students.

5 FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research study was to examine how race impacts the sense of belonging of African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Understanding the African American student experience at PWIs will allow faculty, staff, and administrators to create more inclusive and welcoming campus climates. Given the history of racism and race issues in higher education (Patton, 2016), creating more inclusive environments will address racial campus climates and systemic views that affect African American student sense of belonging (McClain & Perry; Strayhorn, 2012). Additionally, by confronting these racial campus climates, PWIs can increase diversity awareness and provide diverse sources of support to increase African American student sense of belonging and academic success (Baber, 2012; Linley, 2018).

This research study was designed with the intent to hear the silenced voices of African American students, while giving them an opportunity to name their realities and share stories about their experience at a PWI. Using a critical race theory framework and social justice approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six African American undergraduate students enrolled full-time at Citytown University (pseudonym). Research questions used to guide this study were as follows:

1. How does race affect the experiences of African American students at PWIs?
2. How have the racialized experiences of African American students at PWIs contributed to their sense of belonging?
3. What type of support is needed to help develop sense of belonging for African American students at PWIs?

Results of the study highlighted three major themes: 1. Isolation and Alienation, 2. Affirming Identity and Purpose, and 3. Intentional Support and Culturally Relevant resources. Chapter five reviews the major findings of this study, as well as their implications for theory, research and practice.

Overview of Major Findings

The following section will discuss and review the major findings of this study as it relates to the research questions.

The Political Impact of Race on African American Experiences at PWIs

How does race effect the experiences of African American students at PWIs? Given the lack of intentional cultural inclusion on campus, participants in this study discussed feeling isolated, alone or lost during their time at Citytown University. While all participants discussed sharing these feelings, their experiences occurred in various locations such as academic spaces, residence halls, and other public spaces across campus. Participants, similarly to Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, and Sriken (2014) stated, these encounters contributed to greater feelings of discrimination, alienation, and invalidation among African American students at predominantly White institutions. Additionally, the lack of diversity at Citytown University caused participants to question where they fit in and led to varying overall experiences for them all.

According to the African American students in this study, the experiences of African American students at PWIs are continuously in flux due to a lack of diversity and the relationships they have developed with individuals across campus. For many of the participants, it took time to find “their people”, a term used by participants to describe other African American students on campus. Participants in this study also explained how the

lack of diversity at Citytown University made African American students stick out in their classrooms, an experience Baber (2012) explained could cause them to feel isolated within their campus community.

In addition, participants shared that the onliness they experienced in their classrooms led to unwanted attention from their professors and peers. These experiences resulted in the African American students in this study describing their overall experiences as rough, weird, or a journey. Even participants who stated they have had positive or good experiences described how being an African American student at a PWI is challenging and lonely at times. Harper (2013) supported this notion when he explained how PWIs have historically provided challenges to the assimilation and matriculation of African American students.

While sharing the challenges they faced as African American students at Citytown University, participants described there being an obvious disconnect between White and Black students. Additionally, participants stated they often felt like outsiders amongst their White peers. Participants in this study explained that despite forming friendships with their White peers early on, that over time those friendships would dissolve and result in a divide between the two groups. Although this divide was not a result of any specific incidents, many of the participants in this study stated that the more they engaged with their White peers, the more they realized how different they were.

For example, several of the participants described how their White peers showed more interest in emulating their culture than understanding the African American participants as individuals. Participants in this study explained how attempting to emulate Black culture, often resulted in their White peers making racist remarks or comments,

defined by Sue et al. (2007) as racial microaggressions. These encounters even if unintentional, resulted in the participants feeling uncomfortable, misunderstood, and contributed to them having different experiences on campus than their White peers (Harper, 2012; Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012; Van Dyke & Tester, 2014).

Experiencing microaggressions was described by each participant in a different way, but yielded the same negative results which were discomfort, feeling unwelcomed, and confusion. Participants in this research study explained that despite having an increasing minority population, the campus climate at Citytown University was not always the most inclusive. Similarly, to Franklin (2016), African American participants in this study described how they often had to justify their identity or purpose at Citytown University. For many of the participants, this meant combatting stereotypes or confronting microaggressions from their peers or faculty, staff, and administrators.

Combatting stereotypes for the participants often put additional pressure on them to succeed as many of them were one of few African American students in their classrooms. This added pressure was to eliminate negative thoughts regarding African American students' academic abilities and ability to learn. In regards to confronting racial microaggressions, African American participants in this study explained how they at times felt they could not be their authentic self on campus. This was the direct result of not wanting to be mislabeled or exposed by their White peers for "acting black" or not taking college seriously. These experiences caused participants to question who they truly were. Overall for the participants, being an African American was a part of their identity they were proud of, however encountering these racist behaviors caused them at times to be afraid or unwilling to embrace their identity (Johnston-Guerrero, 2016).

Racialized Experiences and Sense of Belonging

How have the racialized experiences of African American students at PWIs contributed to their sense of belonging? While the African American students in this study explained their sense of belonging was impacted in several ways, their encounters with stereotypes, racist behavior, and racial microaggressions had the greatest impact. For many of the participants in this study, attending a predominantly White institution (PWI) presented challenges to their sense of belonging even before arriving on campus (Strayhorn, 2012). Participants explained how they expected to be outsiders and struggle to find “their people.” What participants did not expect was the subtle and unsubtle racism they would face across campus. These microaggressions were perpetuated by students, as well as faculty, staff, and administrators.

Additionally, participants in this study explained African American students at Citytown University faced microaggressions in various settings across campus. In most cases these racialized experiences contributed to the African American participants feeling unwelcomed or disconnected from the campus community. The participants in this study shared that in addition to feeling disconnected from the campus, they often felt excluded from social activities because they did not fit the “requirements” for entry. These “requirements” led to the African American students feeling as if some of their White peers were intentionally creating separation between themselves and the African American participants.

Furthermore, in many instances discrimination and stereotypes were used to determine how the participants did not meet these requirements. As one participant explained, it is hard for African American students to speak up against this type of racism,

when many of the offenders do not understand your viewpoint because they don't even know your world exists. For participants in this study, they were encountering these and other racial microaggressions, which overtime had taken a toll and negatively affected their sense of belonging (Griffith, Hurd, & Hussain, 2017; Harwood et al., 2012).

As a result of their racialized experiences, the African American participants in this study began to question if choosing Citytown University was the best choice for them. Strayhorn (2012) described having a sense of belonging as one feeling as if they have a rightful place in a community or space. The African American participants in this study shared that due to the lack of diversity on campus, they felt isolated and singled out. Those feelings combined with their racialized experiences led to many of the participants becoming discouraged and withdrawing from their friend group and classes.

More importantly, several of the participants discussed how experiencing racial microaggressions in public spaces across campus made them feel as if these behaviors were accepted and the norm at Citytown University. Specifically, participants reflected on instances where racial slurs were written in public spaces or times when their White peers used racist language in their presence or toward them. These racist environments served as barriers for the African American participants in developing of a positive sense of belonging (Hunn, 2014). This environment lead to the participants wishing they had chosen to attend another university, or having to continuously question if their campus community is a safe space for them.

Despite describing its campus as inclusive and open to diversity, the African American participants in this study described feeling excluded and unwelcomed at Citytown University. Lack of diversity amongst their peer groups and racialized

experiences were some of the factors highlighted by the participants. Some participants had developed a sense of belonging on campus. However encountering racial microaggressions and the abrupt departure of their African American peers had negatively impacted their sense of belonging. Additionally, these experiences caused the participants to feel alienated at Citytown University because there were so few people who could relate to their experiences.

Furthermore, events and activities that excluded the African American participants resulted in them feeling unwanted and unvalued within the campus community. These feelings resulted in the participants feeling out of place and led their desire to leave Citytown University and continue their academic career elsewhere (McClain & Perry, 2017; Schreiner, 2013). However, despite their lack of sense of belonging and desire to leave, several participants explained that over time you find “your people” or you just get use to the way things are and deal with it.

Intentional Support and Sense of Belonging

What type of support is needed to help develop sense of belonging for African American students at PWIs? In regards to developing a positive sense of belonging at Citytown University, the needs and wants of the participants were discussed in several ways. The primary needs and wants discussed were related to having safe spaces, being holistically supported, and being heard. For participants, the university’s Office of Equity and Inclusion (pseudonym) was described as a place where students could find themselves and develop positive relationships with their African American peers.

Additionally, the Office of Equity and Inclusion allowed students to become involved in organizations and activities that supported their culture, wellbeing, and

academic growth at Citytown University. This culturally relevant engagement allowed students to feel a part of the campus community, which positively affected their sense of belonging and academic success (Baker, 2013). Overwhelmingly participants shared that had it not been for the Office of Equity and Inclusion they would be lost and lack opportunities to celebrate their culture and identity.

While explaining the importance of the Office of Equity and Inclusion and its programs, participants shared that the office's Minority Student Orientation program (pseudonym) was one of its most impactful initiatives. For participants, their involvement in the Minority Student Orientation program was described as one of the first times they felt a sense of belonging at Citytown University. Involvement in this program occurred in two ways: as an incoming freshman, or as an upper-class student leader/ambassador. Regardless of how the African American participants were involved in the program, they shared that it provided them with continuous opportunities to be engaged with Black students.

In addition, participants explained that the Minority Student Orientation program allowed them to develop positive relationships with their African American peers. These relationships were crucial as they allowed students to serve as mentors and peer counselors for one another. In many instances, the participants explained that to cope and overcome their racialized experiences, they would discuss their experiences with friends who could relate to those experiences (Griffith et al., 2017).

The Office of Equity and Inclusion's efforts demonstrated success, supporting the African American participants in this study. Participants much like Patton (2016) shared that there needed to be more offices like the Office of Equity and Inclusion supporting

African American students on campus. Areas of support highlighted were as follows: academic support, financial literacy, and mental health awareness and counseling. Participants explained that these resources were available on campus, however they did not feel as if the outreach and resources provided were geared toward their needs. Specifically, participants discussed how counseling at Citytown University was not something that was talked about enough in regards to African American students. Similarly, to Franklin (2016) participants stated that the university needed to promote counseling and provide information that dispels the stigmas associated with counseling within the African American community.

Additionally, participants shared that diversity and inclusion efforts at Citytown University should encompass the entire campus community and not be limited to the offices such as Residence Life, Student Involvement, and Equity and Inclusion. Participants explained that to create more inclusive environments on campus, faculty, staff, and administrators should be intentional in their outreach to African American students. This outreach would build trusting relationships between the African American participants and faculty, staff, and administrators. These trusting relationships would organically create safe spaces for the participants, while providing more holistic and authentic support to engender a positive sense of belonging and academic success (Luedke, 2017).

Although the experiences of African American participants were negatively impacted by race and racial microaggression, providing intentional and culturally relevant support was key in helping them overcome these experiences. Additionally, participants explained how increasing diversity across campus and creating more inclusive campus

environments would make them feel more welcomed on campus. Most importantly, the African American participants in this study wanted to be seen and heard at Citytown University.

Participants described being seen at Citytown University as, being intentionally engaged by faculty, staff, administrators, and students. Whereas being heard at Citytown University was described as having a platform to authentically discuss and have their experiences validated. By being intentional, participants explained that Citytown University would show them that they cared, while also making them feel as if it is where they belong.

Implications and Recommendations

Given the findings of this study, the following discussion highlights implications for theory, research and practice. While this study focused on the experiences of six African American students at Citytown University, the results of this study seek to improve the support and sense of belonging for African American students at PWIs. Thus, the following section(s) will discuss recommendations for theory, research, and practice for educational leaders for social justice.

Implications for Theory

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) extended critical race theory (CRT) to education and discussed how it could be used to challenge racial inequalities in education. Additionally, Ladson-Billings (1998) explained that to appropriately apply CRT as an educational framework, educational leaders must be willing to expose racism and race issues in education. In regards to higher education, researchers (Patton, Haynes, Harris, & Ivery, 2014; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) examined how CRT can be used to

understand the experiences of Black students at PWIs. Patton (2016) explained how CRT can be utilized to transform higher education as it relates to social justice.

Given the experiences of the participants in this study at Citytown University, recommendations will be made to expand CRT. These recommendations will explain how CRT can be used to not only expose the racialized experiences of African American students at PWIs, but to also help students overcome these experiences.

Participants in this study explained how being an African American student at a PWI made them feel isolated and alone within the campus community. Encountering stereotypes, racist behavior, and racial microaggressions from their White peers, faculty, staff, and administrators contributed to these feelings.

While describing these experiences and the impact they had on their sense of belonging, participants shared what Citytown University and its faculty, staff, and administrators could do to address its racial campus climate and make African American students feel more welcomed. These suggestions included but were not limited to the following: increasing diversity and diversity awareness, providing intentional academic and mental health counseling, and improving culturally relevant resources available to students. Using CRT, I was able to capture these experiences through storytelling and understand how they could represent the African American student experience at Citytown University. These stories provided insight and recommendations that aligned closely with Franklin's (2016) research around racial battle fatigue.

Franklin (2016) explained racial battle fatigue as the physical, mental, behavioral and emotional responses African Americans have in response to encountering racial microaggressions, stereotypes, and race-related stressors (p.46-47). Additionally, he

described how attending PWIs increases the likelihood of these responses as many African American students at PWIs are victim to the aforementioned racialized experiences.

In order to address racial battle fatigue at PWI's, Franklin (2016) suggested universities should, provide healthy living and learning environments, implement culturally relevant and supportive programs, and be intentional in providing coping strategies and outreach for students. These suggestions, much like those of the participants in this study, will allow students to feel more welcomed and supported at PWIs. Furthermore, these suggestions overtime could eliminate toxicity from campus climates, improve African American student experiences, and ensure PWIs are working proactively to make their campus communities more inclusive.

Understanding CRT for the purpose of this study, allows educational leaders to examine and understand the racialized experiences of African American students in educational contexts, particularly in PWIs (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Racial battle fatigue helps educational leaders understand how these racialized experiences affect students and what universities can do to address these experiences. Both frameworks individually can be utilized to expose and address race, racism, and microaggressions in education.

Moving forward, practitioners and researchers should interweave the key components of racial battle fatigue into CRT. Interweaving these two race conscious frameworks will allow practitioners and researchers to understand how the lived experiences of African American students at PWIs are impacting their health and wellbeing, sense of belonging, and academic success. Holistically understanding these experiences and their effects, will allow educational leaders to proactively address racial

campus climates and find solutions to the challenges impacting African American students at PWIs.

Implications for Research: The Racial Contradictions of “Unintended”

Whiteness

Current research regarding African American student experiences at PWIs has focused on encounters with race, racism, and racial microaggressions (Baber, 2012; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Johnston-Guerro, 2016). While this research is important in addressing African American success and sense of belonging, it often focuses on the lack of diversity or diversity awareness at PWIs (Linley, 2018; McClain & Perry, 2017; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). While discussing the experiences of the African American participants in this study, participants shared that a lack of self-awareness or understanding of culture, caused many of their White peers to be unintentionally offensive. Participants explained that whenever they confronted their White peers about their “racist behavior” they often explained that they did not understand or realize their actions, words, or behaviors were offensive. Based off these stories and experiences, it is recommended that future research examines the effects “*unintended*” *whiteness* has on the African American student experience at PWIs.

The term unintended whiteness utilizes Leonardo’s (2002) research which summarized whiteness as a historically and socially developed construct that is based on oppression, power, and falsehood. Additionally, Nichols (2010) stated, “whiteness should be looked at as not just simply a category of identity but as a position of power formed and protected through colonialism, slavery, segregation, and oppression” (p. 4). Therefore,

unintended whiteness will refer to the lack of self-awareness White people have in relation to perpetuating stereotypes and using racial microaggressions toward African Americans.

Unintended whiteness, much like racial microaggressions, argues not all individuals and systems that oppress African Americans are intentionally doing so. However, where unintended whiteness and racial microaggressions differ is, unintended whiteness examines how being White in itself can have negative effects on African Americans. As stated by Leonardo (2002) and Nichols (2010), whiteness often depicts a position of power which throughout history has been used to oppress, exploit, and imprison people of color.

Additionally, this lack of self-awareness results in Whites trying to relate to the experiences of African Americans which causes African Americans to feel as if their experiences are not being validated. Lastly, Whites being unaware of how their history of colonization, oppression, and segregation effects African Americans leads to actions and behaviors that are oppressive and isolating.

Given this conceptual framework of unintended whiteness, researchers must seek to understand why White educational leaders and practitioners continue to assert a lack of self-awareness in regard to supporting African American students. More importantly, the question should be asked, “At what point does ‘unintentional’ become ‘intentional’?” This question would examine whether the use of microaggression and/or stereotyping is a result of a lack of self-awareness or a lack of interest in learning more about how their behavior(s) influence African American student experiences. For example, if White educational leaders and practitioners continuously attribute their perpetuation of microaggressions and

stereotyping to “not knowing better”, at what point does them not knowing better become a tactic used to use and excuse racist language and behavior?

As Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) explained, a key theme of critical race theory is the centrality of race and racism in society, which asserts that racism is embedded in American life and culture. Therefore, those committed to supporting African American students should have a vested interest in educating themselves and becoming aware of how their whiteness can be perceived by students. Thus, while one could argue that perpetuating microaggressions and stereotypes can be a result of unintended whiteness, unintended whiteness in itself isn't so unintentional. Much like racial microaggressions, African American students' consistent encounters with “unintended whiteness” can result in isolation, feeling unwelcomed, and having to affirm one's identity.

Therefore, in understanding the experiences of African American students at PWIs and unintended whiteness, future research should challenge whether or not the use of microaggressions and racist language is as innocent as previously researched. Additionally, similar to Franklin (2016), research should examine how universities can increase diversity and diversity awareness, while helping White faculty, staff, and administrators become more culturally competent and self-aware. Doing so could transform higher education and promote a positive sense of belonging for African American students (Patton et al., 2014). Additionally, this research will also educate White faculty, staff, administrators, and students on how to maintain open and inclusive campus environments (Griffith et al., 2017; Hunn, 2014).

Implications for Practice

As universities, specifically PWIs, seek to become more diverse they must continue to improve the resources and support for African American students (Harwood et al., 2012; Van Dyke & Tester, 2014). Additionally, they must remember that it was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that many of their college campuses admitted African American or other minority students (Harper, 2013). As a result of this study, the following recommendations for higher education emerged: 1. Develop authentic positive relationships with African American students, 2. Provide intentional and culturally relevant support, and 3. Increase diversity among faculty, staff, administration, and students.

Participants in this research study shared that more communication and engagement with faculty, staff, and administrators would make them feel more valued at Citytown University. Additionally, participants shared that engaging with faculty, staff, and administrators would contribute to them developing positive and trusting relationships with these individuals. Linley (2018) and Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) support this notion and explained that this engagement allows faculty, staff, and administrators to better understand and support African American students.

Many of the participants shared that when selecting their college of choice, they were hesitant in selecting Citytown University. Developing these trusting and positive relationships would allow faculty, staff, and administrators to address these hesitations while suggesting changes to eliminate them for future prospective students. Furthermore, these positive relationships provide faculty, staff, and administrators access to hear the stories and experiences of the African American students on their campuses. This firsthand insight could influence changes in policies and procedures, as well as provide African

American students with a more supportive and inclusive campus environment (Luedke, 2017).

In regards to creating a more inclusive and supportive campus environment at Citytown University, participants in this study suggested the university be more intentional in providing culturally relevant support to students of color. Participants shared that they were aware of resources and supports available to students at Citytown University, however many of them felt those resources could not address their needs.

Resources and supports highlighted as a need were academic support, mental health counseling, and access to safe spaces. In describing the type of support they desired, many of the participants referred to the university's Office of Equity and Inclusion. This office was described as a safe place for students to go and get access to what they may need. However, much like Patton (2016) participants shared these efforts needed to be university wide.

Given their experiences at Citytown University as African American students, the participants explained only receiving intentional support by the Office of Equity and Inclusion which made them feel as if their needs were not important. Additionally, participants highlighted how the Office of Equity and Inclusion could not offer all the resources they needed and often had to refer students to other offices. Despite being referred to offices more geared towards their needs, many of the participants did not feel as though the individuals in those offices could relate or understand their experiences.

At Citytown University approximately 315 (5.2%) of its undergraduate student population identifies as African American (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Given this lack of diversity amongst the student population, participants discussed the need for a

more diverse student population. Additionally, participants described how the lack of diversity among faculty, staff, and administrators makes it difficult for them to confide in people who can relate to their experiences on campus.

Participants explained that having a more diverse student body would provide opportunities for mentorship among African American students. As described by Harper (2013), positive same-race peer relationships and mentorship allows African American students to develop a more positive sense of belonging. Most of the participants in this study shared stories or experiences in which their African American peers provide them guidance or support during their times of need.

In terms of diversity among faculty, staff, and administrators, participants described how their encounters with Black faculty, staff, and administrators gave them hope. One participant explained how having a Black professor was the first time he felt a sense of belonging in his academic spaces. Other participants shared similar sentiments in regards to why they did not feel a sense of belonging in many of their academic spaces. As Baker (2013) and Harper (2013) explained, engagement from faculty, staff, and administrators of color at PWIs help the students feel accepted and welcome on those campuses. At Citytown University, more diverse faculty, staff, and administrators would provide the participants access to more safe spaces.

To frame the collected data and findings, Table 2 below provides a visual representation of the racialized experiences had by participants. For higher education practitioners, the table below can be used to understand the systems of racial exclusion within the system of higher education. Furthermore, higher education practitioners will be

able to utilize this table as a tool to support African American students and enhance inclusiveness across the campus community.

Table 2. Themes Identified in the Data

Systems of Racial Exclusion at PWIs		
Areas of Concern	Racialized Experiences in Relation to Themes	Possible Solutions, Support, and Resources
Academic Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Onlyness in Classrooms II. Othering in Classroom Discussions III. Lack of Academic Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Improve Diversity and Inclusion within each Academic School II. Culturally Inclusive Curriculum and Discussions, Engendered by Safe Classroom Environments III. Intentional Marketing of Campus Resources
Student Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Racialized Social Events II. Otherness in Residence Halls III. Microaggressions in Public Spaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Unconscious Bias Training for Student Organization Leaders and University Staff II. Diversity and Inclusion Programming Initiatives on Campus III. Safe Spaces for Students of Color to Gather
Peer to Peer Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Stereotyping II. Microaggressions in the Form of Jokes III. Racism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Promote Cultural Inclusion Across Campus Community II. Empower Students of Color to Share Their Experiences III. Culturally Appropriate Mental Health Services

As highlighted in the above table, the three greatest areas of concern in regards to racial exclusion at PWIs are; academic affairs, student life, and peer to peer engagement. These areas were discussed by participants as the most common places or environments in which they were exposed to microaggressions, stereotyping, and isolation. Additionally, African American students identified these areas as spaces where they expected or sought support to address issues or concerns. As a higher education practitioner, understanding African American students’ sense of belonging in these settings is key to enhancing the African American student experience at PWIs.

For example, as listed in the column labeled “Racialized Experiences in Relation to Themes”, each area of racial exclusion affected the African American student experience in different ways. While these experiences were not unique to these areas, they were common amongst participants and negatively impacted sense of belonging. Thus, as practitioners work with African American students, they must provide these students with opportunities to share their experiences in a manner that is non-judgmental. By listening to the stories and experiences of African American students, practitioners will be able better understand how these racialized encounters manifested within each student. Furthermore, understanding these students’ experiences will provide opportunities for educational leaders and practitioners to advocate for more inclusive campus environments. In addition, these understandings garner support needed to effectively enhance sense of belonging.

In regards to student support and resources, the table above outlines possible solutions to address the racialized experiences of African American students at PWIs. Specifically, the table provides suggestions to address the “racialized experiences” of African American students at PWIs, within the aforementioned areas of concern. While these resources and solutions emerged in the data, it is important to understand that supporting African American students is not limited just to what is listed above. Higher education practitioners must be intentional in understand and addressing African American student concerns, while also ensuring the resources provided are culturally relevant.

Lastly and most importantly, the table above can be used to identify, understand, and address the racialized experiences of African American students at PWIs. However, addressing the racialized experiences of African American students at PWIs should not be the responsibility of one single person but the responsibility of the institution as a whole.

Conclusion

In this critical race theory study, the experiences of six African American undergraduate students were examined to determine their sense of belonging or lack thereof at Citytown University. This study found that the African American students at Citytown University encountered stereotypes and racial microaggressions in their residence halls, academic settings, and across campus. Given their racialized experiences and lack of support with these race-related and racist behaviors and incidents, the participants overall lacked a sense of belonging at Citytown University. Despite being aware of resources and supports across campus, many of the participants believed those resources and supports could not effectively address their needs. Participants shared that support provided should be intentional and culturally relevant, while helping them overcome their experiences.

Therefore, it is concluded that PWIs should work to understand African American student experiences and provide intentional and relevant support to address those experiences. Furthermore, this study highlighted the importance of faculty, staff, and administrators engaging and developing positive trusting relationships with African American students. This study contributes to the field of education, specifically higher education by reinforcing that race, racism, and racial microaggressions contribute to African American students having college experiences that differ from those of their White peers.

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APPENDIX A

African American Student Sense of Belonging Research Study Recruitment Email

Good Afternoon,

My name is Anthony Kane and I am a doctoral student at Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit. I am contacting you, to invite you to participate in a study to discuss your experience(s) as an African American student at your university. This study, will seek to understand your experiences in regards to race and issues of race within your campus community. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the effects race has on the experiences and sense of feeling welcomed for African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Results from this study will be used to make recommendations to improve the resources and support services available to African American students.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact Mrs. Amber Satterwhite at satterwhitea@duq.edu to complete the pre-interview questionnaire, which will collect general demographic information regarding you as a student.

Once selected to participate in this study, you will receive an email from me to schedule a 45- to 60-minute, one on one interview. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed with your permission. Prior to the interview, you will select a pseudonym which will replace your name and maintain your confidentiality.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration of participating.

Anthony Kane
Doctoral Student
Educational Leadership, School of Education
Duquesne University

African American Student Sense of Belonging Research Study Invitation Email

Good Afternoon,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study to learn more about how race effects the experiences and sense of feeling welcomed for African American students at predominantly White institutions. If you are still interested in participating in this study, respond to this email confirming your participation and 3 days/times you will be available for the interview (evening and weekend times are preferred).

Please note, your participation in this study will be kept confidential. Physical research data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer that I own. Although this data will be published and presented in meetings and/or at conferences, your name and identifying information will not be revealed.

Prior to our schedule interview you will be asked to complete a consent form. This signed form will give the researcher (Anthony Kane) permission to use the information obtained for the purpose of the study. You may withdraw your consent and participation at any time. There are no personal benefits or consequences for participating or declining to participate in this research study. However, your participation benefits this study by: 1) helping university administrators better understand the experiences of African American students and 2) assisting in improving the resources and support services provided to African American students at PWIs.

Thanks in advance for your participation!

Anthony Kane
Doctoral Student in Educational Leadership
Duquesne University

APPENDIX B

African American Student Sense of Belonging Research Study Consent Form

SOURCE OF SUPPORT:

This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Educational Leadership degree in the School of Education at Duquesne University.

STUDY OVERVIEW:

This research study will utilize critical race theory (CRT) to identify how race affects the sense of belonging of African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Additionally, this research study will seek to understand how the racialized experiences of African American students have contributed to their sense of belonging or lack thereof. This research study will suggest and support the implementation and improvement of policies and procedures that effect the experiences of African American students at PWIs. Furthermore, the results of this research study will assist faculty, staff, and administrators at the research site in providing more systemic and efficient support to African American students, and minority students overall.

There are no personal benefits or consequences for participating or declining to participate in this research study. However, participation in this study by the anticipated six African American students will directly inform practice, policies, and programs at the research site. Additionally, your participation benefits this study by: 1) helping university administrators better understand the experiences of African American students and 2) assisting in improving the resources and support services provided to African American students at PWIs.

PURPOSE:

You are being asked to participate in a research project that is investigating how race affects the sense of belonging of African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). This research study will first seek to understand the racialized experiences of African American students at PWIs, then to understand how those experiences have affected their sense of belonging. Understanding participants sense of belonging or lack thereof, the principal investigator will seek to understand the types of support that have been beneficial, and the types of supports these students may need/desire to achieve academic success at a PWI.

In order to qualify for participation, you must:

- Completed all college course work at the research site (Transfer students are excluded)
- Self-identify as African American or Black
- Have sophomore or junior class status (according to number of credits earned)

PARTICIPANT PROCEDURES:

If you provide your consent to participate, you will be asked to complete a pre-interview questionnaire. This questionnaire will be utilized to determine all participants meet the eligibility criteria for this research study. Criteria for participation is listed above. Please note, questionnaire completion is only required prior to be selected to participate in this research study.

Once six participants meeting the study criteria are chosen, the principal investigator will contact these participants and request they schedule a time for a 45-60-minute interview. For the purpose of this study, participants will be interviewed one time. Prior to completing any/all interviews participants will complete a consent form and release of information form.

The interviews for this study will be audio recorded and transcribed with your permission. Interviews will take place in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion or in the Central Office of Residence Life depending on participants' comfortability with each location. Participants may withdraw from participation during any step of this study.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study, but no greater than those encountered in everyday life. Participation in this study reaps no benefits other than those aforementioned, which are: 1) helping university administrators better understand the experiences of African American students and 2) assisting in improving the resources and support services provided to African American students at PWIs.

COMPENSATION:

There will be no compensation for participating in this study. Additionally, there is no cost for you to participate in this research project.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your participation in this study, and any identifiable personal information you provide, will be kept confidential to every extent possible, and will be destroyed within a year after the data collection is completed. In regards to the pre-interview questionnaire, your name will appear as is, but will be changed once you select a pseudonym for your interview. Thus, your name will never appear on any written documents from the interview including researcher notes. All written and electronic forms and study materials will be kept secure in a locked filing cabinet.

All audio recordings from the interviews will be kept secured on a password protected computer, which will be secured by the principal investigator at all times. Identifying information for all participants will be removed from all audio recording prior transcription and during data analysis. Any publications or presentations about this research will only

use data that is combined together with all subjects; therefore, no one will be able to determine how you responded.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:

You are under no obligation to start or continue this study. You can withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence by emailing the principal investigator and stating, “I no longer wish to participate in this study for reasons I choose not to discuss.” If data collection has already occurred, all data related to your interview will be destroyed immediately. There are no risks or consequences associated with withdrawing from this study.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

A summary of the results of this study will be provided to you at no cost. You may request this summary by contacting the researchers and requesting it. The information provided to you will not be your individual responses, but rather a summary of what was discovered during the research study as a whole. You may review your individual interview transcripts prior to data analysis. To do so, you must notify the principal investigator via email when he contacts you stating your transcribed interview is available. Participants will have 72hrs to notify to request access to their transcriptions before data analysis will begin.

FUTURE USE OF DATA:

Any information collected that can identify you will have the identifiers removed and be kept for use in future related studies, and/or provided to other researchers. Data from this research study may be used for presentations and/or individual journal articles related to the research topic and questions.

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 Anthony Kane at Kanea2@duq.edu. If I have any questions regarding my rights and protections as a subject in this study, I can contact Dr. David Delmonico, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at 412.396.1886 or at irb@duq.edu.

Participant Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

APPENDIX C

African American Student Sense of Belonging Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Please complete the questionnaire below and return it to Mrs. Amber Satterwhite for consideration into this research study regarding the African American experience at your university.

1. What is your class status? Circle one
Freshmen Sophomore Junior Senior or Above
2. Are you a transfer student?
Yes or No
3. Were you admitted to the university through the Spiritan Program?
Yes or No
4. Did you participate in the university's pre-orientation program for minority students?
Yes or No
5. What is your major? _____
6. Are you a member or have you ever been a member of any organization(s) through the Office of Diversity and Inclusion?
Yes or No
7. If you answered yes to #6, which organization(s)? _____
8. What race/ethnicity do you identify with? _____
9. What city and state do you reside in? _____

APPENDIX D

African American Student Sense of Belonging Guiding Questions

General Questions Regarding Experience

1. Tell me about why you decided to attend Citytown University?

Potentials Probing Question: What contributed to your reason to choose Citytown? What contributed to your hesitations?

2. In broad terms, how would you describe your overall experiences as a student at Citytown?
3. In what ways has race affected your experiences at Citytown?

Potentials Probing Question: Describe in detail any specific incidents (in the classroom, LLCs, public space on campus) in which you believe your race played a key role.

Questions Regarding Sense of Belonging/Feeling Welcomed

4. Tell me about any experiences at Citytown that made you feel welcomed as an African American student.
5. Tell me about any experiences at Citytown that made you feel not welcomed as an African American student?

Potentials Probing Question: Are there specific experiences that stick out more than others do? If so, what are they?

6. Describe a time where you shared information regarding your experience at Citytown with a faculty, staff, or administrators and you felt they did not validate your experiences.

Potentials Probing Question: Why do you think they did not validate your experiences?

If no, why did you not feel comfortable sharing this information with anyone?

7. Given your experiences at Citytown, what support or resources do you think African American students need to feel more welcomed on campus?

Questions Regarding Academic Success

8. How have your experience (s) on campus impacted to or affected your academic success/achievement? (Grades, Attendance, Desire to Stay/Transfer)

Question Regarding Faculty, Staff, and Administrator Support

9. How would you like to see faculty, staff, and administrators work to improve the African American student experience at Citytown?

Closing Question

10. If you could change anything about your experience(s) at Citytown, what would it be and why?

APPENDIX E

African American Student Sense of Belonging Research Study

RELEASE OF INFORMATION

This form authorizes the *Principal Investigator* to release audio recordings, notes of observations and interviews for the purpose of transcription.

I am committed to keeping your information as confidential as possible. Any identifying information has already been removed from the mentioned sources. Please note, the transcriptionists are prohibited from sharing confidential information or using confidential information from the study for personal intent. The transcriptionists are also required to destroy or otherwise discard information in a secure manner.

By signing the document below, you grant us permission to release audio recordings, notes of observations and interviews for the purpose of transcription.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____