BLACK FACES IN WHITE SPACES: EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT ON THE EXPERIENCE OF BLACK STUDENTS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

by

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(Under the Direction of Merrily S. Dunn)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of social support on the experiences of Black students at predominantly white institutions. Utilizing a narrative inquiry methodology, the study addresses how Black students define social support along with the structures that facilitate or hinder feelings of mattering and belonging for Black students at predominantly white institutions. A review of the literature includes a look at the pathway to college, a picture of the Black experiences in college, an examination of marginality and mattering, along with the capacity of social support to buttress individuals against stressors common to all students and those unique to Black students in the post-secondary environment. Data for this qualitative study was collected at a large, public, predominantly white, research institution in the southeastern United States. The primary source of data was in-person participant interviews with Black undergraduate students. Six proverbial and thematic findings emerged. Utilizing Critical Race Theory and a transformative theoretical paradigm, this study reveals the multidimensional presence of racism and links research findings to actions intended to mitigate disparities. The resulting discussion of findings offer implications for practice and

present a profound counter narrative to dominant culture positions, deficit orientations, and conventional wisdom about Black students in higher education.

INDEX WORDS: Black students, Social support, Mattering, Belonging, Narrative, Predominantly White Institutions, Higher Education, Narrative Inquiry, Qualitative Research

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DEDICATION

For M and X,

May your web of support embrace. May your brilliance liberate.

Love always,

Mommy

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When words are insufficient the heart speaks. My heart is full and has much to communicate in love, gratitude, and appreciation of the incredible people who have made this journey possible for me. Love is a verb. It is what you do. In their profound support of me, each of these people have acted in love. I thank God for their presence in my life.

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To my mother and father, Hawa M. Minor and Cornelius E. Minor, I., both of you have sacrificed more than I could ever comprehend for me to have every possible opportunity to thrive. This has included upending your lives to come to a foreign land uncertain of if or when you might return, going without so that I might have, and advocating endlessly and fiercely in

white space after white space for my beauty, intelligence, and talent to be recognized, valued, and celebrated. Parenthood has shown me just how hard everything you did must have been. And yet you made it look easy – never letting others see the extent of your worry, fear, and unending string of tough decisions inherent in raising Black children in these United States. You have showered me with love and been the foundation of my confidence and strength. I have worked hard to make you proud. I will continue doing so all the days of my life.

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moments where we were falling apart too – the wind knocked out of us by racism and oppression in praxis. Yet and still we persisted in excellence. We thrived. We won awards. We laughed. We stood together. Zest defined our work, not catastrophe. Thank you for showing me that flowers can grow in concrete. Thank you for gifting me the joy that results when colleagues become friends and friends become family.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As social beings, humans are not meant to live in isolation. Belongingness is a basic human motivation and all people share a need to belong (Maslow, 1962). Connection with others is important not only as a buffering agent against the stress of negative life events or challenges, but the very absence of social support or changes in support over time are stressors in themselves that negatively impacts psychological wellbeing (Sarason, Sarason, & North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1985). The American collegiate landscape has diversified greatly over time. Nevertheless, predominantly white institutional environments were not designed with people of color in mind. The powerful effects of racism, segregation, and discrimination in U.S. education are apparent in disparities in enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of historically marginalized groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Additionally, the remnants of exclusionary practices continue to impact institutional climates for racial/ethnic diversity on campuses (Valencia, Garcia, Flores, & Juarez, 2004). Historical events have not only shaped institutional structures, they have also shaped attitudes in a way that impacts both the access and experience of underrepresented students in higher education. Gaining access to these environments only by coercive legal mandate, Black students were added to these environments with little or no thought to accommodating their unique needs or supporting their sense of belonging and connection. Longstanding legacies of exclusion shaped institutional climates, practices, traditions, and policies in ways that made colleges and universities hostile environments for those who did not identify as White, Christian, economically privileged men (Kupo, 2011).

Nevertheless, Black students have persisted, finding their voices and each other in the process of weaving informal webs of social support and advocating for formalized institutionally supported ones as well. The presence of multicultural student programs services, Greek letter organizations, peer mentoring structures, and casual social gatherings serve as prime examples of the multiple and diverse ways that Black students have found each other in predominantly white institutional settings.

Statement of the Problem

When laws required desegregation in American higher education, Black students were simply added to the environment with no substantial changes made to account for their unique needs. Any needs different from those of their white counterparts were deemed deficiencies and cited as exemplars for why they were unfit for the environment. As such, the originally designed exclusionary, anti-Black, male dominated higher education environments have and continue to exact harm on Black psyches, bodies, and spirits. Ad-hoc reform is not what is needed. A new blueprint for American higher education must be created - not to reverse the roles of oppression from one group to another, but to truly include all students in a vision for the educational context where personal well-being, transformative learning, and intellectual curiosity can thrive. This study will serve an important role in helping to create that revolutionary blueprint, providing necessary information from Black students on the structures that facilitate and hinder feelings of mattering and belonging and the overall impact of social support on their experiences.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of social support on the experiences of Black students at predominantly white institutions. Lacking a sense of belonging can undermine academic performance (Strayhorn, 2012). As institutions seek to support the

retention, progression, and graduation of all students, there is a critical need for continued empirical study regarding the experiences of Black students in postsecondary education. This qualitative study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing insight into the experiences of Black students in higher education from their perspective and in their own words. Hilton, Wood, and Lewis (2012) recommended the use of institutional and rich qualitative data to more fully understand the experience of Black students on college campuses. This study represents one component of such an exploration. In concert with other important data, it can serve to guide the work of faculty, student affairs practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and everyone in the collegiate landscape in seeking to support the success of Black students and ameliorate institutional and systemic barriers that thwart achievement. Examining individual narratives are not intended to suggest that individuals alone are exclusively responsible for the outcomes experienced, particularly when significant systemic barriers exist. However, this study is intended to better understand the diverse experiences of Black collegians.

The study will address the following research questions:

I. How do Black students define social support?

II. How does social support impact the college experience of Black students at predominantly white institutions?

III. What do student stories reveal about structures that facilitate feelings of mattering and belonging for Black students at predominantly white institutions?

IV. What do student stories reveal about structures that hinder feelings of mattering and belonging for Black students at predominantly white institutions?

Theoretical Guideposts

Even in the seemingly protective and progressive havens of academia, issues of race continue to be deeply problematic. I enter this investigation intending to ask questions focused on participants' experiences of race. Consistent with that aim, Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a theoretical framework used to expose the salience of race in students' perceptions of their experiences (Henfield, Woo, & Washington, 2013). CRT scholars view race as both social construction and powerful reality deeply woven into the fabric of American life (Delgado, 2000; Comeaux, 2010). CRT begins with the premise that racism is normal and ubiquitous in American society; so much so, that racism is virtually invisible unless exposed in its multiple variations (Delgado, 2000). Racism is not limited to individual acts, it is systemic, structural, multilevel, and accomplished via wide sweeping mechanisms that are particularly visible in the routine rule of law, policy, and practice (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Critical Race Theory is particularly useful in this study because of its heavy use of storytelling as a means to analyze and evaluate the myths and assumptions that inform the conventional wisdom that is often accepted as fact and serves to disenfranchise people of color (Delgado, 2000).

As a theoretical guidepost for this work, the inclusion of a critical race framework is meaningful particularly when one considers the experience of Black students at predominantly White institutions. Naming one's reality is a powerful and cathartic exercise impacting both the oppressor and oppressed – making the invisible visible through the exploration of inequities and the ways in which seemingly race neutral contexts contribute to oppressive educational experiences for Black students (Delgado, 1989; Lopez, Chavez, Erwin, & Binder, 2018). Use of this approach will help accomplish three things; describe the connection between Black students' experiences with social support in the collegiate setting, expose the racialized structure of

interactions between students and institutions, as well as situate that understanding within a context that seeks to empower individuals to be liberated from the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender (Creswell, 2012). In sharing their racial memories – those memories that serve to connect one to their heritage, to events, and to people – students challenge majoritarian stories grounded in stereotypes and misrepresentations of stigmatized communities (Dillard, 2009; Lopez et al., 2018). This approach is committed to addressing the historical amnesia[1] that shrouds discussions on social inequities and resulting 'achievement gaps' in pursuit of a more thorough analysis.

Master Narratives and Counterstories

Master narrative are the social mythologies that mute, erase, and neutralize features of racial struggle in ways that reinforce ideologies of White supremacy (King & Swartz, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). A prevailing master narrative of higher education portrays that desegregation eliminated racism and situates any remnants of racism as purely accidental. This master narrative makes heros of historical firsts and deceased activists while criminalizing and labeling as disruptive contemporary ones. In contrast to master narratives, counterstories are narratives that convey struggles – often omitted or overlooked by the dominant culture and those in positions of power – that intentionally and directly draw on the experiential knowledge of those silenced in education research (Howard, 2008). In the critical race framework, counterstories challenge master narratives and strengthen traditions of resistance (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counterstories are intended to highlight the ways in which social relationships, institutions, and artifacts are deeply and perpetually impacted by

[1] Historical amnesia refers to the problematic act of disconnecting contemporary reality from the forces that created them in the historical past. American majoritarian culture actively seeks to forget or minimize the harsh realities and corresponding impact of hundreds of years of chattel slavery on Black people today.

racial and other forms of marginalization (Woodson, 2017). The purpose of counterstories in legal studies is replicated in the field of education, where counterstories illuminate how conventional wisdom and contemporary rhetoric do not reflect or meet the needs of Black students (Woodson, 2017).

Explanation of Key Terminology

For the purpose of this study, Black students are defined as those that self-identity as Black, Caribbean, African, Afro-Latino, or otherwise connected to the African Diaspora through their lineage and lived experience of anti-Black oppression in the global context. Using the term Black as opposed to Black strengthens this study as a more inclusive selection that serves to connect rather than disconnect the shared experiences of Black people in multiple contexts.

A sense of mattering and belonging is conceptualized for the purpose of this study as a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior (Strayhorn, 2012). In the collegiate setting, sense of belonging refers to a students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling of connectedness, the experience of mattering, being cared about, respected, accepted, valued, and important to the community.

Subjectivity Statement

While academic research is traditionally viewed as an impersonal activity, researcher reflexivity has become an increasingly important theme in contemporary scholarship (Johnson & Parry, 2015; Etherington, 2004). Independent thoughts, feelings, environment, culture, as well as social and personal history cannot be disembodied from the researcher and thus permeate all aspects of inquiry. Reflexivity refers to the ability of the researcher to acknowledge how their own fluid experiences inform the process and interpretation of inquiry (Etherington, 2004). "Reflexivity, characterized by an ongoing analysis of personal involvement, helps to make the

process open and transparent" (Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009, p. 45). Additionally, in deference to the theoretical orientation of this work, CRT establishes as an anchoring principle that all scholarship is political (Lopez et al., 2018.) CRT scholars embrace this reality and seek to achieve transparency with regard to positionality and a description of their endeavors as scholarship that both studies society and aims to change existing structures of racial domination in pursuit of justice (Crenshaw, 1991).

I've always been interested in the impact of racism. My first major piece of scholarship was my 6th grade science fair project in which I looked at racism. I received honorable mention for that piece with the feedback that I should have had a more compelling visual display. I had a three panel poster board with the title of my paper. That was it. My 12 year old self didn't know how to visually represent racism and if I did, it would have undoubtedly been far too ugly for the sensibilities of the judging panel.

My relationship to college educated Black people is multifaceted. In my immediate family of origin and family of procreation, there are nine degrees among five adults. I, my mother, father, brother, and husband all engaged with American higher education. My own personal experience and close familial relationships have allowed me to witness (either first hand or through the African oral tradition) elements of their experiences within the context of higher education that have inspired, perplexed, and angered me.

My Father's Story

My father came to the United States for the love of learning. After completing his undergraduate degree at the University of Liberia in his home country of Liberia, he arrived in the United States seeking a graduate degree. Pursuing a Master of Divinity, he attended the Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia completing his studies in May of 1981.

Gammon is a historically Black theological school connected with the United Methodist Church. As a practicing United Methodist in Liberia, Gammon boasted an impressive alumni roster that included the Bishop of Liberia and had garner a reputation for their commitment to international education. Making the big move even more attractive, was its location in Atlanta which my father described as a capital for successful African Americans. Even still, living thousands of miles away from his new bride, large family, and extensive network of friends, he was challenged to establish a new support system in an unfamiliar land. This task was further complicated by cultural differences emphasizing individual ambition over collective success. Attending a primarily Black school, my father soon found that there would be division and jealously where he thought he would find comradery and community with other Black students. This was the case between the African students and Black Americans. It was my father's observation that African students were more readily accepted by white people than Black American students. This was evidenced by invitations to preach and participate in local church functions, financial assistance, homestay invitations during the holidays, legal aid, and other highly coveted invitations. Without judgement or an ounce of disdain, in recounting this my father casually added his perception that the graciousness that African students experienced by white people was not without the ulterior motive of the white person being able to tout a dual connection to a Black person that hailed from the far and mysterious dark continent. Often, white people with whom he became connected had personal ambitions of establishing international contacts to build mission campaigns and other plans of global scale. Accordingly, the role of social support in my father's experience primarily involved new relationships established within his new community and peers -- of which the International Student

Association became a powerful community and conduit both establishing and connecting him to others inside and out of that body.

The International Student Association primarily sought to support international students in coordinating and addressing immigration needs, doing so in collaboration with the school registrar and United States Immigration and Naturalization Services, an entity of the U.S. Department of Justice that from 1940 - 2003 that administered federal immigration law and policies. The body would meet approximately twice a year with the institutional message to students focusing largely on collecting the needed immigration paperwork and addressing the behavioral code of conduct and expectations. Notably, when the describing the organization and his involvement with it my father indicated that the ISA did not formally address adjustment or social support. Those aims would come to be informal collateral benefits without officially being addressed in the mission. My father came to serve as president of this organization for three years during his course of study. Far away from home, in a city of abundant opportunity for Black people, my father's ability to make meaningful connections with people in short periods of time and find a pathway, where one did not exist before, would be a marked theme of my childhood that I would come to mirror in my adult life. Navigating the landscape of life is a deeply valued skill.

My Mother's Story

Similar to my father's story, my mother came to the United States to pursue her graduate degree as well. Having earned her undergraduate degree from Cottington College, the leading liberal arts institution in Liberia, and worked for two years as a staff developer/trainer of government employees, my mother sought to continue her education with aspirations of returning home to serve. She studied Public Administration at the University of Pittsburgh. As

an international student, she was assigned an advisor with expertise in supporting the transition and success of international students. She recalls this staff member fondly as being instrumental in connecting her to other African and international students. Eager to connect with other African students upon her arrival, she recounts the tale of attending an African student gathering hosted by the institution. Expecting to find community and connection with other Black students, she was surprised instead to find several white South Africans. This at the height of apartheid was not what she had in mind for building community. As such, the institution's earnest effort in creating a pathway for social support in this particular way did not prove effective for her. Given the era, my mother's community was defined largely by racial lines. Black Africans and other international students from Nepal extended themselves in creating a small close knit community of support. Similar to a cohort model, their group moved together through the graduate program. They studied together, socialized together, and commiserated regarding their shared frustrations. One such frustration being that their degrees, credentials and experiences from their home countries were undervalued, undermined, and disrespected. So much so, that all international students were required to attend summer session before their fall start to take what amounted to remedial classes in their discipline in spite of the fact that they boasted more years of experience than their American counterparts. Nevertheless, my mother remained undeterred as she was committed to doing what was needed in the name of advancing her education. She recounts that without the support of the international advisor and this community of support, she would not have been successful in this pursuit.

My Brother's Story

My brother is the coolest person I know. He is also one of the most brilliant. Upon graduating from high school he had secured over a quarter of a million dollars in scholarships

from top notch institutions around the country. My entire family beamed with pride in his accomplishments and often shared the good news with others, only to be asked what sport he played. For so many people, the notion that a high achieving Black man could experience that type of academic success was an unfamiliar notion. Even more perplexing to most was the fact that he chose to attend a historically Black college. I attended with my family countless campus visits and tours. Equipped with all the information needed to make an informed decision, I distinctly remember the feeling of being a fly on a wall as my brother and parents evaluated the pros and cons of all of the offers and institutions. In those conversations so many years ago, the perceived presence or potential lack of social support was a distinct factor that was considered heavily and discussed thoroughly. The decision for him to attend Florida A&M University (FAMU) was in part because my parents felt that at FAMU, their firstborn, a Black male, would be well supported in his pursuit of excellence.

My Husband's Story

In a different, but also important way, the role of social support was a critical part of my husband's collegiate pathway. He delayed his dream of attending the University of Georgia in order to stay closer to home where his support of his ailing mother was needed. He attended the local community college and transferred upon completion. His mother passed away months after he transferred to the flagship institution. The loss of that relationship was significant. It left a void that can never be filled. The support he received from his peer group during that time was incredibly meaningful. Many of these relationships formed in childhood through Georgia 4-H, a youth development organization that is popular in rural communities. Leadership in 4-H connected him with other young people around the state and strong friendships were formed that have lasted a lifetime. One of these friends even helped pay tuition one semester and refused to

be paid back. Quite literally, he would not have made it without them. During college, this group of people along with new friends met through working in restaurants became an important support network. The old adage, "friends are the family you choose," certainly holds true.

My Story

My personal story with social support in higher education is marked by a bi-cultural dual consciousness. I came to the large predominantly white campus fully aware that it would be important for me to 'find my niche' in my mother's wise words. Motivated and committed to doing so, I sought out the multicultural services provider on the campus ready for that to serve as my home away for home as it was described during my visits. What I instead found was unorganized chaos. From that moment it because clear to me that my institution wasn't meaningfully committed to inclusion because how was it that in every other domain with institutional offices things ran smoothly and were polished, yet the service dedicated to students of color was permitted to be such a mess? Nevertheless, I maintained my involvement for my first year and then ventured out to find other ways to be involved and supported. In so doing, I found some truly committed mentors, faculty, and staff - most of whom were white. In maintaining those relationships I felt the need to present myself in a way palpable for their sensibilities. In short, I was respectable and fully engaged in respectability politics. The place where I could truly be myself - for good, for bad, for ugly, was with my close friends. I am nearly moved to tears as I write this because these women stood with me unwaveringly then and have continued to do so in the sixteen years since we graduated.

Along with my own experience, the relationships with my father, mother, brother, and husband have been important vantage points from which I have formed impressions and made meaning of the experience of Black people in higher education. The diversity of our experiences

– as men and women, African and American, international and domestic, graduate and undergraduate, attending predominantly white institutions and HBCUs – highlight for me the first frames of the many manifestations and experiences of being Black in the American higher education context.

Beyond my exposure due to personal and familial relationships, I was drawn to this research topic because of my training as a social worker and time as director of a multicultural office at a large selective university. As a social worker, social justice is a paramount and primary professional value cited both in our code of ethics and as a significantly embedded concept of educational focus in social work programs (National Association of Social Workers, 2018; Council on Social Work Education, 2015). I seek to contribute to the world in a way that allows for full and equal participation of all groups that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Consistent with the definition of social justice, this includes a vision of society that is equitable and where all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). When those conditions are met, everyone thrives. My day to day work with students is in support of that aim and my commitment to helping students accomplish their goals impacts my subjectivity. The current study provides an opportunity to pursue answers to questions that have emerged from my natural curiosity over the course of my lifetime. The sum total of my experiences, relationships, and world view is present with me in this endeavor.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of the literature includes a look at the pathway to college, a picture of the Black experiences in college, and the role of Multicultural Student Services and Programs for Black students. This is followed by an examination of marginality and mattering along with the capacity of social support to buttress individuals against stressors common in the post-secondary environment.

Black Students and the Pathway to College

To begin to understand the Black collegiate experience, one must first examine the pathway to college. Approximately eight million Black students participate in the U.S. educational system (Ricks, 2014). The impact of racism begins early in the student experience and continues all the way to college (Berlak & Moyenda, 2011). Even before stepping foot into a classroom, Black students face significant challenges. In 2013, the percentage of children under age 18 living in poverty based on the official poverty measure, was highest for Black children at 39 percent (Musu-Gillette, Robinson, McFarland, KewalRamani, Zhang, & Wilkinson-Flicker, 2016).

Academic and systemic barriers hindering advancement to the post-secondary environment are commonplace in literature examining the K-12 experience of Black students (Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Ricks, 2014). School discipline practices are an informative lens through which to view how racism and anti-Blackness impact educational outcomes. For Black boys and girls the disparities are starkly apparent with race and gender based stereotypes

functioning to criminalize Black youth and reinforce beliefs about perceived behavioral and intellectual deficiencies (George, 2015). In primary and secondary schools, teachers and counselors are more likely to impose negative expectations on Black males than upon their White counterparts. "Black males are also disproportionately disciplined, more apt to face expulsions, and suspended longer and more frequently than are White students" (Palmer et al., 2009, p. 431). In 2012, the percentage of Black male students who had ever been suspended from school (48.3 percent) was more than twice the percentage of Hispanic (22.6 percent), White (21.4 percent), and Asian/ Pacific Islander (11.2 percent) male students who had ever been suspended. Similarly, the percentage of Black female students who had ever been suspended (29.0 percent) was more than twice the percentage of Hispanic (11.8 percent), White (9.4 percent), and Asian/Pacific Islander (7.9 percent) female students who had ever been suspended (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016).

Overwhelmingly concentrated in special education, Black males are underrepresented in gifted education and Advanced Placement courses (Palmer et al., 2009). In 2012–13, the percentage of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for Black students was 15 percent, the second highest of all racial groups (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). For Black girls, the intersection of race and gender along with racism and sexism deeply impact their educational experiences (Ricks, 2014). The needs of Black girls are often overlooked, an oversight that has contributed to a lack of educational programming and policies that impact their educational experiences (Ricks, 2014). While the social and educational crisis of Black males has inspired programs such as *My Brother's Keeper* and *Black Male Initiatives* nationwide, no such response to the Black women and girls has ensued to address their unique needs in the educational and social context – rendering them invisible (Ricks, 2014). These

factors have a strong impact on the presence, or lack thereof, of Black students in the collegiate setting. The 2013 total college enrollment rate for Black 18- to 24-year-old students was 34 percent, 8 percentage points behind white counterparts (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Between 1990 and 2013, total fall undergraduate enrollment of Black students grew faster than that of other groups – a modest gain of 5 percentage points (from 10 to 15 percent) during this time period (Musu- Gillette et al., 2016).

Among students who started in four-year public institutions, Black students had a 45.9 percent six year completion rate, the lowest of all racial identities. Nationally, 62.4 percent of students complete a degree or certificate within six years (Shapiro, Dundar, Huie, Wakhungu, Yuan, Nathan, & Hwang, 2017). Public colleges and universities enroll the largest percentage of students at nearly 80 percent (Shapiro et al., 2017). Correspondingly, a high proportion of non-white students attend public institutions. Among undergraduate students in 2013, 70 percent of Black students attended public institutions (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). There is necessary pressure and focus specifically on this institutional type with regard to retention, graduation, and other outcomes for underrepresented students (Shapiro et al., 2017).

> Ethnic and racial disparities in education are apparent and consistent across nearly every marker of academic achievement and educational outcome, ranging from academic achievement in early elementary school, to behavioral referrals in middle school, to graduation rates in high school and universities (Quintana & Mahgoub, 2016, p. 95).

There is clear evidence that these pervasive and widespread disparities are impacted by differential treatment based on race, thus demonstrating the present and powerful effects of segregation, discrimination, and racism (Quintana & Mahgoub, 2016).

Black Students in American Higher Education

Black people have a long history of breaking down barriers in pursuit of educational attainment. Prior to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the vast majority of Black students could only attend historically Black colleges and universities (Newman, Mmeje, & Allen 2012). Since that time, Black students have gained access to predominantly White institutions (PWI) primarily by way of legal mandate. While the doors to the ivory tower were legally opened, equality of opportunities has been a more difficult barrier to overcome (Newman et al., 2012).

Being Invisible

In a post *Brown v. Board of Education* America, scholars from a variety of disciplines have written reports, studies, and books about Black people in college. The extent of this body of research over the past several decades can be characterized by the following outcomes or identified challenges: financial pressures; experiences of racism; academic difficulty; maladjustment; and collegiate dissatisfaction (Dancy, 2012). Practitioners have responded to these findings by placing substantial emphasis on the recruitment, retention, and graduation of Black students (Valbrun, 2010).

Recommendations for practice are often linked to campus climate, academic support, co-curricular opportunities, and cultural sensitivity of faculty and staff; all of which are important (Hilton, Wood, & Lewis, 2012). However, often overlooked is the important combination that institutional intentionality and social support play in student achievement. The voices of Black college men and women are often misunderstood or ignored (Davis, 1994; Cokley, 2015). The world, and by extension the campus community, is often eager to place them in the limiting boxes of stereotypes that marginalize their presence and have the potential to make the

educational environment hostile. This is particularly true when their experiences and interests vary from the limited constructed view that others have for them (Davis, 1994). Viewed by some as benign neglect and others as systemic oppression, being invisible has implications on the collegiate experience for Black students (Horne, 2007). Educational attainment is closely aligned with "feelings of support and congruence with institutional norms" (Dancy, 2012, p. 18). Black students at predominantly white institutions in particular may find themselves at odds with the institutional cultural, norms, or ways of being. Informal campus codes of behavior may be difficult to decipher without a trusted guide, making attempts to establish a sense of belonging difficult. Simultaneously wrestling with high family or community expectations and the low academic or campus expectations can result in feeling like an outsider in both worlds (Davis, 1994). Social isolation is an impediment to academic achievement for Black college students at PWIs (Hilton et al., 2012). All people want and need to feel a sense of connection and belonging (Maslow, 1962; Strayhorn, 2012). In the contemporary backdrop of #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName activism, the constructs of marginality and mattering speak to the fundamental need to be affirmed and acknowledged for one's very humanity in the face of oppression (Black Lives Matter, 2012; African American Policy Forum, Inc, 2016).

Marginality and Mattering

Mattering can be best understood by exploring its five components: attention, importance, dependence, ego-extension, and appreciation (Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering, 1989). Attention is the most foundational form of mattering denoting the sense that one can command interest or notice from others (Schlossberg, 1989). The paradox of attention for Black students at predominantly white institutions is that they are often noticed on the basis of their difference alone. This one dimensional degree of notice of their physical form fails to translate

to the type of attention that would have our Black students feel as though their presence would be missed if they were not part of our campus community. Importance conveys the belief that others care about what students think and do, the notion that others are concerned with your fate. The on campus experiences, goals, aspirations, and outcomes of Black collegians must be a priority for all, namely the students themselves, to see. Ego-extension "refers to the feeling that other people will be proud of our accomplishments or saddened by our failures. In other words, we feel that our success will be the success of another and our failure, the other's failure" (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 10). Historically Black colleges and universities convey this sentiment very well where predominantly white institutions often fall short (Harper, 2012). While success is attributed to the institution and embraced with much fanfare (featured on institution homepage, recruitment materials, and any manner of awards and accolades), failure is a burden relegated to the shoulders of the individual student alone. Reciprocal dependence makes individuals feel needed and as if their contributions directly impact others in a way that is unique and special. While necessary to establish a sense of mattering, in the extreme, dependence can be a load that distracts students from their academic goals. The domains of mattering provide a road map of institutional and individual behaviors that can minimize marginalization for Black students at predominantly white institutions.

It Takes a Village: Core Elements of a Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging is a term with multiple definitions throughout literature and research (Osterman, 2000; Anant, 1967; Tovar & Simon, 2010; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Nevertheless, a common characteristic shared by all is the agreement that it is a basic human impulse, a strong need shared by all people (Maslow, 1962). So strong, in fact, that it is sufficient to influence behavior (Strayhorn, 2012). In the text *College Students' Sense of*

Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students, Terrell Strayhorn offers a well-crafted definition that reflects the combined core elements of all definitions at once.

> In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). It's a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an affective response or behavior (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3).

The absence of belonging is alienation, isolation, not fitting in, being on the margins. All of which are linked to immediate and long-term indicators such as low self-esteem, depression, and general dissatisfaction with life (Strayhorn, 2012). As relational beings, sense of belonging has a reciprocal quality. When optimally experienced, each individual benefits from the group, and the group benefits from each member. Decreased or diminished interest and engagement can result for those who do not feel a sense of belonging. For students in educational settings, research confirms that students have difficulty sustaining academic commitment and engagement in environments where they do not feel personally valued and welcomed (Goodenow & Grady, 1993).

Sense of belonging has heightened significance within certain contexts, at key times, and with certain people. Black students in predominantly white institutional settings meet the contextual and situational conditions in each of those domains that render the need to feel a sense of belonging particularly important. Belonging needs are of greater importance in environments or situations that one deems different or unfamiliar, as well as in contexts where some

individuals are likely to feel marginalized, unsupported, or unwelcomed (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007). As such, belonging has key implications for Black students at predominantly white institutions.

Race without Racism or Racists

Racism in contemporary society is often viewed as extreme acts committed by a small group of bigoted, ignorant, or ill-intentioned people (Harper, 2012). Extending to scholarship as well, researchers routinely fail to explain that the impact of race on empirical findings are the outcome of racism (Bonilla-Silva & Baiocchi, 2001). Instead, sociological research fundamentally affirms white America's common sense and conventional wisdom on matters of race, a sensibility that asserts a declining significance of race in contemporary American life (Bonilla-Silvaa & Baiocchi, 2001). Paradoxically, there are numerous examples of how race continues to be a consistent determinant in educational, employment, health, and other outcomes (Harper, 2012). Making sense of this contradiction, Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi offer four ideological frames that illuminate how people interpret information concerning race relations and explain racial differences in outcomes: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism (2001). Abstract liberalism uses ideas associated with liberalism to explain racial matters. Examples may include concepts like equal opportunity, the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy aims and the importance of choice and individualism. Naturalization explains racial phenomena as the results of natural occurrences. Cultural racism emphasizes culturally based arguments such as "Latinos have too many babies" or "Blacks don't value education" to explain disparities between minorities and whites in society. Finally, minimization of racism is the premise that discrimination is no longer a key factor impacting the life chances or experiences of people of color (Bonilla-Silva & Baiocchi, 2001).

Racial disparities are routinely disaggregated in the study of higher education. Be it student achievement, graduation rates, retention, engagement, or other domains, researchers explain, discuss, and theorize about these differences, but rarely identify racism or racist institutional norms in the range of plausible explanations (Harper, 2012). Instead, authors presuppose that racial differences are due to a wide spectrum of other possible factors. Instead of naming racism, coded language and semantic substitutes are used to describe "the individual actions (both intentional and unconscious) that engender marginalization and inflict varying degrees of harm on minoritized persons; structures that determine and cyclically remanufacture racial inequity; and institutional norms that sustain White privilege and permit the ongoing subordination of minoritized persons" (Harper, 2012, p. 10). These terminology replacements for racism and racists include, but certainly are not limited to, "alientating," "hostile," "chilly," "exclusionary," "unsupportive," " antagonistic," and "unwelcoming" (Harper, 2012). Subsequently, the vast majority of recommendations that reveal such findings emphasize helping students of color cope instead of directly addressing racist institutional practices. Significant attention is placed on assisting the student rather than addressing the environmental toxins that led to the distress in the first place – treating the symptom, but not the underlying problem (Harper, 2012).

Institutionalized socialization norms that sustain white supremacy are alive and well at PWIs. Centering Black voices, naming racism, and prioritizing mattering and belongingness is imperative in the predominantly white educational environment. Multicultural student services and programs play an important role in helping to accomplish those aims.

The Role of Multicultural Student Services and Programs

The evolution of multicultural student services and programs in American higher education must be examined within the historical influence of segregation (Kupo, 2011). "Systems of power, privilege, and oppression have created a need for multicultural student services on college campuses as a remedy for communities that have historically been barred from receiving formal primary, secondary, and higher education" (Kupo, 2011, p. 14).

Each racial/ethnic identity has unique cultural histories within the context of American higher education. "The intersections of shared histories of oppression must be acknowledged at the outset of a conversation about the development of services meant to redress that oppressive history" (Kupo, 2011, p. 25). For American Indian students, forced assimilation through boarding schools requiring the abandonment of all cultural identity is part of that history. For other students of color, wholesale exclusion was the law of the land. Minoritized students have gained access to predominantly White institutions (PWI) by legal imperative. *Tape v. Hurley* (1885), *Mendez v. Westminster School District of Orange County* (1946), and the groundbreaking *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) reveal the fervor and fortitude demonstrated by countless scholars, attorneys, activists, and every-day families to force open to doors of the ivory tower to all.

Multicultural student programs and services (MSPS) were born of cultural centers emerging during the Black student movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s in which students held institutions accountable demanding that their experiences be reflected and supported in the cultural, academic, and social aspects of the university milieu (Ladson-Billings, 2012). The work of MSPS started from Black cultural centers and evolved to include other racial/ethnic populations with a mission "rooted in bringing voice, support, and celebration to

college students, particularly those from racially underrepresented populations" (Ladson-Billings, 2012, p. xiv). In this way, MSPS units sprang forth to support institutions ill prepared and/or resistant to serving expanded student populations. MSPS were initially created to respond to the needs of these new students and to support their existence within a structure that was not built with them in mind. On many campuses, the very presence of a designated MSPS is the result of hard-won advocacy by students, faculty, and staff often many years in the making. It is important for practitioners doing this work to know and understand the specific institutional history of the campus of which the MSPS is a part. Whether celebrated or taboo, these narratives are often a critical determinant of the unique structure and purpose of the MSPS. Each university story is different and so too is the MSPS. The resulting work represents and reflects the exponential complexity of institutional history, regional differences, organizational structure, and institution type.

In the contemporary collegiate setting, most MSPS offer proactive programming and services that seek to create welcoming environments marked by inclusive excellence where all students can thrive. This may include, but is not limited to: supporting cultural or identity based student organizations; providing diversity, inclusion, and social justice education for the campus community; advocating for the needs of multicultural students; supporting historically marginalized students in amplifying their voice and developing agency; honoring, celebrating, and validating the experiences and cultures of multicultural students in the larger campus environment; seeking to remove barriers that negatively impact the academic success, retention, graduation rates, and engagement of students of color; recruiting underrepresented students; engagement with and service to the local community; creating a safe community of care for underrepresented students; and connecting students to campus/community resources and support

services including tutoring, personal counseling, financial aid counseling, career development, and others. MSPS balance the need for honoring target only space and creating the conditions that allow students to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance within the larger campus environment as well. Both dimensions are dually important and necessary to student racial/ethnic identity development (Phinney, 1990).

MSPS play a critical role in campus diversity, inclusion, and social justice efforts, but cannot be effective without the active engagement, financial investment, and partnership of the full campus community including all levels of administration, faculty, and staff. Some MSPS organize services to address specific racial identities, while others seek to serve all under-represented and oppressed students collectively. Some have autonomous facilities and budgets that include programing, advising, and community space, whereas others are located under the auspices of other campus entities such as the campus union or housing and residence life. Due to the disconnected nature of institutional organizational structures that force students to parse their identities, MSPS function best when they partner often with offices and centers that serve the needs of women, students who identity as LGBTQIA, international students, first-generation students, and other marginalized social identities. An intersectional approach that makes it possible for students to acknowledge the unique and dynamic interplay between all of their social identities is essential. Strong MSPS are essential to the holistic engagement of students and thus, institutional recruitment, retention, and graduation rates. One way in which colleges and universities demonstrate their commitment to diversity, inclusion, and social justice through the level of support they provide to the MSPS (Kupo, 2011).

MSPS are as necessary today as they were when they were originally established. MSPS practitioners are valuable and important members of the higher educational enterprise exhibiting

the necessary cultural competency vital to their work and a host of skills, abilities, and competencies rendering them effective educators, advocates, fundraisers, event planners, advisors, counselors, activists, and fiscal stewards with and on behalf of students. Critical race theorists assert that racism is inherent in society and intricately woven into the fabric of American culture (Delgado, 2000). Higher education is not immune. MSPS support students and endeavor to move their institutions forward to new levels of inclusive excellence. Ladson-Billings (2012) summarizes,

> Although some progress has been made, literature over the past few decades has consistently confirmed that students of color face discrimination and feelings of isolation within predominantly White collegiate spaces, whether the classroom, the residence hall, or the student union. Their daily interactions with peers, faculty, and administrators in these diverse settings are often clear reminders that as students of color, their experiences, culture, and mere presence are often dismissed, unacknowledged, or treated as invisible. (p. xvii)

Often described as homes away from home, MSPS were and continue to be safe havens. They contribute to developing and sustaining campus environments that welcome all students. In so doing, MSPS provide support and guidance to multicultural students in a way that makes it possible for them to pursue their educational goals, make meaning of their experiences, develop agency, and thrive on campus, as members of the local community, and as empowered people of color in the world.

Social Support

College by its very nature can be stressful and all students are vulnerable to the negative implications of that stress on academics and health (Negga, Applewhite, & Livingston, 2007).

Research shows that perceived social support functions as a shield against stress (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012; Xueting, Hong, Bin, & Taisheng, 2013). Social support is defined by Nicholas (2009) as the existence or availability of people on whom one can rely; knowing that one is cared for, valued, and loved. Social support and active engagement in school help make learning, development, and persistence to degree completion possible (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Connections to supportive others such as school administrators, faculty, and peers help shape what Stanton-Salazar refers to as proacademic identities that support achievement (2011).

Social support is the existence or availability of people on whom one can rely; knowing that one is cared for, valued, and loved (Nicholas, 2009). Manifestations of social support include mutual exchange, not having to take the initiative, listening, caring and understanding, commiseration, unconditional love, perspective, and advice (Johnson, Batia, & Haun, 2008). For Black students, social support networks can be comprised of partners, family members, friends, faculty, colleagues, classmates, and others. As relational beings, social support is important for all people (Johnson et al., 2008). Strong social support is even more meaningful for Black students in predominantly white institutions due to the possibility of diminishing social ties caused by isolation (Johnson et al., 2008).

Social support serves a protective function between stress and the individual (Johnson et al., 2008; Anderson et al., 2012; Xueting et al., 2013). The buffering effect is thought to operate by contributing external resources where internal ones may be lacking (Johnson et al., 2008).

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Data for this qualitative study was collected at a large, public, predominantly white, research institution in the southeastern United States. The primary source of data was in-person participant interviews with Black undergraduate students. In seeking to understand the role of social support for Black students in predominantly white institutional contexts, this study explored the following research questions:

I. How do Black students define social support?

II. How does social support impact the college experience of Black students at predominantly white institutions?

III. What do student stories reveal about structures that facilitate feelings of mattering and belonging for Black students at predominantly white institutions?

IV. What do student stories reveal about structures that hinder feelings of mattering and belonging for Black students at predominantly white institutions?

This chapter describes the study's research methodology and discusses the following aspects of the overall inquiry: (a) researcher's paradigm; (b) research design; (c) methods of data generation, analysis, and representation; and (d) issues of quality in qualitative research.

Researcher's Paradigm

A researcher's theoretical framework is the anchor by which the work is attached (Merriam & Simpson, 1995; Merriam, 2009). Use of a paradigm creates a connection between the aim of a study and the methods used to achieve those aims (Houghton, Hunter, & Meskell,

2012). I have undergone an evolution in my identity as a scholar throughout this process. That evolution has been reflected in the paradigm that resonates most with my world view, practice, and scholarship. This process has most meaningfully impacted asserting my own voice as a Black intellectual and scholar. At the onset of this inquiry, and as was described in my prospectus, I believed myself to be positioned within a constructivist worldview – embracing the notion that knowledge is constructed by understanding through the process of lived experiences and reflecting on those experiences (Schwandt, 2007). The rich conversation of the prospectus defense challenged me to release notions of a static paradigm adoption and made it possible for me to acknowledge the movement that was happening, but that I had been reluctant to name. Firmly embracing a Critical Race Theory paradigm felt both liberating and an act of resistance. As one who was socialized to not openly (instead subtlety and subversively) disrupt the status quo, this represented a different stance in which I felt intensely vulnerable in the transparency of acknowledging racism as a quotidian component of American life – a stance that renders useless many of my own survival mechanisms that play into whiteness culture and sensibilities.

However, my evolution did not stop there. Standing firmly in a CRT framework made it possible for me to get to a place in which I was compelled to shift from highlighting the racism alone – which is ever present and so deeply embedded that an end to it is unlikely in my lifetime – to highlighting the voices of Black people. My paradigm is now both CRT and transformative in centering the experiences of marginalized communities in a way that includes the impact of power differentials that have led to marginalization, and links research findings to actions intended to mitigate disparities. It is insufficient to name the problem in the absence of dedicating the same intellectual labor to solving the problem. Research should strive to advance social justice by examining aspects of power and privilege (Mertens, 2009). A transformative

paradigm emphasizes the use of qualitative research to outline the complexity of experiences and to access and amplify marginalized voices. Unique knowledge is obtained through building relationships of genuine trust with participants – knowledge that would otherwise be inaccessible (Jackson, Hermosura, Vohra-Gupta, Castro, Mendez, Padilla, & Pukys, 2018).

Narrative Inquiry

Qualitative research focuses on understanding human action through interpretation (Kim, 2016). "Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them." (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). This study utilized narrative inquiry as the methodological design. Corrollary to the chosen methodological design, narratives—the stories themselves, were the product of data generated. "In everyday oral storytelling, a speaker connects events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story. Events perceived by the speaker as important are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience." (Riessman, 2009, p.2). Narratives are a form of knowledge that embody telling and knowing. As such, a narrator is one who knows and tells (Kim, 2016). This epistemological approach that people inherently know and can share that knowledge through the stories, resonates strongly with the researcher as a culturally congruent approach with strong connections to people of African descent. This directly challenges traditional epistemological paradigms that view knowledge as objective and definite (Kim, 2016). Additionally, it problematizes a singular way of knowing, being, and experiencing the world which is particularly important because Black people are so often treated as having a monolithic experience.

Storytelling serves five distinct functions (Kearney, 2002):

1. Plot (Mythos): A way of making life into life-stories complete with a beginning, middle, and end.
2. Re-creation (Mimesis): A pathway to sharing the inherent universals of existence - human truth. In so doing, it is an active remaking of the world in light of those truths, interconnecting the past, present, and future.
3. Release (Catharsis): The power to alter through the influence of empathy and ethical sensitivity by understanding what it is like to be in someone else's shoes.
4. Wisdom (Phronesis): Practical wisdom that provides knowledge about the world.
5. Ethics (Ethos): The ethical role of storytelling involving a shared world with others.

Narratives serve many different purposes (Riessman, 2008). For individuals, narratives may be used to reflect, remember, justify, persuade, convince, engage, or entertain (among other uses). Groups use narratives to create connection and belonging as well as to mobilize others. In this way, Catherine Riessman (2008) aptly concludes: "Narratives do political work. The social role of stories—how they are connected to the flow of power in the wider world—is an important facet in narrative theory" (p. 8).

Narrative researchers seek to identify human conditions that are presented in the stories of ordinary people (Kim, 2016). Coupled with CRT, a theoretical framework that places race at the center of analysis, a narrative methodological design made it possible for the researcher to collect stories as data as a means to understanding the lived experience (Roithmayr, 2014; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). In education, CRT offers a way to understand the experiences of people of color along the educational pipeline (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT is grounded with the experiences of people of color in the forefront while simultaneously

challenging the conventional wisdom that prioritizes and accepts the experiences of whites as normative (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999; Kim, 2016). CRT scholars articulate two overall goals: 1) To understand how white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in the U.S. context and 2) To be committed to social justice by working toward the elimination of racial oppression as part of the larger goal of eliminating all forms of oppression (Kim, 2016). These aims illuminate the axiological orientation of the researcher in the current study. This study placed emphasis not on knowledge in the abstract, research for research's sake, but instead on research meant to serve a specific purpose and need for the community within which was situated (Parker, Deyhle & Villena, 1999). Accordingly, this research design also had transformative leanings. "Stories function to alter the ways we view mundane everyday events. Stories can indeed accomplish change." (Riessman, 2008, p. 63). The transformational power of these participant stories to accomplish change was the goal. As the solicitor of these stories, I was a participant in their construction (Riessman, 2008). The dynamic process of storytelling in this context was cathartic, powerful, healing, and empowering.

Narrative inquiry is rooted in the study of the precise (Riessman, 2008). Stories are forms of historical documentation (Riessman, 2008). The seemingly mundane of contemporary life with the benefit of hindsight and reflection offers much more. The narratives of enslaved Black people in the United States are a strong example of this. Collected after emancipation, these stories have provided rich and invaluable resources for documenting history that had previously been invisible to most audiences. Storytelling has played an important role in constructing major social movements of the twentieth century – rendering the stories themselves as objects of close reading an analysis (Riessman, 2008).

Use of narratives in the social sciences have several histories situated in epistemological positions, time, place, and theoretical orientations. Riessman asserts that in the early twentieth century sociologist from the Chicago School collected life histories to examine the experiences of various groups (2008). However, the blossoming of narrative study is tied to the mid-1980s. Oral histories have long been culturally present for people of African descent (Douglas & Peck, 2013). In the way that white supremacy does, the white listening ear elevated what already had merit on its own. Narrative scholars assert that narratives are incapable of standing on their own and require interpretation (Riessman, 2008; Riessman, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Bailey & Tilley, 2002). Gatekeeping the legitimacy of stories of people of color through the assertion that narratives do not speak for themselves, but require interpretation functions like another cunning function of oppression. Liberating stories is to allow them to stand independently without the required academic, white, or other ear to do for them what they inherently do on their own – exist, connect, communicate, and bear witness. They simply need to be heard. They are enough. The goal is not to reduce lived experiences. This work is a representation and assertion of the contrary. The goal was to contextualize experiences as the complex and complete phenomena they are (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). If indeed social justice "concerns the degree to which a society contains and supports the conditions necessary for all individuals to exercise capacities, express experiences, and participate in determining actions", then the voices of these historically and traditionally marginalized Black students along with my own must be liberated and free from reduction, censor, and limits (Reid, 2004). I allow the stories to stand as they are and instead position myself as the megaphone, through the platform of this work, to amplify their voices and join their chorus having shared identity and experience as a Black student at a PWI. Accordingly, my epistemological assumptions reflected throughout

this work honor people as knowers through multiple pathways as connected to their lived experiences. People are the experts of their own lives and when invited to share what they know often will. Stories are manifestations and representations of that cognitive understanding – narrative knowing (Polkinghorne, 1988). Stories demonstrate and document the savvy, resilience, and fortitude necessary to exist in a Black body in the American context and survive and thrive.

For the current study, the theoretical and methodological orientations informed the creation of the research questions placing emphasis on the stories of Black students in a predominantly white institutional setting. The experience of being a Black face in a white space was central to the knowledge being pursued in this study. What was that experience? How does one survive? How does one thrive? This study documents the experiences and the very voices of Black students. By exploring the students' story, insight was gained into how Black students made sense of and understood their own personal educational experiences within this context. Stories are powerful and can highlight places of connection, support, resistance, and barriers to their academic pursuits. Consistent with narrative methodology, these stories were not accessories to the research, they were the research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The stories were the centerpiece of the inquiry in pursuit of an enhanced understanding of the issues Black students face at PWIs.

In looking to those who have been epistemologically marginalized, silenced, and disempowered, narrative inquiry and CRT draw on the knowledge of people of color to challenge biological and cultural deficit stories, providing a counter narrative to deficit storytelling so prevalent in research (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). "A majoritarian story distorts and silences the experiences of people of color. Using a 'standard

formulae,' majoritarian methods purport to be neutral and objective yet implicitly make assumptions according to negative stereotypes about people of color" (Solorzano & Yosso, p. 136, 2001). Many studies draw on majoritarian stories to explain educational inequities through a deficit model that whether intentional or not, communicates the belief that Black students are culturally deprived (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The purported solution for the described socioacademic failure is nearly always cultural assimilation (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The current study actively resisted that notion in favor of revealing the counter-story as a tool for strengthening traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance. "Oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2436). If methodologies have been used to silence and marginalize people of color, so too can they be used to amplify and as acts of transformative resistance.

Data Generation

The purpose of this study was to understand the influence of social support for Black students at a predominantly white institution. Among undergraduate students in 2013, 70 percent of Black students attended public institutions (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Accordingly, data for this study was collected at a large, public, predominantly white, research institution in the southeast United States. The institution (The University of Georgia, n.d.) describes itself in the following manner:

> The University of Georgia (UGA), a land-grant and sea-grant university with statewide commitments and responsibilities is the state's oldest, most comprehensive, and most diversified institution of higher education. UGA is currently ranked among the top 20 public universities in U.S. News & World Report. The University's main campus is

> located in Athens, approximately 65 miles northeast of Atlanta, with extended campuses in Atlanta, Griffin, Gwinnett, and Tifton. UGA was founded in 1785 by the Georgia General Assembly as the first state-chartered University in the country. UGA employs approximately 1,800 full-time instructional faculty and more than 7,600 full-time staff. The University's enrollment exceeds 36,000 students including over 27,500 undergraduates and over 8,500 graduate and professional students. Academic programs reside in 17 schools and colleges, as well as a medical partnership with Augusta University housed on the UGAHealth Sciences Campus in Athens.

This institution was selected due to the existing connection to the researcher on the basis of personal experience as an undergraduate and graduate student and ten year history as a student affairs staff member and administrator. As a cultural insider, I have an ethnographic view of this institution. This familiarity made for nuance rich understanding and engagement with participants and stories based on common understanding both spoken and unspoken. Additionally, as the state flagship institution that is highly selective, I was deeply fascinated by the paradox that undergraduate students spend their entire lifetime engaged in K-12 academic rigor that makes it possible for them to earn admittance. They come to the institution, many between the age of 18-22, having achieved what for some was a dream come true, only to experience the nightmare reality of racism and discrimination.

The primary source of data was in-person participant interviews. Participants were asked to tell their story, thus reflecting on and making meaning of their lived experiences through those stories (Creswell, 2012). Through individual interviews, participants were given the opportunity to share their experiences with social support. Each individual interview lasted between 36 - 100 minutes employing a semi-structured interview technique. This allowed for researcher

flexibility, but also directed the interview within structured guiding questions. Each participant was asked to bring an artifact that represents the role of social support in their collegiate experience. Norman (2008) notes the unique nature of artifacts as an easily assessable, but often overlooked data that provide key insights into how peopled lived, what they valued, believed, their ideas, and assumptions. Participants were simply asked to tell the story of the artifact that they selected. A researcher journal served as a repository for field notes, reflections on interviews, questions to further explore, emerging themes, notes on changes to the research processes, and other research considerations.

The interview guide (Appendix B) served as a framework, however, the semi-structured interview protocol made it possible to ask follow-up questions and allow the conversation to evolve organically. Any mental notes captured during the course of the interview process were later recorded as field notes after the interview. When necessary and appropriate, notes were taken during the interviews. Interviews concluded by informing the participant that a copy of their transcript would be emailed to them. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Participants were invited to review the transcript for accuracy and desired editing along with the opportunity to provide feedback or add to interview data.

Participants

Criterion-based selection (deMarrais, 2004; Meriam, 2009) was used to identify participants who reflected the purpose of the study. All participants were 18 years of age or older and self-identified as Black, African-American, Caribbean, African, Afro-Latino, or otherwise connected to the African Diaspora through their ancestry and lived experience. Excluded from participation were minors and individuals that were not enrolled college students and did not identify in the aforementioned ethno-cultural descriptors. Participants were

identified through outreach to the campus Multicultural Services and Programs unit within the Division of Student Affairs. Student engagement with Multicultural Services & Programs is open to all students, voluntary, and is not tied to student educational records. Outreach included flyer display in the physical space, flyer distribution via newsletter/listserv announcement, and word of mouth recruitment and referrals. Eligibility was determined by potential participant statement of affirmation regarding racial/ethnic identity as Black, African-American, Caribbean, African, Afro-Latino, or otherwise connected to the African Diaspora through ancestry and lived experience. Information regarding the purpose of the study was shared with potential participants in response to all interest and information requests. Students who participated in this study received a $15 Target gift card for their time. Participants selected pseudonyms to be utilized in data representation.

Research Ethics

This study was conducted in compliance with the University of Georgia Office for Research Institutional Review Board, the research oversight committee charged with ensuring that human subjects research is conducted in compliance with the applicable federal, state, and institutional policies and procedures. The Institutional Review Board granted approval before data collection commenced.

Participants were asked for informed consent at the beginning of the face-to-face interview. The informed consent process was discussed both orally and presented in writing with the dual purpose of sharing information about the study and ensuring that participants understood that their participation was voluntary and they could refuse to participate or stop participation at any time for any reason. The informed consent process acknowledged that participating in the study did carry the infrequent, but present potential for revealing painful

discoveries. The degree of discomfort was described as minimal given the nature of the questions from an affirmative, rather than deficit orientation. Of the twelve involved participants, only one interview resulted in sharing additional campus resources and connecting the participant with institutional counseling structures.

All interviews were scheduled in a private room during a three-month data collection period. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for data analysis. At the conclusion of the interview, participants self-selected pseudonyms and provided general demographic information to be used in the data representation.

Dual Relationships Acknowledgement

Consistent with a social justice research agenda, participants are not subjects of inquiry divorced and far removed from me as the researcher. We share a deep kinship and hold dual relationships as neighbors, friends, and fellow members of a small network of Black UGA students (Johnson & Parry, 2015). We share a legacy that started in 1961 with Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes as the first Black students enrolled at this institution. With degrees achieved, we join 310,000 living alumni. Of that, only 14,710 are Black.

It is also important to note that I was also the director of the campus multicultural services center from February 2012 – May 2017. In that capacity, I had direct contact with many undergraduate students who identify as Black. I would characterize my relationship with students with whom I worked in that capacity as warm, positive, and supportive. My reputation in that role and the trust developed as a result was a factor in students' willingness to be involved in this project as was directly disclosed by some participants. Nevertheless, it was emphasized to participants that involvement in the study was strictly voluntary. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time – and still receive the $15 gift card – without any

loss of benefits, privileges, or services to which they were otherwise entitled. Additionally, participants were made aware that participating in the study would not extend or bolster any benefits, privileges, or services beyond those in which they were already entitled.

Interviews

Generating narratives from interviews called for a semi-structured interview protocol that made a flexible stance possible. As is the goal in narrative interviewing, I sought to generate detailed accounts of student experiences rather than brief answers or general statements in response to questions and prompts (Riessman, 2008). The stories that followed came in all shapes, sorts, and sizes. Some were brief and tightly bound. Others were long narratives that grew with each new question posed. They included stories of the past, the present, and projections into the future. They contained hopes, disappointments, dreams deferred, and dreams realized. They contained laughter, love, sorrow, pain, and joy – incredible amounts of joy often juxtaposed with content that was anger provoking and heartbreaking. All of these stories were cultivated through the development of an intentional atmosphere that welcomed narratives into the space – even the ones that were difficult to share garnering some that had never been shared with another human before. Allowing storytelling of this nature to come forward was reflected in the research protocol and researcher approach to engagement with participants (Riessman, 2008). From the onset, interviews were characterized as discourse – conversations in which participants were encouraged to ask questions of me as the interviewer. Rules of everyday conversation such as turn-taking, relevance, entrance/exit topical transitions, and re-entries or returns to previous content when new connections were established were all manifestations of that (Riessman, 2008). One story often led to another from the participant or from me. Creating time and space for extended narration required that I share power in a way that felt respectful and

necessary in this endeavor to stay congruent with my values orientation and theoretical underpinnings of transformative paradigm.

Opening the space for stories also meant encouraging participants to speak in a cadence and dialect that was comfortable for them. To signal that welcome, I comfortably used Black colloquiums, Southern idioms, pop culture references, and a manner of speaking that was my own personal default. For me, this blends academic language and precision with "'round the way" sensibilities and deliveries.

Interviews utilized the below guiding questions to encourage and solicit stories:

1. Tell me what brought you to UGA.
2. I asked you to bring a physical representation of what social support means to you. What did you bring? What is the story behind this item?
3. What does social support mean to you?
4. What language or terminology do you use to characterize that support?
5. Who makes up your inner circle of support?
6. How would you describe your relationship with your support system?
7. How do you stay connected with your support system?
8. How does [social support – use student terminology] impact your college experience as a Black student?
9. Tell me about a time that demonstrates that impact.
10. Tell me about an experience where you didn't feel like you belong because you are Black.
11. Fill in the blank. Racism at UGA is like…
12. Do you think your Black life matters at UGA?
13. How have you come to experience mattering and belonging?

14. What have I not asked you that you feel is important for me to know?

The process of analysis began during interviews. Listening in such an emotionally attentive way made it possible for a deep connection to occur with participants. As a highly empathic individual, this also left me occupying multiple roles. I was the researcher. I was a fellow student. I was an advocate. I was a social worker. I was a student affairs practitioner. I was one human being sitting with another bearing witness to our shared and respective humanity – a stance that both exposed and invited me to participate in the construction and co-construction of stories. This journey took me into the participant world, and also transported me back in time to my previous world as a Black undergraduate student in this place – time travel made possible by being both here and there, simultaneously in two worlds.

Data Analysis and Representation

Narrative methodology does not privilege precise data analysis rules (Riessman, 2008). Instead, researchers have the flexibility to customize an approach consistent with theoretical orientation and informed by qualitative research conventions that help one to sort, understand, and make meaning of the data. The individual interview transcript detailing experiences with social support were the unit of analysis for this inquiry. Thematic analysis was conducted of each interview by listening to audio and reviewing written content with the goal of uncovering and categorizing themes of social support for Black students (Riessman, 2008). While the process of analysis parsed narrative content, this was done in large sweeping sections so as to not chop up or disconnect the stories in a way that would decontextualize or put nuance rich presentation in jeopardy.

Steps in Data Analysis

The individual interview transcript detailing the student's narrative experiences at a PWI served as the unit of analysis for the coding strategy. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. I listened to and simultaneously read transcripts for accuracy. I then utilized an organizing procedure inspired by Ruona (2005). Each interview was compiled into a Word document chunked by interview and research questions. This approach yielded a collective thread of isolated answers to each question by each participant. Doing so made it possible to organize the responses by category rather than by participant. This document was reviewed multiple times as it made it possible to more fully engage in a holistic narrative conceptualization and understanding. During the review process, I kept a separate word document in which I documented my initial along with persistent reactions, realizations, and thoughts on the collective narrative being told by participants. I then completed an initial round of coding by performing a close reading of the interview responses. I highlighted relevant texts, phrases, and ultimately attached in vivo codes to the data. The initial code list was further refined in a subsequent round of coding conducted after re-reading transcripts. Keyword audits and rudimentary hand written tick marks, and notes were all utilized in the process of reading interviews, synthesizing information, coding, and verifying the code selected. I inductively grouped codes into categories, eliminating peripheral codes and combining similar ones. This inductive and iterative process revealed six overarching core themes that captured the findings.

Data analysis was inductive and cyclical making ongoing reflection and refining critical. It was not unusual for me to be doing an unrelated task and have a new revelation about the data wash over me. In this way the analysis process was interactive as I used both participant data and my own lived experience as a Black student at a PWI as verification of the evidence. Data

analysis yielded two representations of the data: proverbial and thematic. After overarching themes were solidified proverbial themes were selected to hone in on the corresponding lesson to the sentiment communicated in the theme. An internet search for African proverbs along with proverbs that were staples in familial lexicon given my own African heritage were also included. Both representations are supported by participant narratives and quotes to add to the richness of the research findings.

Quality in Qualitative Research

Issues of quality in qualitative research can be addressed in multiple ways. For the current study the researcher will utilize the strategies of transcript verification, member checks, triangulation, and audit trails to establish trustworthiness (Kim, 2016). The transcript verification exercise and member check were closely aligned. In addition to engaging participants in an accuracy review of transcripts, they were also invited to provide feedback regarding study themes. Also referred to as respondent validation, member checks serve to corroborate or verify findings by soliciting feedback from respondents (Schwandt, 2007). Seen by many as more an ethical act than one of true epistemology, member checking does allow another way of generating both data and insight. This practice honored the co-constructed nature of knowledge by providing participants the opportunity to add to, interview and thematic data for resonance with their experience. On these grounds, in particular, it is a valuable exercise in establishing trustworthiness. The procedure of triangulation is used as a means establish that the criterion of validity has been met (Schwant, 2007). This process checks the integrity of the inferences drawn by checking them against multiple sources. In traditional audit trails, an independent, third-party examiner reviews an inquirer audit trail. For the purpose of the current

study, the process will be slightly amended, but nonetheless robust as the dissertation committee reviews the work of the inquirer to determine dependability of the procedures employed.

Boundaries of the Study

Rather than utilizing a deficit model framing of limitations, I prefer to identify clearly the boundaries of this study, so that others may utilize the work as holistically situated therein. This study takes a close and in depth look into the experiences of 12 Black students at a PWI. There words should and must speak for themselves. This study is intended to amplify those voices in such a way that the reader would be encouraged and challenged to think about how their own work, role, and observation of Black students in other predominantly white institutional contexts might have similar or divergent experiences along with what they must do in the interest of ending oppression in pursuit of full and complete liberation for all. All people must be part of this emancipatory vision if it is to be achieved.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of social support on the experiences of Black students at predominantly white institutions. The study addressed the following research questions:

I. How do Black students define social support?

II. How does social support impact the college experience of Black students at predominantly white institutions?

III. What do student stories reveal about structures that facilitate feelings of mattering and belonging for Black students at predominantly white institutions?

IV. What do student stories reveal about structures that hinder feelings of mattering and belonging for Black students at predominantly white institutions?

In sharing the findings of this study, full and rich portions of the participants interviews are highlighted. In the intentional quest to liberate stories, long quotes of participant voices are centered and given full opportunity to reveal the wisdom and truth of their experiences in narrative form. Consequently and also intentionally researcher summaries of what was said are brief and serve more as orienting introductory statements in deference to the inclusion of what was actual said in the participant's own words. The goal in doing so was to contextualize experiences and liberate stories as the complex and complete phenomena they are (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Findings Summary

Six major themes emerged from the interviews. First, Black students express that they are here at this predominantly white institution for a reason. They believe that they are not here by happenstance. They are having this specific institutional experience by divine or serendipitous design. Accordingly, what they learn here, in and out of the classroom, no matter how painful or uncomfortable will be essential in their future path. Secondly, finding your niche or community is incredibly important for Black students at predominantly white institutions. Participants touted the role of a smaller more comfortable community or safe haven in the midst of the larger institutional environment as critical. Students find their way to and begin forming these communities even before formal matriculation. They connect with each other as intended or committed UGA students while still in high school through social media, institutional recruitment events, and word of mouth connection in their local communities. These smaller community connections are also found through student organizations, employment, institutional events, and in the places they frequent on campus. While significant barriers to community and connection exist, students find their way and then light the path for other students to do the same. Thirdly, the most frequent venue of exclusion for Black students is the classroom. Both faculty and non-Black peer counterparts make unique contributions that often render the classroom an unwelcoming and isolating place where anti-Blackness abounds. Fourth, Black students are constantly challenged to decipher the actions of others. The nuances of negative interactions are numerous, but often boil down to Black students attempting to discern if the hostile other is simply indiscriminately rude or racist. Black students are frequently in a state of reflection, processing, and analysis regarding the behavior of others toward them and feel the need to assign the proper intentions to behaviors deemed troubling. Rude people are offensively impolite as

perceived by their lack of concern for others – all others. While indeed racist people can be rude, the distinction lies in the equal opportunity rudeness or rudeness specific to Black people as on the basis of their Blackness as a manifestation of one's racism. Fifth, while in their communities of choice and even when independently traversing the campus, Black students are making, taking, and holding space for themselves. They are unapologetic in so doing – daring majority counterparts or others to deny them what they know to be rightfully theirs as well. This applies to physical space, air time to communicate ideas and thoughts, along with emotional spaces that provide safe reservoirs for processing their experiences and fortifying them to persist in this necessary form of resistance. Finally, Black students in PWIs are choosing joy – not just any joy, specifically Black joy. Black joy is the spirit of liberation that inhabits Black beings. It signals that white supremacy cannot and will not have the last word. It smiles in the face of pain and dances in times of despair. Black joy is a choice to live fully in spite of and because of white supremacy's effort to limit our existence. Black joy is a choice to experience bliss, laughter, and fun as often as one can. Black students are joyful.

These six themes offer direct responses to the research questions at hand. Social support is of central importance in the collegiate experience of Black students in a predominantly White institution. As described by participants in this inquiry, indeed for many Black students it is their college experience.

Participant Introductions

Participants in the study included 12 undergraduate students who self-identified as Black, African-American, Caribbean, African, Afro-Latino, or otherwise connected to the African Diaspora through their ancestry and lived experience.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Name	Gender	Undergraduate Classification	Area of Study	Home State	Goal after college
Nina	Female	4th Year	Finance	Georgia	Change the world
Jordan	Female	2nd year	Statistics	Georgia	Attend law school; practice law
Lynn	Female	3rd year	Pre-Business	Georgia	Impact the workforce to see change in the world
Daydreamer	Non-conforming[2]	4th year	Psychology	Louisiana	Grad school and entertainment industry career
Veronica X	Non-binary[3]	3rd year	Early Childhood Education; Religion	Illinois	Teacher of younger grades
Black & Educated	Female	4th year	Environmental Health Science	New York / Georgia	Oncologist; work with breast cancer patients
October	Female	2nd year	Cellular Biology / Women's Studies	Georgia	Medical School; become an OB/GYN
Sasha	Female	2nd year	Human Development & Family Sciences; Entrepreneurship	Georgia	Graduate School; Counseling, non-profit work
Mercy	Female	4th year	Psychology	Georgia	Becoming a GCAC adviser
Twenty-One	Female	3rd year	Psychology /Spanish	Georgia	Clinical mental health counseling
Felicia	Female	3rd year	Marketing; Cognitive Science	Pennsylvania	Travel, love, pay it forward (whatever that looks like)
Jasmine	Female (cis)	3rd year	Early Childhood Education; Human Development and Science	Mississippi	Teaching; Non-profit work

[2] Pronouns utilized for Daydreamer throughout this work are consistent with those used by participant to refer to self.
[3] Pronouns utilized for Veronica X throughout this work are consistent with those used by participant to refer to self.

Meet Nina

Nina is a thoughtful, wise, and giving graduating senior from Georgia. Receiving scholarship support from each institution that rendered the out of pocket expense equitable, Nina vacillated between attending Howard University and UGA. She landed on UGA largely due to proximity to home coming from a single parent home. As Nina and I talked, I was struck that something about her poetic way with words hones in on the dualities of life. This is perhaps best epitomized by the fact that she is a business major seeking to change the world using her specialized area of practice, finance, in pursuit of liberation for Black people. Nina watched her own neighborhood gentrify when she left for college and cautioned neighbors to hold onto their homes. She is active in and believes in Black student organizations, the role of Black UGA in cultivating community and confidence, along with the importance of building as you climb.

Meet Jordan

Thoughtful. Forthright. Clear. Concise. Those words describe Jordan well. A second year student from South Georgia, she is several hours away from family. She considered transferring after her first semester, but found friends, warmth, kindness, and home at the campus LGBT Resource Center. She also found community with roommates that were geographically from the same part of the state, one of whom would cook low country boil (a down home favorite) when Jordan missed home and another who would drive her home to visit family when whenever the roommate was going that way which was once a month. These thoughtful gestures got Jordan through and made her feel like “this is obviously where God wanted me to be”.

Meet Daydreamer

Daydreamer is a proud New Orleans, Louisiana native. He relocated with his family at the age of 10 in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. He describes being coerced into coming to UGA

by his family because of the prestige of the institution. Self-described as emotional -- I was immensely struck by his depth of insight, empathic sensibilities, giving nature, generous laugh, and resilient spirit. A friend once identified love as Daydreamer's superpower. He agrees with that characterization and so do I. For Daydreamer, "it was always about learning and just becoming better than I was before I had you as a friend, and hopefully you being better than you were before I was your friend."

Meet Lynn

As a third-year pre-business student that wants to see change in the world, Lynn is pragmatic and forthright. Her first encounter with the school happened in middle school when she came for band camp. It was love at first visit and she knew she wanted to come to college at the University. However, her dream realized has fallen short of the rose colored picture that she imagined as a 12 year old. Both micro and macro aggressions have propelled her and motivated her to do well and achieve. Clear in her purpose to impact others, Lynn plans to journal about her experiences and one day write a book. I can't wait to read it.

Meet October

October is a brilliant, swift talking, dynamic future doctor with a generous laugh and easy smile. She is a force to be reckoned with that offers up keen and cutting social commentary alongside her institutional and personal experiences, revealing the ways that systems exacted by people stack the deck against Black students. In one apt and poignant description of that very notion, she describes to me the following: "it's like, survival of the richest or survival of the fittest, so if you're not rich then you have to be really proactive, you have to be really smart, you have to be really on it." October is really smart, proactive, and on it. When I think about the

future and am consumed by worry, I remind myself of the Octobers of the world. She's our future and we're going to all be okay.

Meet Mercy

Mercy didn't think she would get into UGA. She was drawn to the school because of the prestige, large size, and multiple opportunities. In spite of having a 4.0 GPA she had to be convinced to apply for admission by her Upward Bound Specialist. She was accepted early decision. Mercy looked forward to college because being Black and smart "from kindergarten on up I was set apart and wasn't cool." In college, however, it was going to be different because "essentially, we're all nerds." Mercy's college experience didn't unfold in a way that included lots of friends. To the contrary, she has found herself in many lonely moments during her four years in college. She questions herself and she questions God – to whom she speaks to like an old friend. Her college picture isn't full of friends, but it has been full of love from the once supervisor turned family that she calls her "college mom".

Meet Felicia

Felicia believes in gut instincts. She relies on them and they have guided her well in many realms. As an out of state student from Pennsylvania, she was gut guided to the University. Her supportive family moved to Georgia for her to spend her senior year in state to establish residency and qualify for the Hope and Zell Miller scholarships (available only to students from Georgia high schools). A high achieving marketing major, Felicia has high standards for herself. She has found a group of core friends that are flourishing together on campus each in their own rite. They support each other fiercely and have developed bonds more akin to family then friendship. BUGA, Black UGA, is the hub that made those connections

possible. “We're just all thriving. That's how we like show our love for each other. We push each other to do better constantly.”

Meet Veronica X

Veronica X is from Chicago. They were attracted to the University for the strong educator preparation program, but regretted their decision the first two years here as they found it incredibly lonely as an out of state student adjusting to Southern manifestations of racism that involved white people using the N-word and intense amounts of respectability politics. Recently shaken by an encounter with a faculty member in which they were put out of class for asking questions, their sense of self had been shaken and was restored by seeing themselves in the same way members of their support system saw them – as a magnetic personality. I was certainly drawn into Veronica X’s brilliance and delivery of simple truths. Toward the end of our time together, they asked me a question that brought me to tears. The question inquired if I had seen a promising amount of progress in my twenty year engagement with the University. My response was that the promise I see in Veronica X and other Black students is incredible.

Meet Jasmine

Jasmine is a third year student from Mississippi. She applied to 11 colleges and had a preference for small schools when making her college decision. Her decision to come to the University was grounded in practicality as related to the financial aid package available and an awareness that attending the flagship institution had unique networking benefits that could be beneficial post-graduation. Jasmine has built strong connections through retreat style programs that foster participant vulnerability by offering spaces where students can be themselves free of judgement. She has attended Impact Service Breaks (formerly Alternative Spring Break), LeaderShape, and the Ignite Social Justice Retreat. She describes these programs as being

deeply meaningful, fostering strong friendships and helping her to get out of her "Black people bubble" by connecting her with a diverse group of peers.

Meet Black and Educated

Soft-spoken with insights that ring loud and clear, Black and Educated (B&E) is culturally Caribbean and calls New York home. She attended high school in Georgia and originally had plans of returning to the Big Apple for college, but finances and practicalities like transportation got in the way. B&E described not knowing that UGA existed until her senior year. She visited campus, loved it, and felt strongly that "this is where she should go". In hindsight she realizes that she was sold a "sugarcoated" dream. While she has had some good times here, like finding a wonderful community of friends in her residence hall community, she has also known hardship. I have known B&E since her freshman year. We met at an institutional event. I saw a lot of myself in her and extended my support inviting her to come see me in the Multicultural office if ever I could be of support. Many students never follow up on those "my door is always open offers", but B&E did. I feel honored that she did and to have had the opportunity to know her for four years. I've watched her navigate college with grace, fortitude, and resilience.

Meet Sasha

Sasha visited campus when she was nine years old. She had two older cousins that attended the University and came to visit one. She was really into gymnastics and recalls fondly going to a collegiate gymnastics meet. She could always see herself as a student here and was drawn to apply as a high school senior for the challenge and prestige of getting in. Sasha loves the 90's television series A Different World and has identified many parallels between the series and her collegiate experience. Sasha is an extremely patient person, yet even for her, there are

times when engaging with white counterparts and/or Black ones who don't know they are Black requires more labor than she is able to expend.

Meet Twenty-one

Twenty-one has a group of "reliables" from back home that play a big role in helping her to remember who she is. Having few Black friends here at the University, she finds herself consistently navigating interactions with roommates, classmates, and others that are fraught with primitive conceptualizations and understandings of Black cultural identity. Often and frustratingly told that she "is not like then" (read other Black people), Twenty-one often "takes one for the team" and engages in teachable moments. In this way, the free education that she is getting by virtue of scholarship comes with a hefty and laborious price tag.

Social Support as Defined by Black Students

It takes a village to raise a child.

We desire to bequeath two things to our children; the first one is roots, the other one is wings.

– African Proverbs

In order to best contextualize the narratives to come, establishing shared understanding for Black students characterizations and definitions of social support is a necessary anchor place on which to ground their stories. Accordingly, prior to delving into the six themes that emerged from this study, this section is dedicated to a full exploration and explanation of social support as defined and experienced by study participants.

Family, friends, backbone supporters, ride or dies, social network, community, squad, were all terminology used when referring to social support. Black students define social support as relationships and connections built with others that are cultivated and characterized by being genuine, honest, affirming, motivating, sincere, and seeking your best interest. "Social support is

having a network in which you can rely on when you feel the need for any type of support or help, be it positive or negative" summarizes Felicia. There is shared understanding and reciprocity in these bonds. These relationships are deemed safe and comfortable enough for vulnerability to exist, for students to not know the answers, be challenged when they are wrong, vent frustrations, and discuss hot topics. Social supporters check in with you, make sure you are okay, push you, and lift you up when you're down (and when you've settled for an altitude that is unworthy of your potential). Generally, these relationships bear witness to your lived experience. They stand with you and walk beside you as you encounter different circumstances in life. Social support isn't tied to the exclusive boundaries of the academic, personal, or emotional. It crosses these distinctions in the interest of supporting one's holistic being – a being that can't be parsed into convenient categories.

Social support represents an important combination of people who truly understand and affirm one's lived experience, challenges, issues, and/or triumphs. Supportive individuals also includes an element of solution-focused pragmatism and a willingness to give feedback that assists one to think through how to address presenting challenges. In this way, social supporters are willing to help with whatever one is going through and look out for one's best interests. Social supporters give feedback that is nuanced and unique – because they know you. These are people who "get it". People who see hardships, listen, and affirm one's humanity. "You can't support someone if you don't even truly believe that what they're going through is real," quipped October.

Felicia indicated,

> Everybody has their own hardships. So you kind of gotta work through it, but that support role is just being able to have people who see your hardships as well, and see that

> you have your own problems too and it's not just like, oh forget you, these are first world problems. No, first world problems have meaning and resonance. It's not just negligible.

While few students acknowledged or referenced the environment around them in their definition of social support, one student identified the institutional role or responsibility in her conceptualizations of social support. Sasha expressed,

> I think – I kind of think of it in a few ways, so I definitely think of like friendships and like the relationships you're able to build with people and then I also kind of think about the environment that the school provides. So like whether it's just like organizations or clubs, but also like, I guess, in a broader sense kind of like what your school is doing for whatever major you're in or like what UGA is doing to foster relationships.

Nina referenced social support as having domains of embodiment in both people and places,

> To me, social support is just somewhere where I can feel comfortable enough to be myself and to thrive in the environment. I know they say your comfort zone, nothing really happens, no growth happens there. I would beg to differ. I think you need to be comfortable. I guess ... Okay, your comfort zone no, but you have to be comfortable in order to really thrive. The thing about it is you have to just be comfortable being uncomfortable. I feel like we're already uncomfortable already, being in this environment so we need a safe space, a safe zone for us.

The Language of Social Support

Show me your friend and I will show you your character. – African Proverb

The language or terminology used to characterize this support was varied, but consistently fell in the realms of family or friends. Choosing the terminology family did not necessarily denote a kinship bond of blood relations. While it certainly included some kin, it

also was generally and globally used to indicate a bond that transcends friendship. Similarly, the moniker of friend could not be taken at face value to mean the same thing in all applications. Multiple distinctions of friendships presented layered tiers of complexity that evolved or devolved over time and were incredibly nuanced. Felicia described the nuanced nature of friendship in this way,

> You can't be friends with that large of a group of people. You know, people's differing dissenting opinions, people are closer than others, and that's fine. So, we moved and shaked and we got eventually to a point where it was a group of eight of us, with four of our other ... I don't ... friends is a lot, but acquaintances is not enough. It's an inbetweener, but we were all really close, and we all did everything together.

Daydreamer described, “Lost a lot of friends, made a lot of friends. Realized who was more real than others.” He went on to describe that even friendships that didn’t stand the test of time are meaningful in the picture of social support,

> Leaving someone better than you left them – that was always my thing. I told every single one of my friends, I was like, "As of right now, I consider you my friend." Let's say that today is the day we're hanging out, getting ice cream or something, "Zoe, I literally consider you my friend. You are my friend. If we're not friends in the future, I still want you to know that I care about you. I still want you to know that I'm hoping that you're okay. I'm supporting you from afar. Just know that at this moment, I care about you and I want everything in your life to be great." Saying that, I'm like, "With that said, I'm going to make sure that I do the best I can to make you better." That's basically being a real friend, not being a good friend, being a real friend. Calling your friend out when they're doing something stupid, telling your friend, giving them reassurance when they're

> unsure of what they're doing is right or wrong. Like, "No, you're right. You're fine. If someone tells you otherwise, call me. Attitude included. Call me, because you are completely right. Do not let your voice be silenced." Making sure, especially for them shy friends I have. Each friend had their own little thing, and each friend I was trying to give a lesson to. Each friend I was trying to take a lesson from. For me, it was always about learning and just becoming better than I was before I had you as a friend, and hopefully you being better than you were before I was your friend.

He continues to describe the precise impact of that approach with Black friends in particular,

> I know exactly for sure that the specific things that Black people go through, they cannot afford to have their voice silenced at all. They just can't afford it. They can't. Now other cultures may be able to. I know for sure white people probably can afford to have their voice silenced on occasion, because it's not going to really hurt the community at large. A Black person being silenced, that hurts the community at large. If I find a quiet Black person, I'm like, "Friend, pick it up." If I find an overly over the top Black person, I'm like, "Hey, hey, you about to get us caught. You about to get us in trouble. I need you to like, three notches, take it down. Please."

The Supporters

A speaker of truth has no friends. – African Proverb

Loneliness and the absence of friends is also an experience that Black students have. This reality is often at odds with what students thought their collegiate experience would entail. Much of my conversation with Mercy delved into the experience of loneliness as a price of authenticity.

Mercy: I've had some great friends, I've met some great people in my classes and you could tell we really connected and it's like, whoa, we didn't expect this to happen. But we were cool, you know what I'm saying. But honestly, I just don't – if I make a friend, cool. If I don't, that's fine too, I'm not pushing the issue or anything like that because I want to be – I want to be able to be myself with Caucasian people and I want them to be themselves too, but I want to – I don't want to put on a voice like this and –

Zoe: Did you ever feel like you had to be different?

Mercy: Honestly –

Zoe: Or were you like, this – this is what you get and if this works out for us, great, but if it doesn't, that's cool too. Has that always been like from a freshman?

Mercy: Yeah.

Zoe: Good for you.

Mercy: I honestly feel that way.

Zoe: Good for you.

Mercy: Yeah, this is what you get and yeah, if you don't then it's fine.

Zoe: Yeah, it is.

Mercy: I feel like I've thought about it, like oh, I could really try and try and fit in, I guess. Or, you know, connect with them in that way. But I – uh uh, that's just not me.

Zoe: Good for you. It sounds like you have really done a really beautiful job maintaining your identity and like being authentic in that way, but then also managing expectations in a way that is like wholly reasonable and not over or

under invested because you're still going to talk to people, I'm still going to – but if that doesn't, that's okay and that is – that's a really hard thing to do, I don't know if you – I don't know if you think about the skill and the savvy that goes into that, but I am – I'm struck by that in hearing you describe it.

Mercy: Wow, I honestly don't think of it as being savvy because I will – I'll talk to the Lord and I'll be down on myself, like Lord, what?

Zoe: No.

Mercy: Nobody wants to talk to me, like I don't have many friends, what is this?

Zoe: Yeah.

Mercy: I don't know what it is about me, like I would question the Lord, be like, what it is – what is it about me that – I don't know, you know, I don't have a lot of friends or I don't – yeah, I don't know what it is and I still struggle with that to this day.

Zoe: Yeah.

Mercy: Shoot, what was I doing? Yeah, I was asking him the other day, like what? Ugh. It's not that I'm trying to be Miss – the social queen or anything like that, but it's just like, you think of college and you think of like having friends, having a lot of friends, going to the mall with a group and doing this and this and that. But it's different, it's very different for me. So yeah. Well, I thought that we were going to be singing Kumbaya.

Zoe: Yeah, what happened? Why we not singing – sitting here holding hands in a field?

Mercy: I don't know. I don't know. Because in high school it was very different for me too because, let's see, I was Black and I am smart so there I took AP classes and

stuff like that and so not – there weren't a lot of us in those kind of classes. So from – shoot, from kindergarten on up I was set apart and wasn't cool. Yeah, just wasn't at the top of the social tier at all, but you know that's why I looked forward to college, I was like, oh man, it's going to be great.

Zoe: Everybody going to be smart.

Mercy: Yeah, essentially we're all nerds.

Zoe: Yeah.

Mercy: At this school.

Zoe: Because that's how you get here.

Mercy: Mhmm, being a nerd. And I get here and it's just like, eh. Like I don't even know how to describe it.

Mercy didn't find connection with friends, but instead found it with the college mom that she never thought she would have. A co-worker turned family is a big part of her social support network. Having deeply meaningful and supportive relationships develop in unexpected or chance interactions was not uncommon. Sasha came to be connected with three really good friends in her Swahili class freshman year. When asked about this, she describes it in the following way:

Sasha: Okay, so let me tell you how I fell into this. My name is Swahili, my name is Sasha, and of course like people just think like, oh, that's like a straightforward name and I'm like, well actually, it means purpose. And then my middle name is Imani which means faith and I was like named for the meaning and my mom likes to be intentional about giving me a name with meaning and African roots. And I've always been interested in learning more about like just Africa in general. So

when I was about to choose a foreign language I was just going to do like French because I took it in high school, I like Spanish because it's logical. But then I was like, Swahili, like what? Let me try that. So I did and my first semester was amazing, there's this one professor who – I don't think she's over the program anymore, but she's like really involved in the Swahili program. Dr. Doe. She's amazing. Like she's one of the sweetest people I've ever met and I'm really glad I happened to take her class my first semester here because she's really big on not just teaching like the language but also making sure the class got to know each other and she really valued knowing your name and like teaching us about culture, like the history kind of behind the words, she'd play music for us and all this stuff. She was just so sweet, like to this day, if I see her, I'm just like, oh my gosh. So yeah, and then she would like, in class, a thought for the day every day, so she'd give you some type of like emotional saying or like whatever. So it was just a really like I'm glad I just happened to like choose that class.

Zoe: And this was your first semester?

Sasha: First semester here.

Zoe: Oh wow, what a great start to college.

Sasha: Yeah, it was an amazing thing to just happen to me and then that's where I met my friend, Denise, who – I'm from DeKalb, I don't know if you know DeKalb and I went to Arabia and I met Denise who went to Tucker which is like – I don't know, like a 10 or 15 minute drive away and then we met another girl, Maggie in that class who went to Miller Grove which is around the corner from my house. So it was just kind of funny how we met each other and we were all like DeKalb

kids. And then like Denise's friend group is kind of becoming my friend group, definitely this year I've gotten to know her friends really well. So yeah, like I just happened to fall into a class where the professor was literally the sweetest and it was like kind of small, probably like 25 people, and like just met two really cool Black girls. And it was definitely more Black people than normal classes, but it was still like pretty mixed, it's not – we have Yoruba here and the Yoruba classes tend to be like straight Nigerians. But I think people have learned like, oh, Swahili is like easy and also it's pretty cool, they're sweet people. So it's really – it was really mixed up, it was probably like 1/3 Black but like I just so happened to meet some really cool Black girls where I'm like, yeah, you're from my area, yeah. So that class was fun. I always tell people – like I have a friend taking it now, I was like, oh, you need a culture class, take Swahili. Because it's fun and they're really sweet and it's easy. It's a good class.

Zoe: Can you imagine how your start to UGA would have been different without that class in the mix? Because that's like a magical – all of the things that you have described –

Sasha: It really was. I think it would have – like I said, I'm kind of – it takes me a while and so I think I might not have been as comfortable as quickly as I was. And also that class was four times a week which is kind of a lot, but I think being in there almost every day of the week, I at least knew like, oh that's – I have Swahili. That was like the comfort class, I could go in there and chill and like you still learned but it was very relaxed and comfortable and it wasn't like – I feel like language classes sometimes can be like mathematical, like that's how the professor

described it and she was like, I don't like mathematical teaching, like here's the formula, this is how you do it, and then now do it 10 times. That's too much. She was very much so like this is how we greet each other because and then she'd give you some historical – I didn't know like whatever reasoning.

Zoe: Oh, what a phenomenal class and phenomenal professor.

Sasha: No, she like – yeah. I wanted to take Swahili, like something from that program every semester I'm here, but I'm not like – I'm not going to be able to, but my goal is to figure out how to keep taking classes. So yeah, I just fell into that, and I think without it I just would have – it would have taken me longer to get comfortable and I think my first year in general consisted of me just testing things out. But I think that class was – like as soon as I started, I was like, oh, this is something I really like here. And like Swahili is not a common thing to have period at all, so that was really cool that I fell into that program. So yeah, hopefully my –

Zoe: Like I want to take it.

Sasha: No, really. I met a couple of my pretty good friends in that class and then met their friends too who are like – it's not like our whole little like crew. So yeah, Swahili was definitely where it's at.

While some students found their circle of support in this way, others describes pre-existing relationships as being a major part of their network. Immediate family, extended family, and friends from high school were often mentioned. One student is part of an online Facebook support group for people who identify as Black fems and non-binary. Also making up part of that support network were friends, student organizations, and peer mentors that met on campus – friends turned roommates and roommates turned friends. Persons employed with the university

were also noted as occupying space in this inner circle of support. This included University personnel fulfilling their employed function along with University staff members that were seen more as co-workers due to student employment. These notations included one mention of University faculty, one mention of the Office of the Dean of Students, one mentioned of the Office of Multicultural Services and Programs, and two mentions of the LGBT Resource Center. Jordan was one of the students for whom the LGBT Resource Center provided tremendous support. So much so that the physical representation of social support (Appendix D) that she selected was tied to her connection to The Resource Center, as she refers to it.

Jordan: Well I always ... Once I thought about it, where have I received the most support since being here? It was the Resource Center. And I actually just made that pin last week at Dogs Making it Better.

Zoe: Oh wow, you made it?

Jordan: Yeah.

Zoe: Oh that's cool.

Jordan: Meg had a little station set up to where we could come make our own pins. And so I went and made one, and it's white, and then it has LGBTRC spelled out in the rainbow colors, because I feel like everyone there has made a different impact on my life. Because after first semester last year I really wanted to transfer schools, and my mom was just like, finish out the year and then we'll talk about transferring to another school. And so coming back second semester I was like, well I have to be here anyways, so I'm gonna try to make the best of it.

And then I met a lot of people there, like Sammy and Tameka, and then Shane. And you know, they make you realize that yeah, college is hard, it kinda sucks

sometimes. But having people like them that can just pick you up when you're down. Because I have friends outside of the Resource Center that I didn't meet through the Resource Center. But they aren't so open minded and willing to just listen to you without, not necessarily judging you, but just saying something that just rubs you the wrong way. And I don't know, I know I can talk to any of them at any time and they won't ... They're gonna roast me because that's just how we are. But not about something serious…

Zoe: Yeah. So it sounds like your web of support is firmly rooted in the Resource Center?

Jordan: Yes.

Photo description: A white colored round disc that reads "--- heart's the LGBTRC!" The photo has been cropped to exclude the name that appears prior to the heart. The disc lays on a brown wooden surface, is handwritten, and features rainbow colors and a red heart.

Similarly, Veronica X selected a physical representation to demonstrate the important role the LGBT Resource Center has had on their collegiate experience. They described it this way:

Veronica X: So, I brought a picture which is like kind of cheesy but let me pull it up. So I'm – I'm an ambassador for the LGBT Resource Center, right, so I – Wow, that really narrows down my identity. But that's fine because I literally don't care. And so

this is our first group picture that we took at Athens PRIDE. And so I very much feel like the resource center has been my support system especially because the first time I started feeling like a day of happiness was after I went on the Ignite retreat my freshman year and like the resource center is the one who puts on the Ignite retreat. And from there, that's where I finally felt like I had met likeminded people. So ever since then, I've kind of just been chilling around the resource center.

Zoe: Yeah. So, was that your first engagement with the resource center through Ignite, or had you –

Veronica X: Actually I worked at the resource center my freshman year. So like it always has been, but like I didn't have peers, I guess, from the resource center. Meg is chill and Meg was my boss and I love Meg, but like Meg is not my peer. And the Ignite retreat was the first time where I met peers that I actually didn't hate.

Zoe: This is good, this is really good. So I know what the Ignite retreat is, but for the record, if you can define that experience.

Veronica X: Yeah. So the Ignite retreat that everyone should go to is a weekend retreat that the resource center hosts and you apply for it and you get in or you don't get in. I got in and you go on the retreat and it's just like a retreat for like social justice basically and to talk about like how to actualize social justice work and they feed you five, six times a day. I gained like 25 pounds in one weekend. And it's great and there's a lot of tears and laughter. I had a great time.

Zoe: Oh, that's wonderful. That is so wonderful. That you would characterize that as kind of the first time that you had a day of happiness was after Ignite or at Ignite?

Veronica X: Yeah, during Ignite. Like was very much like a turning point in my experience at UGA.

Photo description: This is a selfie that features eleven people. The photographer has eyebrows raised with a slight smirk. The casually dressed group standing behind him are smiling and posing for the photo.

Mercy acknowledged the important role of dining hall staff as being impactful supporters of her. She indicated,

Mercy: Oh, also I met some great people work in the dining halls. Like staff and stuff.

Zoe: Oh, tell me about it. Yeah.

Mercy: They – like I said, I will talk and it just so happens that they will talk too. So we – we're on a first name basis and it's like, Mercy, how's it going, how's that class that you said you had a test in, project due, blah, blah, blah, it's past the –

Zoe: Just hey how are you doing?

Mercy: Yeah.

Zoe: They're part of your life.

Mercy: Yeah, very much so.

These relationships with mothers, sisters, brothers, roommates, high school friends, university staff, faculty, partners, co-workers turned family, grandmothers, dining hall staff,

mentors and online support groups comprise the inner circle of support for students. These relationships are described as dependable, reciprocal, active and not passive, built on challenging and pushing one to be their best. These relationships make an investment. They are worth being fought for. They are said to be selfless, familiar, soothing, open, heartwarming, sharing commonalities, filled with discernment and sensitivity to their unique needs. Black and Educated put it this way, “I would say whenever I had issues and I sought help, I felt as though they didn’t provide just the bare minimum of what you would expect, they really tried to work hard and do follow-ups to make sure that I got to the point where I needed to be.”

In summary, these relationships help Black students to not only survive in the predominantly white institutional context. They help them to thrive. Felicia sums it up this way,

> We're each other's support systems. And we're all like really prospering. We all push each other to do better. So, for instance, we're all different majors. Pamela and Diane are the closest in major type. I'm in Terry. Renee's in Grady. Naomi and Joanna are like health promotions or something like that. I'm not too good at the whole science thing. I don't know, but they're closer-ish. So, Naomi was an orientation leader this past summer. We're like, "Yes!" And I'm a Terry ambassador, and Renee's she's working the games, the football games with ESPN. She's production assistant, and Diane’s in all these leadership programs. We're just all thriving. That's how we like show our love for each other. We push each other to do better constantly.

Proverbial and Thematic Findings

Here for a Reason

Love, like rain, does not choose the grass on which it falls.

– South African Proverb

The majority of respondents represented that they were here for a reason. God, the ancestors, and/or serendipity had drawn them precisely to this experience. Often these talented students had their selection of institutions to attend. However, for many finances weighted heavily in the final decision. For those who the financial need and their enthusiasm to attend the University aligned, they entered into the environment with hopeful exuberance feeling both drawn to and a sense of fit in this place. For those that would have made a different choice if financial resources were unlimited, they described focusing on the value of their selection for the educational product, connections, and important lessons learned outside of the classroom that they would need moving forward in life. Both students who wanted to be here and those that may have made a different choice if the circumstances were different described encounters that reinforced their choice as good and right for them. They were indeed here for a reason. They identified and shared stories of those signs – unexpected encounters, occurrences of good fortune, and positive experiences that were said to be evidence of that truth. For Jordan, one such occurrence was having randomly assigned roommates that were from the same rural region of the state.

> Yeah. I always thought that was really weird, because myself, and then ... It was six of us in the apartment, but four of us were from South Georgia. Because when I looked at the demographics, 'cause I'm a stats major, I'm really into demographics. And they were like, 5 percent of the students from Georgia are from South Georgia. And I'm just like, what

are the odds that we would all end up in the same ... It was really weird, and I really thought about that second semester, I was like, this is obviously where God wanted me to be, because I have these people from South Georgia, when the odds are not saying that we should be in the same apartment, due to random ... It was so weird.

Sasha characterized it this way:

I went to a program where they brought back the first Black freshman class.Yeah. And I think sitting in that event was like I'm here for a reason and I like can't take this for granted and I'm supposed to be here, you know what I mean? And so I think going to stuff like that was a – so I never really felt like I'm not supposed to be here, it was always like, I'm here for a reason and no one can tell me that I'm not. That's why I hate the whole like – this is kind of going off topic, but I hate the whole HBCU versus PWI discussion because I'm like, there are people who literally went through people like yelling at them and riding them to be able to come here, so I'm supposed to be here. So like I never really felt like I wasn't supposed to be here, but I think there were definitely times where I was like, they might not think I'm supposed to be here or they probably think I got in because I'm Black, not because I had an amazing GPA or whatever –

Felicia recounts the story of knowing that this was the place for her:

Felicia: I've lived in Philly my whole life, so 17 years. My parents were going to move down here to Georgia, the metro Atlanta area after I graduated high school. We'd already bought the house two years before we were going to move down here. We gutted it, we were kind of trying, we were making it look nice, exactly how we wanted it. And so we were back and forth down her all the time, and we'd drive, so we had a car and things like that. It was the middle of my junior year at this

point and I still hadn't figured out where I wanted to go to school, and my dad was like, "Why don't we do just college tours down there. You know you want to go somewhere that's hot." I was thinking about going to the West Coast and stuff like that. But then I was like, ooh, I won't be coming home. I would only come home twice a year, and that's not okay. We decided to do some college tours down here and UGA was one of our pit stops, and we actually got really lucky cause it was in the middle of the summer. It was July, and the bus tours are going, but they're pretty packed in the summertime because that's when most people go. There were two open spots, and me and my dad hopped on and while I was on the bus tour, I remember I was passing Sanford, and I was like this is where I want to go to school.

Zoe: You just knew.

Felicia: I just knew.

Zoe: Was that a feeling, like what was that knowing like?

Felicia: It was definitely a feeling. It was definitely one of those gut instincts, so like you feel it in the pit of your stomach. This is where I'm meant to be, like I see myself here, and I hadn't been that with a lot of the other schools I've visited. Like, oh yeah it's nice. I did soccer camp out at University of Southern California. I was like, it's nice but I don't see myself here, you know. At UGA I really felt like I could see myself being here for four years and growing as a person.

Then at that point, my dad was like, "Okay, you know it. We're going to make the necessary moves." And we moved down there a year early actually, so I could

establish in-state residency and graduate from a Hope Zell Miller approved high school.

Zoe: Y'all better plan.

Felicia: I got to. So, that's how I ended up at Georgia.

Zoe: Outstanding.

Felicia: Just knew this is where I needed to be.

Simply put, for many Black students in this predominantly white environment they share Lynn's sentiment that "I always know that wherever God places me then that is where I'm meant to be and there's where I'm meant to grow."

Finding Your Niche: An Anecdote to Being Outnumbered and Overwhelmed

If you want to go fast go alone. If you want to go far go together.

– African Proverb

"I wouldn't say there are specific times I don't feel I don't belong, but I just feel like it's easy to feel overwhelmed and outnumbered" expressed Twenty-one. While this feeling of overwhelm certainly included the impact of being a Black student in a predominantly white institutional setting, it was also linked to other domains of collegiate life and stress. There was, however, an intersectional impact of Blackness when layered on top of what is deemed normalized levels of college stress and strain.

While being Black in America required all students to have some level of exposure to their own Blackness in the context of whiteness, for some the demographics of their high school environment served a protective function, particularly during one's freshman year transition to college. Students that attended very diverse schools that were majority or had equal distributions of Black and other students of color, encountered varying degrees of culture shock, emotional

fatigue, and isolation during their freshman year. Black students for whom the student demographic of the University mirrored that of their high school came into this experience with meaningful and transferable experience navigating and negotiating their existence side by side with white people. The practice and savvy gained in high school equipped them with compensatory strategies that proved helpful in this context. There was simultaneously respect for master code-switchers and a growing fatigue with the need to do so. For some, this landed them decidedly against the strategy. Well illustrating this is Felicia's experience. She attended a private school in Philadelphia until her senior year of high school. She and her family moved to Georgia so that she could graduate from a Zell Miller eligible high school since she had selected UGA as her college of choice. She recounts:

Felicia: Yeah, and then as far as the transition goes, I feel like I helped people who it wasn't normal for to transition.

Zoe: Oh, say more about that.

Felicia: So I was like for instance ... not so much Nancy. Nancy's been pretty good about the whole code switching thing, but people who it was a shock to come around so many White people and they were like ... it wasn't so much a fear, but it was an uncomfortableness, I kind of helped them to understand honestly, they don't really care much, so you shouldn't care much, but I mean go with what you're comfortable with. I kind of helped them to be more comfortable in that environment. Even with me being on the soccer team, working people into the fold of that kind of comfortability.

The transition for October was startling. As valedictorian of her high school class, when conceptualizing her collegiate experience she did not plan on daily indignities being part of that.

For many Black students one of those indignities comes in the form of people not sitting next to them on the campus transit buses.

October: I feel like freshman year, like I was saying with the bus, that stuff caught me off guard, because I was just like –

Interviewer: Yeah, because you don't account for that, you wouldn't know to plan for that.

October: Exactly. I was like never – I mean, high school, I don't care what nobody says, high school is not the real world. So I come out here and I'm in the real world and I'm just like, while y'all acting like this? I was like shook, I was like, okay, well then don't sit by me, I didn't want to sit by you anyway. So just stuff like that had me shook freshman year and it was just like, all I had were my friends.

For Sasha it is all about being comfortable:

Sasha: I think it just goes back to being comfortable. Being that I came from DeKalb and like my school – at my school, it was 99 percent Black. I think it's important for me to have a core group that like looks like me, I mean, and like that understands me. And not that I'm – like I've definitely had diverse experiences from like gymnastics and other things I did, but I just think that I came from a place where everybody was confident in their Blackness, like there was no question of it, and so I think coming here where there's not that many Black people, like sometimes it's just refreshing to be around a group where you can just be yourself and talk how you want and be confident in your Blackness and like – like it is what it is, you don't have to feel like I'm the only Black person in this class or like I'm one of, I don't know, five and like you kind of – I don't know, you don't have to

change what's natural I guess. So I think it's kind of cool that I have this core group where like sometimes we can just chill and like –

Many students find themselves code switching and altering their speech patterns, volume, and other behaviors so as to not reinforce tropes of performative Blackness and stereotypes. As she talked about the importance of the community of support that she had created, Sasha went on to illuminate some elements of that:

Sasha: I think like one of the – I guess, I think people tend to do naturally, especially in college, is like how you speak. Of course the codeswitching, being really aware of like your slang and things like that. and then also just like my opinions, I sometimes am like, mmm, let me tone it down because I don't want to – I mean, and not always, I think it depends on like the class or the environment, but sometimes I find myself being like this is probably – okay, for expect, I'm a – like I said, I'm an RA. Last year I wore my little Black Lives Matter pin on my book bag and my Georgia pin and all this stuff and this year I was like, I would hate for one of my residents to not want to speak to me or like ask me a question or get to know me because I have a Black Lives Matter pin on my book bag and they perceive it as some type of radical thing where I'm literally just saying, Black Lives Matter. You know what I mean? So things like that or certain things I'm like, okay, let me tone this down so they can get to know me and not like assume certain things, which I mean like, I'm sure it goes both ways, because you know like if I see someone – I don't know, probably going to be like, uh, okay, conservative. But so – you know, so like I think it's just being hyperaware, I think college, people get really passionate about like their ideologies and I think that

> sometimes I'm like hyper aware of like how I might come off if I say certain things, especially if I'm the only person or like one of few because then I've got to try to defend a whole race.

Finding your niche with Black UGA.

For many students, finding community with other Black, students of color, or likeminded students was both part vaccine protecting against and anecdote to cure feelings of isolation and overwhelm. BUGA, pronounced bug-ah, or Black UGA was for some the place that they found their niche. Regardless of if students found community in BUGA they had opinions about the usefulness, relevance, and inclusive nature (or lack thereof) of this niche. When asked to define BUGA and by extension the commonly known student center gathering for BUGA, Tate Time, this is what students had to offer. Felicia described the connectedness of the group, "the Community of Black Students at UGA. We call ourselves BUGA. Cool. So, when BUGA 19, we were all very close. We had a whole group message with like 200 people." Veronica X adds that "Tate Time is a time of day where all the Black students at UGA meet in Tate to be publically Black and talk about Black things and do Black stuff." The definition of BUGA and Tate time may be where the agreement ends. Black students see themselves as in or not in BUGA. Membership isn't on the basis of Blackness alone it's a choice to affiliate socially such that it was not unusual to have students comment that they are in BUGA or have no connection what so ever. Nina clarifies some of the critique,

> People think it's like a high school and it's cliqued up. At the end of the day, it kind of is. What it means to people, it's a place, it's our support system. It's a place for us to go to feel included in the midst of all the sea of white, we have this little Black sea here. This is what it is. People take it too seriously, I think. It's not super serious but you can't demean

> it either. You can't be a Black person demeaning it because that just ... It just looks bad all around, you understand what I'm saying? People do that all too often and try to call it out for what it is like being a high school. I really feel like it's the people who aren't always super social. I'm not saying ... I have socially awkward moments. I have social anxiety too. I get really nervous sometimes too. I can definitely understand those feelings but I can also understand what BUGA has done for me. It's given me a lot of confidence on this campus.

The social nuance of BUGA has long been discussed among Black students and has even been the focus of a student produced documentary. Black & Educated describes her impression of the complexity:

> So I think maybe about a year or two ago Black UGA or BUGA, they had a documentary about what it meant to be Black at UGA and also around Tate Time which is supposed to be a specific time of day, I'd imagine around lunch time, but through some students it's kind of an all-day thing where they sit in our student center in a particular area and they just exist and they talk to each other. So they had a documentary because they are – it's kind of like an ongoing gap now between upperclassmen and lowerclassmen where the – especially freshmen coming in feel as though they can't approach upperclassmen because – which I've experienced. When you go there, it's not a, hey, welcome, you look new because we can definitely tell the new students on campus. They have like a resting face that's not very pleasant or encouraging. So they kind of did a documentary to talk about kind of the purpose of it and how people felt being at UGA.

Lynn was ambivalent about BUGA. It has benefited her, but she also saw challenges with it as a construct.

I think it's stupid. I think it's very, it has a negative connotation already to it because it comes off as like we're gonna limit. Cause there's so many other African American students on campus who have no association with that at all. None. I mean it's not stupid because it's like a place where everyone can go but it, the vibe there can be stupid. You walk in and you feel like no one wants to talk to you. Everyone is just like looking at you and you're like, okay that's weird. We're already like a small percentage. That shouldn't necessarily occur. How I got my core friends from involving myself with it, yes.

Some incarnation of BUGA has been around ever since there was a critical mass of Black students present. Whether students choose to affiliate or not, it's raison d'être is clear. It provides a public and highly visible pathway to community and connection for Black students.

Other routes to finding your niche.

Other meaningful pathways to connectedness and belonging described by participants include a combination of assuming a personal stance of resilient openness, reframing to an inward mindset that addresses their own insecurities in ways that allow them to show up more fully and confidently – empowered to do so by having safe others to do that personal work in community with, and by using the formal institutional mechanisms for students in marginalized identities – student organizations and identity based offices. Examples of all three such pathways were captured by Twenty-one, Nina, and Sasha. Twenty-one comments on being open to relationships not based on skin color, but character and assuming a willingness to teach others about expanding their often limited and stereotypical definition of Blackness:

Twenty-one: I just try to open eyes where possible, 'cause it makes me feel better if I can get these people to just stop thinking there's only very few limited specific ways that Black people are supposed to act. I know the media portrays this, I know the

music that Black rappers make, you're like, "They're talking about drugs, sex, money, this, that, that's all that's on their mind. This Black guy dated my friend and he broke her heart. I'm not going to date Black men because all Black men are like that." It goes beyond that. It goes to the character of the person. So just trying to navigate through that, if I find someone, they interest me, we can make a connection, we can laugh about something, and if they bring up those things and I try to be like, "Everyone's not like that," and they're open to listening, then we can progress from there. But if you really want to keep this narrow-minded idea of people, I don't want to talk to you or tolerate that.

Zoe: So what have you found to be true? Have people been generally willing to expand their definition? Or are people holding fast to this narrow construct?

Twenty-one: To an extent, they'll expand. But then they'll regress and go back to where they were. So at one point, I was like I finally got through, I understand this. And then someone thought that they were by themselves and I hear a conversation, "Black people just got in," I was like okay, we're back to square one. Were you just acting as if it got through to you to pacify me, because I don't want you to pacify me. If you want to think like that, fine. I can't get past it. It's always going to be in the back of my mind, but okay, they don't really care, I guess I'll just focus on other aspects of the relationship that we have here, and just not get to where that person could go from being a friend, or a roommate, or a classmate, to a reliable. You can just say where you are and that's fine with me.

Zoe: Have people gone in the opposite direction? They were a friend, or a roommate or a classmate, and they make clear that they weren't in contention to be a reliable?

Twenty-one: Yeah.

Zoe: But has it gone the other direction to where you're like, "I can't with you and I won't with you?"

Twenty-one: Yes. So you take the positive that you can get. Anytime I'm working on a project with some people and they're like, "Twenty-one, what do you think from your perspective?" Because some people will acknowledge that we're different, but they won't put it in a negative sense. And if you ask me my perspective instead of just assuming, I'm so grateful. Thank you. You get the picture. You take the positive for what you can get it, and it's okay. You don't have to be a majority. Just be you. You'll find those people as you mesh with, or those people will find you.

Nina knew that doing her own individual work toward self-empowerment and actualization in the safe and supportive community of friends would be the way to connection and belonging. Once she found her way, she could help others find theirs.

> Well, I think that's more about my own individualism. I kind of had to take that for what it was. This environment, I'm not going to be here for too long. Even though America kind of does look like this, I definitely have my safe space like I do have with my friends. I kind of had to look at myself. First of all, deal with my own insecurities besides what I have to deal with here. Get over those and then deal with these. My focus, more so now, is focused on others. I'm fine. I'm going to be fine. At the end of the day, I'm going to be okay. I know that for myself. I can't be sure of that for other people. I'm going to try to help them and help them figure out what I figured out.

Sasha feels most like she belongs at Black university events.

> I'd like to feel like I belong at like regular UGA events. But I think – it just goes back to being comfortable. You know what I mean, those like – the fashion shows, or either like spoken words or whatever event is happening and supporting my friends performing, those moments are kind of cool because it's like we have a space to be ourselves, to showcase our talents, our art, our thoughts, whatever. And I think those are the times where I felt like this is really cool, this is like where – this is a space where we belong.

Even when the organizational structure creates divides, students find community as described by Black & Educated:

> I think the orgs that I got involved in, regardless of where you are, they're always going to be organizations that identify with you in some way and you can meet great people there. So for me, it wasn't necessarily the Black orgs, but Caribsa which is the Caribbean Student Association which is under the umbrella of International Student Life which, to me, kind of doesn't make any sense which has also helped to create a divide between the Caribbean students and the Black students because it's more of a – we barely have international students in our org and I don't feel as though when we have international Caribbean students who come, I don't necessarily feel like there is a connection.

So while the institution does provide some mechanisms and structures that lead to connectedness and belonging. Given the rigidity and divisive impact of institutional organizational charts, strikingly students are the primary architects of their most meaningful support networks. Additionally, once they find community and connection, many students feel a sense of responsibility to help other Black students in finding the same. Lynn describes:

> Lynn: I need to get a nice journal and keep up with so much. Because I feel like on a daily basis, there is so much that I experience and I'm like, wow! This has got to

be able to help somebody. I just feel like there's a purpose for me to impact at least someone if it's not someone in family like more than ever or with someone that I don't even know. Despite everything that goes on, despite anything that I'm going through, I know that my close people are going to, I'm going through; I can always keep the idea that we're getting through this together. We're here. We have the support we need. If it's ten people or if it's ten thousand people, we can find the people who actually will support us and will work into us to get out the greatest output.

Zoe: That's what so striking to me, is that this kind of network of support is constructed by you. That's not anything the institution did.

Lynn: Right.

Zoe: That is – you all built that.

Lynn: Cause who else was gonna do it.

Classroom Exclusion: On the Inside and Made to Feel Out

There is no difference between mother and baby snakes, they are equally poisonous.

– Malawian Proverb

Having multiple pathways to connectedness and belonging is of critical importance because something that study participants made abundantly clear is that contrary to the anomaly of Sasha's beautiful experience in Swahili, class generally does not offer one such pathway. Fifty-eight percent of the students interviewed responded that a class or a classroom assignment executed with a group of classmates was the source of their feeling that they did not belong. It was the single most frequently mentioned venue where Black students felt excluded to the greatest extent. Freshman chemistry, First Year Seminars, English 1102, Marketing, Calculus,

and more were cited. Veronica X did not mince words in making it clear that they felt no sense of belonging "in every single classroom ever, at this university." Faculty and peers contributed to this feeling, each in unique ways. Veronica X described the faculty influence:

> Teachers are just like weird around Black students. I remember when we were like – somehow got on the – I was in one class and she was talking about how she – when she was teaching in elementary schools, the kids broke out in lice or something and she was like, yeah, certain parents think that their kids can't get lice, but like all kids can get lice and she looked at the three Black students without saying our names, she was like, either you can get lice and even you can get lice, and even you can get lice. And I was just like, you're so weird. That's just like a weird thing to do. I guess I haven't had like overt racism or anything from professors, just like really weird realizations.

However, more than just being weird – professors have a deep impact on student emotional and intellectual labor beyond the role of student – something more akin to teaching the teacher. Veronica X goes on to describe one such encounter:

> Teachers say crazy – I should stop saying crazy when I don't mean crazy – say wildly insensitive shit and I was in my educational diversity class or whatever and I love this professor, don't get me wrong, he's always sweet, so gracious, but I think maybe week one I was like – we have to do like a discussion post or something and I was like, how when people use the phrase everyone is an immigrant that's really like a erasure of like people's whose ancestors were Black slaves and like indigenous folks. And his mind was blown and I was really like, you're like 55, 60 years old –That never occurred to you? And he was like Jewish so I just expected more. I was like, I don't – I don't understand why this is a mind-blowing concept to you. And he was like, well I just never would have

thought of that. And I was like, okay. He's so cute in the sense that he – he was always very willing to accept new ideas and he was a great professor and I was just like, why is this new?

Not surprisingly, faculty members can either bolster or hinder student classroom engagement and feelings of belonging. Jasmine describes a bolstering effect:

Jasmine: I think when you like are in classes with – when you're not the only Black person, you kind of like feed off of other people's energy, like I don't know, and I think for – I know also first semester of freshman year I took an English – my English 1102 class, only Black girl but not the only minority, definitely the only Black girl and my teacher – like I don't know if he was just trying to make an active effort to make sure I was good or if he just like, that's just who he was and he just really liked me as a person or something, but he just kind of like – whenever I did something well, he would shout it out or like he would always say my full name and like when I – we did like these family history projects where we use ancestry.com and of course I couldn't find anything.

Zoe: That's an interesting project because everybody ain't on there.

Jasmine: Everybody else was just like, oh yeah, my great great somebody was related to George Washington and I was like, uh – so I think he was – he took an interest in my – the research that I was doing and the little stuff that I was able to cough up, he was like, I feel like very affirming about it and just kind of like at this time Black people were such and such and such. He was like, yeah, and you know there's this author that writes about that and says – you know, he would kind of like add to what I was saying, so I was like, okay. This might not be that bad. I

don't know, like I was the only Black girl but that class made me feel – I kind of felt like a star, like a celebrity. I don't know. Yeah, that was –

Zoe: So he – so would you say – so how – as I'm making sense of what you're sharing, like he really affirmed and validated your experience – not only like your lived experience, but like when you think about ancestry and even offered an academic perspective to say like, yeah, there's a lot of literature written by XYZ person.

Jasmine: Right. And he like – I think he had some Black people in his family. Like he even did – he kind of – he was doing like his own family research and he was talking about how like he has a large group of family in Liberia.

Zoe: That's where my people are from. Oh my gosh.

Jasmine: And so he took like – he had this big picture, right, like he was in the middle, his white family on this side and then he's just like –

Zoe: I think I know the faculty member that you're talking about because he and I met and now his name is escaping me but he wrote a play about – yeah.

Jasmine: I'm curious to see if you –

Zoe: Oh gosh. If you call the name I think I'll remember.

Jasmine: Doe.

Zoe: Yes, that was him. Yes, John. We met. I met him. That's cool.

Jasmine: Yes. That's –

Zoe: So he was fascinated in his own tie and connection to Blackness, and so as you were sharing would offer things too. So how did that feel for you I guess is my –

Jasmine: Yeah, it felt – like it made it like a lot easier to navigate that class. It did kind of make you feel weird because I was – since I didn't know if he was just trying to

like overcompensate to like – because it was obvious that I was the only one. The only Black person, and the only one that couldn't really get much information, so I don't know if that was it, but I couldn't tell so I just kind of like gave him the benefit of the doubt.

Zoe: Way to go, John.

Jasmine: Right. So – yeah, he was just kind of like highlighting my work and calling me by my full name all the time, made me like a teacher's pet almost or something. But I liked that recognition because it made it like – it let my other classmates know that I was –

Zoe: You did not come to play.

Jasmine: Right. Exactly. I'm talented, I take stuff seriously, and I also think I kind of did more than everybody else maybe. They – it was so funny, at the end he was like, oh, I made y'all – I hope y'all know I made y'all do way more than the other classes do, and I was just like – and then this girl beside me, she like laughed, like yeah girl, you actually read 15 books, I didn't do that. I think that helped a lot. I think that was like freshman – In the first semester or the second semester, I think it was – I don't know.

Zoe: So that helped move you along in terms of your sense of like I don't have to try to be like – I'm here, because – like you said, I'm smart, I've worked hard, probably harder than you, and I deserve to be here so you better recognize.

Jasmine: Right.

Classroom exclusion and getting dismissed.

Veronica X highlighted an encounter with a faculty member that significantly hindered their sense of belonging in the classroom. They were publically asked to leave a lecture.

Veronica X: But I was – I recently had a very negative experience with a teacher who basically made me feel like she felt my entire existence was rude and so I kind of have been walking around with that feeling like everyone just perceives me as rude and aggressive.

Zoe: I'm so sorry that that teacher impacted you in that way.

Veronica X: Yeah, she kicked me out of her classroom, it's been a thing.

Zoe: Really?

Veronica X: It's been like a four or five week thing.

Zoe: Would you tell that story?

Veronica X: Yeah. So I was in class and she was explaining this assignment and we were all like – everyone in my class was confused. I asked a question and I think she answered it and was like, do you understand? And I was like, umm, no, not really but we can just talk about it later. And she was like okay and I was like okay. And then she was like, are you angry that you're confused? And I was like, no, I just don't understand what's going on because we're going back from assignments to due dates to assignments to due dates and we were doing all of this verbally so like my brain just couldn't draw a picture, draw a chart in my head. And so then she was like, okay, we can talk about it after class and I was like, okay. And then other students kept asking questions and I think I asked another question and she seemed like – I asked another question and then another student asked a question

and she was like, guys, it's not that confusing. And I was like, not to her, to the person sitting next to me, but from other students' accounts, she heard me say it. And I was like, well if we're all confused then it's confusing. And I didn't see this, but from what my other classmates told me, they saw her get really upset and she didn't say anything and then she went into the lecture and she asked is leadership an art or a science? And she wanted us to choose one and I said, well why can't it be both? And she said, I never said that it couldn't be both, I just said, pick either one. And I was like –

Zoe: It's implied.

Veronica X: Yeah. Well I didn't say that, I was just like, okay. And she was like, just know that I've noticed you being snippy back there. And I was like, I don't understand where that's coming from. And she was just like, just know that I've noticed it and if you continue you can leave my classroom. And I was like, I genuinely don't understand where any of these comments are coming from and she was like, see that's exactly what I mean, you can leave, and so I got up and I left. And I came to the resource center crying and just confused and like angry and I talked to Rashad about it and he helped me draft an email and stuff to send to her and she replied and that didn't really satisfy me. So I sent her another email and she didn't reply. I sent her another email, she didn't reply. So then the dean got involved and we were supposed to set up a mediated meeting with me and that professor. Mind you, I sent her three emails in two weeks and she didn't reply to them. And I guess she was giving the person who was trying to set up the meeting like a hard time with giving time availability. So that was like a whole thing and then four

weeks after the incident, she finally came to me after class and was like, hey, do you have a minute to talk? Like four weeks later, like this happened like a month ago. And we talked about it I guess and I felt better after we talked about it but she really made it about saying that I was being unprofessional and my conclusion that I took away from that conversation was that she equated professionalism with kindness and so to her I was rude because in her eyes I wasn't professional and my rebuttal to that was like, I'm a student trying to learn, this is not let's be professional time, I'm not the professor, you're the professor. I'm not out in internship. And basically she just – she basically was like my tone was rude and that my mannerisms are rude and like stuff that I feel like I can't change about myself, and so I really walked away from that meeting feeling like my existence was offensive and I just felt like trash and it sucked but she came across to me as one of those Black people who –

Zoe: Wait, she's Black?

Veronica X: She's Black.

Zoe: Oh God. That is not how I had that playing out in my head.

Veronica X: Plot twist.

Zoe: What?!

Veronica X: Yes. Plot twist. And I told her, I said, you know, I told her, I was like, you know, I've never been kicked out of class in what the 15 years that I've been a student in classes. And she was like, do you want to know why I think that is? Because they already assume that we're sassy and so they let it go. I was like, I don't think that's what that was about.

Zoe: Oh, I thought I was making sense of this but now I'm – oh, my head is spinning.

Veronica X: Mine. Too. Mine too. And she basically tried to hit me with that, oh, I used to be you and the road you're going down is not going to get you anywhere.

Zoe: I'm getting hot, I'm like – I'm physically – I'm feeling this tension in my body.

Veronica X: Four weeks of my life, Zoe…that I will never get back.

Zoe: And you're going to class all the while this subtext is playing out and you're emailing her and she's not replying.

Veronica X: And she never replies. She doesn't reply to me.

Zoe: And then you're in class.

Veronica X: Yes.

Zoe: So what is it like to muster to go to that class, particularly right after it happened, that next class meeting?

Veronica X: I didn't look at her, I felt very like on edge and like tense because I got kicked out of class and I still didn't have any understanding as to why. And so I just – I'm in an art class too, so I just did my art homework quietly as class was happening. And then the class after that, I was pissed so I went from being timid and scared to being pissed the fuck off and I decided I was going to ask whatever questions I wanted to ask, I'm going to be as annoying – not annoying, but I'm going to ask whatever thin question comes into my head. And I just wanted her to pick a fight with me. And that was when she finally decided that she wanted to say something and she just gave me that impression that she is real about the respectability politics and I'm not and I told her that. And this is another thing that pressed me, was she was like – in my email – because she made me being kicked out about

professionalism, right? And so then when we finally had our face-to-face meeting, she addressed the fact that I had replied to her professionally – and I was like, you know, I ascribe to professionalism when I need to, when I'm at work or when I'm out at my internship, but other than that, I don't ascribe to the notions of professionalism because they're rooted in whiteness –

Zoe: You better name it, yes.

Veronica X: They're rooted in heteronormativity.

Zoe: All the things.

Veronica X: They're rooted in gender roles and I don't do it. And then her reply to that like in person was like, I don't know if that works on your other professors, but that's not going to work on me. And I was like –

Zoe: What does she mean by that?

Veronica X: I think what she meant was –

Zoe: Because she's Black – I don't – because all those things that you said are true, all that is true.

Veronica X: I don't know what she meant by that. Maybe she thought I was trying to like sound superior or something, I don't know. But that's straight up the truth, like when I went to my internship on my first day I wore a button-up shirt, slacks, and leather jacket and the white girl who I love, she's great, but she wore a t-shirt dress and leggings and converse and my internship supervisor said that she was dressed more upscale than I was. And I'm like, that is all about professionalism being rooted in gender roles, like that's not – like clearly if you laid those two outfits next to one another –

Zoe: No, and the embodiment of whiteness and the impact of that. So on a Black body, I don't look professional, but put lesser quality on a white body and certainly it is. I'm sorry.

Veronica X: You can go fight her, I can fight <Inaudible>.

Zoe: I'm like I'm just so –

Veronica X: Rashad had to talk me down so much.

Zoe: Yeah.

Veronica X: I was like – because she's not much older than me, so I was like –

Zoe: Do you think she caught herself because she subscribes to respectability politics, like trying to school you or take you – be harder on her own? You know what I mean, to like –

Veronica X: I think she – yeah, I think she was –

Zoe: – I want you to –

Veronica X: – trying to be harder on me because I'm Black and she "used to be me" and saw how hard -

Zoe: – and wants to see you – yeah.

Veronica X: But that's still fucked up.

Zoe: No, you're right, you're absolutely right.

Veronica X: Just because you're a sellout – I don't want to say sellout, but just because that's the path you chose to go down –

Zoe: There are many paths.

Veronica X: Exactly.

Zoe: I'm really sorry that happened to you.

Veronica X: Thank you, I appreciate that. But, the dean's office was great in kind of response to it.

Zoe: That's good, that's really good to know.

Veronica X: And basically the dean straight up told me, she was like, unless you're physically threatening someone, no one can kick you out of class. And I was like, okay, that's good to know.

Veronica X's dismissal from a class that she had every right to be part of is both problematic and complex. There is literature that explores the experiences of Black faculty, particularly Black women faculty, in PWI environments. While not the focus of the current inquiry, readers are encouraged to hold the complexity of both parties holding multiple marginalized identities as well as the role of white surveillance as a legitimizing force through the observation of peers and involvement of the dean while considering this situation for both student and professor.

Classroom exclusion via a failed connection.

October, the valedictorian of her high school class, failed a class freshman year. She attributes much of the difficulty she experienced that ultimately resulted in her failing the course to her challenges communicating with, feeling comfortable around, and getting support from the faculty member. She describes the distinct feeling that she did not belong in that class and the disdain she felt radiated from the faculty member in their interactions in the following way:

> The fall semester of my freshman year I took a calculus class which I failed that class, I've never failed anything before in my life, so that was a big wakeup call. I was like, wow. I want to retake the class just because for self like you know, because I know that I can do great in it, but it was just the professor. I was like one of the only girls in the class. Second, I was one of two Black girls in the class and – one of two Black people in the

class, it was me and then my roommate. She withdrew, she was like, no, I can't do this, this is ridiculous, no. and she has to take the class, so this is for her major. At that time, it was for my major but I changed my major – so now it's like not even relevant to me, it's just on my transcript being an F. I've never had an F in my entire life on anything. So this is like, I've been – like literally that's been something I've been like dealing with mentally, that's been stressing me out, because I'm just like, I've only told so many people because it's just like this little shame kind of like, dang, how do you go from valedictorian and then your first semester you get a whole like F. So I was like – so I'm sitting there and I was in that class and I think a lot of the reason why I got an F was because I was really uncomfortable in that class, once she left, like we sat by each other, once she left –It was just me. And it was just like, okay, I'm sitting in a little class with nothing but all these white boys and these Asian boys and then maybe like this one white girl – no, there were two white girls and one of them dropped. So there's this other white girl, but I mean, I didn't sit by her, I didn't know her. So I was just like, okay. I made friends with this one boy, he was – he's like half Hispanic and Black, so he's multiracial, so I was friends with him and he was doing well in the class sort of, I mean, he was doing better than I was. I mean like just like being in class was like – the professor, he's like a white guy and I don't know, he talked like an astrophysicist and I'm just like, dude, like a lot of people – first of all, I mean, I wasn't the only person that was doing bad in the class, a lot of people were doing bad, but I just felt worse because I was just like, okay, I'm here – I went to his office hours and like his office hours were like the same thing, like he's just talking like Einstein, I'm just like, look man, I don't know any of this stuff. I don't know what you're talking about, you know? I just feel like every time I went to his

> office hours it's kind of like, wow, this girl don't know nothing, this girl – this Black girl don't know nothing, I'm not even about to sit here and like – I'm not about to dumb this down for her, she should know this stuff already, you know, I'm just like – and he said, what did you get in calculus one? I got an A in calculus one. He was like, that's weird. I found out I had an F like the day before Christmas, so I was depressed, I didn't even tell – I've never told my mom or my dad I got an F because I'm not telling them that, nope. So they think that I just – I don't know what they think, but anyways. So – it's not their business anyway, but you know, I was just like depressed that whole week and then like going in that next semester.

Classroom exclusion by peers.

Interactions with non-Black peers were described as ranging from welcoming, to benign neglect, to full on disdain and exclusion. The welcoming relationships were often described as connected to facilitated or guided programs. IMPACT Service Breaks, Leadershape, and the Ignite Social Justice Retreat were all noted by Black students as being experiences where people were open, willing to listen, and provided opportunities for Black students to engage with peers (along with staff and faculty) that seem to care. Sasha describes the benign neglect she has experienced in this way:

> Just little things like low-key like ignoring – I don't want to say ignoring, but like seeing through me. I think it kind of goes back to classes too, but like I don't know, like it – trying to have like – like having a group thing and not really addressing – good example, and so it was funny. I couldn't really be mad, I'll explain why, but we were in a lab and it was me and an Indian girl and two white girls and we were just like talking, getting to know each other, and having a group conversation with the four of us and then at one

point one of the white girls look at the other white girl and goes, so did you rush this year? And they just started talking about Greek Life and it was odd to me because like we were legitimately having a conversation with four people and you brought up a topic and not only did you not ask the other two people at the table, but you specifically looked at the one other white person and continued that conversation like we weren't sitting there and I couldn't really be mad because like, no, I'm not going to rush a white sorority, but also like, we were having a group conversation and maybe I joined a service org or a business frat or like something and you didn't even like – you legit just – you know what I mean. And so I think that there have been a few times where it's like, they're unaware of their natural preference or that not every – that doesn't apply to everyone. But yeah, I feel like people – I think it kind of goes back to like – not intentionally, but just seeing through you, that people create their groups and I'm just kind of like — I'm pretty calm, pretty to myself, so if it doesn't feel natural I'm not going to push it and I don't really – like it feels very – I don't know, like I'm talking to you because you're my classmate, not like I genuinely am getting to know you and build relationships. I was just kind of aware in that class, I feel like a lot of people like finding their crew and I'm just like – okay. So, I don't know, we'll see.

For their contribution to the more active forms of exclusion of Black students, non-Black peers frequently put their bias on display by sharing their belief that Black students are affirmative action admits to the institution. Black & Educated recounts with a dry wit fit for stage the following:

B & E: Oh, I tell people this all the time because it kind of stuck with me. So my freshman year I had chemistry. In high school, I had taken chemistry, like I took

chemistry honors and then I took AP chemistry, so I was kind of well-versed, so coming in, we had a chemistry lab – freshman chem lab for the first semester and our lab teaching assistant was explaining the different materials in the lab which I thought was – I thought it was a little unnecessary because most people at that point have experience with chemistry or biology and so I knew all of the instruments already and he was talking about lighting a Bunsen burner which I have done multiple times, I knew everything, and so there were two white guys, they were sorority girls which at UGA is a very interesting experience, interacting with them. But they were whispering about Black students and they were talking about how Black students only got in because of affirmative action which they heard and I thought was crazy because they didn't know what an Erlenmeyer flask was or a beaker and I was – I knew everything, I knew all the lab equipment and so I was just confused as to why they thought that they belonged to be there but they didn't know the basics, because even if you – in 5th grade we learned – like they have printouts. You learn this at the youngest of ages even if you did – like even if you did a volcano back then, sometimes you have a beaker inside the volcano, so I was just a little flabbergasted because I was just like, so Black people only got in because of affirmative action, so here I am trying to tell you what a flask is and a beaker and a graduated cylinder and yet you say that you're supposed to be here.

Interviewer: In all of your mediocrity.

B & E: So –

Interviewer: Oh, sweet dear ones.

B & E: So that to me was just –

Classroom exclusion in group projects.

Similarly, group projects is another oft utilized scene where the exclusion, social isolation, and silencing of Black students occurs. Nina comments on the social isolation with the following encounter:

Nina: Recently I had a class project. I'm actually very lost in the class. I think I'm going to drop it. My group members, they seem very close. They're really close. They were talking to each other even about the homework or the test and I'm like wow, that's my group. I see them together on campus too. They became friends from the group.

Zoe: Did they know each other before?

Nina: No. No. We're all different grades. Well, I'm saying grades. We're all different levels.

Zoe: So they didn't know each other before. Was the group kind of a random assignment?

Nina: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Zoe: So randomly assigned group and they have all bonded and coalesced and are hanging out, doing homework together.

Nina: It's only four of us.

Zoe: Wow.

Nina: So three of them. I remember I tried to wave at the girl.

Zoe: Did she wave back?

Nina: I didn't necessarily wave. What I'm trying to do is I'm trying to make eye contact before I wave. I'm trying to have you look at me. I'm like we're in the same group, I know you know me. It was kind of weird. She's a little awkward anyway but still.

Zoe: So she never made eye contact? The wave never happened?

Nina: We kind of just walked right past each other. She don't have to tell me twice. I won't do that again. They're super close. This one guy, Casey, he's the guy. It's kind of like guys are more laid back anyway. He's probably the easiest one to talk to out of all of them. The other two are girls. Like I said, if I was white, I probably wouldn't hang out with them anyway. Not to be rude or mean but I feel like they don't want to hang out with me. I'm like oh my gosh. I'm the cool kid, not you.

Felicia's experiences with peers in group projects and internships has silenced and caused her to accept an inferior work product in trying to walk the tight rope of being a Black and a woman with ideas to share and an opinion. She describes the impact of those encounters as follows:

> But I would say the one where I feel like I didn't belong is coming into my marketing classes. Now I'm in my major-specific classes, so my Marketing 4100 and my Marketing 4000 class, I'm one of two in one class and three in another of Black students. And we're all females. There's no Black males. I kind of feel underrepresented. I feel like in that way, what does the rest of my field look like? Who am I competing with? And then definitely make a major impact. So, how will I ever be able to compete knowing that there's so much like ... it's not outright, but there's definitely I've got to climb up a steeper hill than other people. But now I'm in this group project and I'm even talking to my boyfriend about, and I'm like toeing the line of being angry Black woman, cause I want to

get an A, obviously. I don't like group projects, really. I like working with people, but I don't like group projects, necessarily, because I'm putting my grade partially in your hands cause if you're not up to snuff, I'm just going to do it myself. And then when I'm putting my ideas out there, I'm trying to justify my ideas, it's like, "No, no, no, no, no, no." I'm just like, "This is starting to itch, but whenever you guys say something it's like, 'OKay, I can see.'" Like, I try to facilitate more so than ... cause if I say "No," it's like how dare you. And when I get said no to, I'm like okay. That dynamic rubs me the wrong way.

I asked Felicia how she makes sense of that dynamic. She responded,

Felicia: I just ... I don't want to say, I don't want to blame it on race, but it definitely is like it's a stereotype. It's like the Black people in the class don't do anything. Like they are known for taking the backseat, taking the back road, and since I want to take a leading role because that's how I am as a person, regardless of how I'm Black or not, it's like oh you're overstepping your boundaries. Like, you girl, you asking for a little too much, like mmm, what are you talking about? This is not ... you shouldn't be stepping your foot out like that. And I think I can tailor the way I want to present my ideas and ...

Zoe: So the code switch.

Felicia: As much as possible. Yeah. But it's like when I don't get the same treatment back that I receive from other people, like when I try to facilitate other's ideas, I'm like, "Okay, explain to me what you want to do more." And stuff like that. But when I say something, it's like, "Oh no. I don't think we should do that. Cause that's not what he's asking for." And in my head, I'm like it's exactly what he's asking for.

You're not understanding it correctly, but I can't say that. Whereas like you just said it to me. I could say it back, but I don't feel comfortable doing that, and I don't know why I don't feel comfortable doing it, but I just feel like it'd be like not good for me.

Zoe: Cause what do you think would happen on the other side of giving it to them like they give it to you?

Felicia: I'd get a bad peer review.

Zoe: Okay. Okay.

Felicia: And peer reviews factor into the grade.

Zoe: The grade.

Felicia: Because I feel like it's easier for me, like my grade point on that would like, compared to them it's like a slippery slope, like I would do one thing it's like…

Zoe: Aren't peer reviews ... yeah.

Felicia: And like it doesn't necessarily, I don't have to think about it that way, but I have to consider it.

Zoe: You do.

Felicia: And that consideration, it makes me think of it that way. Because I don't want to be lax about it and say something that will in turn be detrimental to me.

Zoe: Yeah, that's understandable. Gosh, what a tricky thing to negotiate.

Felicia: Exactly. Exactly. And that's why I'm talking to my boyfriend, I'm just like, "I really want to say, just screw all of you. I'll just do it myself." Then I'm like, oh you're not being a team player. Here we go. No, I'm just trying to make sure we do it right. And if I were to do that, I would do it myself and be like, I did this on

the side. And they'd be like, so you went off by yourself? I was like, no just to have ideas so I could show you guys in context. It wouldn't be received like that. Whereas, I kind of feel like I have to be receptive to everything that they're ... so it's a slippery slope, like I said.

Zoe: Yeah, it is.

Felicia: And that's kind of like where I feel like I'm sticking out a little bit more, toeing that line of am I doing too much? Or am I not doing enough? There's a smaller area for me to occupy.

Zoe: Well, and other people have drawn those lines, not you. Those are boundaries you've not said are boundaries, but that they are drawing and then acting on.

Felicia: Yeah, and it's like when I try to ... if they were to say something ... I say something, I propose an idea, it's like, "No, I don't think we should do that." I try to explain myself. But when I explain myself, it comes off as me being argumentative and combative instead of trying to show you my thinking. I'm not think that all my ideas need to be on paper, that's not what I'm saying.

Zoe: No, but I have ideas and I get to say them.

Felicia: Exactly.

Zoe: The word combative is triggering for me. I once had a supervisor tell me that I was combative because I dared to have an opinion that differed from the one that she held.

Felicia: Yeah, absolutely.

Zoe: And so saying, like how dare you have an idea, have an opinion that is divergent from my own perspective.

Felicia: Exactly, and this goes back to my internship, too. I had a similar summer-long group project and the thing about my internship is they were headquartered out in Denver, so everybody's in Denver. I was at branch office. So I had to Skype into all the meetings.

Zoe: So were you in Atlanta area or where-

Felicia: Yes.

Zoe: Okay.

Felicia: I was in Alpharetta, so I had to Skype into all the meetings. So that first of all is a disconnect that I didn't like. I like to be close proximity to people and I feel like that is the best way to facilitate conversation, so I couldn't really get my ideas out there, because you know you're interjecting. People are in like a room like with ten people-

Zoe: And they forget about the one person that's on the Skype.

Felicia: Exactly.

Zoe: Yeah.

Felicia: So I'm trying to throw ... I would type in the group chat. No one's looking at the laptop, and then it's hard to interject, because if you say something you're not, first of all barely going to hear you and then it's, they have concrete stuff on the board and like-

Zoe: That you can't see.

Felicia: Oh, we said that already. And I can't see it at all, so we at the culmination of it, I really hated our project at the end. I was like, this could have been so much better. This is terrible. But you can't say that. That's not nice. I know that. I would never

say that. That's what I thought, but I was never gonna say it. So I had to be kind of proud of what we did come up with, and I'm just like, I'm not but okay, I can put on a good face. So we get to Denver and they give us a day before the actual presentation to the executives of the company, big names at the company, so we can practice our presentation all together, because like I said people came from out of town and things like that. So as of that moment, I didn't even have a role in the presentation, and I was like, that's not cool. I'm a marketing major. This is me. This is what I'm supposed to do. I want to help. And I still didn't get anything. I got the sign-off at the end, like, "We thank you for your questions and your time listening to us. Do you have any questions?"

Zoe: How did you feel about that experience?

Felicia: I was so upset. I remember like I had a lengthy conversation with TJ, my boyfriend, about it and I was just like I'm flabbergasted, like you forced me into this role. I tried, I extended myself as much as I could. I was like when I got there, everybody had their slides. I was like, oh can I do transitions between them, you know, so I can get a little more of a speaking part and it looks like I know what we have going on. "Oh we've already kind of factored those in, so we don't really need you to do that. Could you ..." I'm like, oh my gosh, this is terrible. I don't wanna ... because from the outside looking in, it looks like I didn't do anything at all. And even the research and the work that I did do during summer barely got used in the actual presentation. Our presentation was terrible. Compared to the people who were like finalists, I was like this is what I was trying to-

Zoe: Get us to deliver.

Felicia: Get us to go down this road and we did the literal bare minimum. I don't do-

Zoe: And they felt real good about it.

Felicia: Right. I don't hand in subpar work, okay? So that's inexcusable for me, but if I can't invest myself like I want to and I'm being barred from investing myself like I want to, it's like what do I do? It's not a self-pity thing. I don't feel bad for myself. I'm trying and trying and trying and it's not good of for you. Trying is not enough sometimes.

Zoe: So do you feel like the standards are different for your White counterparts?

Felicia: I feel like they get a baseline that's higher than mine. For instance, working with that project in the summer, of course the people in Denver, they were all White so they had more of a say-so first of all. Even if I was there, id be like in the same role as I am in my group project here, toeing that line. I want to, but I don't know, and they're more like affluent background. Like I don't come from the same kind of background. Like I was interning with a Fortune 150 company, like that's a different demographic than people where I come from are used to seeing or even get to. So, that was a ... I've never been barred by that, but you gotta ease it into, cause I don't really know how to ... I learn as I go type of thing. But, I mean, I feel like they had already established a leadership positions before I even had a say-so. I can't even ... We went to Denver twice. Once in the beginning of the year to actually get assigned our teams, and once at the end of the year to present. At the beginning, I try to be, like, when they assigned us our teams we sat at a table together and like, get to know your teammates and stuff like that, and I'm like, okay I'm going to try to be a facilitator and be really out there, you know.

Zoe: The liaison that you are.

Felicia: Exactly.

Zoe: Liaise.

Felicia: I tried, and it's just I get overpowered. It was like a group of 12 of us, I think, so 11 people above you is a hard ladder to climb. Especially when you have men figures who are like, the White male, like I already assume the leadership position. I am the leader. Like, no not necessarily. I wanna have a say-so. But I knew at that point that this is not going to go well. I'm trying and not succeeding already. It's like Day One from introductions, it's like ... we don't relate to you at all. Next. Oh you go there, I know that person, too. And it's just like, I didn't get so much enthusiasm.

Zoe: Just over here.

Felicia: I have interesting stories, too.

Zoe: Yes, yes.

Felicia: But I mean. It's kind of like roll with punches. Like my boyfriend, he gives me really good advice, he's just like you know that it's going to be this way, so you have to practice prevention, so instead of assuming that back row position, you have to be better about trying. Like you say you try, but how hard are you trying? You have to ... and if you know being in that group setting is not going to get you there, you're really good at one-on-one conversations, talk to everyone individually. So that way everyone has an idea of you, they get to know you better, you're in the fold. Okay, like these are little things I can work on.

Classroom exclusion in a study session.

In the classroom and in outside of class dealings with classmates can present tremendous challenges for Black students. Even participating in study sessions becomes potentially fraught as Daydreamer describes in the following experience:

Daydreamer: I just had a situation, what? Two, three weeks ago. A Sunday, where basically I tried to go study with a group of students, and it didn't matter if they wanted me to study or not, it was just the way that they treated me. They could have easily just said, "Hey, sorry, we don't really want to study with you." I would have accepted that more, but the fact that I walked in and you're just like looking at ... I said, "Hey." I said, "Hi." White kids, nothing but white kids, and I'm just like, "Hey, hi, whatever." No one's saying anything. Then I walked to the seat, the room was so empty, but I see a seat available, so I go walk to the seat. This one girl just busts out laughing, just laughing, dying laughing. Of course, I went to the Equal Opportunity Office, telling her, "I feel like that was discrimination." Even if that wasn't their intention, because I'm not psychic, I don't know why they did it. I don't know if it was based on my race, or my gender, which they can't really judge my gender because I'm a male, or I'm a man with the male sex, so you can't really ... Thanks America, whatever. Then it's like with being Black, being gay, all that type of stuff, I don't know. I don't think I'm disabled. I had like a little breakdown before, working through it, but I don't think I show symptoms of being disabled. I don't know what it was about, but I know how it made me feel. The way that it made me feel was that it was a hostile environment, made me feel intimidated, made me feel like I need to leave, blah, blah, blah, so I did. I went to the Equal

Opportunity Office. She was like, "You know ..." I said my whole story, and this is what made me mad about her. I said my whole story, and instead of her saying, "I'm so sorry to hear that, blah, blah, blah," the first thing she ...

Zoe: That happened to you, yeah.

Daydreamer: She said it later, but the first thing she said was, "Nothing you've said is actionable." I was like, "First of all, what's actionable? Are you saying you can't do anything about it?" "Yeah." I'm just like, "Why?" She was like, "Legally, y'all weren't told that y'all had to work together, and they ostracized you. Y'all made a choice. Choosing who you study with is almost as important as choosing who you're friends with." I was like, "That's not the same thing at all. How do you have this job? How?"

Racist or Rude?

The eye never forgets what the heart has seen.

– Bantu proverb

Black students at predominantly white institutions spend a great deal of time, effort, and mental energy thinking about their interactions with white others. They replay these interactions in their minds and repeat them to their support networks. They are often sifting and searching for meaning and the intention of the other. Knowing if one is racist or rude then helps them to assign a schema for the person and future interactions in a way that is self-protective. I asked each participant to complete the statement, “Racism at UGA is like…”. Black and educated noted,

I can't think of anything else but to say it’s just like a pimple on your face that you know needs to be – I guess, popped, even though you shouldn't – that needs to be removed but

you're just going to let it sit there. So you know it needs to – you know it's there, it's not really talked about, you just go about your day, it's not really happening, until I guess – I don't know, maybe it pops and leaves a scar and so now – then you have to talk about, oh, this scar is from a zit that I had that I popped.

Veronica X described that racism at their institution is like a "disgusting infection". When asked how much of the campus body was infected they indicated the following:

Veronica X: I'm going to go with a conservative 85 percent. But honestly, I don't even – I mean like it's a university, it's large, no one's perception of a large university is completely accurate. And, I don't leave Memorial Hall and I think there's a very good reason for that. Like I spend all of my free time across the hall in the resource center and I feel like that's a very telling thing – and like Aderhold, but I have to be at Aderhold.

Zoe: Yeah, so you go where the class is, where you must be, and then you come to the resource center where you want to be.

Veronica X: Yeah. Or like in The Intersection or up at MSP. And that's really all I do at this school.

Zoe: So there are defined safe havens amidst the disgusting infection.

Veronica X: Mhmm.

Jasmine indicated that "Racism [at her institution] is like the bat that only comes out at night." When asked to elaborate she struggled to find the words, but was well aware of the familiar sentiment. She described,

Jasmine: And so what I'm really getting at is like a lot of it is like – I think more so post-election, a lot of it has become more apparent and more like – people are more

afraid to be more out there but I think it's more like hidden, like they're not – it's like hidden behind like – I don't know if this is a word, like cowardice or something. Like it's there but it's never going to be said in your face and never going to – it's kind of like hidden but it's there still.

Interviewer: What are some of the strategies that come to mind when you think about how people hide behind the cowardice. Like how do you see that manifest?

Jasmine: I'm trying to think of a scenario. Saying one thing or like meaning another. I've really had some strange experiences with elevators.

Interviewer: Oh, say more – what happens on elevators?

Jasmine: What was that – I don't even know if this racism, but it's like so unclear and so like – but, I know two times that The Standard – there were like some people waiting – we got to the bottom of the stairs or – no, we went up a floor or something – no, I think we were going down but we like – because we were on the 5th and then there's a ground floor, we stopped somewhere in there and then – so like people were like waiting, a group of white boys like waiting to get on the elevator and then the door opened and it was just us in there, my friends and I, and then all of a sudden it seemed like they wanted to take the stairs. It's like, y'all were clearly waiting for the –

Interviewer: You were clearly waiting for the elevator.

Jasmine: And then – I don't know if this is like people trying to be weird about us, but one guy was like – I think – I don't know, we got on the elevator or whatever and then he was like blocking the numbers or whatever and then – I don't know, I think we just – I think we – the thing stopped and we were like, oh, we never really got a

chance to push the floor that we was on and then he made the comment, oh, you should have just taken the stairs. And I was like, wait, what? I can't remember the full extent, but it was – he was like – that was really like, okay, you take the stairs. And there was another time – this was in Russell like freshman year. I never really knew like it was –

Interviewer: Yeah, you just don't know.

Jasmine: You just can never really know if they're just like rude people or if it's just like – that's what I was saying, it seems like it's like hidden or unclear sometimes.

Interviewer: Yeah, that is – it's tremendously shrouded and you're – it leaves you wondering, did I read that or what just happened?

Jasmine: Yeah, stuff like that. And it – and I think people are more – when people aren't around, they're more likely to be like more open about it, like you might hear – but I don't know. I can't really think of any examples right now, but some I just kind of like know and just understand –

Interviewer: That it's around, it's here. It's happening. Yeah.

Jasmine: Right.

Racist or rude: Reluctant classifications.

Black students often give white people the benefit of the doubt in ambiguous situations – and at times that grace is extended in unambiguous interactions as well. Participants were reluctant to label people racist or acknowledge that they have been impacted by a racist encounter. Felicia assigns the simile of shadow to the concept of racism on campus.

Felicia: Racism at UGA is like a shadow. It's like a ... it's always there when the sun is out and things of that nature, like on a normal day, but completely unacknowledged,

negligible. It's like glossed over. It is ... I feel like it's a microcosm of everything going on in the nation now. People see it. They want to say something about it. They never say anything meaningful and nothing changes. So it's like if you're not a part of it, like if you don't experience it yourself, so what. It gets undermined. Not to say that it's explicit at all time. I've heard horror stories, like people going downtown and getting called the N-word, things of that nature, but I've not experienced that myself so I don't know how to act in that situation. However, that gets undermined. The one thing that I did see that did change based on like a racism level, was at one of the bars downtown there was a drink called like an N-word-rita. We were able to come together, petition to get that removed from the menu. It was like a watermelon martini, something like, or watermelon margarita. So that was progressive, but that was it. I don't think anybody really knew about it besides people on Twitter who were speaking about it, and people who signed the petition. I think it's not ... It's like really a case by case basis. For me, I haven't experienced outright racism. I do, like I said, like in the group project, I do feel like the color of my skin plays a role in how I'm perceived by other people. However, not on an obvious, oh I think this about you because of your skin. It's more like a stereotype, like, I assume this because of your skin, because of the way you look and the way you present yourself. I'm a Black girl that sits in the front of the class. Of course, when we were forming groups, I knew nobody was going to pick me up. I was going to be like, for instance, one of the last people picked. Everybody has friends in that room except for me. I mean like a few other people don't necessarily have close friends in that room, but you

would get picked up before me. So when they were assigning groups, I didn't feel like it was racism, but I felt like it was like I knew I wasn't going to get picked first. When the professor's going around, who doesn't have a group, who doesn't have a group. Every time. Both of my classes, I don't have a group. And I attended in my one class, I was asking people in the front row, who sit with me, next to me, like, I'm an engaged student. I sit here and take notes. You look at me take notes. You see me every day-

Zoe: Every day.

Felicia: In the front of class.

Zoe: Right here.

Felicia: Since day one. It's just like still like they turn around. And not like when I would reach out to them or something like that, but when looking for a group, they don't look next to them for their peers. They look for who looks like them or who they think they would work best with, and I have to be assigned a group. I would rather not be assigned a group. I want to be seen as an asset to somebody's team, instead of oh we have to pick her up because we don't have enough people. But overt racism, no, but it is glossed over in my mind. Like it's a shadow. It's there. You see it. Sometimes you acknowledge it, most of the time you don't.

Nina indicated that racism on campus is subliminal. Both she and Daydreamer commented on the subtle and difficult to detect nature of modern day racism leaves Black students perpetually responding to things that others simply don’t or won’t see. Nina describes her shadowboxing experience in this way:

Nina: It blows your mind too. It makes you feel like the crazy person because when you defend yourself, it's like you're crazy. She's crazy.

Zoe: Why is she all amped up over-

Nina: It's this mad Black woman. It's like oh my gosh, I hate that. The mad Black woman. We're just always so angry. I'm just like if you knew what I knew or been through, you would be angry too. You would be angry. But for the fact that we still kind of thrive. We still are creators. We're still here and living, striving. Like I said, they try to make you feel crazy like you're just super crazy. You're just so crazy.

Zoe: And that's not it at all. In fact, you're perceptive.

Nina: Right.

Zoe: And you are ... It takes a certain level of emotional intelligence, as well, to be able to read cues, read folks, read all those things. It is the very opposite of all of those things, to be able to decipher that which is subliminal.

Nina: Even if you're not so sure, you still have that feeling like oh she did that because I was Black. Even if she would have did it to her white counterparts, it's like, it's because I was Black. And if a white male did it to you, it's not because he could be misogynistic. It's automatically he's racist.

Zoe: Or he could be both.

Daydreamer described:

> Here, you have people who just kind of make ... They made me more aware to things that were already present. I'm trying to think of like the right word. I don't want to give you the wrong word. You know like those sociopolitical words, basically stuff like white

noise, and all that. Different behaviors that I noticed, I was like, "That doesn't seem right. Something's off about that. I've never experienced that before, and I don't like experiencing it now. What is that?" Then I just started doing my little research, however I'm typing it up. Then after that, I'm just like, "White noise, dog whistling, blah, blah, blah. All these subtleties. All these subtleties."

Racist or rude or ignorant?

In Daydreamer's experience, white people feign ignorance. He was unsure as to why they do so, but speculated that it may be a defense mechanism used in uncomfortable encounters. Whatever the motivation, Daydreamer expressed exasperation at the depths of their unknowing.

Daydreamer: I've been having white roommates since sophomore year.

Zoe: How does that impact your experience?

Daydreamer: It kind of just makes me a little bit more aware of how white people can be. I've learned that white people have a tendency to feign ignorance a lot. They're confused about everything. They don't get anything. They're confused. They're perpetually confused. I'm not saying that to be mean. I'm saying that just from me watching them, observing. Me in a conversation with them, I'm saying this, this, this, this, that, that, and that, and they're just like, "What?" I'm just like, "Are you trying to be cute? Are you trying to undermine my statement? Are you trying to get out of the conversation? If you do, just be straightforward and just walk away."

Racist or rude: Definitely racist.

Sometimes there is no question that an encounter was indeed rooted in racism. Students are forever changed by these experiences. They remember them long after the event has

occurred. It changes how they see the world and how they show up in it. October says that racism at UGA is the norm. She indicates that passive forms of racism exist without interrogation. “It’s been normalized for like certain just like passive things to just be as they are. It’s normal – oh, they just do that. Why are they – they just do that, that just is how it is. Why don’t they sit by you on the bus? That’s just – they just you know. And I feel like it’s – a lot of it is passive, I mean sometimes it can get pretty active.” October describes one such encounter at an on campus concert sponsored by the student programming board.

October: I went to a Waka Flocka concert with my friends and you’d like a Waka Flocka concert, you'd think it’s going to be Black people, no, it was like 80 percent white people in there. I was just like, okay. And I was – first off, I don’t even like Waka Flocka like that, but I just –

Interviewer: Yeah, but he was coming –

October: He was coming –

Interviewer: Yeah, you've got to –

October: I was like, I've got to go out. So I've never even been to a concert in my life, this was my first and last – well not my last because I want to go see Drake, oh, love him. Anyways, but – and we were up in the front, so everybody was pushing and all this stuff like that and like my friends were all with me, at the time – who was it? It was me – so there were five of us. But it wasn’t – one of them who is in my current circle wasn’t there, someone else was. So we were there and you know Waka Flocka finally came out and then there was all this pushing and stuff like that, and I'm a little person and there's these really big dudes like pushing and stuff, I'm like, bro, I can't breathe. Get off me and stuff like that. At one point, this

dude – this white guy, he was like pushing, him and his friend were like pushing and me and my friend were here and she's small like me and we're just like, aye, chill and stop pushing us. And this white dude – one of the white dudes – because my friend like – I'm not – I've gotten more outspoken now, at the time, this was like the beginning of my second semester, I was still kind of upset about the whole math thing, I was pretty much just going out because my friends were like, come out, you'll have fun. I did not. But anyways, come out, you'll have fun. I said, okay, you know, whatever, I don't even want to be here, okay, whatever. I went and I was just like, I wasn't very outspoken until now, now I'll call somebody out because I just – I don't have nothing to lose now. I'm just like, I got an F, you can't get worse than that. He – she said something back to him and he was like – what did he say? He was like, oh, nigger this blah, blah, blah at a Waka Flocka concert? Are you serious? The person on the stage – now he said it to her and she was hot, boy, we was in there like – and then I was like yelling at my other friends, everybody was loud, and I was like, hey, he called her a nigger and everybody squaded up, we was ready to fight in there. And then Waka Flocka – like he came kind of like to our section area of the stage and you know as he moves around the stage everybody moves so then I ended up like – somehow I ended up on the floor and I was getting like stepped on, I had finally got all the way to like – I crawled out to like the wall and they could not find me, my friends could not find me, and I was out on the wall and I had texted them, there was no signal, I tried to get to the back area and I was like, I'm in the back and then that's when they came back for me and we went outside and like I have – I have really

bad anxiety problems, I tear up when I get frustrated and I could not speak, I was shook. I have never experienced anything like that in my life. And – because like you can't see anybody you know, it's just all these white people everywhere, you're getting trampled. It was crazy. So I'm out there, I'm outside breathing, you know, and the manager – I guess like an assistant manager, he was out there and then my friends was like yelling at him, they were like, you need to have security because somebody as little as her shouldn't be up on the floor and blah, blah, blah, y'all are supposed to have people – people shouldn't be pushing like that and all he could say was, I mean, it's a Waka Flocka concert, dude, what do you expect? Like oh, I expect to pay money to get trampled? Like what, that doesn't even make any sense. And he was just being so rude to us and I feel like it was because, A., we're Black and we're girls and we're young, so I feel like that was a whole intersectionality thing, just like, oh, we're not even going to deal with that. You got the triple whammy, who cares if you're – you're probably just being dramatic because women are irrational, quote unquote. And then you're Black so you're just yelling right now because Black people yell and then you're young so you don't know what you're talking about. It is all of it, like we're going to disregard all you on every level. So you know – I wasn't even talking because I couldn't even talk, I was like really like shook and they called my boyfriend and my boyfriend was on the phone and he was trying to keep me calm and I wasn't saying anything, I was crying, and I just – all this, I couldn't even speak and he was like talking to my friends any kind of way, like the dude, and my friends were getting like – they were getting mad and they were getting heated and like the real

manager came out and he was like, hey, hey, hey, he was actually like a sensible, older white guy. He was like, hey, what's going on? And they told him what happened and he was like, oh my God, we can't be having stuff like that. We'll give you guys your money back or whatever and so – he went and he gave everybody refunds or whatever for the money which frankly I didn't even want a refund, I just wanted to not be there. It wasn't even the money thing. And then the – so then my friends were like – one of my friends was like, yeah, that guy right there, he was being so rude to us and stuff like that and then the dude was like, "y'all got your money, that's what y'all wanted, so why are y'all even still here?" And I was just like – so that's when I finally just – I just snapped out of my trance and I got up and I – look, I'm not usually like the cuss out type of person, but I cussed him out. I really cussed him out. I was like – and my boyfriend was still in my hand, apparently he had me on speakerphone so his whole living room was like – and I was like, you can't blah, blah, blah, and I was like, I got trampled and stuff, like I'm some garbage. You garbage and. I was just like, I was going off on them. I was like, and you were about to <Inaudible> because I'm a Black woman, I'll show you, dude. I was like – I was going off on that – that night woke me – that was what woke me up to like, wow, this is real life. And he didn't say anything because he was like – because I literally – I was so – I've never – I'm very like – everybody – literally, my friends, they were shook, they were like – because I'm the little one, I'm not confrontational, I am not confrontational at all, I'm very – well now I am, but before then I was – Before then, I was – I'm very passive, I'm more like the, hey guys, let's just go, don't even – I would have been

like let's not make a big deal, let's just go. They were just like – they didn't even know what to do. The managers were looking like, I'm not going to stop because you obviously on that stuff. I was going off, I really went off. Like I – at one point I kind of like lunged at him, but I was like this, but everybody was talking about that for a week.

Similarly, Mercy has encountered racism as a Black student on campus. She recounts an experience that left an indelible imprint on her.

> Racism at UGA is like spraying air freshener into a room. When you first spray it, you can see it and then after some time you can't see it anymore, but the smell still lingers. I feel racism is like that or at least I've experienced it in that way. When events happen on campus, then come the racist comments and what have you like the first gust of air freshener. Once that event dies down and time progresses, I feel people tend to not focus on it so much, but it still lingers like the air freshener's scent. You know it's there. I went to an Alpha probate outside of Creswell Hall my sophomore year and while it was going on, we noticed Caucasian people were looking. Some were looking out their windows and there was even one person in the tree looking close to where the probate was going on. And then on Yik Yak, I heard some people were saying "Looks like they're waiting on the boat" suggesting that the probate's audience were slaves waiting to get on the boat to America. Or it may have been "Looks like the boat just arrived." Something of that nature. So yeah, I'm not too focused on that event anymore, but it still lingers in my mind to remind me that racism still exists.

Making, Taking, and Holding Space

However long the night, the dawn will break. – African Proverb

Black students noted with pride the ways in which they are making, taking, and holding space in this predominantly white environment. In sharing their experiences, it is apparent that space in any designation – airtime, physical, or emotional -- is rarely given or yielded to a Black body. Instead, it must be created, taken, and sustained. Participants described the ways in which they have and are continuing to do those things. One of the most public proclamations of space for Black students is Tate Time gatherings in the student center. In protest to this unapologetic claiming of space, white students at times conspire to deny Black students the opportunity.

B & E: There have been times where a [white] student is like, "I noticed that at a particular time there's a large amount of Black people at this particular space in Tate" and some have even threatened to – "let's get a group of white students and let's go and let's have this space because who told them that this was their time."

Zoe: What? The audacity.

B & E: There have definitely been moments on social media where they're just like, so is this a thing that nobody knows about and so people have explained that this is an unofficial thing, it's an unofficial official thing, but some people were saying how they – white students were saying how they sat down and they were looked at in a weird way which I don't – I imagine that they were.

Zoe: I imagine.

B & E: But the fact that a lot of people were just like, let's go and invade this so that they can't sit here because it's like, well, who told us that we can have our Tate Time?

Zoe: How dare you sit in your own student center and talk to your friends.

B & E: And so that kind of confused me because I'm like, it is our student center, we just happen to congregate at particular times and for me the grand hall is a – when you look in there, there are predominantly white students sitting over there, it just happens that this is what occurs and so even when Black people try to create a space for themselves, it's always an issue.

Zoe: Hmm. So, is it a fair statement to say that the message that sends is that there's no space for you here or is that taking it too far?

B & E: It's kind of hard to say that there is no space because we've kind of made space and there are – we have definitely been able to exist and graduate seeing the Black grad photo that MSP puts out, it lets you know that we exist.

Zoe: We're here.

B & E: And we prosper. I remember my freshman year the Alphas weirdly had a probate in front of Creswell.

Zoe: Mhmm, I remember this.

B & E: And I remember seeing students like go out of their way to kind of walk farther away to get to the door, which there was a lot of people for a very small space, so the fact that they were approaching and as soon as they realized that we weren't necessarily moving, you see them kind of walk a little further out to avoid us which was unnecessary because it was not like we were doing anything that you would see would cause harm or we would talk to you. And then very few people were just like, what is this? Oh, okay. And then they went about their business. So occasions like that, I just look and I laugh because it's funny but it's really not.

Zoe: Yeah. So, what strikes me about one of the things that you have just shared, particularly in regard to the probate, is this whole idea of kind of the space we take up with our very beings and this whole notion of really like white supremacy that their beings deserve space but ours don't and that the space that we take or hold should yield to them. And so like I liken that to like walking down the sidewalk.

B & E: Oh, yeah. And see this is where it gets into the can Black people be racist because we have made statements where they'll be talking or just standing and especially – and I love to use the example of the Soule bus stop where there's not a lot of space on the sidewalk between the bus stop and the buses are going to pull up and so there's always a lot of students and when you're walking through, no one moves, like you – sometimes I'll see students have to step out in the street or go around the bus stop which is kind of like in the mulch to have to walk past them which I think is inconsiderate because you see me, you can kind of side step, there won't be a lot of space but there will be just enough.

Zoe: We can both exist on the sidewalk.

B & E: But they really don't move and so when you say things like, well, white people tend to take up space and don't account for other people, then they get offended and then they want to say that you're racist.

Making, taking, and holding space through authentic expressions.

Daydreamer describes making the conscious decision to have his physical demeanor reflect his internal emotions – in this way making and claiming space for an authentic expression of his physical presence.

Daydreamer: I just try to reflect the times in my demeanor. The day Trump got elected, I walked around and I didn't care who I looked at mad. I was walking around mad the whole day. I'm sick of it. I don't have to sit here and walk around smiling, like everything's fine. This isn't minstrelsy no more, we don't have minstrelsy no more. I can clearly walk around and say and feel however I want, so I'm going to do that. If I'm walking up a street and there's like a crowd of white people walking up the street, and they don't move aside for me to get ... Make a lane. Make a lane. I'm not about to sit here, "Excuse me. Excuse me." No, I'm not doing that. I'm going to sit there and walk ... If I have to walk right through your group angry, I'm going to walk right through your group angry. Oh well.

Zoe: You've made space for yourself here.

Daydreamer: I'm really just increasing my force field pretty much.

Making, taking, and holding space today for tomorrow.

Black students are not only managing their present environment, they are preparing for their next. Nina describes it this way.

> This environment, I'm not going to be here for too long. Even though America kind of does look like this, I definitely have my safe space like I do have with my friends. That's why I don't necessarily want to work in corporate America for too long. I'm about to re-experience this at an even more heightened level. I won't see any, probably, any executives who look like me or who are women period. Then I have to go deal with that as well. I have to go deal with me being a woman. That's just going to blow my mind.

Even with the challenges of present and future realities in sight, Black students in PWI environments are making, taking, and holding on to their space fiercely as a matter of necessity.

Daydreamer summarizes his conceptualization of how personal growth and maturity has allowed him to create his own reality in that way.

> As a mature ... Not just me being influenced by, me actually being influenced by and influencing my environment. I can do that now. Clearly here, I'm just like if I don't like something, bump, like force field. You know what I'm saying? I control my environment. I control my space. You know what I'm saying? I like that. Thanks psychology. I like that.

Black Joy

Happiness is not perfected until it is shared. – African Proverb

Black joy abounds for Black students at PWIs. It doesn't hide, shrink, or quiet its boisterous voice. To the contrary, it sings, flies through the air in laughs, and is publically and palpably evident. Where more than one Black student is present, so too is joy. It is in residence at social functions of every variety, knowing smiles in passing, side eyes over white fragility, shouts across quads to friends, hysterical laughter about white avoidance on busses, lively discussions of hot topics, and deconstructions of the latest campus experience. Like flowers growing through concrete, Black joy at PWIs cannot be stifled. Black joy flourishes. Black joy abounds. Student stories were filled with humor and wit. Interviews were filled with laughter. Simply put, the demonstrated impact of social support on Black students at PWIs is joy. Of all the stories that evoked Black Joy, Felicia's recollection of an outing with her BUGA friends is the one that represents this notion most fully.

Felicia: This is when I had that like feeling like this is where I'm meant to be, like it solidified that initial gut feeling from the bus tour to now it was ... It was when BUGA 19 was still a larger group and we'd go to all the parties freshman year, so

after the bigger parties and things like that, always go to Waffle House. That Waffle House on South Milledge holds a lot of memories, okay? That's they would culminate, and I would remember, it's such a happy time and feeling. We were in Waffle House, and our one server girl, Jaime, love her to death, if I ever see her again, she's really for the people. So she's serving us, she loves us and she's giving us extra bacon, stuff like that. She's like, "Oh you want this? You want that?" And I'm like, we literally overrun the Waffle House, so it's just a Waffle House full of this BUGA 19. And the song that was on ... I can't remember exactly what it was. I think it was a Chris Brown song. And one of our friends, Chadwick, he's like really boisterous. We're all singing, we're just singing in the Waffle House, all 30 of us. And it's just so beautiful, and the servers are laughing along with us, and it's just like we overtook that Waffle House. And I'm just like, wow these are people that I can really like I can gel with, this feels good. I don't know how else to explain it. And then Chadwick is like in the middle of the floor and he like rips shirt, singing, and we're just all laughing and having a good time, and in that instance even if anyone of us had a nitpicky problem with someone else, it did not matter in that moment. And it was just like this is a support system. That's what I felt like BUGA in 19, BUGA 19 was for me. I'd come at the right place, I was in the right place at the right time for the right instance. But overall-

Zoe: With the right people.

Felicia: Yeah. And for with my core family and friends, just my routine, it's integral. They're an integral part of my routine, from ... I remember last year I would make my rounds. That's what I call it. I gotta make my rounds. So after I get back from

class off the bus, walk to Busby, hit the one room, hit the second room. Go home. I'd either go to soccer practice or I'd go straight to my boyfriend's. I had to see everyone in one day, and that really is, I'd say that's what defines my college experience, is making sure I get those people in and making sure I continue to have those meaningful interactions. Cause if I don't have that, I kind of feel like, dang what did I do today. I didn't see my friends.

Zoe: That experience at Waffle House sounds so joyful.

Felicia: It really was.

Zoe: You know, like, just pure unadulterated joy.

Felicia: It really was. It was just like that Black joy, too, like look at us, like on South Milledge, you know? Who do we think we are? It was a wonderful time, and we were all just in one spirit together and it was great.

Zoe: Beautiful.

Felicia: If you were to ask any one of us about that night, we would all have great things to say about it.

The location of this Waffle House was worthy of note because Milledge Avenue is the location of the white sorority and fraternity houses. To be a Black student at UGA is to be leery of this area of campus. Yet and still, there they were being Black, being joyful, on South Milledge Avenue.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research study was to explore how Black students narrate their post-secondary experience in a predominantly white institutional setting. Through analyzing the stories of Black students, the goal of the study was to better understand the influence of social support and structures that facilitate and/or hinder feelings of mattering and belonging for Black students at PWIs. Use of that understanding is situated within a transformative scholar activist orientation that prioritizes the elimination of oppression and pursuit of liberation. The transformational power of participant stories to accomplish change was the goal of this inquiry.

This research used narrative inquiry to elicit student stories by conducting in depth interviews complete with artifact analysis. Participants in the study included 12 undergraduate students who self-identified as Black, African-American, Caribbean, African, Afro-Latino, or otherwise connected to the African Diaspora through their ancestry and lived experience. The study addressed the following research questions:

I. How do Black students define social support?

II. How does social support impact the college experience of Black students at predominantly white institutions?

III. What do student stories reveal about structures that facilitate feelings of mattering and belonging for Black students at predominantly white institutions?

IV. What do student stories reveal about structures that hinder feelings of mattering and belonging for Black students at predominantly white institutions?

This chapter includes a summary and discussion of the findings through the back drop of the existing literature, participant voices, and my own lived experience. Participant voices are welcomed part of this discussion and are included to best elucidate the implications for practice and recommendations of future research.

Brief Summary of Findings

Storytelling has long held a place of honor for people of African descent. In this inquiry it served the dual role of culturally responsive epistemological approach and a means to engage Black students in a meaning making experience regarding their histories in this institutional context. The key thematic findings of this study were (a) Black students feel that they are here, in the PWI environment, for a reason; (b) finding your niche is a key and necessary strategy in creating safe communities of care; (c) classroom exclusion is a very real part of their experience; (d) deciphering the actions of others as racist or rude as necessary to maintain safety consumes time, effort, and emotional energy; (e) Black students are making, taking, and holding space on their campus; (f) and Black joy in every form abounds. These themes reveal the very nature of the influence of social support for Black students at PWIs.

In Depth Summary of Findings with Implications for Practice

This section includes a detailed synthesis of findings together with implications for practice. The collective presentation of this in depth summary, which incorporates my own insights and revelations as a Black student and researcher, present a compelling and important counter narrative that centers Black conceptualizations of the overall influence - including impediments and bolstering influences – on social support for Black students at PWIs.

Supporting Black Students at PWIs

Black students are entering into the PWI environment eager to make connections with supportive others, often beginning to do so at the point in which they decide to attend, well before formal matriculation. In this way, Black students exhibit that they know early on the important role that social support will play and that it will be needed. While peer groups often serve as those first sources of support. Students are keenly aware that peer support alone will be insufficient to meet all of their needs all of the time. They are searching for and in need of people that will extend themselves in a holistic, genuine, and consistent way. Ideally, faculty and staff in the campus environment will be present sources of support and as findings suggest, indeed for some students they are. However, one of the challenges present in faculty and staff doing so are the boundaries attached to their roles that make fluidity and supporting the holistic individual unlikely. October describes it this way,

> I had advisors but, I mean, no offense, they were all like white women and it was just like strictly like academics and I feel like you know you talk about academics and it's just so one-sided, there's just so much more than just like these grades and these teachers and stuff and I feel like – you know, you've got to like know a person, I feel like – I don't know, I feel like the whole advising thing, what are they really advising you about? They're just telling you, okay, take this class, take this class, take this class, but I want to do this with my – well, in order to stay on schedule and to – everything is like protocol, protocol, protocol. I feel like that's not really – that's just someone that's telling you what you need to do, that's not necessarily the support really, like I don't know, in my opinion.

October found the type of support she needed in a peer mentor that was several years her senior. The two women met when October interviewed her for a class project.

> I've never had a mentor, I always feel lost on this campus. I need somebody to talk to that has – that's older, you know, like I love my friends but I feel like we're also figuring it out together. I'm like – we kind of – it would be nice if I had someone that's like older that's already been through stuff like that. So I had texted her.

The text read like this:

> Hey. I hope I'm not bothering you and I hope this message doesn't have you like, what? Either because it's a bit out of the blue, but long story short, I went to church yesterday and they were talking about letting go of bad things and incorporating good stuff and guidance into our lives and I don't know. it really spoke to me because honestly sometimes I feel pretty lost and overwhelmed on campus and I think that it's because I don't have an older influence in my life besides my mom to help guide me and be an influence just to sit and talk to. and I was looking at the footage and I felt so comfortable talking to you and you're really wise beyond your years, you're such a go-getter while taking care of your responsibilities and I really respect that, I want to be like that when I'm your age. Any who, I lied and said long story short, but would you possibly be interested in being my mentor? So then she texted back like clockwork. She was like, oh my God, girl, that was so sweet, I'd love to. Let me start by saying I'm so glad that I could be of some positive influence to someone on this campus because that was definitely my goal and stuff. And then ever since then we cool.

Students need support and guidance individually and collectively. Student organizations serve an important function in students finding each other through shared interest and identity. When discussing experiences with student organizations, participants voiced frustration that student organizations are expected to function optimally with little to no guidance. "I feel like

all of these orgs need advisors. I know that we're all pretty much grown. They want us to be independent, but I think we need advisors. I think we need faculty there to help," expressed Nina. Institutions have varying policies regarding student organizations. It is not unusual for institutions to permit organizations to form and exist without requiring faculty or staff advisors. Often the campus multicultural services unit has the single greatest concentration of Black student organizations. In the campus context where this study was conducted, the direct student organization advisors for groups under the auspices of the multicultural unit were master's level graduate assistants – which gives groups a maximum of two years of engagement with a graduate advisor before turnover is inevitable. Whether due to this specific dynamic or other reasons, constant transition and fluctuations in advising support makes it difficult to garner momentum and sustain progress. This directly impacts the effectiveness of student groups to live their missions and ultimately serve as effective venues for students to connect and support each other. It would behoove institutions and benefit Black students greatly to have thoughtfully selected advisors in stable positions at the institution to render the level of sustained support that would be most meaningful for student organizations and individual students to thrive.

Intersectional Representation

We know that representation matters (Peeren & Hoffman, 2010). The findings of this study clarify that intersectional representation matters. Students need to see people that share multiple dimensions of their identity represented at all levels of the organizational structure. Much of the existing literature focuses on having these models at the top (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). The stories that students told reveal the importance and utility of having opportunity to see themselves represented in positions of authority and leadership as well as in the roles of mid-level administrators, entry level positions, and graduate students. In this way, multiple rungs of

the career ladder are visible to students with intersectional representations of themselves. October identifies this important consideration in the following statement:

> I just feel like they're just – there are less – there are not many –Black people at least that I have seen in administration in these roles and stuff. Like I literally just had my first Black teacher – like this semester and if I wouldn't have taken this class then I wouldn't have had her. I was even more surprised that it was a woman because I've seen Black men teachers walking and stuff—a few, but like this was the first time that I've seen an adult Black woman on this campus that is like in a teaching guiding role. That representation does matter. It gives you more places and people to like talk to. I feel like if you were white this conversation wouldn't have gone how it went.

Representation has and will continue to matter as one means for Black students to identify potential supporters. This is not to say that viable supporters come only from those in shared identities, but students in this study utilized this as one means of testing who might be safe, relatable, and willing to make that type of investment.

Naturally Occurring Places of Engagement with Supportive Others

Having engagement and access to Black faculty and staff in naturally occurring formalized educational mechanisms such as class, research opportunities, work-study experiences and the like, provide important opportunities for students to experience mattering and belonging. Unfortunately, however, Black students are often unlikely to have engagement with Black faculty or staff members in these naturally occurring ways due to the scarcity of Black faculty and staff members in PWI environments (Peeren & Hoffman, 2010; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015; Lemelle, Alexander, & Moore, 2010). Because the opportunities to connect do not naturally occur, institutions attempt to compensate by providing programs, panels, mixers,

that get Black students and faculty in the same room. These one off experiences do not cultivate the type of depth of relationship that is needed to be sustained over time. Additionally, the strategy creates additional labor for Black faculty members in an environment that does not acknowledge, let alone reward, labor of this type. Faculty who choose to mentor students in their discipline have ways in which they can engage students in the realm of their scholarship and academic work. The same is not true for a student and faculty member who meet at an event, but will never meet in the contexts of the classroom or other sustained and meaningful place of connection. Mercy highlighted this in sharing about her relationship with her work supervisor whom she now calls her college mom and a faculty member that she met at a panel discussion. Mercy demonstrates the important point that just because you share an identity with someone, that does not mean that there will be the type of connection needed to cultivate meaningful social support. For Mercy, the one on one 56 minute conversation that we shared about her experience in college was filling a void. She wanted people to know that Black students need faculty and staff to reach out to them.

Mercy: Yeah, I mean, I was going to say that – there's a definite need for this – these kinds of talks and there's a need for people such as faculty and staff that can reach – if they can reach out to Black students, college students, do it because, yeah, it's needed and like I appreciate it, I appreciate you taking time out to hear what I have to say and I know other people would too. You've established that there is a need, because you wouldn't be doing this if there – you felt there wasn't.

Zoe: Do you feel like as you have kind of moved through this experience that, number one, how often have you engaged with faculty or staff that share your identity and when those interactions occur, do you feel like folks reach out to you or that that –

you know what I mean, like there's a little something extra? You know what I mean, to – of care and concern?

Mercy: No. I don't reach out like that. I mean, I have tried, I – for a minute, I was talking to Dr. Doe.

Zoe: Oh, okay. Yeah, I know her.

Mercy: I was talking to her for a while but I stopped going to talk to her about things and that's been it. I don't feel I know all of the Black faculty and staff on campus because I went to the BFSO luncheon and it was great, it was great. I felt privileged to be in the room, I was like, on snap.

Zoe: Look at us.

Mercy: Yes. And I knew some of the people who were getting awards and stuff like that. so I was like, wow, that's great, but on the other side, I felt like, wow, I'm such an introvert that I don't know none of these people and the only reason I was invited was because my college mom asked me if I wanted to go and that's because I know Lynn, she works at the Alumni Association. So yeah, that was the only reason I was invited but, yeah, I was like, dang. Hmm, I could really get to know some people if I really could, but you know.

Zoe: It's hard.

Mercy: I don't know, yeah.

Zoe: I mean, it is hard to make those connections and you know when you think – I don't know how many Black faculty members you've had in your time here. Like I didn't have a Black faculty member until I was a senior.

Mercy: Yeah, that's the thing. I haven't had –

Zoe: Right, right.

Mercy: I haven't had any so it's just like – yeah, I'm trying to think and make sure that isn't a lie. Yeah, I haven't had any.

Zoe: Right, and so like that becomes – you know, as a student, that's a pretty significant touch point to begin cultivating those types of relationships.

Mercy: Relationships, yeah.

Zoe: And when that just doesn't exist, it doesn't exist.

Mercy: Because you know, I went to – I feel like you were there as well. There was the National Council –

Zoe: – of Negro Women – the panel.

Mercy: The panel. Yes.

Zoe: Yeah, I was there.

Mercy: There were four individuals that were there and that's when I was like, you know, I'm going to reach out to Dr. Doe and go for it.

Zoe: Good, good.

Mercy: Yeah, and I did and I was like, eh okay.

Zoe: Well you've demonstrated – you can do it. And part of – you know, you have found your college mom, you have found kind of these deeply, deeply significant and meaningful relationships that have flourished beautifully and sometimes when we reach out it just doesn't. Like – and that's okay too. You know? And that's okay too.

Mercy: Yeah, because – yeah, I look at it as if – you know, I'm blessed because I didn't know I was going to have a college mom when I was coming into school, so you know, I'm good, I'm good.

The Harm of Assumptions and Conventional Wisdom

When it comes to Black students and faculty, institutions tend to operate from a framework that includes several assumptions. One of which is that shared Blackness in the absence of any other commonality is enough for a supportive relationship to development. This belief is fundamentally and disturbingly rooted in operationalizing and distilling Black identity down in a profoundly limiting and one dimensional way. On January 12, 2017 I attended a program on campus called "Conversations with the Class of 1966: UGA's First Black Freshman Graduates". This event that brought back the first Black graduates from this institution that started as freshman (the first two enrolled Black students transferred from other institutions and the first Black graduate was a graduate student). Two of these trailblazing graduates were women and roommates during their time on campus as students. To the crowd's great amusement, they noted that they did not get along nor particularly like one another at that time. Since desegregation institutions have been putting Black people together assuming that shared Blackness was enough. The current practice of panels and mixers as meeting grounds for meaningful connection is the equivalent of setting up a play date. It infantilizes Black adults (both students and faculty) and does not yield the outcomes hoped for. Accordingly, the primary function served does not prioritize student needs, instead it serves an institutional need to superficially demonstrate support of diversity.

Black students need opportunities to have meaningful and sustained engagement with others so that supportive relationships have shared proximity, time, and opportunity to flourish.

This will require an intentional focus in expanding the diversity of faculty in every discipline and in every place where student services are rendered. It matters not how we make sense of the experiences that students have. It matters how they makes sense of the interactions that they have. Accordingly, definitions of and manifestations of meaningful support will be varied.

A second problematic assumption includes the belief that students should and will initiate connections with faculty and staff. This belief serves to normalize and reward extraverted students while leaving introverted students to fend for themselves. The combination of having an introverted personality and the isolation and exclusion that Black students in the study generally encountered are a recipe for extreme isolation in a context with high stress – a combination that has a breaking point when it comes to mental wellness. One study participant, a psychology major, who learned about the prevalence of mental health issues among college students in class candidly addressed his own mental breakdown.

Daydreamer: You can't nonchalantly, at least when I was in Abnormal Psych, you can't just nonchalantly just teach, "One in ten college students will probably acquire a mental health disorder. 30 percent to 70 percent will probably have two or three." You think you can just say that real gassy and just nonchalant. You have to say that more like, "Unfortunately ..." You have to say it real solemn. You have to.

Zoe: There's gravity to that. These are real people.

Daydreamer: Everybody in class over here like, "Girl, is it going to be me?" Everybody in class, all these psych students. Just imagine all these psych students learning, literally learning the statistics on how each of these things can occur, how these occur, what can trigger them. All the developmental pathways being affected. All those things that connect, intersectionalities via development. There's just you

sitting there, just taking these notes like, "Girl, is it going to be me?" It was me. It was little old me.

Zoe: What got you out of that? What did you connect with like you have these real friends that saw about you?

Daydreamer: I ran away from them. I ran from my friends. I ran straight to my mom. I ran straight to momma. I was like, "Momma, I need you to come and pick me up like right now." She's like, "What is going on?" "I just want to go home." Literally drove that night to get me, that night. Came back, she was like, "What is going on?" I'm like, "I have to withdraw. I can't do this no more. Hardship withdrawal. Blah, blah, blah, blah." Next thing you know, she was like, "Oh baby, not my son. Not mine." Took me to a therapist, took me to a psychiatrist. She was like, "I don't care what nobody in the community say about whatever," because they have that whole little divide in regard to ... This ain't Black spaces though. We got this whole little divide in that regard. Even with that, she like, "I don't care what nobody say. My son is getting whatever he needs to feel better, because that's mine." I went to all these different doctors, and did all the things we had to do. Then after that, I came back the next semester, ready to go.

Ill-equipped Mental Wellness Resources

Daydreamer left campus to access the mental wellness resources that he needed. Fortunately, he had a supportive parent that was immediately responsive to his need and had the means and resources needed to access the care that he required. That may not be the case for everyone. Accordingly, it is important that students have access to quality, culturally sound, mental health resources in their immediate institutional environment.

American higher education around the nation is in crisis around meeting the mental health needs of campus populations (Stock & Levine, 2016). Black students specifically are often met with barriers to accessing the care that they need. Such barriers include: (a) direct access limitations that impede service provision; (b) and difficulty with clinicians who are not culturally responsive or humble; and (c) a neutral stance clinical approach with regard to systemic and institutional issues of race that focuses issues of the concern on the individuals to the exclusion of systemic factors that are present and impacting the lived experience and well-being of Black students.

In my former role as a Multicultural unit director I was often called upon to do workshops or trainings with campus clinicians that worked with historically marginalized students. In each and every presentation it was necessary to situate social justice as a counseling concern. Some of the strongest resistance to that content came in the area of subordinated and dominant group patterns that directly addressed the manifestation and impact of power, privilege, and oppression as present and fundamental in the American social context. Consistently, the white fragility in the room was palpable. There was a staunch desire to hold fast to a neutral stance. I asserted then and reassert now that a stand for neutrality is inherently a vote for the status quo and a statement that all things are as they should be. Issues of social justice are integral to counseling as students do not exist independent of society, culture, and context. The literature on health disparities and wear on the bodies and minds of Black people is well documented (World Health Organization, 2018). There is a clear relationship between social injustice and health. Oppression exist and negatively impacts mental wellness.

Social work programs prepare practitioners for clinical practice in a way that addresses this dynamic. While they occupy some of the counseling roles, other disciplines predominate.

Black students need diverse clinicians that are prepared and ready to meet their needs in the therapeutic relationship on both the micro and macro level. Black students take on enough additional labor. Educating a clinician about the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression should not be one of them.

The Black Tax: Refunding Black Students

Black students are in PWI environments to get an education and spend an inordinate amount of their time in service to their institutions. Black students do additional labor that is simply not required or expected from their white counterparts. This service takes the form of educating educators and representing the institution in spaces and places where diverse representation is desired. The same small group of students are asked to assist in institutional recruitment efforts, share their perspectives on panels of every sort, serve on search/review/selection committees, attend both high and low profile university events and more. Even more disturbing is the role of respectability politics and code switching in determining which students get these types of opportunities. Students internalize institutional messages and spend a lot of mental energy thinking about how to be publically Black in a way that is not only palpable for whiteness, but will also provide opportunities to meet their needs for esteem, belonging, and connection. Students evaluate themselves and peers on their effectiveness in code switching. When reflecting on her freshman year Jasmine indicated, "I was trying to get acclimated and everything, so it was just kind of like weird. I wanted to excel but I didn't want to act like a Black girl or something." When asked to further elaborate she shared, "I guess I didn't want to like be like late or be ghetto I guess and like – I don't really care about that anymore now." Lynn highlighted this phenomena in her comments on the selection of university tour guides, all of whom seem to meet a certain unspoken criteria.

> And it's like, if you look at all the tour guides, what do you usually see. But it's like you have to have this jolly outlook on UGA, everything's positive. If you don't necessarily have that over like a 100 percent positive outlook on UGA, how are you going to be able to adapt to that audience?

Black students are well aware that there is a particular manifestation of Blackness that is praised in the PWI environment. The message conveyed is that institutions only want to see Black students smiling and grateful to be present. Institutions want to hear and see happy, complimentary, and positive things from Black students. Black students receive direct and indirect messaging from a variety of sources that reinforces this by rewarding students that fall within the narrow scope of this performance mandate. Black students that offer critique or express dissatisfaction in any way are silenced and pushed even further to the margins.

Not all institutional engagement opportunities are bad, a burden, or diminishing to one's full being. However, greater intentionality and care should be taken to attend to these opportunities to make certain that they do not become so. A key question that warrants ongoing inquiry is this -- Is the student's time, effort, and energy being spent more on institutional goals/priorities than their own? Educating others and appearing everywhere a Black face is desired are not the primary roles of Black students on campus. Particularly, if fulfilling these roles impacts the student's primary role and the function of learning.

From the mundane to profound, the very existence of Black students in the PWI environment is frequently subject to the scrutiny of the white gaze. Navigating campus while simultaneously dissecting and evaluating interactions breeds exhaustion. The additional intellectual, emotional, and intuitive labor takes a toll on the energy that Black students have for other endeavors and complicates their ability to meet other challenges that are commonplace in

the collegiate experience. The resilience and elasticity to sustain a nimble self-protective stance is a compensatory strategy worthy of note.

Beautiful in Every Shade

There are many ways to be Black and all manifestations of physical and cultural Blackness are indeed beautiful in every shade. White students are allowed to be quirky, smart, witty, serious, neurotic, and nonchalant, among many other characteristics. They are allowed complexity and depth. They are given the benefit of the doubt that one bad day is not the totality of their potential represented. Black students are denied nuance in both personality and emotional displays. As important and revolutionary as Black joy is, Black students like all people need to be able to express the full range of emotion as generated by their encounters. Black lives matter applies to all Black lives and all Black voices – even the ones that are loud, disagreeable, militant, and don't otherwise show up in a presentation, method, or manner that is congruent with white sensibilities. Justice and equity extend to everyone.

Silence is Not an Option

Institutional silence is not an option. When issues or situations arise that impact Black students on campus, students are looking for their institutions to respond with care and concern for their wellbeing and the impact of assaults to both physical and psychological safety. Hollow statements do as much harm as silence. Conventional wisdom suggests that strong leadership is the solution to address this need. To the contrary, humble leadership is what is needed most. Humility coupled with wisdom to know when one is operating outside of their practice depth. The traditional hierarchies and the power dynamics of the American higher education environment make leading with humility a challenge. As places that honor inquiry and knowledge acquisition, there is a great deal of discomfort in not knowing and asking others for

help. Ironically, in this way students are expected to operate in ways that institutional leadership is unable or unwilling to model. This must change.

White Fragility

Institutions and individuals need to deal with white fragility and its corresponding implications for pedagogy. Black students are micro and macro aggressed in the classroom both by faculty and their peers. White fragility is harmful to Black students because it denies, blames, and shifts responsibilities away from white people, functionally absolving them of their responsibility to engage in dialogue and solutions around issues of race. The participants in this study made clear that the classroom is one of the most fraught places on campus. The classroom – the primary venue of academic engagement, growth, and discovery presents a preeminent challenge to learning – the exclusion and marginalization of Black students. PWI environments were not made with Black students in mind nor were they retrofitted to include them when campuses desegregated. Black students were simply added with the expectation that they change to fit these environments. Progress in this realm will require a duality of focus from both people and structures. Nothing short of a revolution will do. While such a call to action casts a wide net and can feel daunting, the beauty of grand challenges is that one can start anywhere and make progress. Given the findings in this study, it would be revolutionary to honor the Black experiences and voices that are present in this and other studies that offer guidance in creating more inclusive and culturally responsive campuses. The revolution begins with centering Black voices; naming and addressing racism; and prioritizing mattering and belongingness for Black students in PWI settings. The revolution continues with committing individual and collective action in one's classroom, department, school/college, and institution. Comfort is the enemy of progress for white allies that would engage in this work. If a white body experiences an entire

meeting, program, or event as wholly and completely comfortable – consider regarding how other perspectives might experience that same space. Let white comfort be a red flag that prompts thoughtful reflection and interrogation of the encounter. Utilizing influence, authority, and reach to engage others in similar examinations of conventional wisdom and solution oriented corresponding action keep the revolution moving forward.

Hindsight Realizations

The findings and implications of this study present a profound counter narrative to dominant culture positions, deficit orientations, and conventional wisdom about Black students. Consistent with a critical race perspective, the voices of Black students reveal that racism has been so deeply institutionalized that it has become shrouded – hiding in plain sight. This work was intended to shine a light. It is a detailed account not only of the experiences of twelve Black students at a PWI – it is a detailed account of systemic and institutional racism at work and highlights the role that individuals and mezzo systems play in exacting and perpetuating institutional racism. In so doing, it also highlights the role that individuals and mezzo systems must also play in dismantling oppression. This reality forces educators to reconcile their contributions and engagement with Black students as facilitating or hindering feelings of mattering and belonging, helping to achieve or obstructing the pursuit of liberation. This quest requires ongoing labor and unwavering commitment to dismantle existing systems to make space to reconstruct living, learning, and working environments in which Black people are physically and psychologically safe, secure, and valued.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

This study has the potential to inform future studies that focus on the experiences of Black students. Subtlety and nuance are critically necessary when attending to the highly

complex experiences of race. Accordingly, further investigation should focus on better understanding the factors that contribute to supportive relationships, particularly when those cross racial lines. While increasing intersectional representation, white and brown faculty and staff have important responsibilities in meeting the needs of Black students. Creating contemporary wisdom (in contrast to traditional or conventional wisdom) gleaned from research and scholarship can play an important role in helping others create meaningful connections and assume a supportive stance in relation to Black students.

In the historical past and the contemporary present, theory provides educators with a means to understand the experiences of students, a common language among colleagues, and a manner in which to support the continued development of students (McEwen, 2003). Additionally, the use of theory helps to guide professional practice in the following ways: (a) where students are in developmental terms, (b) how students differ, and (c) how the environment impacts learning (McEwen, 2003; Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978; Strange, 1994). As our understanding of identity evolves, there are infinite possibilities for how dynamic and intersectional identity might be represented in theoretical knowledge. As such, future scholarship should do the following:

1. Continue to address the impact of intersections of identity;
2. Partner with other disciplines to advance holistic understanding; and
3. Utilize the practical wisdom of practitioner scholars

Important understandings can be garnered from the theories that are currently available and the enhancement and new developments to come. The narratives in this study illuminated the challenges present for Black students in the PWI environment. There is great opportunity for current and future scholars to make meaning and significant contributions to student

development theory. Understanding intersectional experiences more fully will help to advance theoretical and practical knowledge regarding student needs. The MMDI and RMMDI provides useful frameworks for conceptualizing the core self and salient social identities. Continuing work that acknowledges the exponential and interactive nature of multiple dimensions of identity will continue to be important in the future scholarship of student development theory (Jones & Abes, 2013). The possibilities are endless for the combinations and corresponding complexities of identities. Partnering with other disciplines to advance holistic understanding puts the outcome over the process. Collaboration and partnership are values of our profession and should not be limited by discipline (American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1998). Finally, utilizing the practical wisdom of practitioner scholars adds an important voice to the scholarship of student affairs. We must do a better job engaging our colleagues that see themselves more as practitioner and less as scholar. Important knowledge resides within them that can be helpful in our collective professional understanding of student development.

Important Considerations for Scholars

As our understanding of students continues to expand with the scholarship, there are key considerations that are important to bear in mind. These include: (a) keep it simple; (b) maintain focus on the holistic student; and (c) embracing a diversity of ways of being and knowing. New scholarship and enhanced understanding of existing theories will likely yield and even more complex picture of students. It will be important to remember the elegance of simplicity in theory (Bloland, Stamatokos, & Rogers, 1994; Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978; Strange, 1994). If novice, mid-level, and seasoned professionals alike are to embrace theory, we would be wise to not alienate individuals with layers of complexity that fail to enhance or advance

understanding. Valuing the holistic student is one of the proud hallmarks of student affairs scholarship. We need not lose sight of our roots. Finally, theory is useful because it aids in understanding students. Students are the core of our work and should remain the core of our focus. As we all bring varying personal talents, skills, and abilities to bear in our work it is important to realize and embrace the different ways of knowing (Kegan, 1994; Baxter Magolda 2004; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Student affairs practitioners use the theories that resonate most strongly. Continuing scholarship forward in a way that speaks to a wide swath of individuals will ensure that theory continues to be present in our work. Finally, we must write policy with theory in mind (Coomes, 2005). For those reluctant to embrace theory, policy becomes the bridge that links theory and practice.

The Role of Reflection and Reflexivity

There is tremendous value in reflection and reflexivity in practice. As an ongoing component of mindful practice, reflection is a state of being that positions practitioners to devote time, earnest effort, and energy for the purpose of thinking about and learning from their experiences, work, and our wider world. Incorporating ongoing reflection in our work requires that we not rely solely on an understanding of practice from the distant past. It holds space for us to negotiate and ultimately evolve given what is happening at present and based on feedback that we solicit from those with whom we work and serve. A reflective and reflexive stance challenges each of us to stay present in our own lives and our engagement with others in a recursive and intellectually active way by which we ponder, process, and evaluate our actions. Doing so can illuminate gaps in knowledge, blind spots, action/values incongruence, among other meaningful revelations to inform practice.

Concluding Thoughts

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of my matriculation as a first year undergraduate student. Twenty years, three degrees (a fourth imminent), 11 years of professional practice in three student affairs functional areas and one academic unit – all working with, for, and on behalf of students with passion and zeal guided by the values of equity, fairness, and justice. I have not always gotten it right, but I have been intensely committed to doing better today than I did yesterday. I am happily, gleefully, and joyously still learning. Just as I have and continue to evolve, so too do our students. My hope is that everyone attached to institutions of all size, manner, and type will assume a never ending learning stance about the students that we serve, with Black and other historically marginalized students in particular. Our shared liberation demands that we not hold our institutions nor our students captive with limited notions of who we think they are. A vision for the future requires that we honor their voices and invite their full beings to stand in their truth as we co-construct learning environments that are intentionally built for every person to thrive. Let's get to work.

I close with a letter to my children. At present, M is six years old and X is nearly two years old. In the years that are sure to fly by, this letter captures what I know and what I have learned that I wish to impart when the time comes for them to head to college.

Dear M and X,

I love you. As a young Black woman and man, the world will not always demonstrate the same. For that reason, it is still true that you must work twice as hard to get half as far. The good news is life isn't a race. You don't have to look into the next lane and concern yourself with what someone else is doing. My prayer for you is that you stay safe from harm on your path. I'd like to think that safety is achieved by

avoiding collisions with other runners and the interference of the referees. But I know better than that and at this point, I believe you do too. We know that there are no guarantees in life. But we don't live in fear. We live in promise. Standing on God's promises. So I want you to run, skip, walk, jump, or cartwheel down your path in a way that makes your heart soar. When your heart soars your feet will too. Watching you do that will be an inspiration to others. It will empower them to ease on down their path in a way uniquely meaningful for them also. This is how you change the world. You be you. This profound act gives other people permission to do the same. I will always be so very proud of who you are. I love you because of who you are at the core of your being. There is nothing that you could ever do to change that fact.

When I was in my early twenties your Granny gave me a birthday card that I liked so much I framed it. It featured a poem called "How to Make a Beautiful Life". Both of you have made my life more beautiful than words can describe. Thank you for being exactly who you are and for sharing that sweet and powerful spirit with me and your Dad for all these years. Now you have the opportunity to share it with the world.

How to Make a Beautiful Life
Author Unknown

Love yourself.
Make peace with who you are
and where you are
at this moment in time.

Listen to your heart.
If you can't hear what it's saying
in this noisy world,
make time for yourself.
Enjoy your own company.
Let you mind wander among the stars.

Try.
Take chances.
Make mistakes.
Life can be messy
and confusing at times,
but it's also full of surprises.
The next rock in your path
Might be a stepping stone.

Be happy.
When you don't have what you want,
want what you have.
Make do.
That's a well-kept secret of contentment.

There aren't any shortcuts to tomorrow.
You have to make your own way.
To know where you are going
is only part of it.
You need to know where you've been, too.
And if you ever get lost, don't worry.
The people who love you will find you.
Count on it.

Life isn't days and years.
It's what you do with time
and with all the goodness and grace
that's inside you.
Make a Beautiful life…
The kind of life you deserve.

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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Student **[NAME]**,

My name is Zoe Johnson and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia. I am conducting a study about the experience of Black students at predominantly white institutions. I am conducting this research project as part of my program requirement and I would like to invite you to participate in the study.

I am studying the role of social support among Black students at a predominantly white institution (PWI). ***The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of social support on the experiences of Black students at predominantly white institutions.*** That being the purpose, I am looking for participants who are 18 years of age or older, identify as Black, African-American, Caribbean, African, Afro-Latino, or otherwise connected to the African Diaspora through their ancestry and lived experience of anti-black oppression.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to meet with me for an interview that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview will be held at a mutually agreed upon time and location. During the interview, we will discuss your experience as a college student. Students who participate in this study will receive a $15 gift card for their time. Additionally, anyone can be entered into a drawing to win one $15 gift card.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any time. Your participation in the study will also remain confidential. While the results may be published, your identity will be protected.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have about the study. You may contact me at (**706) 542-5419 or zoe@uga.edu**. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Merrily Dunn, at (**706) 542- 1812** or **merrily@uga.edu.**

If you would like to participate, please email me directly at zoe@uga.edu. In your email, please include the best phone number to reach you. I will call you to further discuss the details of the study.

Thank you for your consideration!

Sincerely,

Zoe M. Johnson
Doctoral Candidate, College Student Affairs Administration
zoe@uga.edu
(706) 542-5419
Principal Investigator: Merrily Dunn, Ph.D.
Co- Investigator: Zoe M. Johnson

APPENDIX B

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

Hi. My name is Zoe Johnson and I am a doctoral candidate in the College Student Affairs Administration program at the University of Georgia. I am conducting a research project on the role of social support among Black students at predominantly white institutions. Specifically, I want to learn more about how social support has contributed to your success. I appreciate you meeting with me today to talk about that.

Before we begin the interview, I would like to remind you that the information you share during the interview will be kept confidential as explained in the consent form. I will not use your name or any other identifying information about you that might allow someone to figure out who you are. Feel free to skip any questions you do not want to answer and at any time you may end the interview. I anticipate that the interview with take approximately an hour. Though I will be asking you questions, if at any time you have questions throughout the interview, please feel free to ask. At this point, do you have any questions for me before we begin?

I would like to start our conversation by getting to know you better, so…

Tell me what brought you to UGA.

I asked you to bring a physical representation of what social support means to you. What did you bring? What is the story behind this item?

1. What does social support mean to you?
2. What language or terminology do you use to characterize that support?
3. Who makes up your inner circle of support?
4. How would you describe your relationship with your support system?
5. How do you stay connected with your support system?
6. How does [social support – use student terminology] impact your college experience as a Black student?
7. Tell me about a time that demonstrates that impact.
8. Tell me about an experience where you didn't feel like you belong because you are Black.
9. Fill in the blank. Racism at UGA is like…
10. Do you think your Black life matters at UGA?
11. How have you come to experience mattering and belonging?
12. What have I not asked you that you feel is important for me to know?

Wrap-Up: I want to thank you for sharing your experiences with me. I really appreciated your insight and time you spent with me today. Would you like to review the transcript of our interview today for accuracy and editing once it has been completed?

APPENDIX C

IRB APPROVED CONSENT FORM

Black faces in white spaces: Exploring the influence of social support on the experiences of Black students at predominantly white institutions

Researcher's Statement

We are asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Merrily Dunn
Department of Counseling and Human Development Services
402 Aderhold Hall
Athens, GA 30602
Phone: 706-542-1812
mdunn@uga.edu

Co- Investigator: Zoe M. Johnson
School of Social Work
279 Williams Street, Room 109
Athens, GA 30602
Phone: 706-542-5419 (office) or 404-840-5250 (cell)
zoe@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of social support on the experiences of Black students at predominantly white institutions. Lacking a sense of belonging can undermine academic performance. As institutions seek to support the retention, progression, and graduation of all students, there is a critical need for continued empirical study regarding the experiences of Black/African-American students in postsecondary education. This qualitative study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing insight into the experiences of Black students in higher education from their perspective and in their own words. This exploration can serve to guide the work of

student affairs practitioners, administrators, and policymakers seeking to support the success of Black students.

Study Procedures
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to:

- Meet individually with the researcher for one 60-90 minutes interview. During the interview you will be asked questions about the role of social support in your college experience.
- You are asked to bring with you something that has come to represent the social support you have experienced in college.
- A copy of your interview transcript will be emailed to you for your review.

In total, the estimated duration of your participation in this study will range between 75 minutes to two hours depending on length of interview.

Risks and discomforts
We do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research. The potential for revealing painful discoveries is expected to rarely—if ever—occur, and the degree of discomfort is expected to be minimal. In the event that you experience emotions that may need to be further discussed with a professional, you will be directed to the University of Georgia's Counseling and Psychiatric Services (706-542-2273).

Benefits
You will not benefit directly from this research outside of the opportunity for reflection around the role of social support on your collegiate experience. The findings of this research may lead educators to a greater understanding of the factors that support Black/African-American college success. It is the hope of this research to gain a greater understanding of these factors in order to influence program initiatives and policy.

Incentives for participation
There will be an incentive for participating in this study. Students who decide to participate voluntarily in this study will receive a $15 gift card for their time. Students who would not like to participate in this study will be allowed to enter into a random drawing to win one $15 gift card. Anyone can enter the drawing.

Audio Recording / Artifact Photograph
With your permission, your interview with the researcher will be audio recorded. The recordings are needed so that the researcher can fully attend to what you are saying and have a record to review after the fact. Once the audio recording has been transcribed, they will be destroyed.

Please provide initials below if you agree to have this interview audio recorded or not. You may not participate in this study if you are not willing to have the interview recorded.

_____I am willing to have this interview recorded.
_____I do not want to have this interview recorded.

Artifact Photograph
With your permission, the artifact you brought that represents social support will be photographed. The photograph is needed for the data analysis and may appear in the final write-up for publication.

Please provide initials below if you agree to have your artifact photographed.
You may participate in this study if you are not willing to have your artifact photographed.

_____I am willing to have my artifact photographed.
_____I do not want to have my artifact photographed.
_____I am willing to have my artifact photographed for purposes of the data analysis, but do not wish for the photographed to appear in the final write-up for publication.

Privacy/Confidentiality
The only people who will know that you are a research subject are you and the principal and co-investigator. No individually-identifiable information about you, or provided by you during the research, will be shared with others, without your written permission unless required by law. You will be given the opportunity to create a pseudonym, or will be assigned one, for the purposes of data collection and corresponding research reports. The pseudonym code will be maintained in a password protected electronic document in the researcher's computer files and will be destroyed after it has been determined a follow-up interview is not needed and data collection has been completed.

The project's research records may be reviewed by departments at the University of Georgia responsible for regulatory and research oversight.

Email will be used as a method of communication in this study. There is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself. While the researcher may ensure the confidentiality of a participant by utilizing standard procedures (pseudonyms, etc.) when the researcher writes up the final research product, the researcher cannot ensure confidentiality during the actual Internet communication procedure.

Taking part is voluntary
Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to stop or withdraw from the study, the information/data collected from or about you up to the point of your withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed.

If you have questions
The main researcher conducting this study is Zoe M. Johnson, a doctoral candidate, under the direction of Merrily Dunn, Ph.D., a professor at the University of Georgia. Please ask

any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Zoe M. Johnson at zoe@uga.edu or at (706) 542-5419. You may contact Dr. Merrily Dunn at merrily@uga.edu or at (706) 542-1812. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at (706) 542-3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:
To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT ARTIFACTS

Jordan

Photo description: A white colored round disc that reads "--- heart's the LGBTRC!" The photo has been cropped to exclude the name that appears prior to the heart. The disc lays on a brown wooden surface, is handwritten, and features rainbow colors and a red heart.

Veronica X

Photo description: This is a selfie that features eleven people. The photographer has eyebrows raised with a slight smirk. The casually dressed group standing behind him are smiling and posing for the photo.

Daydreamer

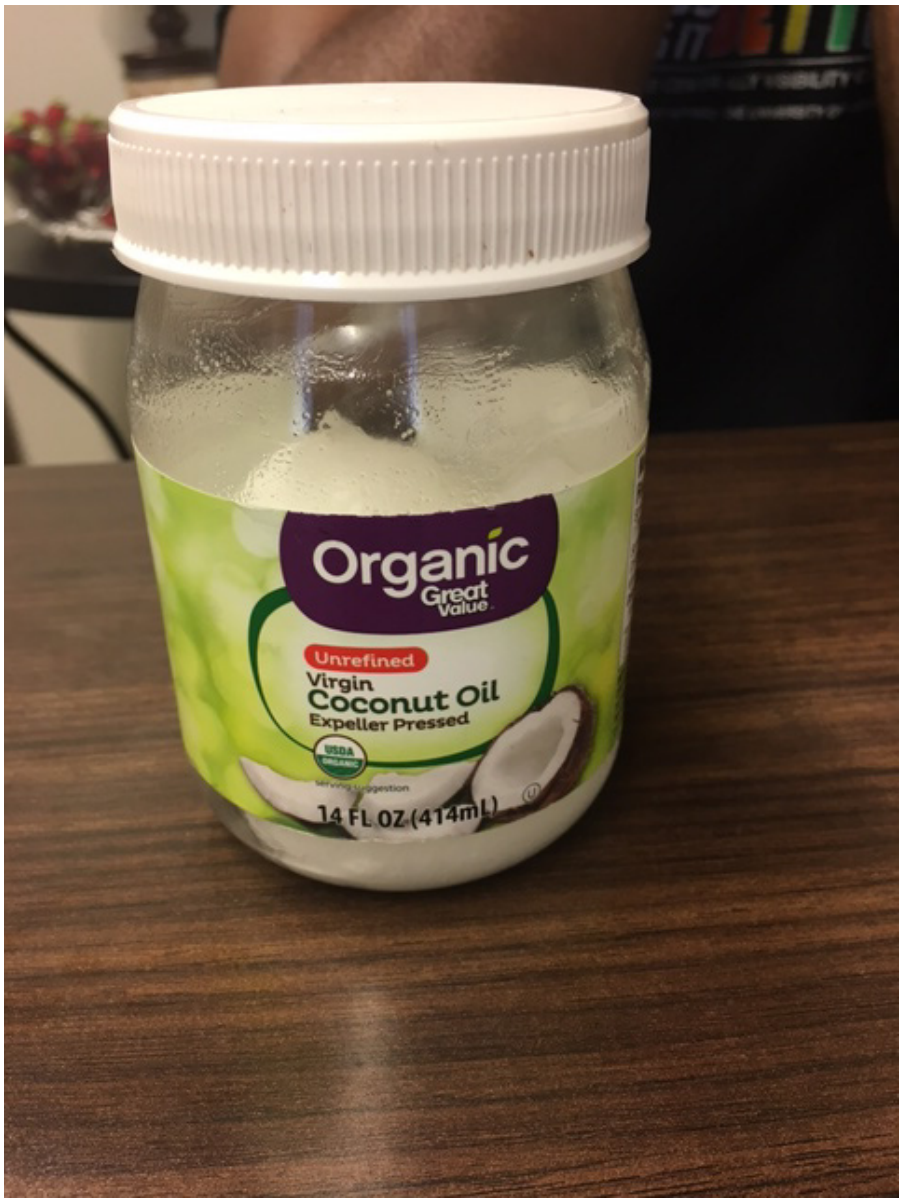

Photo description: A jar of Organic Great Value unrefined virgin coconut oil. The label is primarily green with a picture of an open coconut. The jar is closed and is half full. It sits on a brown wooden surface.

Lynn

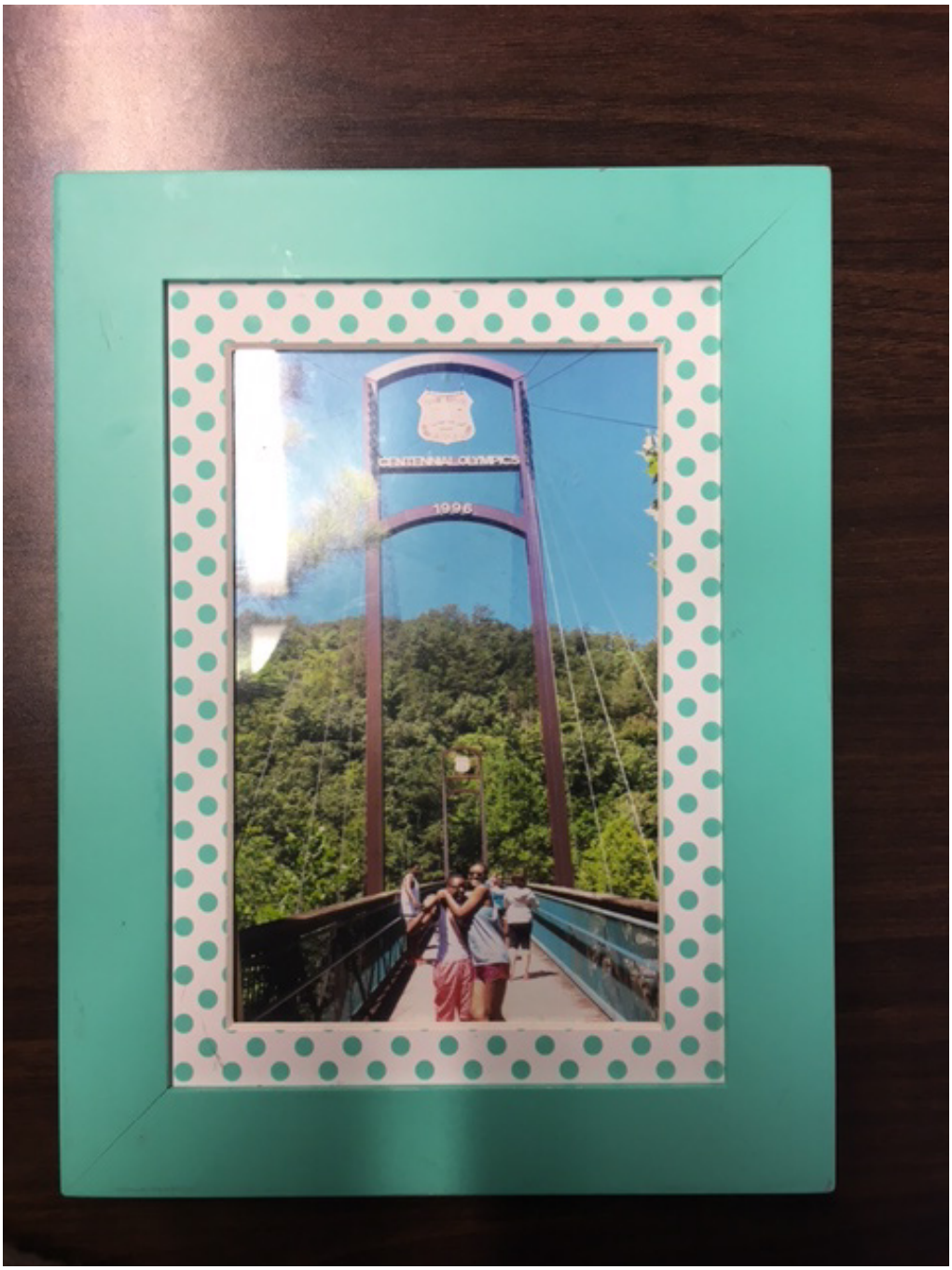

Photo description: A sea foam green frame with white green polka dot matting featuring a picture of two young people hugging on a bridge. Bystanders are visible on the bridge with lush green vegetation and a bright blue sky in the background.

Nina

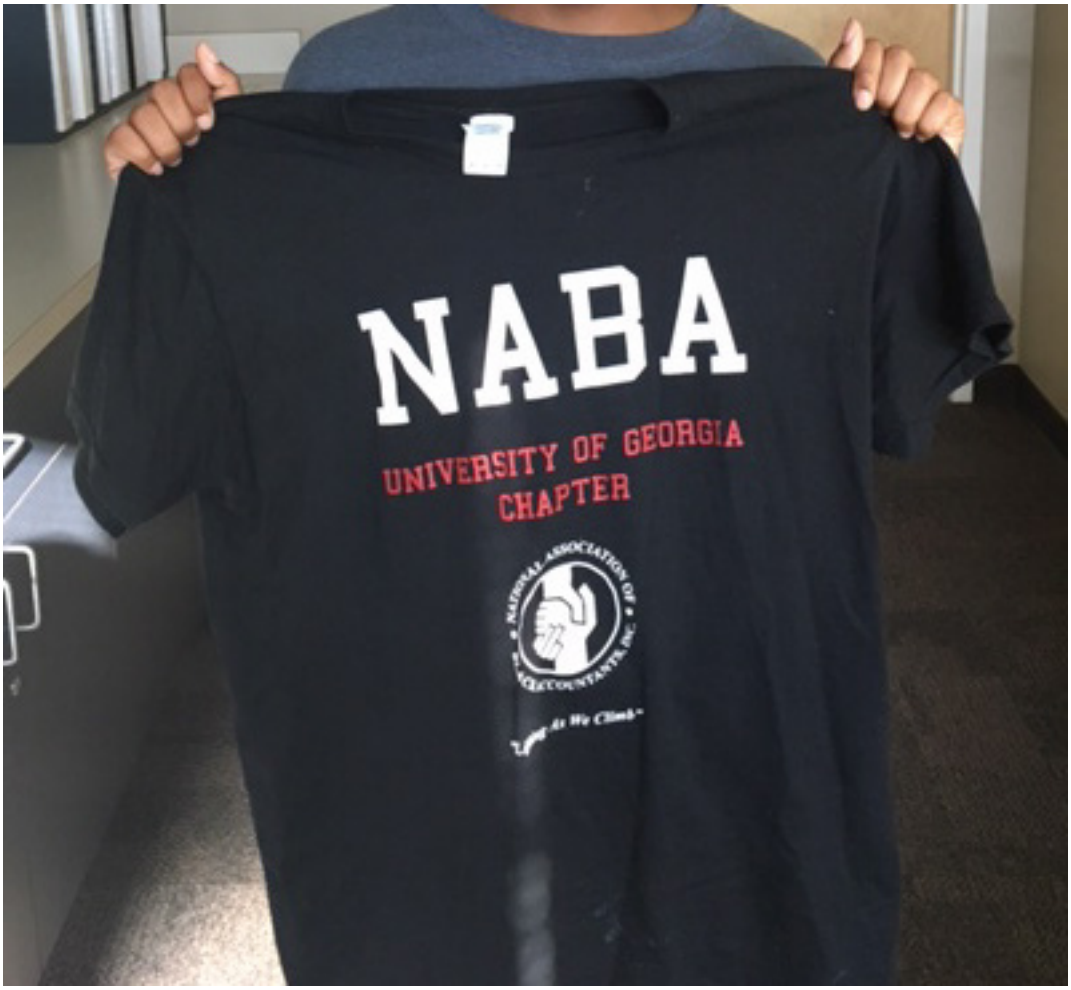

Photo description: Black hands holding a black t-shirt that reads “NABA University of Georgia Chapter”. The t-shirt features a logo of two hands, one pulling the other up. This photo was cropped to exclude the participant’s face.

Photo description: A high school graduation stole that displays the emblem of Benjamin Banneker High School, established in 1988. The stole is light grey with red embossed emblem. It lays on a wooden surface.

October

Photo description: A button that reads “Melanin Poppin’” with different shades of brown laying on a wooden surface.

Twenty-one

Photo description: A closed scrap book with a chevron patter in grey and tan. The scrap book is featured slightly open and standing on a dark grey textured surface with papers and folders in the periphery.

Mercy

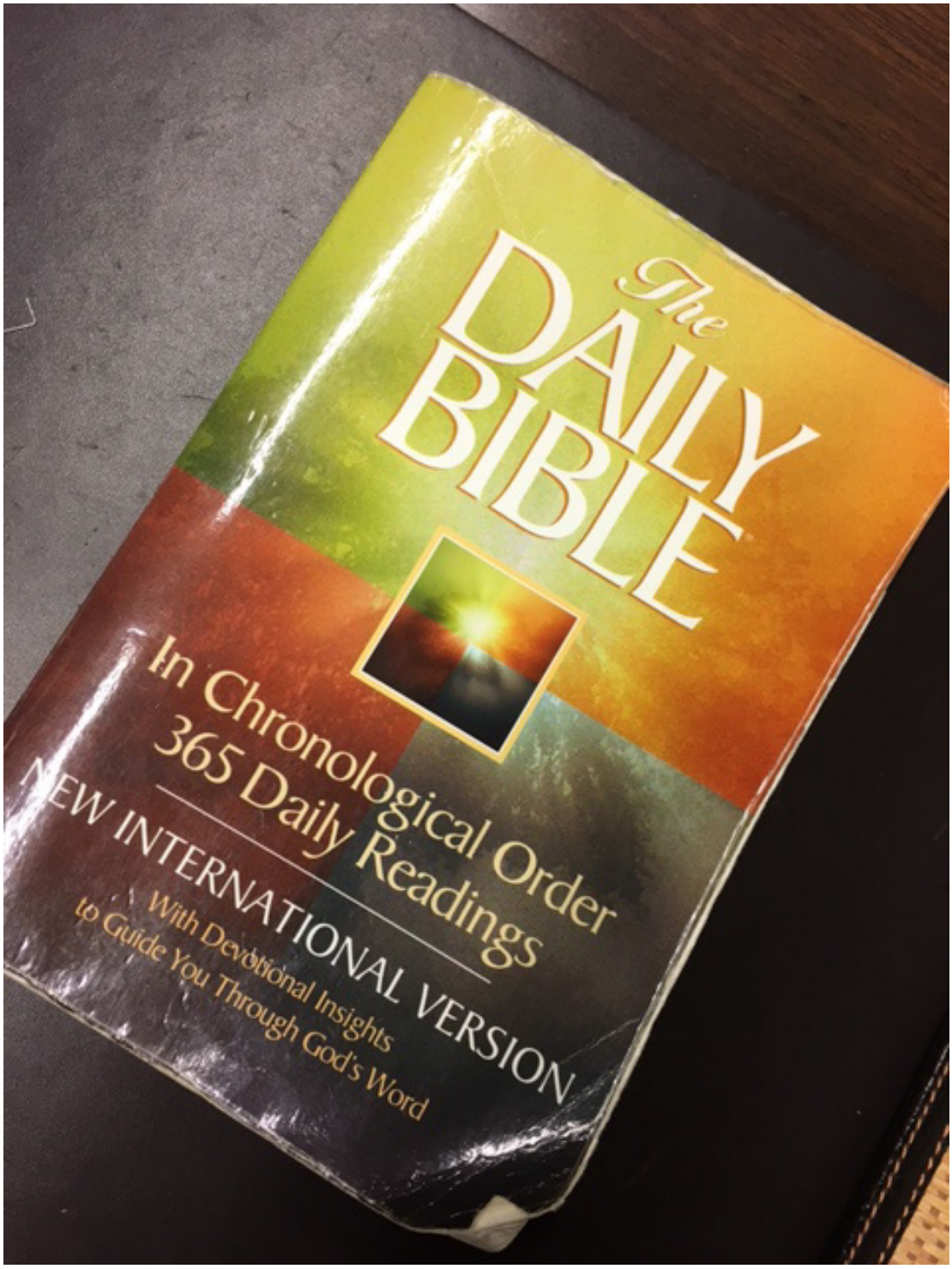

Photo description: A book entitled, "The Daily Bible: In Chronological Order 365 Daily Readings – New International Version, With Devotional Insights to Guide You Through God's Word". The Bible cover is green, orange, and grey featuring a sun shining through a shadowy image of trees. The Bible is askew in the photo and lays on a dark brown surface.