BLACK MEN IN LEADERSHIP: BUILDING SENSE OF BELONGING AT A HISTORICALLY WHITE INSTITUTION (HWI)

By

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(Under the direction of Laura A. Dean)

ABSTRACT

Nationally, Black men graduate at 39% on six-year graduation rates at four-year, public institutions (NCES, 2022). Black men have experienced one of the lowest rates of success compared with students from other demographic populations (Black & Bimper, 2020), but these outcomes are related to underrepresentation, racial hostility, and social isolation at historically White institutions (HWIs) (Allen et al., 2018; Mustaffa, 2017; Thelin, 2017). The purpose of this study was to explore how leadership roles can help Black men thrive and build belonging with a HWI, even in hostile and unwelcoming climates. The following research question assisted me in gaining insight from participants in this study: How do Black men build a sense of belonging with a HWI through leadership roles? A vital area that contributes to the college experience of Black men centers on their involvement in clubs and organizations (Brooms & Goodman, 2016), which contribute to Black men's transition, adjustment, and social inclusion in college. Exploring the student involvement of Black men highlights the positive outcomes of their collegiate experience (Brooms, 2018). The theoretical foundation of this single institutional study was rooted in intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019).

This study used narrative inquiry and semi-structured interviews to explore the rich, in-depth, and nuanced stories of Black men in leadership and their relationship with a HWI. Narrative analysis was used as a method of plotting and analyzing the events, actions, and happenings of narrative data from eight undergraduate Black men in order to produce coherent stories as an outcome of the analysis (Kim, 2015). Emergent themes from the narrative analysis revealed that Black men made connections on campus, framed belonging through relationships and environment, explored belonging through leadership roles, and built institutional belonging through non-Black peers. The stories of these participants indicated that Black men are not a monolith, Black men increased in sense of belonging through leadership roles in both Black and non-Black student organizations, Black student organizations created a space of authenticity for racial identity, and non-Black student organizations helped Black men build institutional belonging at a HWI.

INDEX WORDS: Black men, Sense of belonging, Intersectionality, HWI, Leadership Roles

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to every Black man who never received the opportunities, resources, or support to finish high school. I dedicate this work to every Black man who attended some level of college but dropped out or stopped out due to an unlimited number of personal circumstances, financial limitations or structural issues that impeded their educational attainment. I dedicate this work to every Black man who managed to graduate with their undergraduate degree at historically White institutions (HWI) or historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU). I dedicate this work to every Black man who pushed their education even further by pursuing a certificate, masters, specialist, or doctoral degree. I dedicate this work to every Black man, with or without a degree, who choose to support and uplift the next generation of Black men into higher educational spaces.

In regards to family, there are four loved ones to whom this work is dedicated. I dedicate this work to my grandmothers, Sharyn Scavella and Annie Range. Grandma Sharyn was a strong presence in my family. Losing Grandma Sharyn during my undergraduate senior year in 2014 was difficult for me and my loved ones. In some instances, she'd flick buggers at you, bend you over her knee to take nasty medicine, and boomerang her shoe at you if you were flippant. In other instances, she would slice mangos to share with you, take you to the grocery store and talk with half of the patrons, send you to the store to buy some goodies for pain, and spend time with you watching old shows like *Matlock*, *In the Heat of the Night*, or *Touched by an Angel*. As the queen of nicknames for our family, she would create a special name for many of her grandkids, including me. I was one of her favorites or I seemed to have been whopped the least out of the grandchildren! Our family miss her dearly and there will never been a thorny, sweet, yet tough granny like Grandma Sharyn. I also want to dedicate this work to my grandmother, Annie Range.

Grandma Range was always super sweet and kind. She made the best banana pudding, hands down! During recent hometown visits before her passing, she would experience a number of health challenges, but she would hold my hand and rub my arm as she thanked God for living through another crisis. Every time she touched my arm or grabbed my hand, it felt like she was doing it for the last time. She would ask me to pray for her and listen to what I was up to in school. Grandma Range was very proud of me and I was proud to be her grandson. Next, I dedicate this work to my Auntie Deborah Anne Lee. Auntie Deborah married into our family through my Uncle Kevin Lee. She was always sweet, special, generous, and had the coolest raspy voice of anyone in the family. She was friends with my mom at a very young age. The last time I saw Auntie Deborah was at my brother's memorial service. Three or four weeks later when visiting my mom in my hometown, we all found out through my Uncle Kevin that my Auntie Deborah had passed away. She was under five feet but her love for people was immeasurable in height. As I reflect on her life, I hear her raspy voice calling my name with pride and joy. Lastly, I strongly dedicate this work in honor of my late brother, Roger Lee Coleman, Jr. The institution in this study is named after him – Roger University (RU). He was the first grandson in the family and my mother's first child. I like to brazenly describe Roger as an extroverted version of me. For those who know me, they would find that impossible, unless they met Roger in person! I want to spend more time in this dedication on how his life and his death impacted my graduate school experience with my master's degree, and now with my doctoral degree.

A few days before my publishable paper IRB project was cleared, our family found out that Roger had left this world. After a month of running logistics to help our family honor my brother's life, I was back in the academic saddle. My coping mechanisms have always been to

work around my emotions and focus on tasks I can do or fix. Grief was no exception. I used that grief to push through the publishable paper study and eventually passed that portion of my CSAA-D requirements in late November. After realizing I had completed the task, I began to sob from the hard work that I managed to complete. I sobbed at the pain and hurt that was still held in my heart from losing my elder brother. Lastly, I sobbed from the honor bestowed onto me from six Black men who trusted me with their experiences about how Black student organizations gave them so much at a HWI. As late December became a focus on prepping for COMPS and working on my prospectus at the same time, I knew I wanted to name the institutional site after my late brother, Roger Coleman. By the time I graduate in August 2024, we will experience the first anniversary of Roger's passing. By the time I participate in the graduation ceremony in December 2024, it will be the month of my late brother's birthday. Additionally, the last time he came to Athens was for my masters graduation from the Louise McBee Institute of Higher Education (MIHE) in December 2019. He surprised me by driving from Miami, Florida (our birth city) to Athens, Georgia without any notice or any invitation. I was shocked to see him! He asked me why I did not invite my brothers to my graduation? I simply said I didn't think of them, nor did I think any of them would drive from Miami, Florida or Savannah, Georgia to attend. I saw the invite as a burden and an illogical decision. However, Roger saw it as a point of pride. Although I was annoyed by it, he chastised me for not thinking they would be willing to celebrate my achievement. Roger bragged about him showing up on his birthday, talked about how long and stormy the drive had been, and then crashed on my couch from exhaustion. Graduation was a beautiful experience because Dr. Tim Cain made a speech about me as his advisee, while I cried and held onto my mom during the ordeal. I was so happy

that I was able to introduce my parents and my brother to Dr. Amy Stich, who truly changed my experience in the master's program from survival to thriving through learning.

I was also blessed that Roger was able to meet very important friends and former students in my life. Some of them included Yi Huang, Meagan Bradford, Samuel Shafritz, Ayodele Dare, and Alex Maddox. They were quite shocked and highly entertained at my brother's bravado and social skills. He had them laughing and he was the life of the party. As I drove him to celebrate at Waffle House, he and I argued back and forth in the car while Sammy watched quietly from the back seat because I was in a production called *Jekyll and Hyde: The Musical*. While Roger bought a ticket and was excited to see his brother in a musical for the first time, I did not want my parents to attend the show. The character I was playing was a corrupt Bishop who was quite friendly with sin! Additionally, some of the musical numbers by the female actors would have made some jaws drop. Since my parents are pastors, I refused to invite them nor have them see their son playing a Bishop who was living a backsliding lifestyle. However, Roger insisted that we should invite mom because it was "art" and she should understand "art" in theater. I said no, and said he should keep this musical to himself. We paused in our argument and joined the rest of my friends for Waffle House. Per usual, Roger had my friends in stitches. Yi even told me "You know, you don't seem to be the same person when your family is around" and I told Yi "Yeah, that's because most of us are big personalities, so I am much quieter. However, I am not the little brother that he froze me in time to be. I have a voice and I speak my mind and he will learn that soon enough!" Months later, my mom found out about the show because Roger told her not long after he saw the musical, despite promising that he wouldn't! Mom appreciated that I respected her enough not to invite her and said "You know Roger can't hold water."

My brother was a lot to handle and a force to be reckoned with, but I miss those moments as I write this dedication. I was glad that Roger drove 11-12 hours to see his little brother graduate. I was glad that he was able to meet my favorite professor from MIHE, Dr. Amy Stich. I was glad he was able to meet my friends because they will be the only ones who can recall the big impression he left behind. As an artist and singer, himself, I was glad that he decided to attend my musical. Although Town & Gown Players told audience members not to record or take pictures, he sat on the front row and filmed me every time I was on stage! Furthermore, he told me I did great job, then shared that several of our background singers were vocally lack-luster. To add to the night, Roger was hitting on one of my castmates and walked away with her phone number. As the oldest in our family, Roger had a strong passion to pursue college, but it never worked out. However, I picked up the family baton and I carry my educational success as the family's educational success. At my brother's memorial service, one of his best friends said to me, "Roger loved you so much….he loved all of his family (realizing he may have offended some siblings)….but he really talked about you a lot and he believed in you. Your brother really loved you and he was so proud of you. He always knew you would do great things." I may not have the random phone calls, the big hugs, the singing, and the bombardment of his physical presence, but I do have the words of his friend in regards to how he felt about me. I have his memories and his pictures and his legacy. Thanks to this dissertation study, others will know Roger Lee Coleman, Jr.'s name as Roger University or RU.

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I want to give honor to God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost (the Trinity) because I could not have survived or overcome this process without my faith. I thank God that education served as a love of my life, but also a mental shield from the difficult experiences that me and my family faced while I was very young. My Christian faith is the core of my being. I do my best to live in the truth of loving God and loving my neighbor because love is the greatest commandment (Matthew 22: 37-40). Through faults, I have honed in on self-improvement and imperfections that constantly arise in my life. Through faith, I have emerged victorious over several trials and tribulations that dared to choke out hope from my lungs or stamp out the light from my eyes. Through love, I received so much encouragement, support, resources, opportunities, guidance, correction, and well-being through the village of academic and non-academic faculty, staff, friends, and family. I am blessed beyond measure because of where I am, due to where I've been. However, God is not finished with me yet. My future remains bright! I can't wait for the rest of the journey! Whatever comes next, my faith will keep me grounded, my community will keep me covered, and my calling will propel me through God's divine plan and purpose.

I want to thank Apostle Dr. Tangela Flemming (mom), Apostle Randy Flemming (dad), Jeaneva Ilas (sister), Christopher Norton (brother), Adam Coleman (brother), and Roger Lee Coleman, Jr. (late brother). I have several grandparents, grand-aunts, grand-uncles, aunts, one uncle, many cousins, nieces, and one nephew to thank for being my family! Above all, I am most thankful for my mom and I want to acknowledge her. She is my heart and she has been my greatest cheerleader.

My mom, Tangela Flemming, did everything she could to make sure to carefully watch over me and protect the anointing and calling on my life. I am grateful that she was successful.

While my mom did not finish school and did not have a college degree, she poured everything into her children. She was the essence of *Black Girl Magic* before it was a phrase. She would not eat, so that we could eat. She worked to keep food on the table and shelter above our heads. Even when there were times we faced homelessness, she made sure we went to locations with safety and security in mind. My mom has always been my shero. She and I will always be close and we continue to inspire each other. She continues to carry the gospel as a preacher. She co-leads her own church (with dad) at New Sound International Ministry and she created a non-profit in honor of her mother to serve the Tifton community. Additionally, she has constantly signed up for classes to knock off requirements for her GED. Later on, she received her masters and doctoral degree in theology. We are both crybabies because we love each other and we are so proud of how we continue to push each other into greatness. While my mom may not have understood the world of public high school and higher education, she has always supported me and always told me that I could be anything I wanted to be in life. Her love for me and the values I have are foundational to who I am and how I live in this world. Thank you, mom, for all of your sacrifices and I hope to continue making you proud of me! I love you!

My dad, Randy Flemming, is actually my stepfather. However, I call him dad because I acknowledge him as my father. I think stepmoms and stepdads have a bad rap sometimes, so I want to make sure people know that your stepdad can become your dad. My dad came into our lives when I was around 11 or 12 years of age. At that time, my mom did a lot of the work to raise me as a single parent. I truly didn't think I needed a father. However, my mom needed a husband. He loves my mom with all of his heart, which is the greatest thing he could ever demonstrate to me. Additionally, he called me and my sister and my older siblings his sons and daughter. He didn't have to accept us, but he did. I am forever grateful. I was able to see what a

powerful and responsible Black man looked like in real time. My dad is not much of a talker, but he always lives his life through his actions. He has pushed himself and stretched himself for decades to take care of our family. By him stepping up and being the provider of the house, it allowed my mom to focus on taking care of my sister when she was diagnosed with cancer at an early age. After remission and once my sister was stable, my mom was able to focus on the ministry. If my father had not stepped in to take care of the harder parts of providing for a family of four, our lives would have been more challenging and difficult. We grew up on challenging and difficult, but my dad provided relief and air to breathe. I am forever grateful for him hugging me, saying "I love you" and calling me randomly to check-in on me. Thank you, dad, for all of your sacrifices and I hope to continue making you proud of me! I love you!

Jeaneva, I love you and I am proud of you! I have spent the most time together with you than any other sibling and I am glad it was you. The others tortured me when I was younger! We grew up with a knock-out, drag-out relationship. We argued and fought all the time, but we also had fun doing it. Through our long history of iron sharpening iron, we helped each other grow. You taught me patience. You taught me how to work with someone who experienced a lot of hurt and pain from bullies who dared to push you around. You taught me what it was like to care for a loved one who would eventually beat cancer. While my values came from mom and my image of a Black father came from dad, my virtues were developed through our sibling rivalry and relationship. I am truly thankful for how you have developed and shaped my life. I know that I am one of the few people in your life that you trust and would listen to when things are hard. Your big brother loves you and he is glad you exist. I can't wait to keep watching you grow and watching your dreams come true! I love you, sis!

Chris, I thank you so much for being a smack to my back (playing the smacks game) and the first philosopher I was exposed to while growing up. You know you were a boot in my behind! According to you, I was too soft and that concerned you because you feared I would not be able to protect or defend myself in the same world we grew up in while living in Miami. I didn't like your methods back then and I can't say I agreed with everything you thought or said, but I truly appreciate it now. I learned enough from you on how I should react if I was in danger. However, that kindness that I had as a kid never went away nor was it soft. It has been one of my greatest gifts to connect with people from so many walks of life. Understanding you as an older adult, you have that same gift of connecting with people and winning them over with your heart. I am glad we have that in common. I appreciated that you gave me a first-class course on understanding street smarts. I still carry these skills today for survival. At the end of the day, the streets won't see any of my degrees. I am grateful for the instincts that I have in regards to engaging people in unfamiliar surroundings. Also, those instincts are credited to how I stay alert and alive, no matter where I go. This has been instilled in me because of you. Lastly, I call you my first philosopher because you were the deepest and smartest person I met. You always had a brilliant way of speaking and analyzing and advising. You knew a lot about life and you never hesitated to share life's wisdom with me. I am grateful for how you have helped shape me and how you were my first teacher about life. I love you, bro!

I acknowledge my bio-dad (biological father), Julian, who provides the Haitian side of my DNA. You were an absent father and I don't know whether you're alive or not because we've never connected since I was 10 years old and when we left South Florida for South Georgia. However, your absence has taught me who I will never be when my time comes to

father children. If not for your absence, I would have missed out on what a dad really looks like in this life.

I want to say thank you to my Auntie Lady Bug (Theryn). There was a time when I had to live with you while mom was figuring out the hardships of life. I appreciate how your home became a home for many in our family over the years. My favorite cousins came from your side of the family because we spent so much time together as kids! I appreciate you making room for me and I hope to bless you and honor you for that one day.

To the two homeless shelters that my family stayed in while living in Miami, thank you for existing! I still recall the moments of living in the shelter and one scar on my left hand indicates a moment of time at that shelter when I was playing with Jeaneva, my sister. I am grateful that these facilities existed because we needed them.

I want to acknowledge government programs like food stamps and welfare benefits. These programs were necessary for keeping my family afloat when we had nothing. Additionally, when my mom was working, these programs continued to help us close some of the gaps. Eventually, my mom reached the point where she did not need these programs anymore by working extra, but these programs helped provide for us and saved us from harsher hardships as a low-income family.

I want to acknowledge the public school systems I attended in Florida and Georgia. To escape poverty and other challenges faced by my family, I became infatuated with education. It was a great escape and I really loved to learn. My mom often said I would go to school with mis-matched socks but I was rushing out the door with excitement to learn new things. I have always loved learning and it always made sense to me. I am glad my hunger as a learner continues to this day!

I want to acknowledge Leon E. Sharpe, who served as an attorney to help my mom once my grandfather, Roosevelt “Champ” Norton, passed away. Mr. Sharpe was the first educated Black man that I met who had a law degree and seemed successful. Outside of Johnnie Cochran, Mr. Sharpe also inspired my love of law and my (fortunate) failed attempts to apply to law school. I recalled my mom telling me to look at Mr. Sharpe’s degrees and telling me that I could be like him. This is the first memory I have of connecting a career with higher education.

I want to acknowledge Ms. Johnson from Irwin County Middle School. She was my first Black female teacher. She was a tough cookie and she demanded respect. I remember when she discovered I could not write in cursive. She called a meeting with my mom, which was confusing because my mom knew I was exceling in school. In that meeting, Ms. Johnson revealed I could not write in cursive. My mom was shocked, looked me in the face with confusion and said, “you don’t know how to write in cursive?!” And there I was staring at two Black women who asked me questions that I did not possess the answer to! When was I supposed to learn cursive?! No one taught me! I assume the lack of learning happened since we moved from Florida to Georgia. However, I appreciated the grace that Ms. Johnson exhibited and I appreciated her urgency to make my mom aware of my inexperience. Because of Ms. Johnson, my mom forced me to learn how to write some alphabets in cursive. The only thing I learned was how to successfully sign my name. It’s a skill I still use (sometimes) to this day.

I want to acknowledge Ms. Terry Graydon for changing the trajectory of my life as a middle school student learning earth science. I was tracked on the standard education pathway, but Ms. Graydon saw I went above and beyond in her class. Thanks to her, she recommended me for the Independent Learning Program (ILP) in Tift County High School for my ninth-grade year. This new track, with a higher academic pathway, put me in the classes with the big fishes. I

was surrounded by Tift county's perceived smartest and most brilliant minds. I was the underdog in these challenging classes, but I learned to lean on wisdom and I gleaned every opportunity I could from my teachers and new peers. This was the first time I recall being one of two or three Black men in these advanced classes. For 10th grade, I continued the higher academic pathway track through advanced placement (AP) courses, which were foundational in preparing me for college. If it were not for Ms. Graydon, I would have doubts about my academic preparation and critical thinking skills as a prospective college student.

I want to acknowledge my biology teacher, Ms. Kim Bridges. After scoring 100 three times on her tests, she pulled me to the side to ask me if I ever heard of the University of Georgia's (UGA) Young Scholars Program (YSP). Young Scholars was a six-week STEM program in the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES). YSP would be monumental in exposing me to UGA as a first-generation student. Additionally, I used most of my money to contribute to groceries in the house for five years. UGA helped me put food on the table for my family and provided me a world-class education. I am forever grateful that Ms. Bridges recommended me to YSP because YSP changed my life. It's the reason I have a passport, the reason I've traveled to Costa Rica and Ghana, the reason I went to UGA, and the reason I developed as a student affairs practitioner. This is why my email has "ysp" in the name. Thank you, Kim Bridges!

I want to acknowledge Dr. Claudia Powell-Dunkley. Dr. Dunkley was the first Black or Caribbean (Jamaican) woman of color that I met with a doctoral degree. Dr. Dunkley was one of the 6 individuals who interviewed me for the UGA Tifton YSP. She was the only woman of color in the room and it made me breathe a little bit to know that someone was in the room. Specifically, Dr. Dunkley was one or two of the only people in the room with her doctorate and

her qualifications as a researcher and scientist were undeniably impressive. Over the years, my sister would eventually be mentored by Dr. Dunkley, which was amazing! Hours before I defended my dissertation, I was able to judge UGA Tifton YSP posters with Dr. Dunkley. To be a colleague through judging and having the opportunity to know that Dr. Dunkley was in the room outside of my defense provided me great comfort and nostalgia. Thank you, Dr. Dunkley, for inspiring me and being in the room to hire me!

I want to acknowledge my mentors in YSP. These mentors include Lara Lee Hickman and Stan Diffie. Lara Lee was a great mentor and truly down to earth. The first day of doing research, her student workers told me I started at a rough time since we would harvest several crops at UGA's farm property. I was the only Young Scholar with intense manual labor and definitely wondered "why did they put the only Black student in the fields?!" However, I would not reverse my experience! I truly learned hard and summer heat, which helped me appreciate an office job! Outside of the labor and heat, I learned a lot about nematodes, tomato spotted wilt virus, and Black shank disease. Lara Lee also made sure we could pause on harvesting before the peak of the sun so we could focus on lab work in the afternoon. There are always experiences of intimidation and a disconnect with scientists and young high school students. However, Lara Lee connected with me and cared for me like one of her own. I learned my love of STEM and agricultural research thanks to her. If that year did not go well, I would have never returned and eventually led the program for 10 years. Stan Diffie and the Diffie family have held a special place in my heart. They were the first family I ever met that sounded the same, from the parents, to the children! While I was high school friends with their son Drew, I also had Ms. Laurie Diffie, Stan's wife, as a ninth grade physical science teacher. After a hot and heavy plant pathology summer, I was head over heels to be in doors for entomology under Stan Diffie! I

really enjoyed learning about fire ants and thrips, which are microscopic insects that transfer plant disease like the tomato spotted wilt virus. Yet again, I was lucky to have an exceptional mentor who really connected with me and helped me understand the value of the work I was contributing to in research. Thank you, Stan, for keeping it real with me and furthering my love for research, especially when I hated bugs!

I want to acknowledge Ms. Debra Salter and Dr. Chanon Collins, my AP English and Language teachers. Thanks to their tutelage, my writing was above average and it helped me throughout community college and UGA. A lot of my vocabulary today stems from those classes back in high school. I am grateful for most of my teachers, but my English and Language classes continue to have the greatest impact on my creativity, lexicon, and critical thinking. Dr. Collins was the first female PhD I ever met and I was strongly influenced by her candor, honesty, critiques, and encouragement.

I want to acknowledge Ms. Shelli Phillips, my drama teacher. The drama classroom experiences are still special and precious to me because I became a late bloomer in the theater space. I have more than made up for it through my experiences at Town & Gown Players in Athens. I still use the improv lessons and critical thinking from Ms. Phillips and I enjoyed how her classroom environment was structured and designed with a student-centric approach. She is probably the first student affairs-based teacher I ever saw in action. Yet, I did not understand what that term meant back in the day. I always enjoy mixing my oratory skills with some dramatic flair. The experiences and skills of the drama room still follow me to this day and I have used those skills in several academic settings to spice up learning and dismantle stale professionalism.

I want to acknowledge Dr. Tonja Tift for mentoring me in debate and being the second Black woman I ever met with a doctorate, but the first Black woman I met with a doctorate in secondary education. Dr. Tift's last name was special because my hometown is Tifton, Georgia. Dr. Tift spent extra time beyond her required duties to help structure a debate club. My first student organization individual awards came from doing Impromptu debate. Thanks to debate and Dr. Tift, I put my improv and public speaking skills to work. Those skills are still active today. One of my best memories involved Dr. Tift inviting her debate students to her home to watch *The Great Debaters*. My peers and I never visited the home of an educator, so it was awesome to understand that Dr. Tift really cared for us enough to invite us to her home and meet her husband, Mr. Tift. I never watched *The Great Debaters* previously, but the film really showcased how talented and brilliant Black people were capable of standing on equal footing with White students during the 1930s. I was glad to hone my skills with Dr. Tift, but I also experienced being culturally and racially supported as a high school student through Dr. Tift's mentorship.

I want to acknowledge Principal Dr. Willie Miles. He was the first Black principal of my high school. I cannot say every decision he made was looked at favorably within our school system, but I appreciated that he was the first Black man I met with a PhD and the first Black man that came from a family of educators. I later met his sister through Rotary Club competitions and learned that education was a strong component in their family. A family of Black educators with degrees was a foreign concept to me. While Dr. Miles was educated, I still observed racial microaggressions directed at him and I witnessed students make fun of his slang. Through peer pressure, I also participated in the mockery. I recalled feeling uncomfortable about that in high school, but now I have the language to understand that being Black and being

educated would not be enough to change the perspectives or views of constituents in a rural community. Dr. Miles was an inspiration, but also a warning sign about what challenges would exist if Black men are put in visible administrative positions.

I want to acknowledge Jessica Gandy! As a first-generation high school graduate, I was super lost when it was time to register for classes. I had no clue what a credit hour represented in regards to classes. However, Jessica Gandy was an ABAC representative who helped me at orientation. Jessica did not shame me or question my lack of knowledge or experience. Instead, she was patient and educated me on credit hours, along with how many hours I should register for in order to be a full-time student. Recently, Jessica was a reference for a prospective student and I had the pleasure of sharing how much of an impact she had on my life. Thank you for supporting first-generation students like me, Jessica!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

From the early 2000s through 2018, enrollment of marginalized Students of Color (SOCs) continued to expand in United States (US) higher education institutions (Fernandez & Butcher, 2023; Renn & Reason, 2021). The increased diversity of students in American higher education eventually influenced the shape and structure of colleges by bringing a range of experiences, needs, and supports (Thelin, 2017). Yet, SOCs are not distributed evenly across institutional types and locations (Fernandez & Butcher, 2023). When concentrating on race and gender specifically, lack of access and opportunity has been detrimental and devastating for Black men in postsecondary education (Wood & Palmer, 2013). The evidence of this detriment lies not only in present day graduation rates and negative experiences at Historically White Institutions (HWIs), but also through a barrage of academic and social barriers faced by Black men.

From its founding, the educational system in the US was organized to support and reinforce racial hierarchies, which has historically prioritized educational opportunities for White students (Diamond & Lewis, 2022). In addition to racial hierarchies, increases in family income inequality have also contributed to increasing gaps in educational achievement and attainment between children growing up in low- and high-income families (Duncan & Murnane, 2016). Lower levels of degree attainment for SOCs pose negative consequences for individual students and larger society (Black & Bimper, 2020; Museus, 2008). For example, individuals without higher education credentials will have lower lifetime earnings and are more likely to remain at or near poverty levels (Renn & Reason, 2021). Regarding the impact of low levels of degree attainment on society, those without a college degree will contribute fewer tax dollars and are

less likely to engage in civic participation at local, state, and national levels (Renn & Reason, 2021). Thus, it is important for higher education researchers and practitioners to better understand how to maximize the success of higher education's increasingly diverse undergraduate populations at HWIs (Museus et al., 2017). This study will focus on maximizing the success of undergraduate Black men at a HWI.

Before exploring the stories of successful Black men who navigate HWIs, we must take a look behind the historical curtain of higher education and its relationships with Black students. From past to present, this chapter will convey a holistic approach to understand the stories of Black students who experienced challenges to access equal educational opportunities at a HWI. After covering the historical context of Black student stories through the segregation and desegregation era, I will share present day challenges with Black student enrollment and persistence, which provides background to understand how harmful outcomes have emerged as Black students attend institutions that reproduce inequitable educational opportunities. In this study, I will focus on the intersectional social identities of Black men, while examining the relationship of how a HWI's power, influence, and environment shape the experiences of Black men. This chapter will explore belonging of Black men through Black and non-Black student organizations. Lastly, this study will explore how student leadership at a HWI can assist Black men in reclaiming their authenticity, while building institutional belonging on campus. While deficit approaches blame Black men for weaker academic outcomes and ignore institutional challenges with unfavorable racial climates (Clark & Brooms, 2018; McGown & Perez, 2020, Yosso, 2005), Black men can persist in these institutions. However, this study is not centered on Black male persistence, especially since persistence and resilience predominantly correlate to survival-based realities for Black men. This study intends to center and explore the stories and

experiences of Black men building belonging with a HWI through student leadership roles in both Black and non-Black student organizations.

Historical Barriers

Despite the clear benefits of higher education, the US legal and judicial system has systematically limited Black student attendance at public institutions (Allen et al., 2018). Under the second Morrill Land Grant Act, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were established to give Black students the opportunity to attend college. However, this came about because Black students were excluded from educational opportunities offered at White land grant institutions, which were established under the first Morrill Land Grant Act (Allen et al., 2018). While colleges and universities perpetuated segregation policies to gatekeep educational outcomes, Black colleges and universities tackled unequal resources and financial challenges to provide space and place for Black students who strived for higher education (Williams-Lott, 2018). After *separate but equal* was toppled and overturned in 1954 through federal courts from a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) lawsuit, Black college students were able to desegregate countless HWIs (Williams-Lott, 2018). However, the fears of a multi-racial nation by White Americans did not disappear (Thomas, 2020; Wilder, 2013). Southern White institutional leaders and racist rioters from the public used every means necessary to resist desegregation efforts in HWIs (Williamson-Lott, 2018). Yet, Black students persevered through physical, psychological, and racial barriers at HWIs to seek a better life and achieve their educational goals (Williamson-Lott, 2018). Today, the majority of Black students attend HWIs, which is credited to the sacrifice and labor of ancestors and allies who provided a place at the table for Black student educational attainment (Allen et al., 2018).

Present Day Barriers

By 2050, about half of the US population will be composed of individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds—African American 14.7%, American Indian 1.1%, Asian and Pacific Islander 9.3%, and Hispanic 24.3% (Pitre & Pitre, 2009; Schneider, 2023). While flagship institutions are supposed to be accessible for all students in each state, these institutions are overwhelmingly and demographically dominated by White students (Diamond & Lewis, 2022). As a result of these unequal flows of resources, separate and unequal practices have continued to widen in the postsecondary system (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013), especially when White students hold a relatively greater share of the seats at the best schools. Additionally, low persistence and degree completion rates continue to plague higher education, while Black students persist at even lower rates than their White peers (Black & Bimper, 2020; Museus, 2008).

States with the largest Black populations have unreasonably low Black student participation, which correlates to Black undergraduates being severely underrepresented at more selective, four-year institutions with anti–affirmative action policies and practices (Allen et al., 2018). Historically, Black men have experienced one of the lowest rates of success compared with students from other demographic populations (Black & Bimper, 2020), but these outcomes are related to conflicts, hostilities, and discrimination on campus (Thelin, 2017). The systematic exclusion of Black students from the most selective, public institutions confirms the reality of HWIs, while reaffirming the harm of campus climates that impede Black men after they are enrolled (Allen et al., 2018; Mustaffa, 2017).

Statement of the Problem

Nationally, Black men graduate at 39% on six-year graduation rates at four-year, public institutions (NCES, 2022). Of White students who begin college at a four-year institution, 67%

will earn a baccalaureate degree within six years, compared to 47% of students with Black social identities (Black & Bimper, 2020; Museus, 2008). The enrollment of Black women is nearly double that of Black men, and Black women have a higher six-year graduation rate of 50% at four-year, public institutions (Frazier, 2011; NCES, 2022). Undergraduate Black men continue to have low persistence rates, the highest borrowing rates, and the most significant debt burdens of any group (McGowan, 2020; NCES, 2022). Due to lower persistence rates and graduation outcomes, researchers, policy makers, and educators assumed Black undergraduate men did not have what it takes to succeed in college (Clark & Brooms, 2018; McGowan & Perez, 2020, Yosso, 2005). While institutional factors are minimized or ignored to explain the predicament that Black men face, our institutions fail to understand the knowledge, skills, and abilities utilized by Communities of Color to navigate institutional obstacles and reach success (McGowan & Pérez, 2020). Although persistence, retention, and completion are important measures of student success, these factors must be contextualized when SOCs are involved (Fernandez & Butcher, 2023). Since Black men attend HWIs more than HBCUs (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2023), researchers have continued to identify campus climate as a major detriment to Black student success at HWIs (Brooms, 2018). In the past twenty years, Black men have only experienced an increase in their graduation rate by 4% (NCES, 2022). Historically, Black men faced legal exclusion from land grant institutions, which denied them access to equitable educational opportunities.

After Black men overcome barriers and unjust admissions practices to gain the social and economic benefits of an education, they still have additional challenges to face at four-year, public institutions after enrollment (Renn & Reason, 2021). Surveys have shown that White students generally have better perceptions of campus climate than Black students (Brooms,

2018). In other words, Black students attend the same campuses but experience more harassment based on their race and perceive the campus as being more hostile. Unfortunately, Black students continue to enter educational spaces that are bombarded by culturally and racially offensive icons, symbols, and building names (Thomas, 2020). Some of the challenges faced by Black men at HWIs include academic and social isolation, social integration, and the lack of institutional agents for support (Brooms, 2018; Palmer et al., 2014). These compelling narratives from Black students describe the campus climate as a source of *minority stress* (Fernandez & Butcher, 2023). Minority stress directly influences depression and indirectly dampens intent to complete college (Fernandez & Butcher, 2023). Additionally, students' perceptions of hostility, conflict, and marginalization in their campus communities can have negative implications for development, learning, and achievement (Schuh et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2019). Even when controlling for other factors at HWIs, such as high school grade point average and economic status, ‘‘Black students face challenges beyond academic preparation and [academic] ability that affect their chances to succeed at college’’ (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010, p. 311). HWIs represent extreme environmental stress and racial hostility for Black men, which lowers sense of belonging, reduces engagement, and impacts graduation rates (Brooms & Druery, 2023). Yet, there are ways that Black men attempt to navigate White college campuses to find a sense of belonging (Brooms & Druery, 2023). One of these strategies involves student leadership. This study shared how Black men demonstrate success beyond historical harms, deficit thinking, and racial hostility at HWIs, especially at a top tier four-year public institution. This study expanded research to explore how leadership roles can help Black men thrive and build belonging with HWIs, even in hostile and unwelcoming climates.

Black Men Can Succeed at HWIs

Although the deficit narrative of Black men echoes loudly in literature, the stories of Black men at HWIs are complex and nuanced (Clark & Brooms, 2018). While many Black men have struggled at these institutions, there also have been many students who have performed well and successfully completed their degrees (Clark & Brooms, 2018). Two major factors that contribute to Black men's success at HWIs include a sense of belonging and establishing meaningful relationships (Clark & Brooms, 2018; Strayhorn, 2019). The feelings of inclusion and belonging have been shown to be strongly related to social experiences outside of the classroom, such as extracurricular activities (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022). Yet, the literature is conflicted regarding how interactions in extracurricular spaces shape inclusion and belonging (Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022).

Black Men in Student Organizations on Campus

A vital area that contributes to the college experience of Black men centers on their involvement in clubs and organizations (Brooms & Goodman, 2016), which contribute to Black men's transition, adjustment, and social inclusion in college. Exploring the student involvement of Black men highlights the positive outcomes on their collegiate experience (Brooms, 2018). Specifically, student leadership and increased engagement has been linked to Black men who get involved in male-centered programming on campus (Brooms & Goodman, 2017; Clark & Brooms, 2018). While HWIs can certainly be oppressive and hostile, scholars should holistically include the leadership of Black men to convey a range of experiences in the changing nature of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019; Tichavakunda, 2022).

Black Men Building Sense of Belonging through Leadership

Campus involvement and participation creates attachment and sense of belonging, which is crucial to how Black men can shift from surviving to thriving at HWIs. More involvement in co-curricular spaces is associated with stronger friendships and lower feelings of social isolation, especially when students participate in organizations oriented toward their racial-ethnic groups (Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022).

When Black men serve as leaders in co-curricular organizations, purposeful engagement and involvement can positively impact the institution via educational outcomes. With purposeful engagement and involvement, student organizations assist students with social adjustment and academic success (Strayhorn, 2019). Black student organizations serve as catalysts for positive student outcomes and socioeconomic upward mobility via student organizational social networks (Brooms, 2018; Guiffrida, 2003). While some students may prioritize the benefits of social networks, other Black men may need Black student organizations as a safety net or protective shield. Student organizations on White campuses serve as counter-spaces for Black men, mitigating race and racism at HWIs (Givens, 2016; Guiffrida & Douthit 2010).

Involvement and engagement can inspire leadership and motivate Black men beyond their personal goals or aspirations in a student organization. Black men lead with a sense of purpose that drives personal and collective identity, which creates pathways for other Black men (Sims et al., 2021). Black men who join fraternal membership groups and participate in ethnic/cultural student organizations gain positive support and social and academic integration (Brooms, 2018; Guiffrida, 2003). These student organizations assist Black students in navigating college, especially between the Black college community and the larger historically White campus community (Brooms, 2018). Black student groups play critical roles to enhance student

adjustment and achievement, create space to gain comfort within White colleges, and increase sense of belonging on campus (Brooms, 2018; Guiffrida, 2003). As Black men engage in leadership, they gain academic motivation, skills, personal growth, and racial collaboration (Brooms & Goodman, 2016). Black men can overcome stereotypes and isolation, while creating positive contributions to campus life (Brooms & Goodman, 2017; Zell, 2011).

Building Belonging in Black and Non-Black Student Organizations

In Black and Bimber's (2020) study, Black men in leadership were unable to be simply a student, because they were involuntarily racialized subjects on White campuses (Black & Bimper, 2020). Findings in the study revealed that Black men taught each other how to skillfully navigate HWIs, while simultaneously engaging in systematic and significant interactions among themselves and members of other campus groups (Black & Bimper, 2020). As a result, Black men were equipped to navigate non-Black student organizations (Black & Bimper, 2020).

Black men in student leadership roles have a sense of obligation to racially uplift the Black community through leadership opportunities on campus (Collins et al., 2017). Black male students who help lead Black student organizations on campus become more grounded due to their "(a) increased levels of commitment, (b) additional responsibilities, (c) heightened sense of identity, (d) and propensity to work in group settings to achieve goals pertaining to the racial uplift of their campuses and communities" (Collins et al., 2017, p. 84). Yet, Black men in student leadership roles are motivated to join both Black affinity groups and non-Black student organizations as platforms to support and empower Black student interests (Collins et al., 2017; Harper & Quaye, 2007).

Overall, research indicates that some Black students may need peers of their racial group to feel comfortable, while others need to form connections with students of other racial-ethnic

groups (Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022). Both of these needs connect to sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). Still, we must better understand what factors generate these different needs in order to develop better support systems, tangible solutions, and inclusive racial campus climates (Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022). By listening to the stories of Black men who participate in Black student organizations and non-Black student organizations, this study explored the nuanced social identity and belonging needs of Black men at a HWI. Furthermore, researchers must understand if Black men in leadership roles extend their sense of belonging beyond their student involvement and to HWIs. By learning from the experiences of Black men at a HWI, this study explored how leadership roles in Black or non-Black student organizations can influence institutional belonging.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black men build a sense of belonging with a HWI through leadership roles. The following research question assisted me in gaining insight from participants in this study:

- How do Black men build a sense of belonging with a HWI through leadership roles?

Undergraduate baccalaureate degrees represent higher value for future economic viability, cultural and economic development, and leadership development (Allen et al., 2018; Kezar et al., 2005). A college education represents increased wealth, improved employability, improved lifestyle, and well-being (Allen et al., 2018). As higher education attainment continues to be critical to economic mobility and financial stability, the underrepresentation of Black men and lack of degree attainment at the collegiate level will produce greater inequality (Cuyjet, 1997; Quarles et al., 2023). Research that focuses solely on the difficult experiences of Black men at HWIs may potentially further alienate and detour Black men from accessing coveted

resources and educational opportunities that a HWI provides. Due to the frequent focus on negative racialized experiences of Black men at HWIs, scholars must stay committed to explore how Black men have positive experiences, joy, and success on otherwise hostile campuses (Tichavakunda, 2022). Exploring engagement and involvement experiences of Black men is an untapped area to learn how to expand opportunities for Black men to thrive at their institution. Additionally, we must learn how Black men in leadership build a sense of belonging with HWIs as they navigate barriers and pursue success.

Theoretical Framework and Methodological Approach

Since the purpose of this study was to explore how Black men build a sense of belonging with HWIs through leadership roles, the theoretical foundation of this study was rooted in intersectionality and sense of belonging. Intersectionality dismantles Black monolithic assumptions, while unraveling the intersection of social identities that shape Black men. The importance of belonging continues to show positive outcomes on college student development (Samura, 2016). Furthermore, students are more likely to succeed in higher education if students gain a sense of belonging at their home institution (Allen et al., 2008; Brooms, 2018; Kuh et al., 2006; Strayhorn, 2019). While sense of belonging research continues to contribute to growth in understanding and improving college students' experiences, little is known about how different students experience and understand belonging (Samura, 2016). When Black men serve as leaders in co-curricular organizations, purposeful engagement and involvement can enhance their character, build their identity, and positively impact their success (Clark & Brooms, 2018). This study used narrative inquiry as a qualitative approach to explore the rich, in-depth, and nuanced stories of Black men in leadership and their relationship with their HWI.

Positionality

As an instrument for this study, it was important to share my background, identity, and positionality. I am a straight, cisgender Black male from the Southeast region of the US. Additional social identities include identifying as a Christian, first-generation scholar, rural student, and coming from a low socio-economic status and background. While I have several social identities, being a Black student who attended a two-year public historically White community college and a four-year public historically White university impacted my expectations of higher education and educational attainment, once I graduated. While I graduated with honors academically, the most growth I experienced came through three part-time jobs and eight non-Black co-curricular activities. Of these eight co-curricular activities, I held leadership roles in four student organizations, which impacted my academic and social outcomes at a four-year public HWI.

The leadership roles that I held equipped me to become a strong advocate for SOCs, especially with supporting undergraduate Black men as a student affairs practitioner for over 16 years. As a previous advisor for a majority-Black student organization, I had the pleasure of mentoring leaders in Black and non-Black student organizations at HWIs. I have personally witnessed how leadership helped reduced isolation, increase positive academic habits and behaviors, and expand student belonging through leadership roles on campus and with the institution.

Although I shared my racial identity and gender identity with the participants of this study, the additional social identities that these students held did not completely overlap with my experiences. Subsequently, the understanding and conceptualization of belonging and leadership can take a new meaning through the stories that these participants tell for themselves.

Framing the Study from Previous Research with Black Men at PWIs

Recently, I conducted a research study titled “For Us, By Us: Building Black Men through Minoritized Social Identity Organizations at Predominantly White Institutions” (Norton, n.d.). As of right now, this research paper is unpublished, but the findings provided inspiration for the direction of my dissertation study. The purpose of the previous research was to explore how Black men persist, despite the challenges at PWIs, and the role that social identity organizations played in their experience. This research was conducted at a selective, public four-year HWI. All participants self-identified as Black men, and the qualitative study had a total of six participants, which represented three juniors and three seniors from different majors and social identities (Norton, n.d.).

One of the themes identified in this research project included formation of identity and agency in Black Student Organizations (Norton, n.d.). From the findings, Black men were focused on expanding support systems to other Black men. These support systems were in Black student organizations, while expanding Black male representation into the fabric of the greater campus community (Norton, n.d.). Several participants credited how Black student organizations became a foundation of development, opportunity, and advancement (Norton, n.d.). Many participants talked about ways to support other Black men to progress beyond the Black student community and seek broader representation at higher levels of their institution. The findings from this research project brought clarity to how Black men experienced service and leadership and how Black men desired to expand their involvement as Black male leaders across campus (Norton, n.d.). Additionally, these Black men expressed a sense of pride in their identity and confidence in how their experiences would impact and shape their institution, positively.

While this previous research project added insight about the experiences of Black men in Black student organizations, it was no coincidence that many of the participants were involved in non-Black student organizations and shared a desire to expand their leadership outside of Black student organizations. The previous research project inspired this study, which removed racial restrictions on how Black men got involved on campus, focused on leadership roles of Black men, and explored the relationship of belonging between Black men in leadership and the institution.

Terminology

Black – throughout this study, the terms "Black" and "African American" are used interchangeably to refer to individuals whose ancestral origins are traced back to the African diaspora (Strayhorn, 2019)

Campus Climate – is defined as the way students identify the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards of the institution displayed by the faculty, staff, administrators, and their peers regarding the level of respect for their needs, abilities, and potential (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Historically White Institutions – Postsecondary institutions of higher learning in America in which the student body has been and continues to be over 50% White (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022) and reflect Whiteness in histories, traditions, symbols, stories, icons, curriculum, and processes at the exclusion of others (Clark & Mitchell, 2018; Fernandez & Butcher, 2023)

Sense of belonging – a basic human need and fundamental motivation, which can drive student behaviors and facilitates educational success (Strayhorn, 2019)

Chapter Summary

Chapter one provides insight into the experiences of Black men, who boldly enter educational spaces that often offend, oppress, and alienate them based on race and gender. While these are the realities of HWIs, Black men continue to persist through today's academic and social challenges to succeed. If Black stories have a fighting chance to evolve from persistence to belonging, this study must take into consideration the historical parallels from past policies and practices in higher education, especially at HWIs. By contextualizing how HWI climates perpetuate continual negative impacts on Black men today, this study provided opportunities to advance research on how Black men build sense of belonging with a HWI through leadership roles.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter two of this study discusses the historical foundations of higher education and the impact of Black student activism for educational equality in the 1960s and 1970s. After reviewing past tensions and relations between higher education and Black students, I will share the parallel experiences of HWIs with Black students and Black men today. I will review the impacts of negative campus climate realities at HWIs, while providing crucial information on positive experiences through engagement and involvement. After understanding how the past impacts the present experiences of Black men, I explore how the application of intersectionality, sense of belonging, and leadership can act as building blocks between Black men and HWIs.

US Higher Education from Past to Present

The impact of Black history and slavery not only shapes the identity of Black students, but also the historical foundation of higher education. In the 17th century, enslaved Africans were physically and emotionally compromised on ships to the New World (Wilder, 2013). Merchants treated Black people like cargo, laying enslaved people on their sides, chest to back, with little more than a couple of feet of vertical space (Wilder, 2013). Africans lived in colonies, which continued to erode their basic rights while colonists coerced their labor through oppression (Palmer, 1998) on Indigenous land (Zinn, 2015). Eventually, the American college would be an extension of merchant wealth, and the slave trade subsidized the college and the colony (Wilder, 2013). The founding, financing, and development of higher education in the colonies were thoroughly intertwined with the economic and social forces that transformed West and Central Africa through the slave trade, while devastating Indigenous nations in the Americas (Thomas, 2020; Wilder, 2012; Zinn, 2015).

After the Civil War & the End of Slavery: 19th Century

After the Civil War and the end of slavery, the success of free Black communities aggravated many White people and exacerbated fears of a multi-racial nation (Thomas, 2020; Wilder, 2013). New England's colonists cast Black people as a threat to democracy and took action by decimating the economic development of free Black communities and destroying schools for Black students (Wilder, 2023). In the midst of minimizing and sabotaging economic and educational opportunities for Black people, universities maintained a Whites-only institutional policy (Thomas, 2020). Specifically, Southern White institutional leaders rebelled against campus activists who saw colleges and universities as levers of social change (Williamson-Lott, 2018). Not long after the second Morrill Act, the Plessy v Ferguson 1896 Supreme Court ruling legalized the *separate but equal* doctrine in the US, including education (Williams-Lott, 2018). However, the journey to access higher education would not end in the 19th century.

Black Student Leadership and Activism on HWIs in the 1960s and 1970s: 20th Century

During the 1940s and 1950s, Civil Rights advocates challenged discrimination cases based on the *separate but equal* doctrine (Allen et al., 2018). After *separate but equal* was overturned, diverse students arrived at historically White campuses, where they were met with neutral policies and color-blind programs and services (Stewart, 2010; Williams-Lott, 2018). No special provisions were made to accommodate the new mixture of diverse students on campuses, and remnants of enslavers and Jim Crow segregationists were enshrined in building names and monuments (Thomas, 2020). The parallel between historical barriers faced by Black students during desegregation and present-day barriers faced by Black men described in chapter one of this study, makes it clear that Black students, then and now, encounter multiple issues after

enrollment. Some of these issues are related to adjustment to college, academic performance, financial resources, feelings of loneliness and isolation, racial hostility, and a lack of connection to the campus (Stewart, 2010). As Black students became disillusioned with disappointing outcomes of integration at HWIs, Black men and women would take on student leadership roles at HWIs to demand first-class citizenship and full equality on campus (Williamson-Lott, 2018).

In the 1970s, the Black Power movement galvanized students, and their heightened racial consciousness clashed with the majority culture, leading to racial tensions on campus (Stewart, 2010; Williamson-Lott, 2018). These student-led movements challenged their institutions and pushed student affairs into an arena of social justice to meet the needs of diverse students who had been historically barred from higher education (Stewart, 2010; Williamson-Lott, 2018). Black student leaders perpetually worked to create safe spaces on campuses, creating Black student organizations and offices that provided services to Black students, Black fraternities, and Black sororities (Givens, 2016).

Impact of HWIs with Undergraduate Black Students Today: 21st Century

While the overall number of Black undergraduates attending public four-year institutions has grown in the past four decades, public flagship institutions have seen the opposite (Allen et al., 2018). A key point in the struggle over affirmative action was the Supreme Court's 1978 Bakke decision that race could only be used as a "plus factor" in admission decisions, and the use of quotas was prohibited (Allen et al., 2018). The Bakke decision weakened affirmative action because it restricted the intentional use of race in admission practices (Allen et al., 2018). Black undergraduate enrollment has remained significantly lower than the Black proportion of state populations (Allen et al., 2018; Quarles et al., 2023), especially in states correlated to anti–affirmative action litigation, policies, and practices (Allen et al., 2018). Overall, Black college

students make up only 16 percent of enrollment in public institutions (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2022). Additionally, public four-year degree-granting institutions are the largest higher education sector in the country (NCES, 2022). While 67% of Black students attend public institutions, 42% attend public four-year institutions specifically (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2023). For this study, I focused on public four-year universities because as a public good, these institutions should benefit from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds of all students (Allen et al., 2018; Harper et al., 2009).

Campus Climate Experienced by Black Students

Campus experiences and how students perceive the campus racial climate are related to educational outcomes (Hurtado et al., 1998;Tichavakunda, 2022). A campus racial climate is "... part of the institutional context that includes community members' attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and expectations around issues of race, ethnicity, and diversity" (Hurtado et al., 2008, p. 205).

While Black students from the 1960s and 1970s were met with neutral policies and color-blind approaches, Black students from the present-day experience universities that are neither neutral nor safe. As HWIs continue to limit the agency of Black students and amplify the agency of White students on campus, Black student leaders will continue to protest racial hostility, demoralizing campus climates, ongoing racism, and inequitable experiences at HWIs (Allen et al., 2018; Ray, 2019). HWIs are understood as institutions of higher education "...whose histories, traditions, symbols, stories, icons, curriculum, and processes were all designed by Whites, for Whites, to reproduce Whiteness via a White experience at the exclusion of others" (Brunsma et al., 2013). Many studies show that Black students tend to perceive race relations and

the racial climate in a more negative manner than their White counterparts (Hurtado et al., 2008; Tichavakunda, 2022).

Impact of Undergraduate Black Male Enrollment Today

According to the National Center on Education Statistics (2022), 39% of Black men graduate from four-year higher education institutions over a six-year period, marking the lowest degree attainment rate for all race and gender groups. Moreover, the graduation rate has only increased by 4% since 2000 (NCES, 2022). To understand the impacts of these low graduation rates, it is important to focus on HWIs in states with high Black populations. Black undergraduate enrollment at flagship institutions (generally less than 4 percent) is significantly below the representation of Black people in the state (Allen et al., 2018; Quarles et al., 2023). Given enrollment patterns and trends after the pandemic, Black student degree completion at flagships is discouraging (Allen et al., 2018; Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2023). The scholarly literature on Black males in higher education perpetuates a deficit narrative that assumes Black men lack the skills or drive to succeed in college, but there are Black men who experience success in higher education. It is important for researchers and educators to examine the diversity of Black male experiences, ask new questions to learn new needs, and innovate our institutions with support and solutions (Brooms, 2018). While many scholars have urged HWIs to reckon with and address their racist pasts, many HWIs have not fully grasped and embraced this charge amid false post-racial and race-neutral ideologies (Brooms & Druery, 2023). Thus, racial micro- and macro-aggressions, hyper-surveillance, stereotyping, invisibility, and gendered racism create hostile campus climates for Black students (Allen et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2016). It is important to examine significant underlying factors affecting the status of Black men on college campuses, including their disproportionate underrepresentation and corresponding

'invisibility' in the campus community (Brooms, 2018; Frazier, 2011). Furthermore, these outcomes pose a dangerous threat to sense of belonging.

Cuyjet (1997) explored some of the ramifications and consequences of underrepresentation by focusing on the disproportion of Black men in comparison to Black women, noting a two to one ratio of Black females to males on campus at that time. Cuyjet (1997) suggested that the lack of Black males in college was hurting diversity on many campuses. This in turn prevents students from other races from having the opportunity to interact with, get to know, and reject the negative portrayal of Black men often seen in the media. Moreover, these ratios of Black men and Black women are nearly identical after much time has passed since Cuyjet's study. According to data from the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* website (2023), 995,000 Black men were enrolled in college during 2021, while 1,717,000 Black women were enrolled in college during the same year.

Campus Climate Experience by Black Men

Black men often report hostile racial climates at HWIs, which leads to feelings of alienation, institutional mistrust, and a limited sense of belonging on campus (Strayhorn, 2019; Tichavakunda, 2022; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Black men at HWIs constantly endure a process of dehumanization, including a range of experiences from encountering racist stereotypes to feeling underserved and alienated (Goings & Bonner II, 2017). Anti-Black racism affects Black college students through enrollment, retention, degree completion, hostile campus climates, unequal resources, and the dismal underrepresentation of Black faculty (Allen et al., 2018). Mills' (2020) study involved a site selection with similar student population numbers and nearly identical racial demographics to this study. From the findings, seven Black men experienced six environmental microaggressions – segregation, lack of representation, campus criminality,

cultural bias in curriculum, tokenism, and pressure to conform (Mills, 2020). These students often confronted and navigated hypervisibility, racist insults, and discrimination on a daily basis.

Due to these racialized experiences, Black men experience racial battle fatigue (Morales, 2014; Tichavakunda, 2022). Racial battle fatigue is an emotional and physical exhaustion produced by race-based stress (Smith et al., 2016). Yet, even in the worst of times, Black people live and experience joy (Tichavakunda, 2022). In Tichavakunda's (2022) study, 11 Black men shared how finding Black joy at HWIs contributed to their liberation, achievement, and confidence. One of the participants in this study held several leadership roles and shared that Black joy could exist without the burdens of serving the Black community, but the term "is rooted in fight" (Tichavakunda, 2022, p. 430). The pain and trauma experienced by Black men at HWIs is unfair, but finding joy through their challenges is how Black men fight for their humanity and existence. For Black students who experience barriers as a result of the cultures of HWIs, positive student engagement and involvement can be a critical factor in their ability to find belonging on their campuses.

Positive Experiences through Student Engagement & Involvement at HWIs

Researchers have found a myriad of ways in which Black men continue to strive toward success (Brooms, 2018; Strayhorn, 2019). Positive campus experiences can influence outcomes such as sense of belonging or engagement (Strayhorn, 2019; Tichavakunda, 2022). Student engagement is the "time and efforts students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (Kuh, 2009, p. 683). Student involvement supports learning, and positive engagement in college can significantly affect students' sense of belonging on campus (Palmer et al., 2014).

A number of researchers have shown how Black men learn to rewrite their own narratives and navigate college authentically and on their terms. Out-of-class activities help to enhance students' collegiate experiences (Brooms, 2018). Although Givens (2016) presents a one-sided narrative with Black men finding support only in alternative spaces and experiencing unsupportive institutional climates, it is vital that scholars and student affairs leaders gain greater insight to Black students' positive lived experiences (Tichavakunda, 2022). Research should expand on how Black men think about themselves through their intersecting identities to better support what Black men need (Brooms & Goodman, 2016). Although these student organizations are based on Black men's racial and gender identity (Givens, 2016), it is shortsighted to consider Black men as a homogenous group whose academic, social, personal, and cultural needs are all the same or that they can be met through a singular program or organization (Clark & Brooms, 2018).

An important factor that Black men face is a deficit-oriented narrative that can position them as outsiders or even imposters on college campuses (Clark & Brooms, 2018). At HWIs, Black students must be viewed as holistic beings (Tichavakunda, 2022). These students have nuanced experiences and multifaceted lives with intersecting identities (Tichavakunda, 2022). Peer groups prove to be valuable when navigating HWIs, especially when Black men can explore and affirm their identities (McGowan & Perez, 2020).

Theoretical Frameworks

A theoretical framework is informed by an individual's theoretical perspective and by existing literature, concepts, and theory (Biddix, 2018). Theoretical frameworks are used as powerful tools to guide solutions and decisions (Biddix, 2018). For this study, my theoretical

perspective is constructivism and the existing literature and concepts used will include intersectionality and sense of belonging.

Intersectionality

According to Davis (2008), intersectionality is "the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination" (p. 67). Feminist scholars have embraced the popularity of intersectionality theory to a more complex and sophisticated field of study (Kim, 2015). Intersectionality is defined as the "interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power" (Davis, 2008, p. 68). The concept of intersectionality originates with Kimberlé Crenshaw through critical race theory (Kim, 2015). Realizing the limitations of feminist theory and critical race theory, Crenshaw (1989) urged theorists to consider how both gender and race intersect to shape Black women. Intersectionality links identity to interlocking systems of oppression and shares the impact of social systems and power (Wijeyesinghe, 2019). Intersectionality offers critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocal construction phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities (Wijeyesinghe, 2019).

The Relationship of Race, Gender, and Class for Black Students

While a majority of intersectional work on racial microaggressions examines race and gender, Morales (2014) explored intersectionality of Black students through the relationship of race, gender, and class. Through Morales' research, racial microaggressions operate via gender and class, which creates culture shock on campus and negatively effects Black students psychologically, physically, and academically. Some of these negative academic effects include

lower grade point averages and academic performances of Black students, which limits Black student success (Morales, 2014). Additionally, racial microaggressions create severe stress, resulting in fatigue, increased blood pressure, anger, sadness, and depression (Morales, 2014). Understanding intersectionality of Black students on campus helps scholars examine how racial microaggressions negatively influence the experiences of Black students in higher education, including higher dropout rates and lower retention rates compared to their White peers (Morales, 2014). Morales's (2014) research also focuses on how non-Black peers interact with Black students on campus. Specifically, Black men experienced racialized and gendered microaggressions through assumptions that Black students were low- income or working class, despite the class diversity of respondents in his study (Morales, 2014). Some of the findings of Morales' study revealed how non-Black students held preconceived notions of racialized poverty being parallel to Blackness (Morales, 2014). These assumptions informed the ways that Black students were perceived, treated and ultimately marginalized on campus by non-Black students (Morales, 2014). Furthermore, non-Black peers exoticized Black students because of their lack of contact with Black students, which led to perceived "uniqueness" and objectification of Black men (Morales, 2014).

Costs and Benefits of Expanding Intersectionality in New Disciplines

As intersectionality has expanded as theory and methodology, debates and critiques have emerged about the development, adoption, and adaptation of intersectionality within disciplines (Cho et al., 2013). At its early stages, intersectionality focused on dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness via anti-discrimination and social justice. Since Crenshaw coined the term in 1989, intersectionality has become a traveling theory (Harris & Davis, 2019). Over time, intersectionality has expanded from Black feminism to critical, legal, and race studies and

multiple disciplines, including higher education (Cho et al., 2013). In the last 15 years, nearly 100 peer reviewed journal articles have used intersectionality in higher education (Harris & Davis, 2019). While some researchers believe intersectionality should solely explore studies centering Black women, other scholars argue for the expansion of intersectionality with multiple populations and intersections of social identity (Harris & Davis, 2019). Today, intersectionality provides scholars with "a critical analytic lens to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, ability, age, sexuality and gender disparities through structures of inequality" (Harris & Davis, 2019, p. 347).

Intersectionality is used to advance social justice, unveil structures of inequity, and transform individuals and institutions (Harris & Davis, 2019). However, some scholars have misused intersectionality in ways that dilute the theory (Harris & Davis, 2019). Some of these misuses include intersectionality being used as a buzzword, limiting the theory only to feminism, a lack of holistic citation practices that disempower and discredit academic and non-academic women of color who holistically influenced intersectionality, and reducing intersectionality to a tool that focuses only on multiple identities (Harris & Davis, 2019). To mis/use intersectionality as an "identitarian-only framework is to undermine the capacity of the concept to critique structures of power and domination, produce transformative knowledges, inform praxis, and work toward social justice." (Harris & Davis, 2019, p. 354).

Intersectionality is too often misused or oversimplified; however, it is important to consider Crenshaw's (1989) work to ensure the application of the full concept. The intersectional approach was used by Jones and Abes (2013) to understand the social identities of Black men and how Black men understand and navigate inequalities at HWIs, especially since SOCs often perceive the campus environment and climate very differently than White students. Recently, higher education scholars' use of intersectionality as a framework has increased, including

pairing intersectionality with another framework to explore race and its intersections with other social identities (Harris & Davis, 2019). For the current study, intersectionality was paired with sense of belonging to explore how Black men build belonging with a HWI.

Sense of Belonging

In this section, I review how sense of belonging has been defined, developed, and applied from the 1960s to present day. This section revealed negative effects from lack of belonging and positive impacts with sense of belonging. Lastly, this section connects belonging with engagement, involvement, and leadership.

Conceptualizing Sense of Belonging

The evolution of the concept of sense of belonging has transformed from the 1960s to the 21st century. Early research on belonging stressed its importance as a basic human need and fundamental motivation shared by all people (Maslow, 1962). According to Maslow (1962), if physical needs and safety-related needs are satisfied, the need to belong will emerge. While Rosenberg & McCullough (1981) defined belonging as a feeling of connectedness, McMillan & Chavis (1986) took their research a step further by deriving sense of belonging out of concepts from a sense of community. By building on Gusfield's (1975) geographical and relational notion of community, McMillan & Chavis (1986) defined belonging through the membership of a community. Sense of belonging involved the feeling that one fits in the group, a feeling of acceptance by the group, and a willingness to sacrifice for the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). From a recent perspective, sense of belonging relates to "an individual's sense of identification or positioning in relation to a group or to the college community, which may yield an effective response" (Tovar & Simon, 2010, p. 200).

A lack of belonging is typically described as a sense of alienation, rejection, social isolation, loneliness, or marginality (Hagerty et al., 2002). These experiences are linked to negative proximal and long-term outcomes such as poor academic performance, low retention, dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, depression, substance abuse, and suicide (Berger, 1997; Hagerty et al., 2002; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

As the conceptual construct of belonging increased in value, researchers began to learn more about positive factors and outcomes in higher education (Hagerty et al., 2002). For college students, peers play an important and powerful role in facilitating sense of belonging (White & Cones, 1999). Other factors related to sustaining students' feelings of belonging included peer interactions, faculty support, student involvement, and campus climate (Hagerty et al., 2002; Hoffman et al., 2002). Additionally, belonging research focused on SOCs has expanded in schools and colleges (Kuh et al., 2006). Rendon (1994) focused on the importance of cultural validation of student identity, Hurtado and Carter (1997) conceptualized belonging to capture whether a student feels they belong in the college community, and Jun and Tierney (1999) discussed the value of cultural integrity through culturally relevant institutional practices to engage student identity and increase the likelihood of college success.

Sense of belonging is "a critical aspect in retaining all students and particularly Students of Color" (Maestas et al., 2007, p. 238). Findings from Maetas et al. (2007) indicate that academic and social integration, along with experiences and perceptions of diversity, positively impact sense of belonging at a Hispanic-serving institution. Museus & Maramba (2011) built a concept of cultural integration. Cultural integration incorporates academic, social, and cultural elements into spaces, practices, and activities. By implementing cultural integration, institutional

agents can empower SOCs, while simultaneously building campus environments for these students to thrive (Museus, 2011; Museus et al., 2017).

Despite ever-growing research on sense of belonging with a focus on institutional practices and interventions (Kuh et al., 2006; Samura, 2016), these studies continue to miss how the students themselves play a contributing role in how students navigate and understand their processes of belonging (Samura, 2016). Thus, research that approaches belonging as a process in which students are actively and continuously engaged is needed, especially with Black men.

Strayhorn's Approach to Belonging

For the purpose of this study, I focused on Strayhorn's approach to understanding belonging. Strayhorn's (2019) conceptualization of belonging addresses the changing nature of one's sense of belonging and the need to maintain one's belonging. Strayhorn (2019) argues, "Satisfaction of one's need to belong not only prevents negative thoughts and mental health issues, but also leads to a variety of positive emotions and expressions" (p. 12). Many of the qualitative and quantitative studies Strayhorn has conducted suggest that sense of belonging is important for Black male collegians; most Black men in his studies reported sense of belonging as an ambition or goal (Strayhorn, 2019). To fulfill the goal of belonging, Black men get involved in student organizations and leadership experiences for college adjustment or for becoming a part of the campus community (Strayhorn, 2019).

Sense of belonging is closely related to well-being, mental health, academic achievement, and retention (Astin, 1993). According to Kuh et al. (2005), "feelings of belonging help students connect with their peers and the institution" (p. 119). For Black men who attend HWIs, sense of belonging can be achieved from positive faculty, staff and peer interactions and building supportive campus racial climates (Strayhorn, 2019). According to Strayhorn, "belonging is a

basic human need and fundamental motivation, that it drives student behaviors, and facilitates educational success. Sense of belonging develops in response to the degree to which Black men feel respected, valued, accepted, and needed by others on campus" (p. 121). Black men who fared well in higher education reported a stronger sense of belonging in college than those who performed less well, due to isolation, racial hostility, and alienation at HWIs (Strayhorn, 2019). Ultimately, students are more likely to succeed in college if they feel that they belong at their institution (Samura, 2016; Strayhorn, 2019).

Sense of belonging is relational (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Strayhorn, 2019). Through positive interactions and involvement on campus, students establish meaningful relationships, which become critical resources on the college experience (Strayhorn, 2019). While sense of belonging can impact strong support networks to enhance students' commitments, campus connections, and retention, more research must be dedicated to explore the differences in college students' sense of belonging, social identities, and campus environments that create a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). Strayhorn's approach is chosen for this study because he acknowledges the changing nature and need to maintain belonging, while also acknowledging the need to explore the relationship between the student and the institution (Strayhorn, 2019). This study explored how Black men build a sense of belonging with the institution via leadership roles.

The Subcultures of Campus Environments at HWI for Minoritized Students

Although HWIs can perpetuate a dominant culture across an entire college campus, smaller-scale subcultures within that broader dominant culture can create spaces and opportunities for Black students (Museus, 2008). Bolton & Kammeyer (1972) defined subculture with the following description: "normative-value system held by some group or persons who are

in persisting interaction, who transmit the norms and values to newcomers by some communicated process, and who exercise some sort of social control to ensure conformity to the norms . . . the normative-value system of such a group must differ from the normative-value system of the larger, the parent, or the dominant society" (pp. 381-382). Campus subcultures are important in understanding the experiences of Black men at HWIs. Additionally, subcultures can be created by different groups on college campuses, including students who share similar racial and ethnic backgrounds or members of a formal student organization (Museus, 2008). Many minoritized students choose non-majority settings, such as ethnic student organizations, as their primary venue for involvement at HWIs (Museus, 2008).

The Connection Between Belonging and Student Organizations at HWIs

Sense of belonging is connected to academic and social engagement on campus (Clark & Brooms, 2018; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Research on student organizations in racial/ethnic minority college students' experiences continues to contribute to an understanding of sense of belonging, and scholars are expanding studies to learn more about minoritized student involvement and leadership in student organizations (Museus, 2008). Ethnic social networks help bolster minoritized students' survival in college, while they are navigating cultural isolation, racial isolation, and survival (Brooms & Goodman, 2016). Ethnic student organizations offer a critical venue for the social involvement of minority students at HWIs (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007). Ethnic and racial peer culture can shrink the social and physical size of the campus, reinforce academic excellence, create social support, and increase solidarity and identity (Brooms & Goodman, 2016; Nagasawa & Wong, 1999).

Guiffrida (2003) found that ethnic student organizations worked to facilitate the social involvement of Black students at a HWIs. Black students reported that ethnic/racial student

organizations provided opportunities for connecting with faculty, giving back to the Black community, and connecting with Black peers (Guiffrida, 2003). Further, additional literature has provided evidence that racial/ethnic minority students express their cultural and racial identities through their participation in ethnic student organizations (Harper & Quaye, 2007). While it may seem intuitive that Black men would experience this, it is important to remember that Black men can and do experience the opportunity to be themselves fully without suppressing or hiding their Blackness (Tichavakunda, 2022). Aside from this freedom, other Black men may discover or focus more on different social identities outside of race and gender, due to the possibility of being tokenized as a small population on campus. Harper and Quaye (2007) qualitatively examined the role of Black undergraduates' membership in student organizations and found that those organizations provided an important venue for students' identity development and expression.

The Connection Between Belonging and Black Men in Student Organizations at HWIs

Black student organizations serve as catalysts for positive student outcomes and socioeconomic upward mobility via student organizational social networks (Guiffrida, 2003). Student organizations on HWI campuses can serve as counter-spaces for Black men, mitigating race and racism at HWIs (Givens, 2016; Guiffrida & Douthit 2010).

Black men who form supportive peer relationships on campus have higher levels of satisfaction and an increased likelihood for academic success (McGowan & Perez, 2020). Black men also acknowledged the significant role their peers, with whom they shared both race and gender, played in their collegiate success through involvement in campus organizations and activities (McGowan & Perez, 2020). Though scholars contend supportive peer relationships are necessary for Black men as they navigate throughout the campus setting, more empirical work

exploring the origins of these connections is needed (McGowan & Perez, 2020). Black men's experience on campus can have a significant impact on how they experience college (Clark & Brooms, 2018). Positive student experiences are grounded in how Black men feel, how they matter, and how Black men are valued in college (Clark & Brooms, 2018). Black men create positive experiences for themselves through finding community with other Black men and involvement in Black student organizations (Guiffrida 2003; Tichavakunda, 2022). Fortunately, several Black student organizations have been shown to facilitate a positive transition to the college environment.

Black Male Initiatives Programs on HWIs

Black Male Initiative programs have expanded on college campuses to rectify some of the challenges faced by Black men and provided a support network on campus (Brooms, 2018; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Brooms (2018) found that Black males' engagement in a Black Male Initiatives (BMI) program increased access to social and cultural capital, creating counter-spaces on campus and facilitating peer-to-peer networks with other Black men. Additionally, students gained a greater sense of self, expanded in collective identity awareness, and felt empowered. Gaining better knowledge of resources on campus was important for many of the students (Brooms, 2018). Black men believed that their college experiences would be fundamentally different without the social and cultural capital that they gained through participating in BMI (Brooms, 2018). Although the participants asserted that many of the resources were in place for all students, they felt disconnected from many of these opportunities or shared that they held little to no knowledge on how to access campus resources and opportunities (Brooms, 2018). Access to capital, including human capital, helped alleviate some of their potential struggles,

provided Black men with access to mentors and a variety of institutional agents, and helped mitigate some of the stressors in transitioning and persisting in college (Brooms, 2018).

Leadership

Leadership is socially constructed (Acosta & Guthrie, 2021; Guthrie et al., 2013), which explains why there are over 1,500 definitions and 40 models of leadership that exist today (Acosta & Guthrie, 2021; Kellerman, 2012). According to Komives et al. (1998), "leadership is a relational process of people working together to accomplish change or to make a difference that will benefit the common good" (p. ix). From the perspective of Guthrie and Jenkins (2018), "Individuals may define [leadership] differently based on personal identities, experiences, traits, behaviors, or worldviews" (p. 4). From this definition, an individuals' personal definition of leadership can be socially constructed through multiple identities, which influence how students in higher education institutions engage in leadership roles and campus organizations (Acosta & Guthrie, 2021). Student organizations and involvement have an impact on leadership self-efficacy and how students view leadership in positive ways, and multiple studies also reflected how student leaders gained new and more complex experiences and their leadership identity deepened (Acosta & Guthrie, 2021).

Social identities influence how students in higher education institutions engage in campus organizations and leadership roles, (Acosta & Guthrie, 2021). When Black men serve as leaders in co-curricular organizations, purposeful engagement and involvement can positively impact positive institutional supports toward the matriculation of Black men (Hotchkins, 2014). Black student organizations serve as catalysts for positive student outcomes and socioeconomic upward mobility via student organizational social networks (Guiffrida, 2003). Research on college leadership roles and social identities will assist student affairs professionals to understand Black

men in leadership roles at HWIs (Acosta & Guthrie, 2021). Student organizations on HWI campuses can serve as counter-spaces for Black men, mitigating race and racism at HWIs (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010).

Exploring Black Leadership

When Black men serve as leaders in co-curricular organizations, purposeful engagement and involvement can positively impact their success. Black men in leadership roles develop and enhance their character, sense of self, and identity (Clark & Brooms, 2018). According to Givens (2016), Black student engagement at HWIs has largely been shaped by resistance to White campuses that exclude Black experiences and Black culture. Thus, Givens argues that Black student leaders work to counteract the experiences of exclusion, and Black student engagement is generally oppositional to the institutional climate rather than supported or cultivated by institutions (Givens, 2016; Solorzano et al., 2000). Thus, Black students can create positive alternative spaces of support for themselves within, yet separate from, a university they find to be racially hostile (Givens, 2016; Museus, 2008). Despite the challenges, undergraduate Black men continue to pursue their educational goals within racial peer groups and outside of racial peer groups, which reflect different identities and different social interests (Brooms & Goodman, 2016).

Chapter Summary

Although HWIs are far from perfect institutions, Black men can succeed through engagement and involvement as Black leaders in student organizations, which supports sense of belonging. This study went one step further to explore how Black men build a sense of belonging, not just within their student organizations, but with their institutions. As the literature displays a tug-of-war on Black male experiences, scholars must do something different.

Although the understanding of sense of belonging is expanding from Strayhorn's conceptual approach, there are still gaps on the nature of belonging between Black student leaders and the institutions they attend. While many researchers have focused on sense of belonging for Black and Latino students (Samura, 2016), this study has a qualitative methodological approach to focus on how Black men build sense of belonging through leadership roles at a selective, four-year HWI in the South.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Chapter three of this study conveys components of research methodology and research design, which was a qualitative study through narrative inquiry. The elements of the research design described below include site selection, population, recruitment, data collection and data analysis for the study.

Qualitative Research

Since the purpose of this study was to explore how Black men build a sense of belonging through leadership, then the research required an approach to understand rich stories experienced by Black men at HWIs. Qualitative research is intended to study complex constructs from a holistic approach by acquiring a deeper understanding of lived experiences in diverse contexts (Hong & Francis, 2020; Zelcane & Pipere, 2023). The research design process in qualitative research begins with philosophical assumptions that researchers have and how researchers employ interpretive and theoretical frameworks to further shape their research (Kim, 2015). Qualitative research is generally associated with a constructivist perspective (Biddix, 2018). Following this perspective, qualitative research can be characterized as "concerned with meaning, researcher – respondent rapport, co-construction of the research findings by the researcher and respondents, practical application of research findings, and the reciprocity between and among researchers and respondents" (Biddix, 2018, p. 76). *Knowledge constructivism* is defined as situational, depending on the views and experiences of an individual (Biddix, 2018). Participants will construct meaning based on their social identities and student leadership experiences as Black men at an HWI.

This study focused on the words and experiences shared by Black men, along with the process, understanding, and meaning created in their experiences in leadership roles at HWIs. As the researcher, I was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis for inductive and richly descriptive qualitative data (Prasad, 2018).

Narrative Inquiry

Narratives involve some of the oldest and most natural forms of sense making, and narrative approaches focus on how participants interact in life through culture and cross-cultural connections (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The purpose of this study was to explore how Black men build a sense of belonging at HWIs through leadership roles. As stories grow as a common source of data, the use of stories and first-person accounts has become vital to qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience and connecting fragments of life through stories (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), this study will explore how the stories of Black men in leadership connect to sense of belonging with HWIs. Narratives are used as representational forms for results or findings in various qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Clandinin, 2013). In the inquiry process, researchers work within narrative inquiry space to "unpack" the lived and told stories (Clandinin, 2013). The starting point for this narrative inquiry was telling stories, which allowed me to engage in conversations with participants who told stories of their experiences (Clandinin, 2013). Since narrative inquiries center the participants' lives, the focus remained on Black lives as lived and told throughout the inquiry (Clandinin, 2013). Although narrative inquiry focused on people's experience, researchers must also understand the social, cultural, and institutional narratives that shape students at a HWI (Clandinin, 2013)

This study applied a biographical approach, which analyzed the importance and influence of gender, race, turning point experiences, or other people in the participant's life (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As this study centers the gender and race of Black men, the biographical approach was the best analytical lens to explore the importance and influence of how leadership roles inform the sense of belonging of Black men at HWIs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This included turning point experiences and the impact of faculty, staff, and peers who engaged with Black men as leaders in student organizations.

Site Selection

Public, four-year institutions make up the largest higher education sector (NCES, 2022). Approximately 56% of Black people in this country live in the Southeastern part of the US (Moslimani et al., 2024) due to the history of enslavement (Wilder, 2013). According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2023), Black students attend more HWIs than HBCUs. While 42% of Black people graduate with a high school diploma, only 26% of Black alumni who are age 25 years or older have a bachelor's degree or more (Moslimani et al., 2024). The institution for this study was selected because of its profile as a public, four-year institution and its location in one of the top ten states with the highest Black populations (Moslimani et al., 2024).

For the purpose of this study, this institution was named Roger University (RU). Roger University is a public, research-extensive, land-grant institution located in the Southeast US, enrolling a population of 30,000 undergraduate students (OIR, 2022). As of Fall 2022, Roger University enrolled White students at 68% and Asian students at 13%, Hispanic/Latinx students at 7%, Black students at 6%, and Black men specifically at 1%, respectively (OIR, 2022). Roger University ranks among the top 20 public institutions in the US. As mentioned in earlier

chapters, much scholarly literature on Black males in higher education perpetuates a deficit narrative, assuming Black men lack the skills, preparation, or drive to succeed in college (Goings et al., 2015). While Roger University's overall institution continued to maintain an 87% six-year graduation rate, Black men who enrolled at Roger University had a 75% six-year graduation rate (OIR, 2022). While this six-year graduation rate for Black men surpassed the comparable national graduation rate of 39% (NCES, 2022), it is vital to explore how these Black men experienced engagement, involvement, and leadership at this HWI. Since Roger University hosts 800 student organizations and nearly 20 Black student organizations (Institutional Website, n.d.) on campus, this study explored how Black men build a sense of belonging through leadership roles with a HWI.

Population

The population for this study were full-time degree-seeking undergraduate student who self-identified as Black men. As researchers continue to dismantle Blackness as a monolith (Tichavakunda, 2023) and uplift other identities of Black men, it is pertinent to welcome and include Black men with various social identities. Some of these social identities included but are not limited to first-generation status, socioeconomic status (SES), faith, ability, LGBTQIA, nationality, gender expression, language, and geographic upbringing.

An additional criterion for eligibility to participate with this research was that prospective participants must hold one or more leadership roles at Roger University. These leadership roles may exist in Black-centered student organization or non-Black student organizations and could be either elected roles or appointed roles. Examples of these role types included executive roles such as president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer, but also non-executive rules such as committee chair positions. Leadership roles typically provide some sort of charge or

responsibility for a task, over a task, or collaboration with other individuals internal or external to a student organization on campus.

Recruitment

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit Black men to this study. Purposeful sampling allowed me to recruit a sample from the population from which the most can be learned and determine what selection criteria was essential for recruitment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The attributes crucial to the sample were undergraduate Black men who held leadership roles in at least one student organization. While qualitative theorists do not agree on an optimal sample size, an appropriate sample size could range from six to 12 participants, provided there is thematic redundancy after six interview participants (Kim, 2015).

Once institutional IRB approval was received, initial participants were found by asking my institutional contacts at Roger University to forward the recruitment email to prospective participants (see Appendix A). These contacts were faculty or staff members who engaged with student organizations at Roger University. Additionally, student organization leaders were emailed (see Appendix B) using information publicly available on RU's website and RU's faculty, staff, student search database.

Participants were selected on a first-come-first-serve basis from the initial outreach. Once participants expressed interest via email, I sent participants an informed consent form (see Appendix C) to explain their human rights and protections, along with detailed information in regards to the study. To verify eligibility, I reiterated the targeted population in the email and in the informed consent – undergraduate students who self-identify as Black men and have at least one leadership role at RU. For this study, 10 participants contacted me to participate. However, eight participants were confirmed, and those eight Black men were interviewed. Data collection

ended with this study once saturation occurred with eight participants, which was when continued data collection yielded no new information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and no new information was discovered in data collection and analysis (Biddix, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

For participants who were selected, I emailed them a Google form to collect contact information and provided dates and times for participants to select their interview availability. Once this information was captured, I reached back out to the participant with a confirmed date and time, along with the location of the interview and the informed consent copy. The student had a few days to confirm or decline with interview after they reviewed the informed consent. For participants who moved forward and confirmed consent, I confirmed the details of their interview. A few days before the participant were scheduled to interview, I sent a reminder email with the interview date and time. Interviews were conducted on RU's South campus during the weekday and on the weekend. Time slots were offered from mid-afternoon to evening hours to accommodate the busier schedules of student leaders and academic schedules.

Participants were interviewed in-person between 40 – 80 minutes. Although the interviews were in-person, I used Otter software to assist with transcription and used the audio recording function from Zoom. The audio function from Zoom was used as a supplemental source to cross-check for accuracy of interview transcripts with the Otter software and maintain the authenticity of how Black men expressed themselves through language and jargon that could have been autocorrected from Otter software.

Data Collection

In this qualitative study, the data was collected through interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Since narrative inquiry approaches how participants interact in life (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016), the interview process was conversational and rooted in informality to equalize the relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, photos were used as a part of the interview by asking participants to bring a picture(s) of what it meant to be a Black man in leadership and reflect on the reasons why they chose that photograph (McCarty et al., 2023). Photos were used to prompt conversation within the interviews, rather than treated as a separate data source.

Interviews

In narrative interviewing, it is important to establish that an interviewer is an attentive listener and our interviewee is a narrator with narrative thinking. The narrative inquirer's job is to listen with attentive care and ask necessary questions that will further inspire the telling of stories (Kim, 2015). As a narrative researcher, I had to think narratively about how I could generate interview data that would align with my research purpose and research questions, while leaving room for surprises that came out of narrative (Kim, 2015).

As referenced in chapter one and chapter two, this study was framed in intersectionality and sense of belonging. The interview guide (see appendix D) was a list of questions I asked in the interview based on the theoretical frameworks. While sense of belonging was captured between the student and the institution (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), the interview guide focused on the role of undergraduate college Black men in leadership, how intersecting social identities shaped the experiences of Black men, and how Black men navigated and understood their processes of belonging. The interview guide was influenced by Strayhorn (2019) to address the changing nature of sense of belonging for Black men, while understanding the relationship between social identities of Black men in subcultures and spaces at a HWI. This aligned with

constructivist roots to facilitate questions that provided flexibility and space for the participant to share their lived experience (Biddix, 2018).

The interview protocol was semi-structured (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A semi-structured approach included more structured and less structured questions, with some flexibility to allow participants to share data in unstructured moments (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interview guide contained a few specific questions, some open-ended questions, and some topics related to the leadership roles of Black men at RU. In semi-structured interviews, participant responses sometimes generated follow-up "why" or "how" questions (Zelcane & Pipere, 2023), while using probes to learn more from a participant's response (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

While the first section of questions was to ease the participant in answering questions related to their social identities and share stories about their connection to RU, the later sections of the interview guide were derived from the research question. The sub-questions were derived from some of the outcomes mentioned in chapter two, which included a focus on student involvement, student leadership, and any influence related to intersecting social identities, leadership, and belonging. This study utilized photos as talking-points with participants within the context of the interview (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Photos mark special memories in our time, and this memory is essential to how participants construct stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Photos can trigger memories of important times, people, and events (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I asked the participants to bring a photo(s) related to their leadership roles, which helped participants share their stories and make meaning through the interview (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These photos added value to the unique relationships that exist between Black men and leadership roles at a HWI. I used the photographs as a guide for talking

through observations and gaining insight into the individuals in the picture, their experiences, and their relationships with each other.

Data Analysis

The ongoing analysis of the stories and experiences of Black men in leadership produced plot and emergent themes for findings on intersectionality and sense of belonging at a HWI (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The goal of data analysis is to make sense of the data, which involves consolidating and interpreting what participants say and what the researcher observes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Narrative data is analyzed to develop an understanding of the meanings our participants give to themselves, to their surroundings, to their lives, and to their lived experiences (Kim, 2015).

Coding

Coding is most often a word or short phrase that assigns a summative, salient, attention-grabbing attribute of observation-based or visual data (Saldana, 2016). Coding involves assigning a shorthand description or label to different elements of the data so that the researcher can pull relevant pieces of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, I created codes through interviews, field notes, and memos, which supported data analysis and findings on how Black men build sense of belonging through leadership roles (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Narrative analysis (narrative mode of analysis) configures the data into a coherent whole, while sustaining the richness of a story (Kim, 2015). Narrative analysis is a method of plotting the data by analyzing narrative data that consist of *events*, *actions*, and *happenings*, in order to produce coherent stories as an outcome of the analysis (Kim, 2015). To achieve a coherent story, I used narrative smoothing. Narrative smoothing is defined as a method to fill in the gaps between events, actions, and happenings (Kim, 2015). Narrative smoothing is a necessary

method to make our participant's story coherent, engaging, and interesting, while brushing off the rough edges of disconnected raw data (Kim, 2015). When narrative smoothing is used, the narrative mode of analysis can illuminate why and how things happened in the way they did, and why and how the participants in this study acted in the way they did (Kim, 2015).

The beginning phase of this analysis involved refining data by creating category construction (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through category construction, I reviewed the transcript and field notes of the first interview; reviewed the purpose and research question of the study; read and reread the stories and experiences of Black men in leadership roles; made notes in the margins to comment on the stories; wrote a memo to capture a review of the first transcript process, and added ideas or notes to apply for the next round of data collection. After this process, I compared the second interview with the first set of data, built on this process for additional sets of data via open coding, then reviewed tentative categories and clustered data units to find themes in this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

After analyzing and interpreting the participant's stories, I shared emergent themes rooted from the blended theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and Strayhorn's (2019) sense of belonging (Kim, 2015). For the emergent themes, I applied category construction to capture recurring patterns that cut across the data in *events, actions,* and *happenings* of narrative analysis. I started with 32 detailed segments of data across all transcripts within *event* analysis. The detailed segments led to six clustered data units that appeared to be compatible with each other – mentorship, affordability/funding, disconnection to campus, institutional benefits, meeting new people on campus/caliber of people at RU, and connection to campus. Making connections on campus emerged as a theme from the *event* analysis, which represented the stories of five participants. I started with 27 detailed segments of data across all transcripts

within the *action* analysis. The detailed segments led to two clustered data units that appeared to be compatible with each other – relationships/groups/community and environment/space. Framing belonging through relationships and environment emerged from the *action* analysis, which represented the stories of five to six participants. I started with 21 detailed segments of data across all transcripts within *happenings* analysis. The detailed segments led to three clustered data units that appeared to be compatible with each other – belonging through leading and organizing events/programming, building bonds and developing relationships with non-Black peers, and leadership role responsibility. Exploring belonging through leadership roles emerged as a theme from the *happenings* analysis, which represented the stories of six participants. Additionally, Black men building institutional belonging with non-Black peers emerged as a theme from the *happenings* analysis, which represented the stories of four participants.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a parallel set of criteria to the traditional quantitative criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Trustworthiness is typically understood as the qualitative paradigmatic means by which to assure a study is of high quality (Jones et al., 2013) and implies justification and rationality to trust the study findings. Simply put, a trustworthy study generates trust in its data and the interpretation process (Rawhani, 2023). To account for trustworthiness in this research proposal, I included sampling and saturation, note-taking, and reflexivity.

Sample selection is influenced by knowledge about the data sources, access and availability. Researchers consider whether the justification for the sample is reliable and believable based on the primary criteria, which is vital for choosing a sample based on rationale

and credibility. Qualitative sampling is often a difficult balance between richness and quantity. In this narrative study, eight participants were interviewed, which provided voluminous data with multiple participants (Biddix, 2018). Additionally, these eight participants provided rich stories, which were shaped by their intersecting social identities, nuanced academic disciplines, and varying academic classifications.

Taking notes as a researcher allowed me to keep track of the research process, while having a documented process to track the evolution and understanding in subsequent interviews (Biddix, 2018). Note-taking helped me with parts of the interview for transcription, early analysis and interpretation of narratives provided by the participants (Biddix, 2018). I tracked tone, gestures, and comfort-level in the interviews, which connected to meaning for the participants (Biddix, 2018). Note-taking helped me break sustained eye contact with the interviewee (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which relieved any pressure that a participant might have felt during an interview. During the study, I reflected with the research and journaled how I felt and thought throughout the interviews and during data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Being aware of my emotions and feelings, while being an instrument, contributed to addressing validity of the research so that I would be aware of how my values influence the interpretations of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While I do share my race and gender with the participants, the participants shared stories that I did and did not relate to as an interviewer. In moments where I felt seen in the stories of these Black men, I had to remind myself that my role was to be the knowledge seeker, while the participants were the knowledge holders. In moments where I felt puzzled or shocked from the comments that participants made, I reflected on why they gave their answer, along with how their social identities shaped their experiences through their stories. I reminded myself that my role was to shine a spotlight on these responses and dismantle the

assumptions or thoughts of Black monolithic identity that I was socialized to believe. Through reflexivity writing and journaling, I understood the effect my values had on interpretations of data and the retelling of stories shared by the participants in this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Triangulation

Triangulation was used to look at the same research topic through more than one source of data (Zelcane & Pipere, 2023). Triangulation is not only a strategy for a valid research process and findings (Flick, 2018; Zelcane & Pipere, 2023), but it also adds depth to data, which conveys a clearer picture of the study (Fusch et al., 2018; Zelcane & Pipere, 2023). Triangulation was used to cross-check the relevance and significance of perspectives from different angles to generate and strengthen evidence in support of key claims (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016. In addition to analyzing outliers, I followed up via probes, and received feedback from participants in the study. In this research study, I triangulated the interview data with note-taking and member-checking to cross-check the relevance of this study. Member checking allowed all study participants to verify the accuracy and interpretation of their responses after their interview was conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All participants were told that they had the right to change, add, remove, or clarify any of their data. None of the participants suggested any alterations to their data. After I sent data analysis, I received brief, yet positive feedback regarding the data analysis from three participants. None of the three participants suggested any further changes, clarification, or challenges to the analysis.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Chapter four of includes findings about the participants in this narrative study. Tables have been provided below to describe the participants' majors, social identities, and categories of student organization involvement at Roger University (RU). This chapter provides a narrative analysis plot for each participant and emergent themes from the data provided by all eight participants.

Narrative analysis was used to configure the data into a coherent whole, while sustaining the metaphoric richness of each story (Kim, 2015). To produce a plot and coherent whole, I analyzed narrative data that consisted of *events, actions,* and *happenings*, in order to produce coherent stories as an outcome of the analysis (Kim, 2015). The *event* analysis represented a participant's reasons for choosing RU or their experiences of attending RU. The *actions* analysis represented a participant's action to join a student organization, share a photo representative of their leadership roles, or conceptualize belonging through their lived experience. The *what happened* analysis represented the relationship of a participant's level of belonging with student leadership and the institution.

Narrative smoothing helped fill in the gaps between *events, actions*, and *happenings*, while brushing off the rough edges of disconnected raw data (Kim, 2015). After I analyzed and interpreted each participant's stories through *events, actions,* and *happenings,* I revealed four emergent themes based on the overall experiences and stories of all eight participants.

Table 1: Social Identities of Black Men from Roger University

Participant	Major	Social Identities
Georgia	Finance	African American, Straight, Upper-class, Male, Christian

John	Biology with Neuroscience emphasis	American, Born in Ghana, Second Generation Immigrant, Protestant Christian, Live in the Suburbs, Lived in the Midwest and Southern States
Michael	Biomedical and Physiology	Black, Gay
Tyler	Social Studies	African American, Straight, Christian
Hamilton	Biochemistry, Mathematics	African American, Straight, Cisgender, Rural, Middle-class
Diego	Political Science	African American, Nigerian household, Transfer Student, Catholic; Working Class
Max	Political Science	Black, Jamaican household, Bisexual, First-generation
Raphael	Business	Black, Straight, Middle-class, Transfer Student, Southern

Participants

There was a total of eight participants for this study, which represented three fourth-year students, two third-year students, one second-year student, and two first-year students. The majors of these students included biochemistry, biology, biomedical and physiology, business, finance, mathematics, political science, and social studies education. Table 1 above shows majors and social identities of the participants, using pseudonyms to protect their identities. The social identities listed were shared during the interview by each participant.

Table 2: Black Men in Student Organizations and Leadership Roles from Roger University

Participant	Classification	Total # of Student Organizations	# of Black Student Orgs.	# of Non-Black Student Orgs.	# of Leadership Roles Historically Held
Georgia	First-year	7	3	4	5
John	First-year	7	0	7	3
Michael	Second-year	5	4	1	5
Tyler	Third-year	1	1	0	1

Hamilton	Third-year	2	1	1	3
Diego	Fourth-year	3	0	3	2
Max	Fourth-year	1	0	1	11
Raphael	Fourth-year	6	5	1	4

Table 2 showed each participant's overall involvement in student organizations, Black student organizations, non-Black student organizations, and the number of student leadership roles held at RU. Six Black student organizations and 15 non-Black student organizations were represented in this study. Tyler and Hamilton held leadership roles in Black student organizations, while John, Diego, and Max held leadership roles in non-Black student organizations. Georgia, Michael, and Raphael held leadership roles in Black and non-Black student organizations.

Georgia

In April 2023, Georgia attended the weekend recruitment event of his dreams at RU. Although Georgia loved business and entrepreneurship, his father pressured Georgia to consider being a third-generation medical doctor. "He was like, you just need to be a doctor. Like he was telling me, I like nice things. I like going to get Cold Stone [ice cream] every day. I like eating out all the time. You need a job that's going to help you maintain that lifestyle. So, he was like, you should just be a doctor." Georgia finally gave up fighting his dad and began looking at other schools outside of RU. After Georgia's mom found out, she intervened and didn't let him give up on his dreams in business that easily. She remembered that Georgia was admitted to RU and he received a recruitment invitation for prospective students who wanted to experience a weekend at RU with current Black students, faculty, and staff in attendance. After a long and exhausting

soccer game scheduled on the same Saturday, Georgia's mom picked him up from his high school soccer field and drove him to RU for the recruitment event. With little expectations, Georgia met the people who were responsible for his decision to choose and attend RU!

Event: "These are really people, like, I could be friends with"

Once he arrived at RU, Georgia met a number of peers who later became mentors and friends. While he had not thought too hard on where he planned to attend college, many Black men bombarded him with questions about his choices and options. From the dinners to the socials, Georgia saw that Black RU students really cared about him.

> After the dinner concluded, I'm about to go out the door…So these two guys who were now like very dear friends to me. I think of them as mentors in a way. Eugene, James, and Mack, they sat me down. And they're like, yo, you want to commit here? They came asking me a bunch of question. Where are you thinking about going? What are your other choices, and they were just giving me the good scoop on RU. From that moment on, like, really, from that conversation. Like that alone, I was like, dang, like, they really care. These are really people, like, I could be friends with. That whole weekend, I met a lot of great people. I've met a lot of great friends that I have now to this day. So, I'm just very grateful for that weekend

Georgia committed to RU right after the event, but his connections with his peers during that weekend recruitment event were why his confidence was high as a first-year student at RU. Before Georgia was ever enrolled in his first class, he gained a community of peers from Black student organizations.

> So, I already had those built-in friends. And it's like, as soon as I got there, I hit the ground running really. That first week, I never stopped like making connections…I was

> just making sure I was soaking it all in. I feel like RU, the caliber of people that they let into RU, like, everybody is amazing in their own way. When you're in an inspiring environment like that, it's hard not to be great.

Although Georgia was all in as a RU student, other Black students Georgia knew were not shy to say why RU was not the right fit for them. RU was perceived as racist, with low Black student enrollment. While these were the thoughts of Georgia's peers who didn't choose RU, Georgia's experience was positive and amazing.

> I just hope we continue to be able to reach these students. And I hope that we can create a new light for RU. And maybe even for PWIs as a whole for Black students…So I just hope here at RU, we can kind of change the narrative. And in the future, I can see more than just 6% of Black students because all the Black students here, like, they're phenomenal. They're amazing. I love them. But I just wish there was more and I wish we can change that narrative.

While Georgia attended a great program with high exposure to Black students, faculty, and staff, the reality of RU's status as a HWI did not change the demographics of its student body. Before attending the weekend recruitment event, Georgia had similar reservations about the size of campus, the small population of Black students, and the large populations of White students. After attending the event, he had a change of heart and hoped to change the narrative that RU had as a HWI.

Action: "I feel like all that stuff you did in high school is wiped clean"

During Georgia's first year, he really "hit the ground running" with his involvement on campus. From elementary, middle, and high school, Georgia was always independent and involved. As a college student, Georgia wanted to see what life was like as an RU student, by

joining several organizations. He enjoyed giving back to others since he received so much from others at RU.

> Coming in as a freshman? I don't know, I feel like all that stuff you did in high school is wiped clean. Now, they might not say that. They might be like, Oh, keep some of that high school stuff. But nah, I really feel like that high school stuff is like, wiped clean. It's a different ballgame. And it was a different ballgame. Like, in the Black freshmen board. I did student council, student gov in high school. And it was like, kinda like your teacher, or your advisor-person was kinda like, there the whole time helping guide you along the way. Like y'all were coming up with ideas, but they were helping you with the payments, the ordering. Like they were doing all that stuff. Like you were telling them, oh, y'all wanted to do the ideas and they were like kind of making it happen. But in the Black freshmen board, you had to do both, like had to come up with ideas and you had to make it happen. Like we're in charge of the run the show, the marketing, flyers, ordering, picking it up, all that stuff. So, it was like you're having all that freedom, and you have to, like still come in on time whenever the deadline is, all that stuff. So, it was a different ballgame, like having all that freedom. So, it was good to learn how to manage my time better, as well as continue to work in that team environment.

Through leadership in a Black student organization, Georgia gained higher levels of independence and leadership experience. Eventually, Georgia joined a non-Black student organization called RU Camp. He built bonds with other counselors and developed deep relationships with students who were racially and ethnically different from him. Georgia's involvement at RU would inspire and shape his description of belonging

> I would describe belonging as really having that group of people who's going to unconditionally love you, inspire you, and always have your back...it's just having that group of people who you could choose to lean on. And like, that's really when you feel like you belong somewhere. And that's what really makes you feel like, home.

When Georgia shared a picture that represented leadership, he chose the photo of him and his peers at RU Camp competing in a staff Olympics game. Georgia saw how differences of each leader was used to achieve greatness.

> Okay, this photo, we're outside. It's almost about to be sunset time. Like it's a beautiful day outside. And I'm with my color group for RU Camp, and we just won staff Olympics. I'm looking at multiple different people with different learning styles, leadership styles, just an amazing group overall. And a group with these different abilities, can achieve greatness and can achieve anything they put their minds to. And I'm looking at a group of great counselors.

What Happened: "I belong here at RU"

As a leader in Black student organizations, Georgia put his description of belonging into practice when he led events and programs to help Black students become more visible at RU. What initially began as Georgia's leadership responsibilities transformed into creating positive spaces where Georgia and other Black students engaged each other and found belonging through racial identity.

> Definitely increased my sense of belonging…being in the Black freshmen board, and like being a part of the events we threw. You would see the turnout, and you would see people that you haven't seen before, who maybe this is their first time interacting with Black RU, or interacting with other African American students and like, seeing them be

> like, “Oh, I didn't know that we were here like this, or we were connected like this?” And, and like making them making them feel like they belong, and talking with them, and oh, come out to our next event.

When thinking about belonging and leadership, Georgia remembered participating in an exercise at RU Camp. As he and his peers opened up with stories around their social identities and student experiences, Georgia understood how these student stories overlapped, related, and connected to him and other counselors. Even the stories that were different from Georgia’s experience, helped him understand and learn more about his peers through the social identity exercise. Sharing stories of similarities and differences in a vulnerable space was the moment that Georgia felt he belonged at RU.

> So, in RU camp, we have this exercise. The first set of questions, the identity questions you asked me, we have those same things, but we have it on a wall on paper. You like, walk around the room. And you kind of like, talk about why are you standing where you stand, because they'll ask like a set of questions. And you talk about why you're standing where you stand and why you relate to this. I would say that activity and RU camp, make me feel like I belong here at RU, because our stories are so similar, but like so different at the same time. Like the same kind of struggles and worries that other people have that I shared too, coming at RU. As well as hearing the different sides they had. Like them growing up and how it was for them growing up and like their environment. So, I would say that bond made me feel a sense of belonging in that leadership role.

As Georgia continued to expand his leadership in Black and non-Black organizations, he began to reflect on how his relationships through student organizations created wider and deeper

connections to his peers at RU. By building bonds and developing relationships with students who had different social identities, Georgia gained a sense of belonging with RU.

> I love Black RU. I love what Black RU did for me, but interacting with different communities, like the White community, the Latina community, and the Asian community, like, just being able to connect with all different types of people. I think that's the beauty of RU.

Thanks to his mom's assistance, Georgia's story was explored as a prospective student who was nearly pushed into a different college with medical school pursuits, but became a student who grew his involvement overnight as a freshman at RU. Georgia's previous pre-collegiate passion for student involvement and the desire to give back led him to expand his leadership experience in non-Black student organizations. Through vulnerable exercises around social identity, Georgia formed deep relationships with his non-Black peers through their stories. Although the leaders in the non-Black student organization had different social identities, Georgia learned how similar his experiences were to their stories and appreciated the stories that revealed the upbringing and background of his peers. Georgia's sense of belonging extended beyond Black organization, which fostered greater connections to the RU student body. Georgia increased in belonging through his leadership roles and the institution.

John

Before attending RU as a first-year student, John realized he would have to make the best of his academic circumstances due to a major change in his career goals. When he committed to RU, John had big dreams of pursuing business and entrepreneurship. John didn't just talk the talk; he walked the walk with gaining certificates, taking business classes at Ivy Leagues, and creating non-profits. John's initial timeline included pursuing acceptance into the Sharyn

Business School at RU for affordable undergraduate tuition, then he planned to earn an MBA at the Sharyn Business School graduate program. John's initial plans crumbled to pieces when he decided to pursue medicine. John's parents both worked in the medical field, which is why John asked for advice on which academic path he should take, once he was admitted to RU. John's parents had a strong influence on him and they convinced John to switch his major and commit to pre-med.

After reflecting on parental advice and the medical field, John decided to focus on neuroscience. Once John discovered his interest for neuroscience, he realized RU lacked a neuroscience degree! "And so, I'm just trying to make do with not a bad situation, but like, not the ideal situation I wanted either." Stuck with a non-ideal degree and a paid commitment deposit to RU, John learned how to make lemonade out of his biology major, with an emphasis in neuroscience. However, neuroscience wouldn't be the only complication awaiting John as a first-year student. While John was not a fan of RU's large campus, the large size of the student body was bittersweet. Since his parents moved around a lot, friendships were hard to keep, especially as an introvert. RU was a fresh start for John's freshmen year, but the size of campus and the student body would also be a barrier to overcome.

Event: "I don't think I could ever belong in predominantly Black spaces"

Like his parents, John was born in Ghana, then immigrated to the US at an early age. Due to moving around the Mid-West and South of the US, John experienced public, private, and charter educational school systems. To make a better life for John, his parents lived in predominantly White neighborhoods for better schools. Unfortunately, John was too Black for his White peers. After hearing his Black peers call him an "Oreo," John knew he was also too White for his Black peers. As John prepared for college, the survey questions about race would

resurface and the labeling of being called “Black” would be distasteful. John wasn’t socialized in “Americanized Black spaces.” In the midst of experiencing frustration and a lack of understanding with Black identity, John preferred to identify based on his identity as an American.

> Me and my roommate had this conversation last semester…We were thinking about that and we were like, if I were dating a girl, and I was going up to her parents and stuff like that. I wouldn't come in and like, identify as Black. If anything, I would identify as African. Like, primarily, I'd wanted to identify as American. But if I had to, I'd identify as African, instead of Black, like, there's always been this distinction for me. Even my parents have made this theory tons of times, right? There's always been this distinction between Black Americans and us. I think that also ties into why I can never be comfortable in Black spaces, because I've never had Black friends because my parents were like, you know, if you're going to make friends, make White friends. Make this type of friends, right? And so, I've never had Black friends truly. In my 18 years of life outside of, I guess some acquaintances, I really only have one Black friend and I met him this year. Like, I've never really, never felt comfortable in Black spaces, because I've never been in Black spaces. I've never known people. I've never been like, friends with them.

Beyond racial identity, John was rooted in his Christian faith. Before getting involved at RU, John wanted to protect his Christian faith, since he felt college students lost their faith overtime. John always believed if he would be successful in life, it was God who would take him there. John also wanted to make build new friendships and reduce his nerves of being on a huge campus. After discovering there were other Christian students like him, he served in leadership roles and recruitment events for the Christian Students RU (CSRU) club. Through peer pressure

from friends, John joined an additional Christian student organization with a larger number of RU students. While CSRU was smaller and family-oriented, the other Christian student organization had large-scale worship services and felt a lot like RU's campus as a whole.

> Like I said, I've always had a hard time making friends. Yeah. My friends that did come to RU from high school, were like, you should join organizations and do all this, you know, make friends that way. And they've been right. But for the most part, it's not the organizations that I've made my close friendships. I've made acquaintances, of course, There are people I can call friends, but they wouldn't be close friends.

Action: "I can't be burning out already."

While new friendships were on his mind, John's other priorities for joining clubs were rooted in his career aspirations in medicine. From the fear of being left behind as a pre-med student, John dived into several pre-med student organizations

> Well, what influenced me was fear of being behind. Being in neuroscience, I know just how competitive that is, and so I was like, I can't be left behind. I know, it's just freshman year, but I've got to do stuff. So, I joined a bunch of med and neuroscience related organizations and I do enjoy spending time in each of them. But it's a bit overwhelming. There's just not enough hours in the day for me to, like contribute to everything. So honestly, I was thinking about how some orgs, I don't think, are quite what I thought they would be. And honestly also join more, I guess non-med organizations, because I felt really burnt out during the semester. I can't be burning out already. It's freshman year. I have like 12 more years of schooling.

When John shared a photo of him and his peers at Buckingham Palace, he didn't make the photo about himself as a leader. He worked hard like everyone else did on the trip, but he never forgot the folks in the background or the margins.

> So, this is a photo of the Buckingham Palace, right? It's not just a bunch of random people walking in front of it. Although as the leader, you want to be like, yeah, when you win, you want to be like, this is my credit, I did this. But like, you have to be able to let the people who worked in the background be seen, so they feel appreciated, right?...sometimes you can forget just how much work they've put in too. Because you know how much you're working, but sometimes you forget that they're also working to the best of their ability.

While his student organizations were great on paper for his career, John's energy was depleted from focusing too heavily on pre-med. As a way to relieve the extracurricular intensity, John shifted his energies into student organizations that were not focused on pre-med to reduce the burnout. When describing belonging, John believed he should be needed and secure as a student at RU. As the words left his mouth, John immediately realized he contradicted himself. While he did feel needed and secure as a leader and a student, John did not "fully belong." John was not only out of pace with those who shared the social identities of his birth country or faith, he also did not have a "people" or "community" to belong to.

> It's almost like confusing, because I don't know who my people are, in a sense. Like the people at CSRU, they really should be my people, right? Like, I always love being around people who are strong in the faith. I've always been around that diverse group of people, regardless of skin color. So that's never been something that's bothered me. But yet, I feel disconnected. I will find a group, like my church, that we often go to back

home. It's a Pentecostal church. And it's like a lot of Ghanaians - Black people, they're strong in the faith, they're, quite literally on the outside, just like me, but I still didn't feel like I always belonged there. And it's very strange. It's like, I don't know who my people are. Because like, I don't feel like I belong with the people who should be my people. But I also don't feel like I belong with the people who, I guess I try to belong with and I associate more with. It's like I can never really belong to a large group. I always like associate more with like, one on one or like a small group setting. But when it comes to a large group, I guess I don't always feel like I fully belong. You know, those boxes they give children to help them memorize the shapes? The triangle, the oval, the circle, the square. Yeah, it feels like it's one of those except I'm a circle and they're putting me in the box by putting me through the square hole. And even though the circle fits through the square hole, it doesn't belong in the square hole.

What Happened: "They have similar reasons to me as to why they try so hard, why they're working so hard to become doctors."

When thinking about a story of belonging and leadership, John thought about the new pledges of his fraternity. As he helped support leadership for the preparation of the interviews, he overheard some of the answers that resonated with his own experience. John pushed himself from falling behind in academics or student involvement, yet he understood that the struggles experienced by him and the pledges were one in the same.

So, I was helping the governing board with interviews of pledges. And as the pledges were coming in and giving their interview, trying to, you know, answer our questions and stuff, and I was hearing why they wanted to, you know, join the frat. Why they wanted to go into Med? These people are people I can relate to at least in terms of like the medical

> side, because it's almost like, you know, they have similar reasons to me as to why they try so hard, why they're working so hard to become doctors.

Although John felt belonging by being needed from others and having security in leadership roles, belonging wasn't an all or nothing experience for him. John eventually cut ties with student organizations that didn't provide belonging or a sense of obligation. In his late-night study sessions or night-time walks around campus, John revisited quiet thoughts about "fully belonging" at RU. Whether it was friends in pre-med, the Ghanaian church back home, or the faith-based clubs at RU, John knew that there was still a slight misalignment, which blocked his ability to experience belonging in a full or complete way.

> Definitely increased the sense belonging. The organizations I withstood are actually just a few of the ones I initially was a part of in August, and that would have been unsustainable. Thank God, I didn't do all that. But it's also like, these are the ones where I had more leadership roles. And so, I felt more committed to them, whether it was like a sense of duty, or, you know, like, okay, I have roles in here that I have to do. I can't let my team down. Whereas the other ones where, since I didn't really have a role in them, it was easier to like, you know, send them emails, "okay, I can't really manage this anymore. I needed to go but yeah, nice meeting you all" and stuff like that. It was easier to let go. But you don't have the leadership role there. And I guess that also ties into belonging, because having a leadership role makes you feel like you are wanted; to feel like I guess for the most part, you're needed, and so you can't just up and quit on them.

John started off with a neutral and negative point of view of RU due to his change in career aspiration and the size of RU's campus. However, leadership roles allowed John to feel needed

and secure, which helped John feel more obligated and committed to the organizations that were obligated and committed to him.

> As I got into more orgs, as I started to become friends with people; thrown in leadership roles on campus, I started to see RU like, you know, this isn't that bad…It's kind of like I can now see both the good and the bad. Whereas before, my mind was fixated on like, the tiny little grievances I had, which often when you focus on the grievances, blows them out of proportion.

John's story painted a picture of a student with limited academic support in neuroscience, who became a student who changed his perspective of RU through leadership roles. Even with examples of not fully belonging, John's initial lack of belonging at RU shifted to an increased sense of belonging, which minimized his grievances and expanded his relationship to the institution.

Michael

In Fall 2022, Michael and his three best friends graduated from a predominantly Black high school, attended RU, and became pre-med students. "My friends that I came with, they're not Black. They're Asian and Hispanic. It was like, coming from hanging out with them all the time." For the first semester, Michael and his friends had the same classes, hung out to let off some academic steam, then studied together. After spring semester of his freshman year, Michael's social circle changed. Since his friends dropped pre-med, Michael was the last man standing from his group. The changes in convenience of classes, social hangouts, and studying became an isolating experience.

Event: "Where are my people?"

Although starting over socially was an unexpected reset for Michael, he reached out to Black students in his science classes and made new connections on campus. Finding his people was the beginning of Michael's story. After finding his people, Michael experienced two different RU campuses – Black RU and White RU. Michael talked with so many Black students on campus through his leadership roles, that at times he forgot RU was a HWI. However, he was reminded during class exchanges or visiting the central parts of campus.

> I feel like there's also a sense of representation; just like being on campus. When I committed, I was like, dang, I'm going to the number one White school in the State. I came from a Black high school. I'm like, what is actually going on? Because when I saw 6%, and I was like, 6% Like, there's no Black. Where are my people? Half the time I forget that I go to such a White school because the only people I talk to are really just Black. I forget that our school was so White, but when go to like main campus and see class change.

As Michael was reminded of how Black students were underrepresented at RU, he jumped into Black student organizations and became a leader during the second semester of his freshman year. After serving in Black organizations, Michael understood meeting the needs of Black students at RU would take more than Black student organizations. Michael prepared to pursue an orientation leader role so that incoming Black freshmen could find their people, like he did.

> My whole reason to be orientation leader was mainly because of like, seeing how close everybody is in Black RU. It's just like being that like, stepping stone, like that pipeline. Getting Black freshmen connected, early on. Because, I feel like, if I would have gotten more involved with Black RU first semester, then like, my whole semester would have

> been different. I would have been, I guess, more certain in my decision to come here, sooner. But if Students of Color, ask me, like, "Oh, where do you get your hair cut?" I can let them know or like, where someone gets their hair done. So really, it's just like, keeping, like the two or three Black orientation leaders that we do have like every year. Keeping them for the Black RU perspective.

Michael knew how it felt to keep his head down and stay in his studies. As an orientation leader, someone in the Black RU community needed to step up and serve as the pipeline to help expedite the connections that Black students made on campus.

Action: "Who's in that exactly? What is our representation?"

At RU, Michael decided he would step up to represent the Black RU study body as an orientation leader. An orientation leadership role was one of the top most visible student organizations at RU.

> From a Black RU stand point, we put in for The Big Three organizations on campus. Because you have like [RU Student Alumni Council], Orientation, the Visitor Center. Those are the most fishbowl orgs where everybody sees you and stuff. It was just like seeing who would get into that. Those in [RU Ambassador Society] too…We have The Big Five, I can't think of a fifth...RU Student Government Association. But yeah, we always like to try to see like, Oh, who's in that exactly? What is our representation?

When Michael reflected on belonging, he describes the relationship between space and comfort. For Michael, achieving belonging in a comfortable environment was liberating to him and the space that he occupied on campus.

> The sense that you get when you know that when the space that you're in, you just feel you're at your most comfortable. When you belong, you just know that there's nothing in the area in the space that you're in that's going to deter you from staying.

What Happened: "I feel like I've gotten belonging equally on both sides."

As a leader in Black student organizations, Michael connected with more Black students at RU through events and programming. While the Black population is small, Michael passed by Black students on campus without knowing who they were. Once Michael led more events, he recognized familiar faces, which expanded his network and connections among Black students at RU.

> I feel like they increased just because sense of belonging allowed me to connect with more people. Like, in the Black orgs, it's like, there's so many more Black people on this campus that you actually don't know until you get into these different spaces. So, it's like, once I joined the RU Black Weekend Recruitment Program, it's like, oh, now I'm meeting people I don't normally see on a day to day. But then also that effect of once you meet somebody, then you see them all the time. So, it's just like something like that to where now like I'm saying, hey, to different people, I wouldn't normally, just because I just now met them. And then from like, the White orgs like new student orientation. Being able to hang out with them outside of like work and stuff. It's just been reassuring, especially now because I feel like when we like hang out, I meet their friends and stuff now. So, it's like, okay, like, I'm cool, like, and it's just a different perspective that I wouldn't have gotten without this position. I feel like I've gotten belonging equally on both sides.

As an RU orientation leader, Michael answered questions and comments from incoming first-year students about his story. As one of the few Black men represented, Michael felt unique and

distinct as a student leader. As an orientation leader, Michael collaborated with high-level stakeholders and campus partners, which helped Michael share RU resources with Black students who were looking for their people. While being represented was vital for Michael and his Black peers, Michael also built friendships with non-Black peers in a non-Black student organization.

> I feel like it has increased my belonging because from where I'm at now, people want to hear I guess, my story in life, just because it's not the old 'I'm just like, another White student at a PWI'. What about me is…why did I stay at this school? Why do I love the school?...Without Black RU, I feel like I wouldn't have applied to be an orientation leader if I was only where I was before. I feel like Black RU alone helps to build you up to where you can take that step out...And also, I feel like I've gotten back equally from both orgs, like Black and like non-Black.

Michael's story started as the last man standing in pre-med within his friend group, but then he became a representative of his people by taking on additional responsibilities in a visible non-Black student organization at RU. As Michael was constantly reminded of RU's six percent Black enrollment, he stepped up to make sure Black RU was represented in Black and non-Black spaces, which equally contributed to his belonging in leadership and at a HWI.

Tyler

As a young man of faith, Tyler centered his beliefs to make important decisions that affected his life, especially when he applied to RU in Fall 2021. As an early applicant, Tyler's application was deferred, meaning he was not admitted to RU initially and his application would be reconsidered much later in the academic year. However, Tyler didn't pause his life for a later reconsideration. Instead, Tyler applied to the Deborah Anne Lee State University, which is a

four-year public institution with a population that represented 40% Black students, 20% White students, 18% Asian students, 17% Hispanic or Latino/a/x students, and 5% multiracial students. Once admitted, Tyler had clarity on where his freshmen year would begin…or so he thought. At the 11th hour, Tyler received an email that he was admitted to RU! Once again, his plans were thrown in the air by RU and he had to decide between the two institutions. While sharing this news in the parking lot of a Publix, his sister told him to pray on his decision. "So right then and there, I just prayed. I felt like that was the way God was moving me and I haven't looked back. It was the right decision." As Tyler prayed with his sister and cousin, he moved on faith and chose RU to pursue a social studies education degree.

Events: "It's not a perfect institution"

As an RU student, Tyler joined several student organizations early on, but dropped nearly all of them. He did the song and dance of being very involved as a high school student, but he refused to let high student involvement consume the quality of his time at RU. Tyler invested his time and passion in events and programming that mattered to him. Unfortunately, his inspiration came from personal challenges he faced with mental health. Tyler didn't go into details on his mental health experiences, but he emerged from his challenges with a passion to help other Black men tackle these challenges with support, resources, and relationships.

> Well, I was gonna start saying like, you know, RU is a great place that...but then I was like, that's not necessarily true. That's just like...college is college. In an existential way, Life is life. But it's more than people that were in my life here. That made such a difference…my every day is better, from my girlfriend, to my friends, to my mentors, to just my work with kids - I work in an afterschool program. It's moments like that. RU has its ups and downs in of itself. You know, it's not a perfect institution, it's not a bad

> institution. But you know, it's just, it's a small deal. I'm a social person, I believe in like, relationships with others can make or break your time in school.

According to Tyler, RU had its ups and downs like any school did. Tyler's relationships with God, RU staff members, RU support offices, friends, and his girlfriend pulled him through good times and bad times as a student at RU. The connections he made and the relationships he built were the best gifts Tyler would receive, even from an "ok" institution like RU.

Action: "I knew I kind of had to step up. This is something that I really wanted to see happen."

Since Tyler was focused on purposeful involvement, he found it in a Black student organization focused on Black men at RU. The RU African American Men Society (RUAAMS) became the place Tyler invested his time and attention. RUAAMS not only allowed students to determine their own involvement, but it had a very supportive staff member (coded as Melvin) and financial resources to support programming and events for Black men. When Tyler saw the resources and the infrastructure of RUAAMS, he remembered how so many of his ideas as a student leader could not be funded in high school. Not only did he find a funding source, but his experiences with mental health impacted the way he would shape programming for Black men. Additionally, Melvin, the RU staff advisor, connected Tyer to RU's Student Care Office (SCO) staff members to collaborate and partner in his mental health programming initiative.

> I took a chance. I emailed [Melvin] one day, and he really helped me through each and every single one of the events I planned. The one thing I love about [RUAAMS] is that it gives us, all of us, ambassadors and first year scholars and scholars in general, the ability to be as involved as we would like. I appreciate that because everybody's busy. You don't know what people go through. So, with that being said, I knew I kind of had to step up.

> This is something that I really wanted to see happen. I knew I had the support. With all my events, I texted our group chat and was like, “hey, do anybody want to come help?” and plenty of people came. Pretty much most of the ambassadors came and helped in whatever way they could. It was just about me like making that decision. Like, I really want to see this happen and in the environment I'm in, I have the support, and I have the resources. So, each of those projects became passion projects for me. So yeah, that's why I invested so much time.

Tyler pulled out his favorite photo of him receiving an award for his first event at RU. It wasn’t solely about the award for Tyler. It was about how he turned his struggles into a successful program for other Black men who needed help. Tyler was proud that he made a difference.

> It means the most to me, because I deal with mental health. I've received help and seeing people get those resources at my event. And so, getting that award just reminds me that Yeah, I mean, I'm proud of myself, like, I did good.

While Tyler had an extensive leadership background in high school and ran programs through RUAAMS to support the mental health of Black men, he held a critical perspective on leadership. While at RU, Tyler’s negative experiences surrounding leadership included a poorly executed leadership conference that RU sponsored students to attend. At this conference, the host created a simulation of various actions that leaders could take to win the simulation. The more objectives a student won in the competitive simulation, the more rules the winners were able to create within the simulation, which advantaged or disadvantaged other players. As Tyler’ success expanded, he continued to make new rules to influence the simulation, which caused the host to stop the activity and share negative feedback with Tyler publicly. While Tyler treated the activity

like a game with typical rules and strategies, the host of the conference saw the simulation as a real-world reflection. Tyler was publicly called out for being too competitive. The host said Tyler's actions in the simulation reflected that he would be a "bad leader" and the new rules Tyler created showed his "poor moral judgement" outside of the simulation. Hearing these words from a stranger and seeing how other students looked at Tyler made him angry and frustrated. He left the exercise immediately. Outside of Tyler's personal experience, his peers from RU shared that they were turned off by the language and marketing of the leadership workshops, which happened much earlier in the conference experience. The simulation experience was the final straw for Tyler and his group of peers. The personal attacks of the simulation facilitator led the RUAAMS group to ask permission from a RU senior administrator to leave the conference early. Tyler and his peers left the conference and refused to return as a student organization in the future.

> I think the concept of leadership like it's a little bit of a scam. I was involved so much in high school. Student council president yada yada yada, Beta Club, FCCLA, whatever. During that time period, you go in and like they take you to these conferences, and they tell you all what leadership is about. Like this is not sincere. It's not real. I think you can model what effective leadership looks like. I think it looks different in every circumstance. Coming into college, I got involved in 20,000 different clubs. I quit them all. But in those, I saw a little bit of what leadership was, but not too much. It wasn't until I invested my time working with kids at that the afterschool program, and also with [RUAAMS]. And most importantly, just like reading my Bible; I'm a Christian. I think servitude is the nature of a leader. Humble servitude. That's what it means to be a leader. I don't think RU taught me that though. I think God did. I mean, I see it at RU. Like I talk

> a lot about Melvin. These are the reasons why I work with these people. Because like, I see the kindness like I see the love. I see the sincerity and that stuff matters. That's what makes a leader.

The botched conference was not the only bad taste of leadership observed by Tyler. While Tyler focused on one student organization, he saw the opposite choices among his peers. Tyler witnessed performative behavior from his peers who overcommitted to student organizations. What made this situation worse is that Tyler saw that RU's campus weighed the value and worth of students based on how many leadership roles they accumulated at RU.

> Leadership is not something you can just like, give out. Like a class ain't gone teaching leadership. You find yourself in predicaments where like you have responsibilities, maybe, and you move in a way that you're serving others at all times. That's the pinnacle. And I feel like the pitfall that I see a lot a RU is like pride. Especially when it comes to like students who like are in very high positions. Like you're taking this too seriously. I'm not just talking about Black. I mean, I'm well versed with a lot of students who have a resume like ten pages long. Seriously, it's like, wonderful for them. But what bothers me about RU is the fact that, I feel like people value your worth as a student and as an individual by how much you involve yourself in and how high you are in the organization. And I think the reason why I gravitated so much to [RUAAMS] and the [Student Care Office] because they don't see students that way. Yeah, they see students as equal individuals who all have purpose no matter if you're president of your fraternity or you're, like, just a guy getting by. I feel like, that's what's so tricky. RU's standard of leadership is so corny.

When Tyler thought about belonging, his community and authenticity to himself emerged as vital themes.

> I think belonging means just being surrounded by a community that you can be your authentic self. My mind jumps to like friendships more than anything else. But I also think too, that even more, like belonging is like you being able to express yourself freely and authentically to others. Because it's like you can't belong in a space if you don't belong to yourself. So, like, let yourself, be yourself.

As he experienced a tough journey at RU with mental health, Tyler understood the value of expressing who he was to those he treasured, while sharing a space of belonging simultaneously.

What Happened: "My sense of belonging has increased because of the relationship I have with people, not because of the role that I had at any organization with things that I did"

Tyler's self-worth, leadership, and sense of belonging were strongly tied to his faith, not to a leadership role. For Tyler, a leadership role was simply a task or a job that needed to be done. Yet, the relationships that Tyler made within and outside of RU increased his sense of belonging.

> I find that, like, the expectation of like, doing more equals greater value, that deters me from finding a sense of belonging in RU leadership roles. Like I said before, now I involve myself in the things of more of my passion and my direction rather than a need to gain approval or like, feel good about, like, doing a bunch of things…it could just be me, I don't find a big correlation on leadership roles and my sense of belonging. My sense of belonging has increased because of the relationship I have with people, not because of the role that I had at any organization with things that I did. Because like my friends, my girlfriend, my faith in God, family, my hobbies. They make me feel like, good. But my

> things that I do outside of that are part of my life, but my roles and leadership specifically, they don't really like make me feel I like increase or decrease my belonging. I'm just doing a program like, I spoke at an event. It's not that deep.

Tyler did not hold back when criticizing RU for overemphasizing leadership, which influenced why his peers seemed to overcommit in student organizations. As a person who valued relationships, Tyler claimed there was more the university could do to better the development and experiences of students at RU. For Tyler, these were tangible actions and steps RU could take to benefit the study body, beyond leadership roles.

> I think there's a big misconception when it comes to like, "oh, like leadership has taught me." Why don't the university put more time into like helping students develop like relationships?...Like I just think like developing individuals to be individuals who are students, that's what matters and where they gravitate on their own. I think too much emphasis goes into leadership. I think it's corny sometimes. You're here at a university, like RU. When you get into something, it's always like leadership, leadership. Yeah. Sometimes I feel like those leadership conferences are just a backhanded slap to the face. But it's like, do you see anything like, did it really helped me, like, students like, feel at home? Are they developing sincere, genuine relationships, and developing work relationships, things that are surface level? That's what propped up RU leadership sometimes looks like. It's like putting on a show on the outside, right? But then like, you don't ever ask these people like, what? What is their life like on a personal life? You know, because that's how you find the belonging, you don't find the belonging from just being present in five clubs and doing a bunch of events. Just because people know your name doesn't mean people know you.

Tyler's story captured the life of a student who prayed in a parking lot on his educational decision, to a student who represented humble leadership by pioneered new programming focused on Black men and mental health at RU. While Tyler could have stayed on the same path of his peers by joining several student organizations, he chose to invest his time in a Black male-centric organization that provided flexibility, funding, mentorship, and partnership. He used these benefits to advocate for the mental health of Black men at RU. While Tyler observed a few rare examples of humble leadership, he saw a toxic relationship between RU's overemphasis of leadership and students' need to be praised and valued based on the quantity of organizational involvement and hierarchy of leadership roles. While Tyler did not see a connection between leadership and belonging, he did understand the value that relationships have had on his belonging at RU.

Hamilton

Hamilton was raised in the rural parts of his home state, while growing up in a three-generation household. Over time, Hamilton was inspired by his aunt, who was a medical doctor. "From her impact on the profession and the profession's impact on [his] aunt," Hamilton decided to follow in her foot steps to become a doctor too. Yet, Hamilton knew money didn't grow on trees. He prioritized colleges and universities that gave him the best bang for his buck. "The money aspect was a big consideration for me. So, getting a scholarship here was pretty instrumental in my decision-making process." As a rural student, Hamilton wasn't far from home since RU was an hour away.

Event: "So, I would say it's a blessing and a challenge"

Hamilton was "blessed" to study at a RU. The university captured Hamilton's eye with cutting-edge research and scientific innovation. For Hamilton, RU was a top-tier school that offered research and resources, but also racial challenges for SOCs.

> So just the fact that the university is an R1 institution means that there's so much interesting inquiry going on. You can never fully understand it, if you spent your entire lifetime trying to unpack it all. Like, there's just so much going on. And with that comes so many different narratives, like, people from seemingly all walks of life. If you look hard enough, you can probably find it at RU. I mean, it's, it's really incredible. But that's part of it, like, you really have to go out of your way because there is a dominant culture here. They can make it kind of difficult to seek out those narratives or seek out those other places.

For Hamilton, there were many shiny things to admire and adore from any direction of RU's campus, but he wasn't blind to how the "dominant" social identity at RU overshadowed the social identities of other students.

Action: "When you help someone at an earlier stage, it's almost like you're helping your younger self."

Hamilton benefited from mentorship at RU, so when the time came to take on leadership, Hamilton was ready to give back. Specifically, Hamilton remembered his old mentor telling him to "always try to lift as you climb." He kept those words at the forefront of his philosophy to help Black students.

> Because you see someone who might not be necessarily grounded in what they want to do, but they have this, like, just raw determination. That is inspiring. It's humbling at the

> same time. So yeah, that's part of why you do, what you want to do, to be honest. Because when you help someone at an earlier stage, it's almost like you're helping your younger self. So that was kind of selfish, in a kind of really beautiful way.

The photo that Hamilton used in the interview to represent leadership expanded on his role as a mentor. While talking about his admiration for his mentee, Hamilton hoped his mentee would protect his "authenticity" at a HWI. Due to the dominant culture at RU, Hamilton thought his mentee would stick out or be too noticeable. As a mentor who valued authenticity, Hamilton reflected on the role that alternative spaces could play in the social identities of students who were minoritized at RU.

> So, this is just my mentee. A first-year student. And he's just a great guy. He's just really honest. He just is very much himself. And I want to remind him to always be that because it can be kind of tough to be authentic. So yeah, he inspires me to be more honest about myself, too. Due to that, due to that very highly specific cultural tone, it can be difficult to find a place where one can be authentically themselves, without that authenticity, raising questions, or implicitly being overlooked. Hmm. So, I guess that's part of the worry. And the solution to that, I guess is to invest in those spaces where that authenticity can be celebrated in its own right, without having to become like a thing without having that authenticity.

Hamilton connected the relationship between an individual, a group of people, and the environment shared between them to explain belonging.

> Yeah, I guess belonging is like a relationship between oneself and either environment, a group of people, where there is natural, like a synergy between, like a cooperative reciprocity of just like, wanting to be or wanting to foster, wanting to nurture. And there's

> certain, you know, structures which provide that, like most humans, like family and things. And then, but it's kind of beautiful, when they can emerge beyond that, like when you can find belonging in like, a skill or craft. And then similar people who, as well find belonging, in that same thing, and then you find belonging in those people. So that is how I would define belonging.

Hamilton reflected on the synergy that he experienced with a group of people, and illustrated how belonging can evolve from a skill, to the similarities in skills that people share, to the people themselves.

What Happened: "They were just a group of just beautiful Black people all together."

As a student at RU, Hamilton joined the Black Male Emerging Leaders Association (BMELA), which focused on developing leadership skills of Black men. Once he served in a leadership role, Hamilton was in charge of running events and programs to support Black students on campus. The spaces that Hamilton created for Black students in a leadership role would be the same spaces that he wished existed for students like his mentee.

> I just remember some specific times where we had, you know, we do these professional events. Part of one in particular, was just when we were waiting for the event to begin. And they were just a group of just beautiful Black people all together. And they were just enjoying each other's company. And I just felt like nothing really was going on. But we were just kind of enjoying that, like being there. So that illustrates what belonging is.

Hamilton's leadership philosophy centered on service and mentorship. Rather than chase clout or overextend himself, Hamilton focused on the labor of leadership duties or responsibilities that extended outside of his leadership role. Hamilton evolved beyond his position's limitations to add goodwill into positive spaces where minoritized students existed.

> Just generally be a goodwill ambassador, basically, which I think facilitates interactions beyond the role of the Ambassador…Being a like Goodwill Ambassador generally promotes goodwill in the space in which they inhabit. At least I think that's the objective.

As an RU student, Hamilton understood how homogeneity on campus caused minoritized students to navigate the "blessings" and "challenges" of a HWI. Hamilton advocated for alternative spaces, which allowed students like his mentee and other students with different social identities to be comfortable without risk of their "authenticity."

> So, this allows me to bring back the thing about homogeneity that I said about RU, in general, so in this regard, Okay. I think that in order to counteract that, let's not say counteract, but in order to provide an alternative to that. There needs to be an investment in spaces where people have unique or different identities and perspectives, life experiences...can be comfortable simply to be themselves. And I think that being in a leadership role has allowed me to invest in those spaces. By just being there, you know what I mean? Like, and this might even be more of a function of the role being there at all and less about my unique, like situation within it. But I think that having those positions and having people occupy them kind of provides space for dialogue, discussion and contemplation, regarding topics, specific to the identities of, you know, the person who's occupying the role.

Hamilton's story represented a humble leader who tried to lift as he climbed while at RU. Hamilton learned that investing in spaces for students with social identities that are different from the dominant culture at RU was essential for their sense of self and sense of belonging. Being a good ambassador and uplifting spaces for minoritized students created more opportunities for students to feel comfortable and maintain their authenticity.

Diego

Diego came from a private school K-12 background, which explained why he chose to attend Tangie Randy College (TRC), a four-year, private institution within his state. After his first year, Diego's bank account was bleak from expensive college costs and high tuition at TRC. Initially, Diego pursued TRC because his sister was an alumna. However, transferring was a second chance to cut down costs and pave his own pathway in college. Diego's research on RU revealed that it was an in-state four-year, public school, which meant he could pay affordable tuition compared to TRC. During his second year at TRC, Diego had finally settled down with the private college experience and developed good friendships, which made transferring more difficult for him. "But you know, I still made the decision anyways. So, money was the main reason. So, I got here and like I can say looking back here, obviously, it's been a great decision."

Event: "What RU has been able to offer me has been 10-fold compared to TRC."

While money was the major motivation for transferring, Diego quickly learned there was more to RU than cheap tuition. As a third-year transfer student and political science major, Diego met new people, joined a few clubs, and jumped into networking opportunities for Black men at RU. Diego's student experience was night and day as he compared his time at TRC versus RU.

> So, I got here and like I can say looking back here, obviously, it's been a great decision. To like meet a lot more people. I was able to join clubs, obviously, [RU Debate Society], which is really great and really helped me with what I want to do in life. RU offers so much more. The opportunities, the networking abilities and all that. I remember my junior year here. I was able to I meet some people at a Black male dinner. I was able to meet this guy who worked for Disney and able to like, get me a connection to be able to

> go to this like sports convention in Atlanta. That was really cool, like, there was a lot of important people there. Stuff like that, I didn't think I could really get at TRC. And at RU, I'm really not paying anything. What RU has been able to offer me has been 10-fold compared to TRC.

Once Diego made new friendships, he was challenged and pushed in in his educational and personal growth. From philosophy class, to a conversation at a dining hall, to a club meeting, Diego sensed a higher level of thinking and engagement from students at RU.

> I would say it's been good. It's actually my perception, but I feel like the people here like, I don't know what it is, I want to say they seem smarter. I don't mean that like in a derogatory sense. I just feel like coming here, I feel challenged and like pushed to be better. To be able to, like, articulate myself, well, to be able to be confident. To be knowledgeable about things going on. I'm constantly learning and constantly growing.

His peers were critical thinkers, knowledgeable on a variety of subjects, and not afraid to tackle heavy topics. Unlike his student experience at TRC, Diego grew from the relationships he gained and RU's new learning environment.

Action: "***I guess that was like, my first club and my main club here"***

The first club that Diego joined was the Transfer Student Organization (TSO). While he was in other non-Black student organizations, Diego was visible and felt seen in TSO. Since the club was being rebooted at RU, Diego stepped up to serve in a leadership role. One of Diego's first tasks was leading a Thanksgiving party with other new leaders in the club for transfer students university-wide. This event was the strongest memory of belonging and leadership for Diego.

> I guess the first fall semester of junior year, we had, like a Thanksgiving party. I was in a leadership position, we helped organize the event. We helped with the food and all the decorations. It was me and like a few other people who are on the executive board. So, we were like the leaders of the thing. It was a great time. You know, one of the best memories I've had of that club, was that Thanksgiving dinner, which was really cool. Yeah, I was also a leader…I guess that was like, my first club and my main club here. And so like, I guess, that was probably the club I invested the most time in. It was a tight knit group of us. That tight knit group basically became executive officers, and when new people joined, it was a lot bigger. And so like, by the time, you know, Thanksgiving came around, we had the event, you know, it was like, I guess that was like, the fruits of our labor.

Diego's photo was at a RU recruitment event with two other leaders in TSO. While he hustled to get new members for TSO, he shared a photo of him in an RU top hat with the Dean of Students.

> Yeah, so I'm with the transfer student club. This is last year when I was the Outreach officer. So we were, like at a tabling event during like a new student orientation or something like that. Yeah. And so like, it's me and two executive members. And we're taking a picture with the Dean of Students. He's holding a box of cookies. I'm wearing this large RU top hat.

While at RU, Diego did not build the same type of relationships nor invested the same amount time in the other non-Black student organizations he joined, compared to TSO.

> Obviously, you never feel like you're not wanted in whatever space you're in. You serve a purpose. You feel like you're a value to other people. Yeah, it's not really something you like second guess yourself on. I like, meet new people. I think I'm constantly in

> spaces where I feel like I am not like, I don't want to say I don't belong, but like, I'm not the closest with, you know. It's happened so many times and I'm used to being able to manage that. It kind of sucks though because I want to be in that community where like, I feel like really connected, like where I really belong. Like the Catholic center, I really started going this year. They seem like a really cool group of people. I wish I could be with them longer. But even then, you know, the short span of the year, I've been able to make some good connections and meet people. We went on a bar crawl last night, it was really fun. And [RU Debate Society], the same thing, just like I wish I could be there even longer. And the Transfer student club. That's probably like, I felt like the most belonging because I was there at the beginning.

When he thought about belonging, Diego valued being wanted in any space he occupied. Diego wanted to be valued by others. Diego's challenge as a college student at TRC and RU would be a lack of time. During Diego's second year at TRC, he developed good friendships, but then transferred out of TRC and into RU. As soon as Diego was on the cusp of building deeper and closer relationships with friends from other student organizations, graduating at RU was his next transition out of the university system. These time-restraints and limitations shortened Diego's ability to develop campus connections into closer and deeper relationships at RU.

What Happened:* "*I found my place in RU"

During Diego's senior year, he and his peers experienced a leadership change in TSO. The 2023-2024 President of TSO had several personal conflicts which caused her to forfeit her leadership role. As she stepped down, Diego stepped up and steered TSO in the right direction. In his new leadership role, Diego attended more university-wide events to recruit transfer students and he continued his relationship with the Dean of Students at RU.

> I would say it was most apparent in the Transfer student club, just because like, also as President. It's my job to actually like, work with RU. Like, literally, we took a picture with the Dean so obviously, like, I feel connected to RU. He represents RU. And so yeah, I feel like, definitely makes me feel more connected to RU. I found my place in RU. If you have your, like, smaller group, and you can like, go through like RU experiences like, go to football games, or go downtown, or go to basketball games or whatever. And that's all RU has to offer me. So, I guess it's better to experience that with like, with your small group of friends and that's how you can kind of like, you know, be more like you're part of the whole RU community.

TSO connected Diego to the RU community in a special way, which helped him build friendships and find belonging at the institution.

Diego's story started as a freshman at a four-year, private institution, but his story ended as a transfer student who became the RU President of TSO and the face of transfer students university-wide. Diego knew how it felt to leave behind his new friends and start from scratch at RU. As he started over as a transfer student at RU, the TSO became a place where he felt seen by other students who experienced the same circumstances as he did. TSO was the first and major club for Diego, which was why he gave his time and attention to TSO more than any other student organization at RU. Through leadership roles, Diego saw his programming and events come to life, and he eventually worked directly with RU's senior administration to support other transfer students within the RU community. While having a limited amount of time at both institutions was challenging for Diego, he knew the time he invested in TSO was when he felt the most belonging.

Max

While Max had high hopes to attend one of the several Ivy League institutions he applied to as a senior in high school, he eventually landed at RU, as his older brother did before him. Max knew RU was a smart financial decision, but he was annoyed to see the same high school faces from his county attend the same university as him. For Max, it would feel like he would redo his high school years around the same type of people, rather than having a fresh new college experience with new peers. Max grew up in a White suburban neighbor and attended predominantly White schools in his areas. “But since I grew up in such a, like, a huge White area, I was one of like three Black kids in elementary school. I didn't notice like, I just had no idea.” Over time, Max learned more about his social identities as a Black and bisexual man, well before he arrived as a first-year student in Fall 2020.

Event: “I was perfectly fine in my little bubble of people.”

Max’s involvement ran the gamut of sports, academics, and different types of student organizations while in high school. A RU, Max saw that his peers were proudly connected to the university’s identity, but he didn’t share that same experience. As his old high school peers ran around campus to join multiple student clubs, Max decided not to replicate his high school involvement record at RU. This time, Max chose to focus on a student organization that complemented his political science degree and propelled his trajectory to law school.

> I think it was, I don't want to say isolated, but I definitely have a different experience than most people do. Because I feel like there are a lot of people, especially at RU, who are so like attached to the school identity. But there's nothing wrong with that, like I still will chant, but it's one of those things where I think a lot people are like in student government, the visitor's center, all these other things at the university and I just didn't

> have the energy for it. So, I feel like it could have been more connected to the school or at least in organizations or groups at the school, but I was perfectly fine in my little bubble of people.

While Max chose a non-Black student organization to further his career, something in him knew joining a Black-exclusive organization at RU was not the best fit. While Max was the President of the Black Student Union in high school, his "suburbia" background, the sound of his voice, his disconnect from Black-based pop culture, and other parts of his social identities added to a long list of reasons why Black organizations might not accept or understand him. Max admitted that he could see a digital relationship on social media between Black students in Black-exclusive organizations. Black students in Black clubs shared content between members and supported each other's events, programs, and socials in solidarity. Though the interactions of Black students within Black-exclusive organizations appeared positive, Max thought he could not be a part of that experience due to his background and upbringing.

> Because like whenever I'm on Instagram, they're all posting each other, they're all liking each other's content. And I just never felt as if, like, it was something that I could be...I knew I could be a part of it. But I guess, I would have gone there and been like, yeah, no, I don't know anything about this. I don't have that same experience. And so, I've always felt like that weird disconnect. Well, like, I'm trying to show Black empowerment. But like, how I was very nervous when I was writing my like, essays for law school, about how I care about the Black community. It's why I want to go to Philadelphia. I want to be the boots on the ground, like criminal trial work. I was afraid I was gonna get the question, "so why aren't you in a Black organization?" It's always that weird topic for me

> like, “Okay, well, why aren’t you doing more to help the Black community?” But I don't know. I feel like this is something I needed to say.

As Max applied to law school in Philadelphia, his decision not to pursue a Black student organization became a mental concern in the back of his head. Max feared that not joining a Black student organization could be used against him from the law school admissions committee. Since Max wrote his essays on Black empowerment and doing criminal trial law to better the justice system for Black people in the US, he feared his motivations to help Black people would be questioned because his resume would not reflect any Black student organizations. However, joining Mock Trial, a non-Black student organization, changed Max’s life and created deeper experiences to authentically express his social identities.

Action: “I felt more authentic than I ever been in my entire life.”

Max grew up in a Jamaican household, but he did not have a Jamaican accent. Max went through unconscious code-switching as he bounced around between how he talked with his parents, to how he talked with his brother, and how he talked with White teachers and White peers at school. Eventually, Mock Trial helped Max discover his authenticity through “voice” and “sound” as a public speaker.

> For a very long time, I didn't know what my voice sounded like. I would go home and my parents would sound one way, and my brother would sound one way. And then I would be with my friends. And I would sound one way. Then at work, I would sound one way, and talk to teachers in a different way. And I was like, huh. I've got all these years of like trying to code switch and like, be myself. What is the natural voice that comes out of my mouth when I talk to people? And so like, when I started doing Mock Trial, like all that was like, dead silent when you get up there. I did the opening statement on the team, my

> first ever. And I was the first person to talk. And so, I was like, I just get to speak? There's no expectation of how I should sound? Then I had the time of my life, I felt more authentic than I ever been in my entire life.

As Max discovered his own sound, there were moments in different competitions when he was reminded of his social identities in competitions. While Mock Trial travels all across the country to represent RU, the budget is less strained when teams compete in the Southern parts of the US, which reduced the cost of booking flights for 20-30 students per competition. As a newer competitor, Max learned how to navigate around verbal and written feedback that focused on his racial identity. While Max did receive negative stereotypes on race, he also experienced odd positive stereotypes like “you had swagger” or “you sound like Barack Obama.”

As a seasoned performer with three competitions under his belt, Max decided it was time to express himself authentically by wearing his earrings. However, he was caught off-guard with an experience at a competition hosted in Tennessee. Once two older White judges walked in, Max removed his earrings. Mock Trial taught members about how different judges from different parts of the country had performance style preferences; the club also discussed certain social identity restrictions based on where they competed. While women were taught that Southern judges did not prefer women in pants or assertive women who seemed too aggressive in attorney roles, most of Max’s peers did not understand how wearing earrings impacted his social identities as a Black man or a Queer man in the courtroom. Based on the environment and the people in the courtroom, Max temporarily compromised his authenticity and struggled to regain his voice. Max knew the round would not be solely on merit. Although he was a captain, received several tournament awards, and was one of the highest ranked students in his program, Max’s evaluations were still substantially lower than those of his teammates. Max called his

parents, talked with the few Black members who were in the program about their experiences, and learned how to regain his sense of self.

> So immediately, like as they're walking in, I'm taking my earrings out. That whole round, it went exactly how I expected. We lost and the only people who weren't ranked on the ballots were me and the Black people who were competing. I'm looking at the ballots as the captain of this team and I'm seeing that my scores are substantially lower than the rest. Which I'm like, I'm going to throw up and puke. I got in the car and in front of my team, which was probably the worst experience that I had as a captain, I started bawling my eyes out. I had to call my parents and be like, I need... I just got reminded that I am Black. I just need to talk to somebody that is Black to acknowledge that this is a thing that was happening…The next day, three old White men came into the next round, and I kept my earrings. And I did everything I naturally do. And then I scored better and I did it. So, I realized that as a leader, I shouldn't be teaching, especially the kids on my team, that your identity is gonna get in the way. And I felt like that was the worst thing I could have done to them in that moment. To be like, you're gonna be held back because of your identity. At the end of the day, just embracing who you are as an identity. If the only reason they have to score you down is on your identity, make them know that is why. You know what I mean? So, if I'm going to be sitting there, and I'm going to have my earrings in, I started sponging my hair for competitions…I need them to know, like if you have a problem with me as an attorney, I want you to know it's because of your prejudice. It's because I'm an attorney or it’s because I'm Black and I'm not going to…let you pick one. That was a very crucial moment to my understanding.

When Max chose a photo for the interview, he picked the Mock Trial Senior night he attended before he graduated as a student. As he saw generations of new students in the program and old friends who he worked with for four years, he choked up and he teared up.

> As you can imagine a lot of tears were shed then. And I'm sitting in the top with like my three [mentees]...one person from each of my fall teams. Like if I leave this room, then I have to admit that it's over. So, I don't know it was weird. And then I came home and I had given them like all my trophies from over the years, and stuff. Just seeing the blank shelf and being like, now I have to move on to like different things. But knowing that like, my like, kids started texting me being like, "hey, it just hit me. Thank you for everything." And I was like, I can't do this. I'm not strong enough. It was a lot. It was so much. But there's that kid, the one Black kid in the program. So, when we first met, it was the student organization fair for the beginning of the year. And I was tabling, blah, blah, blah, and I just gotten back from Trial by Combat, a national competition with attorneys from the National Tournament. So, I placed! Really cool. I didn't think anything of it. He walks past everyone else and He goes "I'm here to talk to Max." He goes, "can you tell me about Trial by Combat. I want to know everything." They gave us an assassination mock case. They gave us like a shell casing. A physical one to put in an evidence bag and like show the jury. I gave him like the traditional "pass this down." Senior item. You know, I gave it to him. "I'm giving you this Trial by Combat item and here's the reason why." He said, "that means the world to me." He's gonna do it. And so, it was a really big gain for me to see. Even outside the kids that I had, he was never on my team.

In Max's first leadership role in Mock Trial, he was tasked to run the Senior Night, find mementos, decorate the location, and make videos to find newer members who spoke on behalf of senior members. This time, Max watched his mentees run his last event, which was held for him and others who were graduating. Max's relationship with the first-year Black male Mock Trial member is important because Max shared when he joined Mock Trial, there was only one Black male student who was a senior. Now that he was leaving as a senior, and there was only one Black male student who was a first-year student in the organization. Passing on the shell casing represented a tradition for all seniors to pass down a special memento to the new generation, but the senior item also represented a rare tradition to pass down something significant between Black men who would hopefully stay in the program until graduation.

Max grounded belonging in his experiences as a high school student. During COVID, Max remembered the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, a young Black man running in an affluent neighborhood. After skating with his friends, Max was going to walk home, but his friends did not let him. They made Max get in their car and drove him home. While he found the motivations of him and his friends tough to vocalize, Max felt safety and belonging around friends who understood the racial challenges in the country, without needing to share that same social identity. During that same year, Max came out to his friends as bisexual, which was scary to share while attending high school in the South. Yet again, his friends protected him and covered him from harm if other students tried to confront Max about his sexuality. From these stories, Max had a unique take on belonging.

> I felt like I was in a place of belonging, you know, but I think those are the people that you want to, like surround yourself with. I think belonging is like a personal feeling. I think when people feel like they don't belong, you feel the air between you and the people

> you're in the room with, which I think is a weird way to phrase that. Like, I think that like you can be in a room with a ton of people, but you can understand that it's not your group of people. And you can understand that there are differences like in the way that like, maybe you're more energetic about something than they are. They are all talking about one topic and you're not and you feel the differences. But I feel like if you're belonging, you don't even notice it. It's not like you don't say like, "Oh, I am currently in a state of belonging." You just kind of feel comfortable. And I think that's one of the key parts of belonging.

From Max's point of view, a lack of belonging was as observable as the air between him and others within a shared space. However, belonging for Max was not about ignorance of differences. Instead, belonging meant he didn't feel or notice differences because he was comfortable with the people in his space.

What Happened: "I feel like 98% of this campus doesn't understand who I am"

Mock Trial changed Max's life at RU. Because of this, Max committed to the organization his entire undergraduate career and served in 11 student leadership roles. As a leader, Max had to express more of himself because he interacted with 50-60 students within the organization. By being in the spotlight and expressing himself more, Max lived in the truth of his social identities, while maintaining leadership among his peers. However, the moment Max left Mock Trial meetings was when he felt his racial and queer identities more on RU's campus. Even after four years at RU, Max continued to feel disconnected from campus. He criticized RU's overemphasis on a few non-Black student organizations that had a lot more visibility and attention from the institution, despite Mock Trial's consecutive national placements in the past

few years. Ultimately, Max understood that student leadership was responsible for building belonging for his peers, while RU stood on the sidelines.

> I step out of the program, I definitely feel my race a lot more. I definitely feel my sexuality a lot more. And I feel like 98% of this campus doesn't understand who I am. It's like, I'll walk around, I'll be in class. Everyone's like chit chatting about like this Greek life event or that event or the other. I find myself listening to a lot more music walking around campus because like, what am I going to do? Who am I going to talk to? Who am I going to eat with? Who am I gonna do this, that and the other? I feel like being in a leadership role in a student organization kind of...and this is gonna sound terrible, makes me realize how little the school is actually doing, if that makes sense. If like seeing that the way that we've impacted people in the program as like leaders. I come out and I see the rest of the school and I'm like, I see what you're trying to do. You're failing here. I love the things that we do. I love the organization. I am forever grateful for the years that I spent here. Right? But I feel like none of that has come from the university itself. I've had to find that myself instead of the school being like, here.

Max's story began to unfold as a high school suburban student, exploring race, voice, and queer identity. Once he arrived at RU, he focused on his pre-law career and extended his previous speaking competition experience. However, Max had no clue that Mock Trial would grant him his greatest moments of authenticity, mentorship to members with similar racial social identities, and belonging. Although Max did not feel comfortable with the idea of joining Black student organizations, he experienced his own path of Black empowerment and liberation, through leadership. While he remained disconnected from RU's study body and criticized the university for favoritism and taking little to no action to actively support students, he

championed the power of student leadership roles to change lives and build belonging through student involvement.

Raphael

As the son of two alumni from RU, Raphael always knew he would go to RU someday. Raphael's family knew RU was affordable and he could use state scholarships to help reduce the financial cost. In the process of applying to RU, Raphael made a grave error. Since RU had two application cycles, one for early applicants and one for standard applicants, Raphael accidentally chose the wrong cycle and was not prepared to submit all required documentation for the application cycle he chose. As his mom stormed in the room to find out what he did, the deed was done and Raphael was eventually rejected for an incomplete application. Since Raphael had to transfer in as a sophomore, he applied to Jeaneva State University (JSU), which is a four-year public institution with a minority-majority demographic student population.

Event: "Raphael, who do you want to be?"

Unfortunately, Raphael had a terrible first-year experience. Due to COVID, all JSU classes were online and Raphael stayed home and continued living with his parents, which was far from a typical first-year college experience. In Fall 2021, he transferred to RU and experienced college based on all the movies he saw. Raphael partied and drank his way through sophomore year.

> And I was like, Raphael, who do you want to be? And then what are you right now? So, I kind of like figured that out. So okay, this what I'm doing right now. I'm partying and drinking 24/7, right? Okay. That is not what I want to be. No, I don't want to be that. What do I want to be? What are my goals in my life? Okay, I know I want to be a father. I know I want to be a husband one day. I want to be able to have my family, so those are

> my big goals. What are the small goals that I can do to get to that? And that started with you know, becoming a better man, becoming a better leader. Do all the other stuff that I feel like incorporates to being a father and a husband. So, I had to start small. That's when I started to get involved.

By Summer 2022, Raphael realized his peers were making real strides with internships and job searches, while he had nothing to show for himself for the time he "wasted." Raphael decided to let go of "selfish" behavior from sophomore year, while he attempted to connect to RU's campus through student involvement.

Action: "I wanted to get even more involved. Not just in my Black community, but in the entire community"

Once Raphael gave himself a wake-up call, he was more open to take on responsibilities. Initially, Raphael thought leadership roles were students setting themselves up for extra homework. Fortunately, a good friend of his encouraged him to apply for a board position in a Black student organization. After having a surprisingly positive experience, Raphael was hungry for more leadership and involvement opportunities.

> I started poking my head into other things, like, what is [RUAAMS]? You know, helping African American males on campus. Okay, and then [BMELA], I can help. And then [RU Ambassador Society], that came later because, um, I wanted to get even more involved. Not just in my Black community, but in the entire community. Because at the end of day, we go to PWI [predominantly White Institution]. The world is White, to be honest. So, how do I interact with my community, but the community as a whole. So lately, I join a fraternity. You know, I didn't really come with the intention of going to college to join a fraternity. You know, my mom's in a sorority, my dad never pledged. So, I was kind of

> like, eh. If he didn't do it, there's no real connection. I didn't really view them in the best light at first. Yeah, they're just party people and they were they're just crazy. But you know, coming here and seeing them in action, and actually talking to them. It really changed my perspective when I was prepping myself to become a member.

After leading in several Black student organizations, Raphael applied for a leadership role in one of the most visible non-Black student organizations at RU. Raphael wasn't hesitant to be around White peers and he wanted to make connections with the entire RU community. Once he joined the RU Ambassador Society, Raphael noticed a "cultural divide" in pop culture preferences and traditions in Greek life. Specifically, non-Black Greek organizations allowed pledges to openly share which fraternities and sororities students were interested in pursuing, while pledges for Black Greek organizations were not allowed to share which Black fraternities or sororities they were pledging. Additionally, Raphael's fraternity affiliation was a life-long commitment. While there were differences, Raphael observed the similarities with other Ambassadors. Raphael was surprised that his leadership style and the leadership style of his non-Black peers were compatible, especially since Raphael gained all of his previous leadership experience in several Black student organizations. Despite their differences, Raphael experienced deep vulnerability and strong relationships with students who were racially and culturally different from him.

> Yeah, so I've only really been part of one non-Black; that's [RU Ambassador Society]. And that's honestly like, amazing. It kind of showed me that, I don't want to say that we're different. But you know, there is a cultural divide in how we move. What we consider in pop culture. They love Taylor Swift and I don't get it. She's cool, I guess. It was just a really fun experience in terms of just learning their personalities and also kind

> of seeing them like react and learn from me. One thing that really stuck out was when I revealed that I was a member of my fraternity. They all supported me. Everyone was very supportive, even though they didn't really understand what was happening. You know, a lot of their fraternities or sororities they join, it's just for college. Mine is for life. They're like, “hey, like, that's really cool that you did that your senior year, but like, why did you wait?” Honestly, my fraternity is for life, and, you know, they're like, “oh, okay, cool. I can kind of understand that.” You know, obviously, our process and their rush process isn't the same. They can be out and open like, “oh, yeah, I want to join this sorority and that sorority.” But yeah, also um, kinda like the leadership styles? We probably blended more than I thought. It honestly just like family. In that org specifically, we were able to kind of talk about deeper stuff than I did any other org. We were a lot more vulnerable to each other. So, it really allowed me to, you know, kind of embrace, I guess the other part of America? I don't know. People not like me.

As a transfer student, Raphael refused to let his transfer status hold him back from being involved. Since Raphael “wasted” his sophomore year, the pressure was on to make his last two years worthwhile. Not only did Raphael contribute to several student organizations through leadership, but he successfully pledged to the RU chapter of a national Black male fraternity during his senior year. While the sacrifices were great, Raphael did everything he wanted with the time he had at RU.

> Yeah, um, you know, I got here, late. I got here my sophomore year. And I basically wasted my sophomore year, so I only had two years. And I feel like, a lot of people will probably see that as I don't really have a lot of time left. But I feel like I used that time...I did everything I wanted to do in that time. I have a bunch of things I'm involved in, and

> leadership. Things I've done. I feel like, a lot of people say there's not enough like time but like, you can like make the time you can like, work and achieve what you want to do. In like, the time you have, I was able to do all these things in a two-year span.

When Raphael thought of belonging, he felt acceptance. From Raphael's point of view, experiencing acceptance included his faults, his losses, and his wins. Most importantly, Raphael was held accountable by those who loved and supported him.

> It's being with people that accept you, for you. For your faults, for your W's, for your wins, and just people that accept you for who you are. And also hold you accountable. And that's what a lot of my friends and organizations have done, um, especially my fraternity. You know, we all love each other, but we also all expect the best from each other. Incorporated at the end of our name stands for business, so it stands for something. And that we all need to be able to, you know, make sure we're all doing what we need to do, and for [RU Affairs Council] and for [RU Ambassador Society] - what they do, too. So, while I have, you know, like, responsibilities and also other things to do, they held me accountable and also, you know, I listen to them. Just being around people that love you for you, respect you for you, and also you, want the best for you. I feel like that's belonging.

What Happened**: **"I really belong to RU. I really belong to Black RU. I belong to the RU community."

When Raphael pledged his Black fraternity, he was required to keep the process a secret. Since the process was extensive and required a lot of commitment, Raphael "lied" to the people he worked with to make sure no one knew about his pledge process. Anytime friends and peers wanted him to do an assignment for Ambassadors or hang out to catch up, he came up with

excuses about his unavailability. During the pledge process, Raphael dropped the ball on his responsibilities. Raphael was failing those who trusted him. However, once he was revealed as a member of his fraternity through the probate pledge revealing process, Raphael was celebrated, uplifted, and loved. In that moment, all of his communities united at the probate reveal to support Raphael.

> The time that I was revealed to be a member of my fraternity. I just saw, like, the pour of like, love, you know, like, just everyone being happy for me. Like I said, you have to, kind of go away and disappear in the process. Since I'm so involved, that meant a lot of my obligations were being kicked to the side. And that was really hard for me because, I don't like letting people down. Yeah, so that was a very like, trying process. Everybody flooded me with comments of love and acceptance and everything like that. So that made me just feel like man, like, I really belong to RU. I really belong to Black RU. I belong to the RU community. Because even when I was, you know, not doing my best when I wasn't putting in 100% of my time and my effort, they loved and celebrated me anyway.

In spite of these positive experiences, Raphael described not feeling like he belonged at RU when he was involved only in Black student organizations. When he joined a non-Black student organization, he learned from students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. He also was exposed to assignments all across campus, which gave him a large-scale perspective about the RU community. Lastly, Raphael worked with more higher education stakeholders at RU to understand the institution’s resources, mission, and function.

> I will say it decreased when I was only in Black RU, but when I joined the RU Ambassador Society, it increased because I was able to see the entire university. I think a thing about staying with your own community, it can limit your experience, also limited

> your point of view…Being able to bond with people with different backgrounds. That allowed me to really see like, wow, like, this is a great place, especially working all the assignments in different areas. I mean, I'm a Sharyn Business School person. I'm Business. I'm on Central Campus, but being with Ambassadors allowed me to see the entire university: South Campus, North Campus, East Campus, West Campus. I was able to really expand, you know, more on who I met and what I knew about the university. So, um, you know, doing that, that was something that really put me front and center...Now, I don't represent just like a small population, I represent 40,000 students. I'm supposed to be, you know, the best of the best basically, so, I have to live up to that. I have to exemplify that with everything I do with the blazer or without the blazer? You know, at the end of the day, I represent RU.

Raphael's story started with heavy drinking and parties, but his journey transformed from a wake-up call to growing into the man he wanted to become. This growth took place through Black and non-Black student leadership roles at RU. Serving in one leadership role within a Black student organization led to several leadership roles and higher involvement on campus. Eventually, Raphael would join a non-Black student organization and serve as one of the faces of RU. Through leadership and relationships with non-Black peers, Raphael experienced an increased sense of belonging at RU and a deeper knowledge and love for his institution.

Emergent Themes

Four themes emerged from the stories of the participants in this study. These four themes include making connections on campus, framing belonging through relationships and environment, exploring belonging through leadership roles, and building institutional belonging with non-Black peers.

Making Connections on Campus

"The caliber of people that they let into RU, like, everybody is like amazing in their own" – Georgia

Black men made connections on campus as first-year or transfer students, which helped build friendships, mentorship, and networks at RU. According to Rosenberg & McCullough (1981), belonging was defined as a feeling of connectedness. As referenced by McGown & Perez (2020), this study showed how peer groups helped the participants in this study navigate a HWI.

While John struggled with making new friends, he knew the large size of the campus would increase his odds to make new connections. On the other hand, Michael attended RU with three of his best friends. Once his friends left pre-med, Michael began to make new connections and talk to other students.

Georgia, Diego, and Tyler experienced connections that contributed heavily to their experiences on campus. Both Georgia and Diego were very impressed with the student body. While Diego reflected on the intellect of his peers and how he was constantly growing from these encounters, Georgia experienced greatness with students and staff members who were pouring into him.

> Like I really soak everything in and soak in everything everybody was trying to pour into me whether that be Melvin [RU staff member] or my friends. I was just making sure I was soaking it all in. Even from my peers, they were inspiring me. They inspire me every day, they inspire me to do better, because when I'm thinking about what should I do next, I think, what are they doing? So I feel like RU, the caliber of people that they let into RU, like, everybody is like amazing in their own way. When you're in a inspiring environment like that, like it's hard not to be great.

Tyler talked about his peers, but he constantly discussed the guidance and partnership he developed with RU staff members.

> On a professional level, I've worked with a guy named Melvin. He's my mentor, one of the greatest for real. I also work with two individuals, Ian and Ali in Student Care outreach. They're wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, individuals. It shows me that people really care about individuals, like and want to see them do well and provide the means to help them succeed

Campus participation would form early connections and attachments to the RU campus community, which was crucial to the experiences of Black men at HWIs. As suggested from Strayhorn's (2019) and Tichavakunda's (2022) studies, the positive campus experiences and connections would later influence engagement and sense of belonging outcomes.

Framing Belonging through Relationships and Environment

"I guess belonging is like a relationship between oneself and either environment, a group of people, where there is natural, like a synergy between, like a cooperative reciprocity of just like, wanting to be or wanting to foster, wanting to nurture." - Hamilton

The participants of this study framed sense of belonging through their relationships and environment. In literature, sense of belonging is relational (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Strayhorn, 2019). While Rosenberg & McCullough (1981) defined belonging as a feeling of connectedness, McMillan & Chavis (1986) defined belonging through the membership of a community. As referenced in McMillian & Chavis's (1986), the participants in this study shared their experience of fitting in student groups and felt acceptance from the relationships they built within student organizations at RU.

Georgia, Tyler, Max, Diego, Hamilton, and Raphael discussed the relationships to people as *groups, community,* and *my people*. Georgia, Michael, Max, Diego, John, and Hamilton contextualized of belonging *as home, space, room,* and *place*. The relationship that these participants shared with others produced love, inspiration, support, friendships, value, security, acceptance, accountability, and respect. Hamilton's description of belonging provides insight between the student and the relationship to people.

> Yeah, I guess belonging is like a relationship between oneself and either environment, a group of people, where there is natural, like a synergy between, like a cooperative reciprocity of just like, wanting to be or wanting to foster, wanting to nurture. And there's certain, you know, structures which provide that, like most humans, like family and things. And then, but it's kind of beautiful, when they can emerge beyond that, like when you can find belonging in like, a skill or craft. And then similar people who, as well find belonging, in that same thing, and then you find belonging in those people. So that is how I would define belonging.

However, the right environment can catalyze development, liberation, comfort, and expression. When discussing environment, several Black men reflected on feeling no hesitancy but feeling comfort, authenticity, and free expression of yourself. Michael's word provides context of belonging in an environment.

> Belonging, I guess is when there's nothing in you that feels like you don't take up the space that you're in. The sense that you get when you know that when the space that you're in, you just feel you're at your most comfortable. When you belong, you just know that there's nothing in the area in the space that you're in. That's going to deter you from staying.

For the students of this study, peers, staff support, student involvement, and the campus environment played an important and powerful role in facilitating sense of belonging. As suggested by Palmer et al. (2014), student involvement in this narrative study supported learning, and positive engagement, which significantly affect students' sense of belonging on campus. Similar to Kuh et al. (2005), feelings of belonging experienced by the Black men in this study helped these students feel connected with their peers and the institution.

Exploring Belonging through Leadership Roles

"I think the biggest one is like being a captain. Yeah. You understand that everyone in the room kind of looks to you for advice?" – Max

According to literature, belonging-based studies continue to miss how the students themselves play a contributing role in how students navigate and understand their processes of belonging (Samura, 2016). However, this narrative study directly shows how Black men built belonging through leadership roles and how peer groups in student organizations contributed to belonging of Black men at RU. As referenced by Komives et al. (1998), leadership was a relational process that revealed how Black men worked with other peers to accomplish change or to make a difference on RU's campus. Participants in this study experienced belonging through leadership roles.

Diego, Hamilton, and Michael increased in belonging through their responsibilities as student leaders. While Diego's role involved hosting an event for transfer students at RU, Hamilton and Michael hosted events focused around Black students at RU. All three participants experienced a sense of belonging through accomplishment in their execution of the event and the fulfillment they received while seeing their event come to fruition.

Georgia, Max, John, and Raphael increased their sense of belonging through vulnerable experiences as student leaders. John and Max's vulnerable experience was rooted in the way they related to the struggles of their peers. While John connected with pledges because they worked hard and made similar sacrifices to be medical doctors as he did, Max talked about the stress and complications of competition that brought his team closer than before. Georgia and Raphael's vulnerable experiences were rooted in identity. While Georgia participated in a social identity exercise with his peers to understand each other in a deeper way, Raphael shared his pledge to a Black fraternity, which provided acceptance and understanding from Black and non-Black leaders.

> The time that I was revealed to be a member of my fraternity. I just saw, like, the pour of like, love, you know, like, just everyone being happy for me. Like I said, you have to, kind of go away and disappear in the process. Since I'm so involved, that meant a lot of my obligations were being kicked to the side. And that was really hard for me because, I don't like letting people down. Yeah, like, so. I said I can't go, I can't go. I'm sick. I'm sick. I have to see my family, they're coming up. And I was like, constantly lying and lying. Some people are smart. Some people are already Greek so they can like figure it out. Some people didn't. You know, like I said before, like [Ambassadors] really didn't know until I was revealed. Yeah, so that was a very like, trying process. Everybody flooded me with comments of love and acceptance and everything like that.

For the participants in this narrative inquiry, the connections with leadership and belonging related to leadership programming and vulnerable experiences. Student organizations and involvement influenced leadership self-efficacy and how students viewed leadership positively, which aligns with Acosta & Guthrie's (2021) research. Additionally, Strayhorn's

(2019) research aligns with how Black men in this study experienced college adjustment in becoming a part of the campus community through involvement in student organizations and leadership roles.

Black Men Building Institutional Belonging with Non-Black Peers

"Just being able to connect with all different types of people. I think that's the beauty of RU" – Georgia

While all three of these participants acknowledged the experience and leadership exposure they received in Black student organizations, expanding beyond Black student organizations would help develop deeper connections with non-Black peers. The relationships that Black men developed with non-Black peers through student leadership roles helped participants build institutional belonging at RU. Hurtado and Carter (1997) conceptualized belonging to capture whether a student feels they belong in the college community. According to literature, peers play an important and powerful role in facilitating sense of belonging (White & Cones, 1999). In addition to Black peer groups, other factors in this study that related to institutional belonging included non-Black peer interactions, high-level institutional stakeholder access, student involvement, and campus climate, as referenced by Hagerty et al. (2002) and Hoffman et al. (2002).

Georgia was able to learn from peers from a variety of backgrounds, which would be the key to expand his belonging at an HWI.

> It's just so much you can do at RU. And see the thing is me like, I want to stick my toe in everything. But it's so many opportunities, and so many avenues to get connected. And just being able to do multiple orgs and to connect with different types of people. I love black RU. I love what black RU did for me, but interacting with different communities,

like the White community, the Latina community, and maybe the Asians, like, just being able to connect with all different types of people. I think that's the beauty of RU.

In this study, some Black students needed peers of their racial group to feel belonging, while others needed to form connections with students of other racial-ethnic groups. As referenced in Strayhorn's (2019) study, Black men in this study experienced positive interactions and involvement on campus, which led participants to establish meaningful relationships with non-Black peers. Sense of belonging developed in response to the degree to which Black men felt respected, valued, accepted, and needed by others on campus. The relationships with non-Black peers became critical resources at RU. Expanding on Acosta & Guthrie's (2021) research on leadership, Black men in this study gained new and more complex experiences with non-Black peers and their leadership identity deepened with the institution.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black men build a sense of belonging with a HWIs through leadership roles. Chapter four of this study provided a narrative analysis plot to understand the events, actions, and happenings for each participant at RU. Through emergent themes of chapter four, Black men made connections on campus with peers and staff, described the vital connection between the relationships of their community and campus environment, experienced belonging through both Black and non-Black organization leadership roles, and built institutional belonging through interacting with non-Black peers within non-Black student organizations.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study explored how undergraduate Black men build a sense of belonging with a historically White institution (HWI). This study examines the relationships that Black men have in Black and non-Black student organizations and the institution. The following research question assisted me in gaining insight from participants in this study: How do Black men build a sense of belonging with a HWI through leadership roles? Intersectionality and Strayhorn's (2019) sense of belonging approach were chosen as theoretical frameworks to understand how social identities shape Black men and to explore the relationship between the student and the institution. The discussion will include how most participants in leadership roles experienced an increased sense of belonging and how a majority of participants built a sense of belonging with the institution.

Chapter five will be organized based on the stories of Black men at RU, increased belonging through leadership roles, and increased institutional belonging at RU. This chapter will show how the experiences of participants in this study confirmed or challenged literature and scholarship of Black men, especially in regards to the theoretical frameworks. Lastly, chapter five includes implications and a conclusion of this study.

The Students and the Institution: Stories of Black Men Attending RU

While all participants in this study were student leaders, there were nuanced reactions related to how Black men experienced a HWI. As referenced in chapter two, Givens (2016) and Solorzano et al. (2000) argued that Black student leaders counteract the experiences of exclusion, and Black student engagement is generally oppositional to the institutional climate rather than supported or cultivated by institutions (Givens, 2016; Solorzano et al., 2000). However, this

study represented Black men with negative experiences, a mixture of positive and negative experiences, and positive experiences at a HWI. As Brooms and Goodman (2016) referenced in their study, undergraduate Black men continue to pursue their educational goals both within racial peer groups and outside of racial peer groups, which reflect different identities and different social interests at a HWI. As I argued in chapter two, scholars must be careful to avoid pushing heavy-handed negative narratives that generalize the experiences of Black men at HWIs, especially since four-year, public HWIs, like RU, have important resources and connections that can support Black men. Experiences of Black men are not monolithic, and it is imperative that researchers share the full experiences of Black students at a HWI.

Hamilton, Tyler, and Max experienced varying levels of what has been referred to in literature as alienation, institutional mistrust, lack of representation, tokenism, and a limited sense of belonging on campus (Mills, 2020; Strayhorn 2019; Tichavakunda, 2022; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Hamilton's story expressed his frustration with RU and their lack of support for students.

> I feel like being in a leadership role in a student organization kind of...and this is gonna sound terrible, makes me realize how little the school is actually doing, if that makes sense. If like seeing that the way that we've impacted people in the program as like leaders. I come out and I see the rest of the school and I'm like, I see what you're trying to do. You're failing here. I love the things that we do. I love organization. I am forever grateful for the years that I spent here. Right? But I feel like none of that has come from the university itself. I've had to find that myself instead of the school

While Georgia and Diego described their experiences as very positive and enjoyable, John, Hamilton, and Raphael described their experiences as a mixture of ups and downs with positive

and negative stories. Several students described RU as a place with high caliber students, a place of incredible opportunity, an environment of greatness, and a place that provided challenge, constant learning and growth. Yet, the social identities of the participants shaped Black male experiences at RU.

While the participants in this study carried several social identities, racial identity was prevalent for Black men at RU. Participants used these terms to describe their racial identity: Black, African American, or African. While Diego, Max, and John were raised in African and Caribbean households, none of these students identified themselves as the nationality of their parents' home country. As a point of distinction, Diego and John identified themselves as "actually" African American because of their parents' origin from Africa. This emphasis from Diego and John implicated there may be some cultural differences on how the African American identity is understood between an African point of view and the point of view from Americanized Black people with African ancestry. While most of the participants were comfortable expressing their racial identities, it is vital to pay attention to the way students express racial identity, while providing opportunities to reflect the inclusivity of expressions of people who have African ancestry.

During the study, John and Max revealed uncomfortable experiences with racial identity. While John did not prefer to be labeled as Black due to a lack of exposure and understanding surrounding Black identity, Max felt Black spaces would not be inclusive of his upbringing and other parts of his social identities. Both participants grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods, predominantly White schools, and had less of a negative reaction to being minoritized or tokenized while attending RU. Neither participant pursued Black student organizations.

As referenced in Table 1 and Table 2, these eight participants came from diverse backgrounds with social identities beyond the racial and gender identities they shared. While RU is a top-tier four-year, public institution with a long list of opportunities and impressive students, students from this study experienced a wide range of reactions as Black men at this HWI. While racial identity remained prominent in this narrative inquiry, intersectionality of the participants provided insight into the social identities that shaped the responses and decisions of Black men at RU.

The Students and the Institution: Increased Belonging through Leadership Roles

All but one participant experienced an increased sense of belonging through leadership roles. As experienced in Brooms' study (2018), student organizations helped enhance the collegiate experiences of Black men. Similar to the literature referenced in Palmer et al. (2014), positive engagement from student involvement and student leadership at RU significantly affected sense of belonging of Black men on campus. According to Hotchkins (2014), when Black men serve as leaders in co-curricular organizations, purposeful engagement and involvement can positively impact institutional supports toward the persistence of Black men. However, I argued in earlier chapters that this study would not focus solely on persistence, but also how Black men can thrive at a HWI. The Black men in this study thrived through both Black and non-Black organizational leadership roles. Student organizations and involvement had a positive impact on leadership self-efficacy, and seven participants viewed leadership in positive ways. Some of these positive impacts and supports include gained leadership experience, networking with RU staff and RU institutional leadership, added value to their organizations, innovative programming to support peers, and strengthened academic, social, and career outcomes through leadership roles.

Black Male-Centric Student Organizations Benefit Black Men at RU

Black male-centric student organizations benefited Black men at RU by creating what Givens (2016) and Guiffrida & Douthit (2010) referred to as counter-spaces for Black men, which mitigated invisibility and marginalization. This study also echoed McGown & Perez (2020), since the participants of this study acknowledged the significant role their Black male peers played in their collegiate success and campus. Five participants were involved in Black male-centric student organizations. Raphael, Tyler, Michael, Georgia, and Hamilton shared increased access to social and cultural capital to create alternative spaces from the dominant culture on RU's campus, while facilitating peer to peer networks with other Black men and the Black student body. Michael shared his experience of facilitating events for Black students at RU.

> I feel like they increased just because of sense of belonging allowed me to connect with more people. Like, in the Black orgs, it's like, there's so many more Black people on this campus that you actually don't know until you get into these different spaces. So, it's like, once I joined a new Black student organization, like, oh, now I'm meeting people I don't normally see on a day to day. But then also that effect of once you meet somebody, then you see them all the time. So, it's just like something like that to where now like I'm saying, hey, to different people, I wouldn't normally, just because I just now I met them

Additionally, participants gained a greater sense of self, expanded in collective identity awareness, and felt empowered.

Max's experience at a Mock Trial tournament is a reminder that non-Black organizations can create positive counter-spaces. Specifically, Black men like Max leaned on a Black male within the program to ask for advice and guidance through uncomfortable Black experiences.

> I got in the car and in front of my team, which was probably the worst experience that I had as a captain, I started bawling my eyes out. I had to call my parents and be like, I need... I just got reminded that I am Black. I just need to talk to somebody that is Black to acknowledge that this is a thing that was happening. So, like, I spoke to the senior, Black male in the program. I was like, "how did you do this? This is rough." And he was very like, "at the end of the day, like you are who you are. You are a Black man." And I think that it goes towards, I think my biggest thing about Mock Trial, because it helped me be unapologetically Black.

While seven students connected how their leadership roles opened up deeper relationships and increased belonging, Tyler separated the connection between the role and his relationships. Tyler shared that belonging came from his faith. This is an important reminder that some students bring their cultural community wealth from their social identities, rather than finding or developing it through student leadership roles (Yosso, 2005).

In this narrative study, participants in leadership roles developed and enhanced their character, sense of self, and identity. Despite the ups and downs at RU, undergraduate Black men continued to pursue their educational goals both within racial peer groups and outside of racial peer groups, which reflected different identities and different social interests that Black men have in college.

The Students and the Institution: Increased Belonging with RU

Since this study has a theme focused on framing belonging through relationship and environment, it was important to explore the relationship between the participants and RU. In this narrative study, five participants increased in belonging with their institution. To draw distinction between increased belonging in leadership roles versus increased belonging with the

institution, participants who experienced increased belonging with the institution achieved this through relationships with non-Black peers within non-Black student organizations, increased access to high-level stakeholders at RU, and better platforms and visibility to represent Black experiences and needs. From the goal of this study, Black men can thrive and belong in Black student organizations, non-Black student organizations, and within the institution.

Institutional Belonging with non-Black Peers

Black men built institutional belonging with non-Black peers in non-Black student organizations, which connected these Black men to the RU university community as a whole. These relationships were forged through leadership roles that caused collaboration through running events and programming. These collaborations eventually led to sharing vulnerable moments that allowed differences and cultural divides to be understood, respected, and relatable. Furthermore, Black men experienced similarities in the stories, struggles, academic aspirations, and goals with non-Black peers. Through leadership and through vulnerable moments, Black men developed deeper relationships with their non-Black peers, and these relationships expanded beyond leadership roles and leadership spaces.

One of the experiences that contributed to belonging with the institution for participants in this study was holding a leadership role that connected the students to high-level stakeholders at RU. John, Georgia, Raphael, and Michael were all a part of the most visible non-Black student organizations at RU. This expanded students' ability to make connections on campus and elevate the students' relationship with RU through high-level stakeholders. Most of these students used the platforms they were given to share their Black experiences. Georgia had access to high-level staff, senior administrators, donors, and other higher education stakeholders through student government. While Diego's student organization was not among the most visible groups at RU,

he did interact with the Dean of Students often, and his organization participated in large-scale events for RU. This data shows that exposure and engagement with high-level institutional actors not only connects to sense of belonging, but high-level stakeholders also foster positive working relationships with Black men in student leadership roles at a HWI.

Higher visibility and greater platforms within non-Black student organizations provided increased opportunities to represent Black students, create pipelines and connections to Black student needs, or serve the RU study body as a whole. Higher platforms provided participants with more opportunities to share Black experiences about RU, provide greater support to Black student needs through accessibility, and expand relationships with non-Black peers.

Criticisms of RU from Black Men in Leadership

While most participants said that being in leadership roles increased their overall sense of belonging at RU, that was not true for every student in the study. Max and Tyler did not increase or decrease in a sense of belonging with RU. Max shared how he felt disconnected from the campus, while feeling security and belonging in his non-Black student organization. He felt his Black and Queer identity more tangibly when on campus and out of the bubble of his student organization. Tyler's criticism came from RU's overemphasis of leadership and seeing students overcommit themselves to student organizations for validation of their self-worth. Separate from Max and Tyler, Hamilton's response on whether he experienced an increase or decrease was inconclusive. While Hamilton did not address belonging, he did highlight his disappointment with ongoing changes at RU with Black-focused student support roles that were being modified and altered from their original purpose and function. While Tyler, Hamilton, and Max held criticisms of RU, they reiterated the need for student leadership and advocacy as a means to support belonging for their peers.

Discussing Intersectionality as a Framework: Black Men Have Unique Needs

Similar to Brunsma et al. (2013), Black men in this study had racialized experiences at RU by experiencing a disproportionate underrepresentation and corresponding 'invisibility' in the campus community. The students in this study did not have the same academic, social, personal, and cultural needs, which reflected Clark & Brooms' (2018) findings. Inspiration from Brooms & Goodman (2016) influenced this study to understand Black men through their intersecting identities to better support what Black men needed at a HWI. According to literature, social identities influence how students in higher education institutions engage in campus organizations and leadership roles (Acosta & Guthrie, 2021). While all participants self-identified as Black men, only five of them were a part of Black-student organizations. The other three participants were involved in non-Black student organizations. Whether the organization was Black or non-Black, participants joined for a variety of reasons. Some of these included race, gender, faith, academics, career aspirations, student ambassador roles, transitional needs, recruitment from peers, and leadership opportunities. By dissecting monolithic stereotypes about Black men, this study conveyed the unique needs of each student. While John, Hamilton, and Michael are on a pre-med career trajectory, their student organization choices vary based on their needs. As the only two transfer students in the study, Diego struggled with the limited amount of time he had to make deeper connections, while Raphael challenged time as a limitation by doing everything he set out to do. While five participants came from predominantly White neighborhoods and schools in their state, some Black men pursued Black student organizations to be around Black peers, while other Black men gravitated towards non-Black organizations from fear of not fitting in Black spaces or other interests outside of racial identity.

Hidden Harm in Racial Identity via Black Monolithic Assumptions

According to literature, Black men often report hostile racial climates at HWIs, which lead to feelings of alienation, institutional mistrust, and a limited sense of belonging on campus (Strayhorn 2019; Tichavakunda, 2022; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Additionally, Black men at HWIs constantly endure a process of dehumanization, including a range of experiences from encountering racist stereotypes to feeling underserved and alienated (Goings & Bonner II, 2017). While these scholars predominantly focused on non-Black actors or non-Black spaces that perpetuate hostility and facilitate an unwelcoming environment, the study highlights data that shows how Black men can feel alienation, a perceived lack of belonging, or feelings of being underserved, even from Black student organizations. Max and John dealt with conflicts surrounding racial identity, and their voices must be heard to understand how to help support Black men who may fear or assume that they will not receive support from Black student organizations or the Black student community. Through intersectionality, I was able to understand how Max and John's social identity contributed to their hesitations with Black student organizations. By living in predominantly White areas for better schooling opportunities, and attending predominantly White schools, John did not have enough exposure with understanding Black identity. Additionally, he shared how his White peers reminded him of his Blackness, while his Black peers accused him of Whiteness. Although Max was president of the Black Student Union in high school, he also lived in predominantly White areas and attended predominantly White schools. Max shared that the suburban lifestyle and other identities that were a part of him may have caused difficulty to fit in and find belonging in Black student organizations. While Max understood his racial identity and studied race in law, he still understood that the way he sounded, grew up, and expressed his other identities may have been a

rough fit. While non-Black people often think of Blackness as a monolith, this study shows that Black students can assume or accept Black monolithic ideas and assumptions. Since this study is focused on Black men, there are Black monolithic assumptions about how Black men should sound, dress, look, and behave. Black monolithic ideas are dangerous because Black men who do not fit these assumptions can internalize harm. Moreover, Black monolithic assumptions put limits on social identities of Black men by primarily focusing on racial behavior and gendered behavior.

From John's experience, he did not fit into the idea of what he understood to be Black identity and was shunned by others who held Black identity. While John did experience a Ghanaian church as the only predominant space with People of Color, the monolithic concept of Blackness othered John and made him feel like an outsider. From Max's perspective, his voice, where he lives, his knowledge and upbringing on cultural cues, and other aspects of his social identity made him feel like he would not be fully be accepted into Black student organizations. As represented in this study, Black men represented more social identities beyond gender and race. However, Blackness can be experienced as one element along with other social identities.

Discussing Strayhorn's Belonging as a Framework: Relationships Became Critical Resources

Sense of belonging was highly relational with all participants in this study through frequent positive interactions and involvement on campus. Students established meaningful relationships, which became critical resources on the college experience, as was reflected in Strayhorn's (2019) data. Furthermore, the influence of relationships was prevalent in all four emergent themes in this study.

For Black men in this study, sense of belonging was achieved from positive staff and peer interactions, which helped build a supportive campus racial climate at RU. Sense of belonging developed in response to the degree to which Black men felt respected, valued, accepted, and needed by others in student organizations. Through belonging, Black men in this study experienced a reduction in negative thoughts and mental health issues, while they increased in positive emotions within student organizations and on campus. Ultimately, students increased in involvement and success when they felt that they belonged at their institution, which aligns with Samura (2016) and Strayhorn (2019). Specifically, for both the Black and non-Black organizations, feelings of belonging help students connect with their peers and the institution.

Belonging in Black Student Organizations: Creating Space for Authenticity

Several Black men in this study began their belonging journey in Black student organizations, which helped increase Black visibility, created opportunities to connect with other Black peers, and provided spaces for participants to authentically express their racial identity. As suggested from Guiffrida's (2003) and Harper & Quaye's (2007) research, Black student organizations offered a critical venue for the social involvement of minority students at a HWI. As the first student organization of many participants, Black student organizations bolstered minoritized students' survival in college, while they navigated what Brooms and Goodman (2016) referenced as cultural isolation, racial isolation, and survival. To build on research from Brooms & Goodman (2016, Guiffrida (2003), and Nagasawa & Wong (1999), Black student organizations shrank the social and physical size of the campus, reinforced academic excellence, created social support, and increased solidarity and identity. In this study, Michael shared that he forgot he attended a HWI because he predominantly talked with Black students, while Hamilton and Georgia facilitated events where Black students were more visible and comfortable to

express their racial identity around other Black peers. These organizations provided opportunities for connecting with staff, giving back to the Black community, and connecting with Black peers. In alignment with Harper & Quaye's (2007) and Tichavakunda's (2022) research, Black students expressed their cultural and racial identities through their participation in Black student organizations (Harper & Quaye, 2007), which is important since Black men need more opportunities to be themselves fully without suppressing or hiding their Blackness at a HWI.

Challenges to Literature: Sense of Belonging as an Unexpected Outcome

According to Strayhorn's (2019) research, most Black men in his studies reported sense of belonging as an ambition or goal. To fulfill the goal of belonging, Black men get involved in student organizations and leadership experiences for college adjustment or for becoming a part of the campus community (Strayhorn, 2019). In this study, only a few students got involved in student organizations and leadership experiences to achieve the goal of belonging. In fact, most students did not aim to have or experience belonging when they pursued leadership roles. They discussed wanting experience in leadership, being recommended or influenced to apply, being competitive, and enjoying the flexibility to run programming without too much involvement or career aspirations. These reasons may extend beyond college adjustments. While the reasons for getting involved were numerous, sense of belonging was an unexpected outcome for many of the participants.

Expanding Belonging Beyond Black Student Organizations

Strayhorn's (2019) framing of sense of belonging acknowledges the changing nature of belonging. This is confirmed in this study due to Raphael and John initially experiencing a decrease in belonging, but sharing they eventually experienced an increase in sense of belonging with RU via their leadership roles. John described belonging at 95% but still lacked the

remaining 5%, of belonging, which seemed to bother him during reflection. This showed that some level of belonging does vary, even if it is experienced or increased.

According to this study, non-Black organizations were credited with expanding peer-to-peer engagement with different, diverse backgrounds. Non-Black organizations also helped expand belonging beyond student organizations and with the institution.

When analyzing deeper data as to why non-Black student organizations increased belonging with RU, there may be some connection between the type of student organization and the level of student leadership a student held. By being associated with highly visible organizations, this increased access and engagement with high-level institutional actors. Additionally, the position that student held, such as Ambassador or President, may also determine the level of access to high-level institutional actors as well as higher platforms to share one's story.

Intersectionality and Strayhorn's (2019) sense of belonging provided the lens to explore how Black men built a sense of belonging at RU. Black men at RU increased in belonging through both Black and non-Black student organizational involvement. Through the relationships and connections with non-Black peers, Black men gained deeper relationships with the broader student body, received access to high-level stakeholders, and increased in visibility to represent Black voices and Black experiences throughout RU's campus. While the findings showed increased belonging, intersectionality illuminates the relationship and environment of Black men as they made critical connections across campus.

Limitations

Although this study contributed to an understanding of sense of belonging and intersecting social identities in important ways, there were some limitations worth noting. This is

a single-institution study, at a four-year, public land-grant and flagship institution. While the focus on the site selection is a public, four-year HWI in the South, even not all Southern public, four-year HWIs have the same institutional profiles, resources, demographics, or institutional type. The findings of this qualitative study were not intended to be generalized, although they may have applicability beyond this particular type of site.

While I hoped to have participation from undergraduate Black men classified as international students, this study only represented undergraduate Black men classified as domestic students. While John was born out of the US and immigrated from Ghana to America, he was not classified as an international student due to his American status.

Researchers may want to consider the various languages and terminology used to capture student involvement. For the purpose of this study, I used *student organizations* as an attempt to holistically capture a variety of student groups or clubs. Tyler, Hamilton, Max, and Michael's interpretation of student organizations led to them listing organizations that were either local community-based organizations not affiliated with RU, non-profit youth-based programs off-campus, or research symposiums that were facilitated by the university for undergraduate research presentations. Those organizations were coded as "not applicable organizations" (NAOs) and were not counted among table 2's data on student organizations. When asking participants to list the student organizations they were a part of, none of the examples above classified as a student organization. I did not notify the participants of NAOs during the interview to avoid minimizing or directly contradicting the participant's experience. Fortunately, Hamilton, Max, and Michael did not share stories related to NAOs, based on the questions I asked in the interview. However, Tyler did share a few stories related to an NAO. After listening to Tyler complete his response, I added probes to redirect the question to the qualified student

organization that he joined. If I shared a clearer description of what qualified as a student organization, this could have saved me time with transcription and coding. Most importantly, this could have given these students better clarity on my expectations of student organizations. Better clarity for Tyler would have meant that he could have focused his initial responses on student organizations that were not coded as NAOs.

Implications for Research and Practice

While there is a lot of literature to suggest how student organizations and student involvement impact positive campus experiences, more research should expand how leadership roles impact belonging of Black men in student organizations at HWIs. Additionally, current practices from student affairs professionals and student leaders should be polished and expanded to meet the needs of Black men at HWIs.

Implications for Research: Non-Black Student Organizations at a HWI

While Black student organizations created a strong increase in sense of belonging, non-Black student organizations also provided a strong increase in sense of belonging. From this study, Black men were able to experience a level of belonging to feel comfortable around both Black and non-Black peers through leadership roles at a HWI. More research should expand to understand how Black men navigate non-Black student organizations and how Black students and non-Black students build relationships to achieve belonging at different types of HWIs with high Black populations, including two-year and four-year public HWIs in the South. As referenced earlier in this study, the graduation rate has only increased by 4% since 2000 (NCES, 2022). Scholars must stay alert to Black undergraduate enrollment after the pandemic, since Black student degree completion at flagships has decreased (Allen et al., 2018; Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2023).

Distinctively, this study examined belonging from within the student organization and the institution. While Black student organizations were credited for increased sense of belonging within the student organization, non-Black organizations were credited for increased sense of belonging within both the student organization and the institution. Based on the findings of this study, more research is needed to understand the relationship of belonging between Black student organizations and HWIs. Additionally, researchers should explore what institutional supports Black student organizations may need to gain institutional belonging at HWIs.

Understanding Leadership Positions

Scholars should examine the type of leadership roles held by Black men in Black and non-Black student organizations. In this study, Black men who held leadership roles in non-Black student organizations had more access and engagement with high-level stakeholders through visible or prestigious non-Black student organizations. This may be based on the hierarchy of a student's leadership role. Researchers should examine if Black men who have high-level leadership roles within Black student organizations experience the same level of access to high-level stakeholders or not.

From the study, there were Black men who wanted to expand beyond Black organizations, Black men who used non-Black organizations to gain more visibility for Black organizations and representation, and Black men who stayed in their preferred student organizations with negative attitudes towards RU's favoritism with certain organizations. This information can expand research towards any biases or favoritism that may exist with institutional leaders at HWIs, which might influence the differences in access and visibility of Black student leaders in Black student organizations compared with Black student leaders in non-Black student organizations.

Research must continue to show Black joy at HWIs (Tichavakunda, 2022). While the history and data surrounding Black men is difficult and painful at HWIs, scholarship must contribute to a full account of both the positive and negative experiences. In this study, the experiences of being at a HWI varied from very positive, to acknowledging ups and downs. While belonging varies with the institutional relationship, Black men in both Black and non-Black student organizations experienced an increase in sense of belonging through leadership. Although leadership requires the student to take on more responsibilities and labor, it also created opportunities to self-develop, engage with more peers inside and outside of the student organization, and develop deeper relationships with peers who were racially and ethnically similar, as well as those who were different from the participants of this study. Since this study revealed that students perceived which student organizations were among the top five most visible at RU, this insight may help researchers understand how to target top student organizations in future studies, determine if Black men are represented, learn how Black men experience belonging in these organizations, and explore if Black men are thriving in these organizations. A future study on a different campus would represent how a HWI might value student organizations differently compared to RU due to its institutional type, location, resources, and physical campus structure. The relationships between Black men within student organizations and the relationship with Black men in leadership and high-level stakeholders may also represent different findings. Outside of top student organizations, scholars should focus on how Black men thrive through leadership in general. Instead of continuing studies that show how Black men survive HWIs, research should continue to contribute to the literature on how Black men can thrive and succeed, beyond survival.

Implications for Practice: Black Student Organizations at an HWI

Black student organization advisors and Black student leaders who work with Black men must contribute in sharing inclusive messaging around Blackness and Black identity. Black student organization advisors must work directly with Black student leaders to discuss and incorporate intersectionality and social identity inclusivity in Black student organizational governing documents and resources, leadership training, and recruitment training. Black student organization advisors should also seek insight and advice from Black student leaders who are familiar with these topics to enhance resources around Blackness, Black identity, intersectionality, and social identities. Student leadership should assess their organization on their inclusivity of Black experiences and Black identities represented in the organization. After assessing their organization, Black leaders should work with the advisor and the other student leaders to improve or expand student practices, programming, events, and expectations around Blackness, while reducing Black monolithic assumptions that may have emerged in the organization. Partnering with other Black and non-Black student organizations that focus on other social identities or academic interests can be used foster and support Black identity. Even in Black student organizations, Black students must be viewed as holistic beings (Tichavakunda, 2022) at HWIs. These students have nuanced experiences and multifaceted lives with intersecting identities (Tichavakunda, 2022).

While there is no guarantee that all Black men are interested in joining Black student organizations, this study seemed to indicate Max and John's hesitancy and disconnection from Black student organizations, while Diego's story referred to a lack of information and visibility to join Black student organizations. Lastly, there were Black men at RU who either did not attend some early recruitment or networking events as prospective students or Black men who

experienced delays in getting involved because they were transfer students. Black organizations can think about staggering recruitment strategies throughout the year, but also expand beyond their typical networks to passively recruit while promoting events and programming. According to McGowan & Perez (2020), peer groups prove to be valuable when navigating HWIs, especially when Black men can explore and affirm their identities. Creating large-scale Black student events that are hosted by multiple Black organizations, diversity offices, multicultural offices, or student affairs divisions can help increase more Black student turnout. These university-wide events could be club fairs, socials, potlucks, dining hall visits, beginning-of-the-year or end-of the-year events, or community events outside of RU.

Black Staff at RU

As experienced by the non-Black student organizations in this study, more high-level staff and administrators should increase their engagement and relationships to Black student organizations. This will help Black men understand where increased funds originate from and allow Black men to build mutual relationships with higher education stakeholders. By continuing to expand resources to these organizations, Black men can feel supported to continue recruiting other Black male students through resources provided by the institution.

Several participants acknowledged the name of one Black staff member (coded as Melvin) who supported them in Black student organizations. Not only do the efforts of this one Black male staff member show the important impact of student affairs, but this implies that more Black men in mid-to-high staff jobs are needed in HWIs to meet the growing needs of Black men. While Melvin is not the only Black male staffer RU, his mentorship and leadership impacted Georgia, Hamilton, Tyler, and Raphael. For greater visibility, Black men would be needed in not only in offices that focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, multicultural services,

and student affairs, but also in offices that are not related to the typical spaces where these men may be assumed to add value at a university. If Black men at RU could be found in Black and non-Black student organizations, then Black men in visible staff-related roles should be visible in different support units, offices, and departments throughout the university. These initiatives would avoid burnout from limited Black staff representation and expand additional support for Black men who engage with more Black staff members within HWIs. For institutions that focus on supporting undergraduate Black male persistence and success, institutional peers and aspirants should be examined to understand how other colleges and universities create staffing structures and resources. Some benchmarking may lead to understanding competitive pay and benefits to help recruit and keep Black men in staff, the organizational structures of staff who support Black men, programming and initiatives promoted and supported by other institutions, and a budgetary analysis to understand how institutions fund initiatives to support Black men at a HWI.

Black Men Thriving at a HWI.

Student affairs professionals and advisors who lead or mentor non-Black student organizations should work in increase Black men in student leadership roles by advising Black men, writing letters of recommendation, or recruiting Black men who would later take on leadership roles. In addition to these actions, student affairs professionals and advisors should work with the student leadership they mentor to promote and support the inclusion of Black men in student involvement and student leadership. Lastly, student affairs professionals should create strategic ways to engage Black men in Black spaces and non-Black spaces for mid-to-higher level leadership opportunities present on campus. While attending university-wide programs can be positive, the scale of these events may be too large and students can potentially be

overwhelmed. In addition, and in conjunction with increased non-Black student organization presence at traditional events, student affairs professionals and advisors should plan to meet Black men where they are so that these students are able to participate in leadership and mutually grow relationships with their peers to build a sense of belonging. To accomplish this, student affairs professionals should determine if their institution already have any programming related to Black men or Black alumni, so any outreach can take place with pre-existing connections and relationships to meet Black men where they are on campus. However, if the institution lacks in Black-men based initiatives, staff members who advise Black men can help build a collaborative relationship across campus to meet the needs of Black men. As an example, Tyler had a strong relationship with the staff in the RU Student Care Office (SCO) because Melvin connected him for mental health programming. Additionally, student affairs professionals can access institutional data to determine what majors draw Black men at the institution. This can lead to working with professors to make short announcements within these classes to reach Black men about leadership opportunities or partnering with academic advisors to provide digital, physical, and verbal information about leadership opportunities.

Conclusion

As Black men endure racial hostility, underrepresentation, and invisibility at HWIs to gain the social and economic benefits of a four-year, public institutions (Renn & Reason, 2021), student affairs practitioners and institutional actors must be ready to facilitate networking, resources, and visibility for Black men in leadership roles. This study shared the voices of eight qualified and talented Black men from several different backgrounds who differed in social identities, yet they all increased in belonging through leadership roles within Black and non-Black student organizations. Through the leadership experiences in non-Black organizations, a

majority of Black men increased in belonging with the institution as a whole through the relationships of high-level institutional leaders, through the relationships of peers from different ethnic and racial backgrounds, through sharing college student traditions with the friendships they gained at RU, and through higher leadership platforms to gain greater visibility and representation at the student body and university level.

At four-year, public HWIs, Black men can benefit from reduced tuition, increased funding, expansive resources, and employment advantages that impact salary, well-being, and health. However, Black men will struggle to access these benefits if they do not gain a sense of belonging at HWIs. Furthermore, Black men will struggle to have positive experiences on their campus if institutional actors, student affairs professionals, and student leaders are ill-equipped to understand how social identities and intersectionality provide insight to engage Black men based on their needs. Additionally, student affairs professionals must be equipped to reduce the oppression, hostility, and invisibility that Black men experience at a HWI. Through student involvement and student leadership roles, Black men in Black and non-Black spaces can thrive, succeed, and gain access to the benefits of a HWI.

While Black people share a long and painful history, they also share a strong and unyielding timeline of survival and resilience. Black people determined that their lives would not end as the builders of higher education, nor would they end as servants and slaves to the higher educational cause. Black men stand on the shoulders of giants who helped overturn the “Separate but Equal” doctrine for a better future with generations of Black men who deserve the opportunity to learn in top tier HWIs. Black student representation and the representation of Black men continues to shrink at the nation’s flagship institutions (Allen et al., 2018). However, high-caliber students like Georgia, John, Michael, Tyler, Hamilton, Diego, Max, and Raphael

continue to show that Black men today can build narratives from survival at a HWI to thriving stories of joy, success, and sense of belonging. More importantly, students like Georgia, John, Michael, Tyler, Hamilton, Max, Diego, and Raphael added value to RU. Tyler, Hamilton, and Raphael helped recruit Black men and Black students to RU's campus. Tyler, Hamilton, Max, and Raphael mentored Black students and non-Black students in Black and non-Black spaces at RU. Georgia, John, Michael, and Diego represented Black men in some of the most visible organizations at RU. Most of these men used their platforms to advocate for Black stories and Black experiences with high-level stakeholders, while increasing Black visibility for prospective and current Black students at RU. Raphael created innovated programming in the Black student community to centralize Black events and activities on campus, while Tyler created new programming and collaborative partnerships focused on Black men's mental health and well-being.

The Black men who were in Black student organizations have become leaders, mentors, navigators, and friends to a rising generation of Black men entering RU. As students like Raphael leave a legacy behind as they graduate, new students like Georgia and Michael are being propelled faster and farther than Raphael's first- and second-year college experiences. The Black men who were in non-Black student organizations also share same roles as leaders, mentors, navigators, and friends to the rising generation of Black and non-Black students at RU. As students like Diego and Max leave a legacy behind as graduating seniors, new students like John can find their footing within non-Black student organizations and see Black men in leadership within career and non-career-based student organizations. The participants in this study were qualified, whether they were admitted during their first year, second year, or third year of

college. Beyond their qualifications, the impact of three graduating seniors and five current Black leaders demonstrated tangible and innovative changes to the fabric of RU.

Contributions of Intersectionality and Sense of Belonging through this Study

As more studies continue to utilize intersectionality and sense of belonging of Black men, our field can make consistent and sustainable strides in the retention and educational attainment of Black men in quality higher education institutions. This study contributed to the work of intersectionality and sense of belonging by exploring stories of Black men at a HWI.

Intersecting identities are essential to how Black men are shaped as individuals and students of an institution. The social identities of Black men and the dynamics of a HWI's environment affected how Black men navigated isolation and invisibility, while influencing student organizational motivations and relationships on campus. The participants in this study remind us that although Black men were minoritized and marginalized at a HWI, these Black men were mighty in their accomplishments and leadership roles.

Black student organizations increased sense of belonging through counter-spaces, which provided comfortability, visibility, and authenticity. Black men benefited from similar racial identity with Black peers due to shared experiences of racial hostility and invisibility at a HWI. By engaging and interacting with other Black students on campus, Black men felt seen and were able to authentically express and share their racial identity with Black peers. Through Black male-centric student organizations, participants received support and mentorship from Black peers, which contributed to their success on campus. By receiving help from Black male mentors, the participants in this study chose to foster belonging for incoming and prospective Black men at RU, through mentorship and leadership. Lastly, Black men in Black student organizations pursued leadership roles in non-Black student organizations to gain greater

visibility for Black student needs and develop experiences and relationships beyond their racial identity.

Non-Black student organizations increased sense of belonging and institutional belonging for Black men through interactions with non-Black peers and high-level stakeholders, as well as achievement of higher leadership platforms to gain greater visibility for Black students. Black men learned about the similarities they shared with non-Black peers, while respecting cultural differences. Black men developed deeper relationships with non-Black peers through leadership responsibility, vulnerability, and relatability. Black men gained greater access to high-level institutional stakeholders within non-Black student organizations, which exposed those stakeholders to Black student experiences at a HWI and helped Black men learn about institutional resources and vision. Finally, Black men gained higher leadership platforms, which increased Black student visibility for prospective and current Black students at RU. Leadership roles in non-Black student organizations helped Black men reach other Black students, but also non-Black students across campus.

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Appendix A

Email Message to Faculty and Staff with Student Organization Contacts

To: [Insert Institutional Contacts]

Subject: Research Study Exploring How Black Men Build Sense of Belonging through Leadership at [This University]

Dear BLANK,

My name is Narke Norton and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education. Black men are one of the smallest diverse populations on campus and their experience is unique, which means these students need unique support systems and structures to help them succeed. Some spaces that provide involvement, engagement, and development are student organizations. I am curious to understand how student organizations provide belonging, support, and strength to undergraduate Black men. I would like to request your help to identify Black men in leadership roles who may have an interest in my research project – Black Men in Leadership: Building Sense of Belonging at HWIs.

Research Project Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how Black men build a sense of belonging through leadership roles in historically White institutions (HWIs). This research study will explore insight from Black men who are involved in student organizations and examine how Black men self-develop, reflect on the influence of student organization peers, and understand how leadership roles help Black men build belonging. This study has Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

Eligible Participants

Eligible participants include any domestic or international undergraduate students who self-identify as Black men and hold at least one leadership role within a student organization. Black men chosen for the study will participate in an in-person interview between 60 – 90 minutes at [insert location central to campus]. The interview guide will contain specific questions about the identities that make these students unique, their experiences with student organizations, and how Black men build belonging through leadership roles at their institution.

Identifying Participants & Communication for Next Steps

Here are several ways to assist me in identifying eligible participants for this study:

- If you know of any eligible Black men who might like to participate in this research study, please forward the email message below [see Appendix B] to eligible participants within your networks
- Please distribute the email below [see Appendix B] to student organization emails, listservs, social media, or meetings that are within your contacts
- If you are closely affiliated with other faculty and staff members who can help distribute this email to eligible participants, please share this email [see Appendix A] with those contacts

For questions or further information, please reach me by emailing yspnarke@uga.edu. Thank you for your help in identifying participants for the study.

Sincerely,

[Insert Signature]

Appendix B

Email Message to Students with Student Organization Contacts

Dear [insert name]:

You have been highly recommended by your [insert peers or faculty/staff/advisor] to participate in this study due to the hard work, dedication, and commitment you have demonstrated as a Black leader on campus! I invite you to participate in a research study entitled Black men in Leadership: Building Sense of Belonging at Historically White Institutions (HWIs). This study will be an opportunity to share your journey, from student to student leader!
I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Laura Dean in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at The University of Georgia. The purpose of this study is to explore how Black men build a sense of belonging through leadership roles in historically White institutions (HWIs).

You may be eligible to be in this study if you are a domestic or international undergraduate student leader who self-identifies as Black and male. Your participation will involve completing a Google Form for contact information and to select potential time slots, reviewing the Informed Consent for Participation, and participating in an interview. The interview guide will contain specific questions about the identities that make you unique, your experiences with student organizations, and how you build belonging through leadership roles. The interview should only take about 60-90 minutes.

To help protect the identity of participants, participants will have a pseudonym during the interviews and for notetaking purposes when analyzing the data. Participants will have the opportunity to voice their thoughts on their undergraduate experiences and contribute ideas that may influence the support of undergraduate Black men in student leadership roles at HWIs.
If you know of any eligible undergraduate Black men who are student leaders that would be interested in this study, please forward this email or screenshot the information to your contacts and within your social media groups. If you would like additional information about this study, please reach out to Narke Norton at yspnarke@uga.edu or email Dr. Dean at ladean@uga.edu.
Thank you for your consideration!

Sincerely,

Narke Norton

Appendix C
ROGER UNIVERSITY
CONSENT LETTER

Black men in Leadership: Building Sense of Belonging at Historically White Institutions (HWIs)

Dear Participant,

My name is Narke Norton and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services under the supervision of Dr. Laura Dean. I am inviting you to take part in a research study.

The purpose of this study is to explore how Black men build a sense of belonging through leadership roles in historically White institutions (HWIs). Black men are one of the smallest diverse populations on campus, which means unique support systems and structures are needed to push this population from one academic year to the next. Some spaces that provide involvement, engagement, and development are student organizations. I am curious to understand how student organizations provide belonging, support, and strength to undergraduate Black men.

Your participation will involve completing a Google Form and selecting potential time slots for interview. After you confirm that you have reviewed the Informed Consent for Participation and would like to continue participation in the interview, I will email you the date, time, and location of the interview. This research study will explore insight from Black men who are involved in student organizations and examine how Black men self-develop, reflect on the influence of student organization peers, and understand how leadership roles help Black men building belonging. The interview will be one session, which should only take about 60-90 minutes and will be on the south part of campus. The interview will be audio recorded to assist in transcribing the interview. After the transcription is complete, you will receive a copy of the transcription and may provide feedback or edits after you have reviewed the transcription.
Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. Your decision to participate will have no impact in your participation as a member of a student organization.

This research project has little to no risks for participants. Your confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Specifically, no guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties. To help protect the identity of participants, participants will have a pseudonym during the interviews and for notetaking purposes when analyzing the data. Furthermore, there is a small chance that you may feel discomfort answering certain questions. You may choose to skip any questions they wish to during the interview.

As a participant, you will have the opportunity to voice your thoughts on your undergraduate experiences and contribute ideas that may influence the support of undergraduate Black men in student leadership roles at HWIs. Knowing more about the experiences of this population can

help student affairs and higher education professionals to meet student needs, increase student organizational supports, and boost institutional practices for leadership and belonging. Research records will be labeled with study IDs that are linked to you by a separate list that includes your name. The information without your identifiers will not be used or distributed for future research and the list will be destroyed once we have finished collecting information from all participants.

Audio recording devices will be used to help the researcher transcribe the interview for accuracy. The audio recording will be archived until the transcription process is complete. The transcription of your interview will be sent you in order to provide a review of the interview and share any feedback, edits, or changes. During the audio recording, your pseudonym will be used for additional protection of your confidentiality. After I have received clarity or confirmation from all participants, the audio recording and the Google form will be destroyed.

If you are interested in participating or have questions about this research, please feel free to contact me at 706 340-4140 or yspnarke@uga.edu. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Narke Norton

Appendix D

Interview Guide Script and Question Outline

Hi! My name is Narke Norton. I will be conducting interviews to explore how Black men build a sense of belonging through leadership roles in historically White institutions (HWIs). I would like to thank you for expressing interest in this study. The stories and experiences you will share will be helpful to understand Black men in leadership and their relationship with HWIs.

This study will be supervised by Dr. Laura Dean (ladean@uga.edu). Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. If there are questions that may make you uncomfortable, you can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them. As a reminder, I have sent you an Informed Consent letter. Can you please look over this once more time to if you have any questions? Are you still interested in participating in this study? [wait for response]. Did you read through the informed the consent to participate in this study? [wait for response]. Would you like for me to go over any details of the informed consent? [wait for response].

Research records will be labeled with study IDs that are linked to you by a separate list that includes your name. This list will be destroyed once we have finished collecting information from all participants.

What you would like your pseudonym to be during this interview? [wait for response]. Thank you, [insert pseudonym]. Are you ready to begin?

Appendix D

Interview Guide Script and Question Outline

- Introductory section: Background and foundational experiences of the participants
    - Please introduce yourself – name, where you call home, major, classification, etc.
    - *Social identities are contextualized as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and identity, ability, class, religion, region of origin, first-generation status, etc.* How would you describe your social identities?
- Describing experiences with Roger University
    - Can you share why you chose to attend Roger University?
    - How would you describe your experience at Roger University?
    - Since you have been attending Roger University, can you share a story where you felt you did or did not belong?
- The impact of leadership roles
    - Before you share what organizations you're a part of, can you share what influenced you to be involved in the first place? Did you have something specific in mind to get involved at RU or were you open to any organization?
    - Which organization(s) are you involved in? How did it feel to get involved in student organizations at HWIs?
    - Can you share the ethnic/racial makeup of the student organizations you are involved in? What did you hope to gain from these organizations?

    - Can you talk about the type of leadership roles you have served in at RU? What motivated or influenced you to lead in these roles?
    - Based on your involvement, how do you describe leadership?
    - How did serving in a leadership role impact you?
- Building sense of belonging at HWIs through leadership roles
    - Can you share your leadership photo with me? Can you describe the environment and context of the photo?
    - Why did you choose this photo, specifically?
    - How do you describe belonging?
    - Can you talk about any moments where you felt you belonged while being involved in a leadership role?
    - Can you share if your leadership role increased or decreased a sense of belonging in the student organizations you were involved in? How so?
    - Can you share if your leadership role increased or decreased a sense of belonging as student at Roger University? How so?
    - What else would you like to share about your experience at RU, your leadership experiences, and your feelings of belonging in your organizations or at the university?

Appendix E

Google Form to Interested Participants

Section 1 of 2

BLACK MEN IN LEADERSHIP: BUILDING SENSE OF BELONGING AT HISTORICALLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS (HWIS)

Purpose of Research Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how Black men build a sense of belonging through leadership roles in historically white institutions (HWIs). Black men are one of the smallest diverse populations on campus, which means unique support systems and structures are needed to push this population from one academic year to the next. Some spaces that provide involvement, engagement, and development are student organizations. I am curious to understand how student organizations provide belonging, support, and strength to undergraduate Black men. This study has Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

Eligible Participants

Eligible participants include **any domestic or international undergraduate students who self-identify as Black and male**. Those chosen will participate in an in-person interview between 60 – 90 minutes. The interview guide will contain specific questions about the identities that make you unique, your experiences with student organizations, and how you build belonging through leadership roles.

Next Steps to Participate

Please complete this Google form by submitting your contact information below, and select interview time slots based on your availability. After completion of this form, you will be contacted via email with confirmation of your submitted information and an *Informed Consent* document. The Informed Consent document shares information about how your identity will be protected and how interview participants consent to participate in research studies. After participants return the Informed Consent document, they will receive a confirmed interview time and date to participate in this research study.

Please see the bulleted list of next steps below:

- Complete this Google form & share potential interview time slots based on your availability
- Read and review the Informed Consent document emailed to you, if you would like to move forward as a participant
- Review and confirm the interview date and time slot provided to you by the researcher - Narke Norton (yspnarke@uga.edu)

Email *

Valid email

Name *

First and Last name

Short answer text

Preferred Name

Short answer text

Pronouns (optional)

Short answer text

Phone number (optional)

Short answer text

Do you self-identify as a Black Male? *

- Yes
- No

Please share the organization(s) you are affiliated with on or off-campus

Paragraph

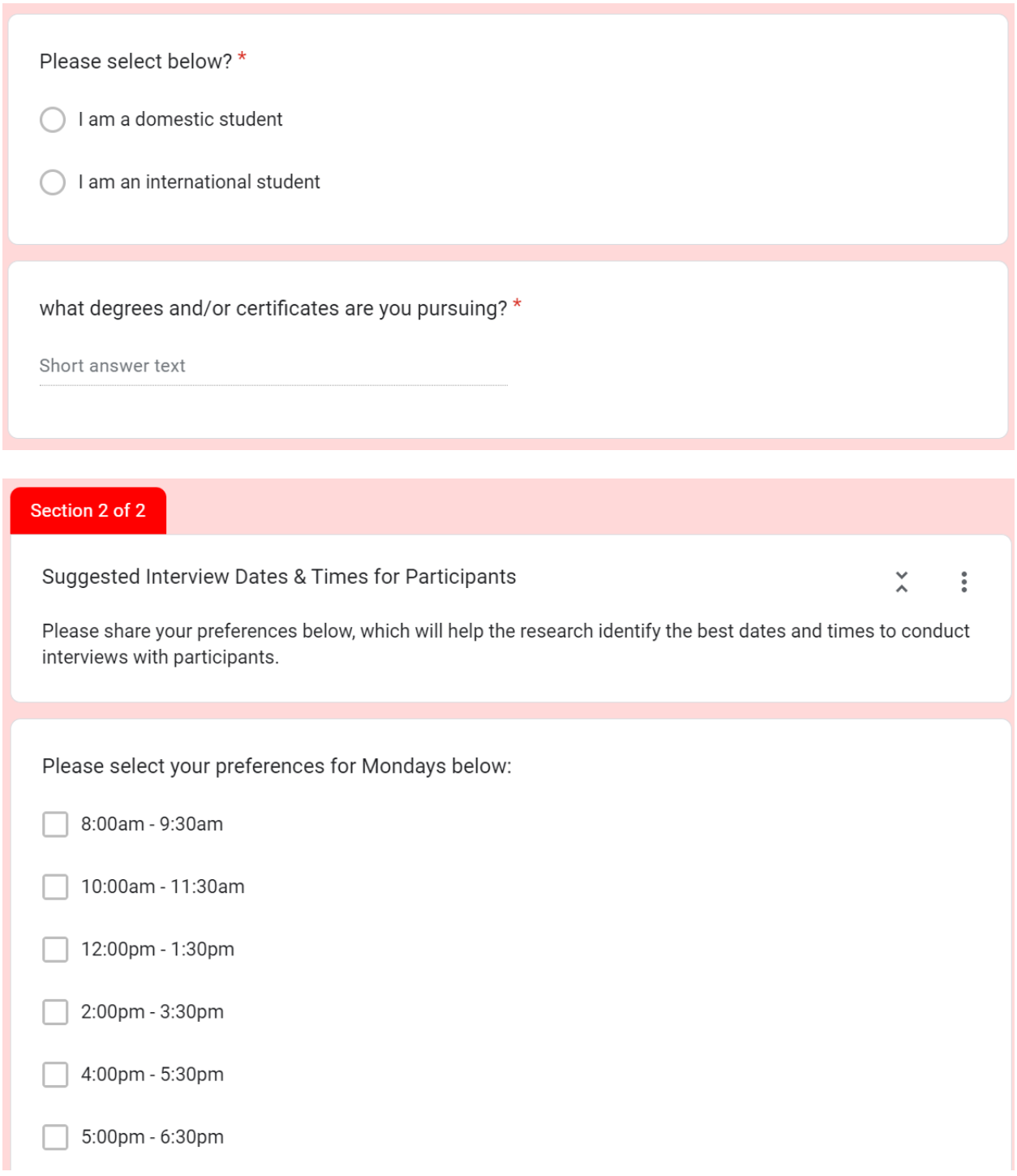
Long answer text

Please share your past and present leadership roles/positions on or off-campus *

Long answer text

Please select below? *

- I am an undergraduate student
- I am a graduate/professional student
- I am both an undergraduate and graduate/professional student
- Neither



Examples in the form will continue to provide dates and time from Monday through Sunday