

BIRACIAL STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING AT A PREDOMINANTLY  
WHITE SOUTHEASTERN STATE FLAGSHIP UNIVERSITY

by

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(Under the Direction of Ginny Boss)

ABSTRACT

This study examined how biracial students at a predominantly White southeastern state flagship university described their experiences. Participants narrated their experiences on a university campus about how the university impacted their ability to find a sense of belonging on campus and the role the university played. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to describe what experiences, if any, affected a biracial student's perception of sense of belonging at a southeastern state flagship university. Findings from this study could help researchers and practitioners understand how to identify factors that may contribute to biracial students' perceived feelings of belonging at predominantly White institutions (PWI).

INDEX WORDS: Sense of belonging, Biracial, Multiracial, Predominantly White, Minority, Mixed race, Flagship, PWI

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to:

My husband, who has always supported me. You have been my rock through this educational journey, making sure I had the time and space to meet milestones and complete my writing. Through this journey, we pursued next-level positions in our careers, had our first child, and navigated life during a pandemic. Even after having our son, you continue to provide support and hold me accountable to ensure I would complete this degree. Time to celebrate!

My son, who was my inspiration for this topic. Thank you for bringing such joy and light into our lives. Even before you came into this world, I knew I wanted to be a parent and although this would be an identity you would have to experience differently from your father and me, I wanted to be able to provide the best support possible. Doing this study and learning about other students who hold identities similar to yours makes me a better professional, advocate, and parent. I love you as high as the sky.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Several studies have examined sense of belonging on college campuses (Johnson et al., 2007; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Museus & Maramba, 2011; Museus et al., 2016). Jackson (2016) found positive connections related to students' participation rates, beliefs in themselves, levels of school satisfaction, and academic persistence when a sense of belonging exists. Researchers have suggested belonging increases student persistence to degree completion, the sensation of thriving at high potential levels, and an increase in quality of life (Chinyamurindi, 2018; O'Meara et al., 2017; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). When defining a sense of belonging for this study, I used Strayhorn's (2012) definition:

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). (p. 4)

A student's sense of belonging not only includes how they identify with people around them, but also how they connect with the university or college as a whole (Jackson, 2016). Sense of belonging can be especially difficult for students with biracial identities at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). A college campus has a major impact on the sense of belonging for students of color, and this issue can often be challenging because students of color at PWIs often feel marginalized and isolated (Maestas et al., 2007).

Researchers have suggested biracial students have different racialized experiences (Museus et al., 2016; Renn, 2004). Racialized experiences can alter biracial students' perceptions of the campus climate, as opposed to their monoracial peers, which suggests biracial students engage differently on campus. Some of the identified facets of the college environment that have a profound effect on students' sense of belonging include: (a) interactions with peers and faculty, (b) cocurricular involvement, (c) perceptions of the campus racial climate, and (d) living on campus (Johnson et al., 2007). Being aware of biracial students and their needs is something higher education professionals need to be informed about as the population of biracial students continues to grow.

In the 2000 census, more than 6.8 million people reported being of more than one race; of the 6.8 million, 2.8 million were under the age of 18 (Jaschik, 2006; Jones & Smith, 2001). In the 2010 census, the number of individuals reporting more than one race increased 32% from the 2000 census, which makes it one of the fastest-growing populations in the United States (Humes et al., 2011; N. A. Jones & Bullock, 2012). The substantial growth in individuals reporting more than one race has a direct impact on U.S. higher education because 40% of people who completed the census in 2000 were under the age of 18, which suggests millions of people will enroll on college campuses when the pick one box approach standardly used on college campuses in regard to race and ethnicity is replaced (Jaschik, 2006). More than one race students have been on college campuses for years, but up until 2000, their voices had not been represented in literature and they have been an overlooked population (Jourdan, 2006; Talbot, 2008). In fall of 2018, 16.6 million undergraduate students were enrolled in degree-granting higher education institutions; of the 16.6 million, approximately 647,000 students identified as

more than one race (Johnston-Guerrero & Wijeyesinghe, 2021). Despite increasing numbers and the potential for continued growth on college campuses, literature on multiracial persons has been very limited, providing little guidance for the field of higher education (Talbot, 2008). Not only are multiracial students discovering their racial identities during their transition to college, but they are also facing unique challenges as they navigate a new social environment (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 1998), and they are doing so in an unfamiliar setting that presents new obstacles.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Racially minoritized students may perceive PWIs as unsupportive, which can have negative effects on a student's sense of belonging (Hussain & Jones, 2021). Existing research has shown interactions with peers, campus racial climate, and participation in cocurricular activities can enhance or hinder a sense of belonging on campus for monoracial students, which brings to question the impact sense of belonging can have for multiracial students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maestas et al., 2007; Museus & Maramba, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012). For racially minoritized students, generally marginalized on campus, establishing a sense of belonging has been shown to be essential to their success (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maestas et al., 2007; Museus & Maramba, 2011). Sense of belonging is linked to persistence, attrition, and mental health.

When a student's need to belong is not fulfilled, their motivation, academic performance, and integration into campus can be negatively impacted, which can make them believe they do not matter (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus & Maramba, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012). Negative implications also include lack of retention, negative social behaviors, and isolation. Consequently, sense of belonging positively contributes to

identity development and goals (e.g., educational persistence, engagement) of students on college campuses (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Museus & Maramba, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012). How biracial students experience belonging is still unknown, which means they can be unaware of how they fit into their campus community or if they would be accepted.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), the population of people claiming two or more races is the fastest-growing racial identification, estimated to reach 26 million people by 2060. Given the anticipated increase in mixed-race students entering higher education over the next decade due the 2.8 million that were under the age of 18 for the 2000 census (Jaschik, 2006; Renn, 2009), and because little is known about how the campus environment influences a student's sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), higher education professionals need to look into what sense of belonging means to mixed-race students and ensure there are relevant, inclusive, and validating opportunities that aid biracial students in finding a sense of belonging on campus. Very few, if any, studies have focused on biracial students at a state flagship university classified as a PWI and students' perceived senses of belonging on their campus (Banks, 2008; Davis, 2020; Shivers, 2011).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to describe what experiences, if any, affected biracial students' perceptions of sense of belonging at a southeastern state flagship university. The southeastern state flagship university used in the study represented a model for other institutions in their system, which is why I focused on this flagship institution for this study.

Although there have been studies on the topic of a sense of belonging among biracial students (Banks, 2008; Davis, 2020; Shivers, 2011), it is imperative institutional leaders continue to work toward supporting biracial students in finding a sense of belonging on campus. This study differed from previous studies and added to existing literature because it focused on biracial students' perceptions of how a state flagship university, classified as a PWI, influenced their experiences. This study may also provide insight into how state flagship universities classified as PWIs can promote a sense of belonging among biracial students.

### **Research Question**

The research question that guided this study was: How do biracial students experience belongingness at a predominantly White flagship university?

### **Definitions of Terms**

Having a clear set of terms and definitions for use in this study can provide clarity and understanding for all readers. The following terms and definitions were applicable to this study to enhance its understanding.

*Biracial* refers to individuals with parents who are “from two different socially designated racial groups” (Root, 1996, p. ix).

*Flagship* is the original institution from which a state university system develops (Miller, 2015).

*Mixed race* refers to an individual who has parents belonging to different racial groups; thus, a person's racial ancestry will reflect two or more racial groups (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2001).

*Monoracial* refers to individuals who “claim a single racial heritage. It is also a system of racial classification that only recognizes one racial designation per person” (Root, 1996, p. x).

*Multiracial* is an encompassing term for individuals with two or more racial heritages. Because multiracial encompasses multiple heritages, biracial is also included in the definition of multiracial (Root, 1996). The terms *biracial* and *mixed race* are used interchangeably with *multiracial* in this study.

*Predominantly White institutions (PWIs)* are institutions that have, traditionally or historically, had a majority of their student populations from White backgrounds (Banks, 2008).

*Racial minority* refers to “Black, Asian, Latinx, American Indian, Pacific Islander, and Middle Eastern/North African racial groups as the oppressed in the context of the U.S.” (Atkin et al., 2022, p. 384). The terms *minority* and *racially minoritized* are used interchangeably with racial minority in this study.

Strayhorn (2012) defined *sense of belonging* as:

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). (p. 4)

### **Summary**

It is instrumental that biracial students find a strong sense of belonging at PWIs because they may perceive PWIs as unsupportive, which can have negative effects on a student’s sense of belonging (Hussain & Jones, 2019). This sense of belonging is even

more important specifically at flagship institutions because flagships are the model for other institutions in their university system and it is imperative they set the example for how to successfully support biracial students on their campus. If racially minoritized students continue to feel a lack of connectedness to their institutions, an increase in the graduation gap and students experiencing mental health concerns will occur.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of literature related to the PWI that served as the setting for this study, historical context regarding race, future implications of a growing multiracial population, and the theoretical framework of belonging that guided this study. The literature review can contribute to a greater understanding of biracial students' senses of belonging at a southeastern flagship institution categorized as a PWI.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to describe what experiences, if any, affected biracial students' perceptions of sense of belonging at a southeastern state flagship university. The findings of this study could provide information to help researchers and practitioners understand how to identify factors that may contribute to biracial students' perceived senses of belonging at a predominantly White institution (PWI). First, the history, context, and structure of the PWI used in this study are discussed to give readers context on the environment in which biracial students exist. Second, particular attention is given to literature that describes the historical and social construction of race. Important census history and population projections of biracial individuals in the United States and statistics in higher education are discussed along with the experience of biracial students on college campuses. Third, this chapter includes the theoretical framework of the study based on Strayhorn's (2012) model of sense of belonging. This section explains the tenets of the sense of belonging model, how a theoretical perspective grounded in a sense of belonging allowed for a holistic view of the overall experience of biracial students at PWIs, and what is known about the sense of belonging of biracial students on campus. Fourth, this chapter concludes with a summary of the direction in which the literature guided this study.

### **A Southeastern State Flagship University**

Most states had established public universities by the 1870s (Douglass, 2016b). The word flagship emerged in the United States when these universities were entrusted with shaping society, economies, and other public institutions (Douglass, 2016a). Flagship universities had a tripartite mission of teaching, research, and public service. U.S. public universities had the responsibility for setting standards and developing other areas of a state's educational system from elementary school to helping develop public high schools.

The southeastern flagship university used in the current study was the state's most comprehensive research institution and was founded in 1785. According to the university's website, the institution was the birthplace of higher education. At the time of the study, the institution was part of a system with 25 other institutions, and this land- and sea-grant flagship was located 70 miles northeast of the capital of the state. According to the institution's *By the Numbers Report*, of the 29,765 undergraduate students enrolled in the southeastern flagship state university in Fall 2020, 68.7% were White, 11.8% were Asian, 7.1% were African American/Black, 6.9% were Hispanic, 4.2% were multiracial, 1.0% were not reported, .08% were Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and .06% were American Indian. As the flagship university, it was the most known university in its state and the one that received the most support from the state government. Flagships are viewed as the leaders in larger higher education systems and often provide policies, practices, and collaborations that influence the behavior of other postsecondary institutions in their state, region, and the nation (Douglass, 2016b). Because of the financial support and leadership role flagships take in the university system, they are

likely institutions with an abundance of resources. The university's designation as a flagship set the university apart from others in this study, and it is important to discuss the experiences of biracial students at this university type.

### **Biracial Students**

Race is a socially constructed category and often misunderstood as a scientific, biological category (Nishimura, 1998; Root, 1996; Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004; Williams, 1999). The race problem in the United States can be traced back to colonial times when a class system was created with the establishment of slavery (Ferris State University, 2010). There was desire to keep races separate and maintain the systematic oppression that existed; thus, White individuals enacted antimiscegenation laws. Antimiscegenation laws made it illegal for people from different races to get married, which also prevented race mixing.

Laws prohibiting miscegenation in the United States date back to 1661 when Virginia passed legislation prohibiting interracial marriage; these laws were common in most states until 1967 (Ferris State University, 2010). Antimiscegenation laws were enforced by the police and U.S. government throughout most of the United States and were not revoked until 1967 (Nishimura, 1998; Renn, 2000; Renn & Lunceford, 2004; Root, 1996; Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004) with the ruling of *Loving v. State of Virginia*. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Loving v. State of Virginia* on June 12, 1967 to overturn the remaining state antimiscegenation laws against interracial marriage, allowing marriages between different races to occur and be recognized (Root, 1996). With the antimiscegenation laws revoked, there was a noticeable increase in the number of interracial marriages in the United States; thus, there was an increase in the number of

multiracial children being born (Korgen, 1998; Nishimura, 1998; Wardle, 2000; Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004). Even though *Loving v. State of Virginia* occurred in 1967, children born from interracial relations generally had to be identified solely by one race (Korgen, 1998). Biracial children with a White parent were assigned the race of the non-White parent until 1989, when there was a change in policy and the race was recorded of both parents (Root, 1996). A multiracial baby with two racially minoritized parents was assigned the racial identification of the father (Root, 1996).

### **U.S. Census**

The first census in the United States was taken in 1790, and the only racial options available were free White males and females, all other free persons, and slaves (Humes & Hogan, 2009). U.S. marshals and their assistants visited each household and recorded the name of the head of house and the people who fit in the available categories. Until 1850, there was very little change in the census racial categories; however, in 1850, a new category, *mulatto*, was added. Although the definition of this term varied between census years, it generally meant someone who was Black and at least one other race. With the change on the 1850 census, it was the first time interracial relationships were acknowledged, even though they were still discouraged and frowned upon.

The Clinton administration launched a review of race and ethnicity categories in 1993 after coming under fire after the 1990 census (Fiore, 1997). Critics said it was outdated and not in tune with the current state of the United States, which was racially blended because of immigration and mixed marriages (Fiore, 1997). In 1997, the administration announced it would allow mixed-race individuals to check off more than one category for themselves in federal processes, including the 2000 census. The five

categories were White, Black/African American, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaskan. The 2000 census was the first questionnaire in which individuals could be recorded in more than one racial category; therefore, they were able to more accurately identify their heritage (Lopez, 2003; Renn, 2000; Renn & Lunceford, 2004; Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004).

When the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) added the opportunity for people to mark their own race as one or more categories on the 2000 census, the result was 126 possible combinations for multiracial individuals to choose from (Renn, 2000). The census report stated 2.4% (i.e., approximately 6.8 million people) of the total U.S. population reported two or more races living in households (Kean, 2006; N. A. Jones & Smith, 2001). Of the 6.8 million people reporting two races, 2.8 million people were under the age of 18 (Kean, 2006). Information from the 2000 census highlighted 15 different combinations of two or more ethnicities in the United States, which compromised 93.3% of the multiracial population (N. A. Jones & Smith, 2001). Lopez (2003) posited the racial classification of mixed-race individuals will continue to be complex but important. Lopez (2003) noted:

Given the deep-rooted salience of the constructs of race and ethnicity in American culture, it is also unlikely that [racial classifications] will soon disappear as ways of organizing and making sense of our social worlds. Therefore, if we are to continue collecting data about race and ethnicity, it is important to acknowledge multiplicity and give students and parents space to identify themselves and their children as being of mixed heritage, should they choose to do so, not only because the identifications may be more meaningful to them, but also because it will more

accurately document the racial–ethnic diversity of our student population as we think about the impact of demographic context on how we educate and conduct research in the context of schools. (p. 36)

### **Population Projections**

In the 2010 census, more than 9 million people reported being of more than one race, which was an increase of 32% from 2000 (Humes et al., 2011). Projections for the future show the fastest-growing racial group in the United States is people who are two or more races, projected to grow to 26 million people by 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). As the mixed-race population continues to increase, the number of multiracial students entering higher education and campuses is also predicted to increase (Jaschik, 2006; Renn, 2009). The share of children under 18 who are of two or more races is projected to increase from 5.3% in 2016 to 11.3% by 2060 (Vespa et al., 2020) showing there is potential for rapid growth in the multiracial student population. The literature on mixed-race and multiracial people has been limited, with research on minority populations focused on monoracial ethnic categories (Jourdan, 2006), providing little guidance for student affairs educators (Talbot, 2008). With a lack of representation, the field of higher education is left with a lack of understanding of this population of students.

### **Statistics in Higher Education**

Statistics on college students' enrollment trends in higher education are readily available through multiple sources, such as the National Center for Education Statistics or the U.S. Census Bureau. Because selecting two or more races on the census was not available until 2000, there are limited data available for this racial group versus monoracial groups. Reports on biracial students are still lacking and remain inconsistent

because of challenges discussed in following sections around the implementation of the collecting and reporting of data required of higher education institutions by the U.S. Department of Education (DOE).

With the decision of the OMB in 1997 to use five specific categories for racial classifications and let individuals select more than one race, the U.S. DOE also proposed an overhaul to how it collects statistics on students' racial backgrounds (Kean, 2006). The OMB mandated federal agencies implement policy changes by January 1, 2003 (Kellogg & Niskodé, 2008). Most colleges and universities already had collection methods for getting statistical information on the racial makeup of their student bodies but had to put off altering their data collection procedures until the DOE put together its final recommendations (Kean, 2006). Educational records for higher education did not reflect the presence of mixed-race students because they continued to use a federal standard that required one racial category per person (Renn, 2011). Even though many agencies, including the U.S. Census Bureau, had already adopted the changes, the DOE took 9 years of studying and planning before releasing their draft on guidance for colleges on how to change the way they collect and report information (Jaschik, 2006). Finally, in 2007, institutions received direction on how they should collect and report data on the racial makeup of their institutions, which came several years after federal agencies had already started to make the shift. The 2010–2011 academic year was the 1st year institutions were required to report racial data in the new format (Renn, 2011).

Political activists and advocacy groups have continued to have issues with the way data are aggregated (Kean, 2006). Even with the change allowing students to check more than one box, all students who check off more than one box on the form are

categorized together in the *two or more races* category. Thus, all multiracial students are lumped together in the *two or more races* category and the DOE would not be able to make any distinction from one student to another and assume everyone in the category was the same. Even though the change presented challenges, it also provided great opportunities, such as allowing institutions to have a more accurate representation of their student population on campus (Kellogg & Niskodé, 2008). The need for colleges to collect and report more precise data on the racial and ethnic backgrounds of their students has become increasingly evident so more specific information on the various outcomes and experiences of multiracial students are better represented.

### **Experiences on Campus**

The college enrollment rate of 18- to 24-year-old individuals in 2019 was 47% for students who identified as two or more races, which was an increase from 38% in 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). With the growing population of multiracial students, the experiences multiracial students have and ways they express their identities influence change in campus peer culture, identity politics, and academic interests (Renn, 2011). Different studies and publications have highlighted two main areas of concern for the experience of biracial students on campus, including their identity development and racism they experience on campus (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Nishimura, 1998).

Not only are students developing their multiracial identity during this time of transition, leading them to face unique challenges as they navigate a new social environment, but they are also doing so in an unfamiliar setting that presents new obstacles, and they are not sure where they belong in the new environment (Chickering &

Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 1998). Nishimura (1998) found biracial students developed challenges with their identity because of the roles of traditionally sponsored minority groups on campus. Several of Nishimura's participants discussed experiencing discomfort in the presence of minority groups, assuming it was because they did not have physical features typical of the particular ethnic group. Already established minority groups do not always meet the needs of a growing diverse student population because they can negate aspects of multiracial students' heritages (Nishimura, 1998). Although monoracial organizations can provide a source of support and networking and contribute to student success and retention, they can also create atmospheres where multiracial students have their authenticity and legitimacy questioned (Renn, 2011).

Kellogg and Liddell (2012) conducted a study on multiracial PWI students' experiences and found many of them encountered racism on campus. The authors broke down these experiences into four categories: (a) confronting race and racism, (b) responding to external definitions, (c) defending legitimacy, and (d) affirming racial identity. Students realized the saliency of race on their campuses, and it not only mattered to them on some level, but it was also how they were identified by the institution and their peers. Students also had explicit examples of how they directly experienced racism, either as a target or an observer. When responding to external definitions, students said they had to combat others' labels for them that did not match their identification and believed they had to choose only one aspect of their racial heritage with which to identify. Students found they had to defend their legitimacy to other students who questioned if their admission was a result of affirmative action or had their identity questioned by minority groups with whom they identified and if they were enough. This

concept of looking *enough* to truly belong to minority groups with which they could identify can be common for mixed-race students (DaCosta, 2007; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012). Students felt affirmed in their racial identity when they possessed knowledge about their racial groups' heritages or if they met another multiracial individual with whom they shared similar experiences.

Not only can interactions multiracial students have be racially charged, but the environments of PWIs can also be racially oppressive. People rarely think about the Whiteness of PWIs or question their history or practices; instead, people may think of PWIs in universalistic terms just as colleges and universities (Bonilla-Silva, 2012). PWIs have a history, climate, symbols, and traditions that embody, signify, and reproduce Whiteness, which leads to an environment that creates an oppressive racial ecology where walking on campus can be viewed as unhealthy, and minority students have no reflection of themselves on campus (Bonilla-Silva, 2012).

Johnson et al. (2007) examined how aspects of the college environment correlated to sense of belonging across a racially diverse sample of 2,967 students. Of the sample, 3.6% identified as multiracial. Students in the study represented geographic diversity in the United States. Of the 34 institutions represented, most of them were large, public, flagship universities that could be categorized as PWIs. Participants completed an electronic survey comprised of 258 items covering topics such as sense of belonging, transitions to college, racial climate on campus, and interactions with peers and faculty. Multiracial students expressed a lower sense of belonging when compared to White students but higher sense of belonging in comparison to students of color. The college environment was a determining factor for sense of belonging; specifically, impactful

campus environment factors included perceptions of the campus racial climate and smooth social transition to campus. In addition, for multiracial students, the perception of a residence hall serving as a source of academic support was another significant predictor for sense of belonging.

Johnson et al. (2007), in addition to the others previously discussed, offered a basis for future research on multiracial students' senses of belonging in college, such as the current study. They demonstrated the need to fill the knowledge gap regarding how multiracial students experience belonging in college and on campuses because little is known about it beyond racial belongingness (Chaudhari, 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this section, I define sense of belonging and speak to its importance. Furthermore, I explain the tenets of the sense of belonging model and how a theoretical perspective grounded in a sense of belonging allowed for a holistic view of the overall experience of biracial students at PWIs.

#### **Sense of Belonging**

For the purposes of the current study, I used Strayhorn's (2012) definition of *sense of belonging*:

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). (p. 4)

The sense of belonging theoretical framework can be used to examine students' connections to their institutions and environments. Strayhorn stated sense of belonging is

framed as a basic human need that takes on heightened importance for specific individuals who may feel unsupported or unwelcomed in certain social contexts. The perception of sense of belonging can be especially difficult for people with biracial identities at a PWI. For minority students, sense of belonging can measure the degree to which they feel included or excluded at a PWI (Johnson, 2007).

Researchers have suggested biracial students have different racialized experiences (Museus et al., 2016; Renn, 2004). Racialized experiences can alter students' perceptions of the campus climate compared to their monoracial peers. Researchers have suggested biracial students engage differently on campus, and it can be even more stressful (Johnson et al., 2007; Museus et al., 2016; Renn, 2004). Minority students seem to benefit more from a sense of belonging than their majority peers (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); thus, institutions should strive to make all students feel respected and valued at their institution, not just tolerated (Sedgwick et al., 2014). Johnson et al. (2007) found the more committed a campus is to the success and well-being of minority students, the higher the perceived sense of belonging will be among those students.

Patton et al. (2016) asserted it is important to create welcoming spaces on campus for multiracial students to help them find community with students with whom they have things in common. Patton et al. (2016) stated, "Orientation presentations, speakers' series, and awareness workshops, and providing opportunities for multiracial students to participate in cultural events, are other ways of creating a feeling of inclusion among mixed-race students" (p. 124). Similarly, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) stated:

Minoritized students without the privilege of seeing themselves easily fitting into the normative campus environment had more complex needs in order to belong.

Interview data suggested a heightened level of self-awareness, which shaped their need to be real (i.e., authentic) in the environment, relationships, and involvement. Our findings should prompt educators to think more deeply about programs and services designed to foster belonging. (p. 939)

Strayhorn (2019) said sense of belonging is particularly significant for students who are marginalized in college settings, like students from racial and ethnic minority groups. Biracial students engage differently on campus, and it is important for them to feel welcomed on campuses and be able to find community (Patton et al., 2016). Educators need to consider what programs and services are designed to foster belonging for students (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016); however, to be able to accomplish that goal, they need to understand the core element of belonging.

### **Core Elements**

Strayhorn (2012) identified seven core elements when considering sense of belonging and students. Each element is relevant when considering the needs of biracial students at a PWI. First, Strayhorn proposed sense of belonging is a basic human need. According to Maslow (1962), satisfying the need for belonging is in the middle of a human's hierarchy of needs and is a necessary precondition for higher levels of belonging to be achieved. If the goal of higher education revolves around knowledge, understanding, and self-actualization, students are not able to move toward higher hierarchy levels of needs until middle needs (i.e., belonging) are satisfied (Strayhorn, 2012). If biracial students are to be set up for success and meant to thrive at PWIs, professionals need to consider how they establish sense of belonging.

Second, sense of belonging is fundamental in driving human behavior (Strayhorn, 2012). The need to belong can compel students to act in ways that do not always result in productive outlets. Institutions hoping to retain biracial students who identify with the institution must provide mechanisms that support their positive association with the institution. Providing mechanisms to support positive association will help to cultivate their sense of belongingness to the institution.

Third, sense of belonging can be more important for a group of people depending on the context, time of occurrence, and population in question (Strayhorn, 2012). Biracial students are a marginalized group who are attending institutions at a key developmental time when they are discovering who they are, with whom they belong, and how they want to invest their time. Believing biracial students choose an institution based on their educational goals and career aspirations, institutions must invest effort to help ease the transition biracial students encounter in potentially new environments so they can focus on their education and not on whether they are accepted by their professors and peers.

Fourth, sense of belonging is a consequence of mattering (Strayhorn, 2012). *Mattering* is the feeling that an individual is valued and appreciated by others (Schlossberg, 1989). Experiencing mattering, depending on the groups with which biracial students have identified, can have varying levels of significance. The level of significance can vary because depending on the frequency of the interactions and types of interactions; the interactions can affirm for students that they are seen, cared for, and needed (Strayhorn 2019).

Fifth, college students' senses of belonging are affected by the intersectionality of their identities (Strayhorn, 2012). The core element of intersectionality was integral to the

current phenomenological study because I explored biracial students' experiences related to their perceptions of sense of belonging. Biracial students manage the intersection of multiple identities, and their need for belongingness can vary greatly. As individuals, they experience belonging in different ways, and every part of their identity shapes how they feel about belonging at their institutions.

Sixth, sense of belonging encourages other positive outcomes (Strayhorn, 2012). Other positive outcomes are related to achievement, engagement, well-being, happiness, and persistence (Strayhorn, 2019). If biracial students are pleased by the educational and cocurricular experiences at their institution, they are likely to persist toward degree attainment. The goal of college campuses should be to have a campus environment that fosters sense of belonging so strong that students feel pulled toward it and supported by others on campus so much that the thought of severing the connection is unimaginable (Strayhorn, 2019).

Seventh, students' senses of belonging must be constantly satisfied because belonging can be influenced by contextual changes in circumstances and conditions (Strayhorn, 2012). Biracial students are privy to increasing racial tensions present in society and experience direct effects when racist acts are committed by their peers. With the everchanging landscape of the United States and college campuses, biracial students look to institutional leaders and how those leaders respond to inform their actions and how to interact in the environments created for them.

Strayhorn (2012) said, "To excel, students must feel a sense of belonging in school (or college), and therefore educators must work to create conditions that foster belongingness among students" (p. 9). There is a lack of literature that speaks directly to

how biracial students find a sense of belonging at a PWI. As a result, this study focused on describing what experiences, if any, affected a biracial student's perception of sense of belonging at a southeastern state flagship university categorized as a PWI.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 2, I explored the institutional setting in which this study took place to understand the impact and influence a flagship institution has on the university system of which it is a part. Based off how sense of belonging was defined for this study, and knowing it is considered a basic human need, the goal of higher education cannot be fulfilled without giving consideration to how multiracial students have this need met. Only then can higher education professionals begin to understand the impact environments created at a PWI have on the sense of belonging of multiracial students. In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodological approach, positionality of myself as the researcher, and data collection and analysis procedures for this study.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to describe what experiences, if any, affected a biracial student's perception of sense of belonging at a southeastern state flagship university. Underrepresented students perceive predominantly White institutions (PWIs) as unsupportive, which can have negative effects on a student's sense of belonging (Hussain & Jones, 2021). Negative implications occur when students do not find a sense of belonging, including lack of retention, negative social behaviors, and isolation. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), the population of people claiming two or more races is the fastest-growing racial identification, estimated to increase from 8.5 million in 2017 to 26 million by 2060. Because people identifying as two or more races is a growing population, and because little is known about how the campus environment influences a student's sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), higher education professionals need to ensure there are opportunities that aid biracial students in finding a sense of belonging on campus. In this chapter, I discuss the methodological approach and data collection process used in this study. The outline of this chapter includes: (a) positionality; (b) research paradigm; (c) research design and method; (d) setting, samples, and population; (e) data collection and analysis procedures; (f) data coding; (g) categorization and theming; (h) interpretations; (i) trustworthiness and reliability; and (j) ethical considerations.

### **Positionality Statement**

As a Black woman who works at a southeastern state flagship similar to the university in the current study and pursuing a doctoral degree at the time of this study, I was aware of my proximity to the university and how my personal identity as a mother to a biracial child could influence my perspective on this study. I acknowledge my experiences of growing up in the southeastern area of the United States and my personal investment in the experience of biracial students has influenced my practice as a professional and topics in which I am interested as a researcher. I was particularly interested in the experiences of biracial students at a southeast flagship institution considered a PWI because I believed it was an area where there was a lack of knowledge and I could have an impact. All of these factors needed to be accounted for in relation to subjectivity and positionality. I aimed to remain neutral and conducted the study with integrity. I reported the data as the study yielded them and was transparent and trustworthy in all aspects of this study. Through the reflectivity journal, I was able to reflect and hold myself accountable throughout the process.

### **Research Paradigm**

For this study, I chose the constructivism paradigm. S. R. Jones et al. (2013) stated a *constructivist paradigm* is where knowledge and existence are interpreted and built by human interaction and emphasize understanding. Sense of belonging as a framework aligns with the constructivist paradigm because ontologically, there are multiple realities to be discovered as they relate to individuals, and each individual perceives reality differently based on their interactions and experiences. Because I examined the experience of biracial students, a majority of my research used their lived

experiences on campus, interactions they had, and how experiences impacted their reality.

From an epistemological stance, the constructivism paradigm recognizes knowledge as being socially constructed and a cocreated finding between the researcher and participants (S. R. Jones et al., 2013). Given the epistemological orientation to my research paradigm, as I interpreted what participants shared, I played a role in the construction of knowledge. The combination of ontological and epistemological orientations in the constructivism paradigm led me to be aware of the biases I brought into the study and the fact I was looking for similarities in experiences but there was no singular experience that could be surmised from the findings. Axiologically, there was a value to honor individuals and their truths in the research. As such, my examination took a deep look at the experiences they had, the impact on their lives, and how the truth of those experiences was conveyed and could only be the truth for that individual.

Finally, methodologically, a qualitative inquiry was most appropriate for this study because little is known about the topic and an in-depth study offered the richest source of information. I used a transcendental phenomenological methodology because this study focused on the unique lived experience of each individual participant, and I tried to examine how they experienced the world on their campus.

### **Research Design and Method**

Because I was interested in looking at what an experience meant to a particular group of people, and not just in a generalized sense (Grossoehme, 2014), I decided a phenomenological study was best suited for the topic. Phenomenology focuses on the prereflective or immediately lived experience of individuals before people have time to

categorize it (Adams & van Manen, 2008). Phenomenologists focus on synthesizing the lived experiences of several individuals and describe the essence, which is defined as the common meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A phenomenological study was best because I focused on the lived experiences of biracial individuals. Because I was intentional about focusing on how participants described the experience as opposed to how I saw the experience, it was a transcendental phenomenological study to describe the phenomenon. *Transcendental phenomenology* is focused less on a researcher's interpretation and how they saw the experience and more on the description of participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I was able to use transcendental phenomenology in conjunction with the constructivist paradigm to focus on how participants described interactions that helped them create knowledge and give understanding to their experiences. I was able to use a transcendental phenomenological approach in this study to focus on the unique lived experience of each individual participant and describe that experience for a better understanding of the phenomenon.

Empirical data-gathering methods in phenomenology include interviewing, observing, and gathering written descriptions used to gather experiential material or descriptions and accounts of stories and lived moments (Adams & van Manen, 2008). Using data-gathering methods, researchers aim to provide a true description of the phenomenon being described. In this study, I engaged participants in both a short demographic survey and semistructured interviews to gather information on how they described their experiences at a flagship PWI in the Southeast. A phenomenological research design aligns with the theoretical perspective of sense of belonging because of

the ability to use interviews as the method and where transcripts from a small sample size can be analyzed and meaning made from what is shared.

### **Setting, Sample, and Population**

In this section, I discuss the research site that served as the setting for the study. I also review the sampling and recruitment plan used to gain study participants. Following this section, data collection and analysis procedures are reviewed.

#### **Research Site**

I interviewed undergraduate biracial students at a public PWI in the southeastern area of the United States. This institution was considered the flagship of its state and was both a land- and sea-grant university. It serviced undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students and was comprised of 17 schools and colleges. As of 2019, 3.81% of students at this institution identified as two or more races, which equated to approximately 1,481 students.

#### **Sampling and Recruitment Plan**

Because this was a phenomenological study where the goal was to gather rich and detailed descriptions of participants' lived experiences (Grossoehme, 2014), a large number of participants was not required. I used purposeful participant selection, and I decided at the beginning of the study how large and diverse the sample needed to be (Grossoehme, 2014). Sample size determination was based on the information I, as the researcher, hoped to gather in the study (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). I ensured the number of participants was relevant to the research question and the size did not reach a level of redundancy (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). I aimed to have no more than 10 participants in

the study in alignment with Mertens (2019), who shared the rule of thumb for sample size in a phenomenological study is approximately 6–10 participants.

I used social media to advertise to biracial students who attended this southeastern state flagship university (see Appendix A). I also reached out to select offices on campus, such as the office of institutional diversity, to ask them to send out a recruitment email (see Appendix B) to biracial students asking them to participate in the study and did not ask for contact information of students. I kept the small number of participants necessary in mind throughout recruitment while ensuring I found participants who actually fulfilled the criteria. The initial advertisement for the study went out in January 2022, and I received interest from five participants who met the qualifications throughout the spring semester. Of those five participants, four responded to my email about having an interview conducted. Over the course of the next 5 months, I continued to use recruitment tools to engage qualified potential participants. While recruiting additional participants, I conducted interviews with the first set of participants. I was able to remain reflexive and assessed the sample after the first set of participants to ensure I was being intentional and purposeful in my sample size (Guetterman, 2015) because I had an extensive period of time between the two sets of participants.

After the first set of participants, I thought I had not reached an adequate sample size and did not have the depth of information I was looking for (Guetterman, 2015), which is when I conducted snowball sampling. I used snowball sampling, where I asked current participants if they were aware of any students who fit participant criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). From snowball sampling, I had another five participants complete the demographic survey. Of those five, three participants responded to my

email about conducting an interview. After participants completed the short demographic survey and they were selected, I confirmed their involvement via email (see Appendix C), received informed consent (see Appendix D), and conducted interviews. In total, seven participants were involved in this study. After completing the seven participants' interviews, I believed I had reached a level of saturation and concluded seven was an adequate number of participants. I determined I had reached the point of saturation because as I was conducting interviews, students shared their unique stories, and common categories and themes were evident (De Wet, 2010).

Participants in the study were made up of biracial students who were currently enrolled full time at this PWI, had attended classes in person on campus, and were in the 18–22 traditional age range. Student participants were from multiple schools and colleges across campus, which resulted in the data being representative of multiple areas of the university. Additionally, participants included men and women, making it a heterogeneous sample that represented different classifications. To ensure confidentiality, each participant selected a pseudonym and was referred to by their pseudonym throughout the study. No personally identifying information was collected that could have linked participants to their pseudonyms.

### **Data Collection Plan**

In this study, I engaged participants in both a short demographic survey (see Appendix E) and through semistructured interviews to gather information on how they described their experience at a flagship PWI in the Southeast. In the short demographic survey, students also completed an Institutional Review Board-approved consent form stating the information gathered in the preselection process could be used.

Interviews shed light on how their backgrounds, previous and current experiences, and different viewpoints impacted how they understood being a biracial student at this southeastern state flagship university. When effectively used, interviews can capture an experience from someone else's perspective (Biddix, 2018), which is why individual interviews were used to allow the conversation to provide depth on participants' sense of belonging experiences. Semistructured interviews had specific questions listed, but the approach was more or less formal and provided me the flexibility to alter the interviews as needed, based on the content of the interview and direction of the conversation (Biddix, 2018). The interview protocol is found in Appendix F.

I shared introductions, a description of the purpose, and process of the interview at the beginning of each interview to establish trust. Audio-recorded interviews ranged from 15–40 minutes and happened both in person and virtually.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

To analyze data in this phenomenological study, I took the following steps: (a) immersed myself in the data, (b) coded the data, (c) categorized similar meaning units, (d) used participants' words to spell out meaning units, and (e) combined each transformed statement into themes (Grossoehme, 2014). During Step 1, I reread the transcribed interviews and listened to recordings for tone and timbre (Grossoehme, 2014). When conducting Step 2 and coding the data, I extracted words and phrases that stood out and described the phenomenon being studied (Grossoehme, 2014). I extracted phrases and sentences that stood out and seemed to be significant to participants, were responsive to the study's research questions, and described the phenomenon being studied (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). In Step 3, I took the meaning units, also known as

the coded data bits, and I categorized the meaning units and articulated them into participants' words, which then transformed into thematic statements that described the phenomenon. In Step 4, I spelled out categories using participants' words and used the thematic states from Step 3 as the descriptions, which ultimately led to the creation of themes for findings for Step 5. I audio recorded each interview with Zoom, a cloud-based software. I used the TranscribeMe software for transcribing each interview and coded the transcriptions by looking for recurring themes of significance that presented themselves.

### **Data Coding**

After the interviews and transcription were completed, coding was applied to make meaning of the data. When coding the data, I extracted phrases and sentences that stood out and seemed to be significant to participants (Grossoehme, 2014). The coding process I followed is also called opening coding when the extracted data are responsive to the study's research questions (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

### **Categorizing and Theming**

Once I completed coding, I categorized and themed the data. I categorized the meaning units and articulated them into participants' words, which then transformed into thematic statements that described the phenomenon (Grossoehme, 2014). According to Merriam and Grenier (2019), themes created from coded data are explanatory of the phenomenon in question. The coding, categorizing, and theming process allowed me to identify similar words and phrases participants shared, which revealed relationships between the themes. Table 1 is an example of how direct quotes from transcripts were taken from interviews and coded to create summaries. Table 1 also shows how categories were created, which ultimately led to the themes.

**Table 1***Quotes, Categories, and Resulting Themes*

Quotes	Summary of verbatim comments	Category	Theme
Stephanie: "It's really nice to like, meet other Asian students. Everybody in that club is super friendly. I went to the lunar new year event, and I had friends there, and it was cool to just dress up and go to the cultural event."	Students reported multicultural organizations had been instrumental in their sense of belonging.	Peer support – organizations participants joined or friend groups they formed	Culture
Jody: "Being a part of the Native American Student Association here and being with all of these people who are like me, they've really helped me find that sense of belonging."	Students reported, even in nonmulticultural organization settings, they tended to create smaller groups.		
Emily: "And for the first time, I was heard and understood and people accepted that this was my experiences, and this is how it affected me instead of kind of questioning who I am racially and permitted me feeling that kind of way and permitted being confused and misunderstood."			
Jake: "I would describe it as very good because I found a very inclusive group of people that I'm able to be friends with and connect with."			

**Interpretation**

When interpreting a phenomenological study, it is important to keep in mind themes that surface can never grasp the entirety of the original experience (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). By sharing my positionality and subjectivity to the interest area of the

study and completing a reflective journal, I allowed readers to better understand how I arrived at my interpretations of the data (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

### **Trustworthiness and Reliability**

To establish trustworthiness in the study, I made sure I took steps to allow readers to trust the research findings. While interviewing, I conducted audio-only recordings so I captured their truthful answers and showed I did not coerce or encourage specific answers. This process ensured the information I ultimately presented was representative of their experiences and perspective of belongingness at a southeastern state flagship university.

Another strategy I used was an audit trail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An audit trail strategy complemented the reflexivity strategy I used. A key concept in phenomenology is reduction or bracketing (Adams & van Manen, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Reduction or bracketing is defined as when a researcher identifies personal experience with the phenomenon and sets those experiences aside so they can focus on the experience of the study's participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher's experiences are not forgotten; instead, they are set aside and not engaged with while determining participants' experiences. I outlined any biases I had and detailed any assumptions I had or relationships to the topic being studied in my research so readers were fully aware. I conducted the audit trail strategy through the process of keeping a reflexivity journal before, during, and after the data collection process. In the journal, I expressed my feelings on this research journey, moments where I was conflicted, and reflected on the entire experience. I documented how the discovery of the data impacted

me and how my reactions influenced my interpretations. I also kept note of how I made decisions when deciding upon themes for coding the data.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Qualitative researchers should be mindful of ethical considerations because qualitative methods can vary significantly (Biddix, 2018). Interview research has significant risks pertaining to confidentiality, especially with a small sample size. Taking confidentiality into consideration when designing the informed consent, it was important participants were aware of any potential risks. With regard to confidentiality, participants received written information about the purpose of the study and verbally confirmed their understanding of the interview, the study's purpose, their ability to withdraw, and confidentiality of the data they would be providing.

To ensure all aspects of this study were completed in an ethical way, I took specific steps regarding participants' identities, audio recordings, transcriptions, and stored data. First, I had each participant tell me a pseudonym of their choosing. During interviews, I conducted audio-only recordings via Zoom, and once the interviews were transcribed, I digitally shredded the audio files. The transcription service I used was TranscribeMe; to protect the data, I stored the key code for pseudonym/name matching and interviews on a password-protected universal serial bus drive.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to describe what experiences, if any, affected a biracial student's perception of sense of belonging at a southeastern state flagship university. I engaged in this study to answer the following research question: How do biracial students experience belongingness at a predominantly

White flagship university? The phenomenological design fit this study because it allowed participants to share their lived experiences and provided me, as the researcher, the chance to focus on synthesizing their lived experiences to describe the phenomenon through semistructured interviews. The interview method fit this study because it allowed participants to speak candidly about their experiences, which allowed their responses to shape the conversation. This method also made it possible for the data to be coded, categorized, and themed.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the findings of the study, which includes discussing the phenomenon of being biracial and how students experienced belonging through the insights of seven research participants. Then, I discuss themes that arose from the interviews.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to describe what experiences, if any, affected a biracial student's perception of sense of belonging at a southeastern state flagship university. I engaged in this study to answer the following research question: How do biracial students experience belongingness at a predominantly White flagship university? Through semistructured interviews, I engaged with seven participants and learned about their experiences. The interviews shed light on how their backgrounds, previous and current experiences, and different viewpoints impacted how they understood being a biracial student at this southeastern state flagship university. This chapter includes the findings and results of the study through description of the participants and their lived experiences at the university, and a discussion of the themes that unfolded from the interviews. The way the findings are shared is done to center participants' voices. The chapter concludes with a summary.

#### **Research Participant Descriptions**

Table 2 displays the pseudonyms selected by each participant. Table 2 also shows each participant's ethnicity and gender.

**Table 2***Research Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Gender
Stephanie	Asian and Black/African American	Female
Harrison	Black/African American and Latino	Male
Jody	Native American and White	Female
Emily	Hispanic and White	Female
P	Hispanic and White	Male
Jake	Indian and White	Male
Naomi	Black/African American and White	Female

**Participant Experiences**

Because the focus of transcendental phenomenology is on participants' descriptions of their experiences as opposed to the researcher's interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018), it was necessary to share how participants described their experience in a concise and descriptive manner. The experience for each participant is provided using quoted material to highlight their voice in sharing their experiences and is necessary to fully understand the data and emergent themes of this study.

**Stephanie**

Stephanie was a Black and Asian mixed-race senior in the prepharmacy program at the university. She transferred to the institution from Mercer University after her 1st year and planned to graduate from the university. She selected the university because they had an excellent pharmacy school program. She shared, "They [this university] have the best one in the state." She also stated the university was the cheapest one in the state

because it was a public institution. She described her time at the university as being focused on her academics with the demands of her major.

### ***Stephanie's Experience of Being Biracial on Campus***

Overall, Stephanie said the experience of being biracial on campus was good. Stephanie explained she had not had many challenges on campus as a biracial student. She did mention when people found out she identified as biracial, "They are usually surprised." Further, she shared, "A lot of times, people just ask because they want to know based on what I look like." She recognized even though she was part of the minority population, it was not uncomfortable.

### ***Stephanie's Definition of Sense of Belonging***

Stephanie defined a sense of belonging as: "Belonging is when you feel like you're a part of something."

### ***Experiences That Contributed to Stephanie's Sense of Belonging at the University***

When asked about what, if anything, made Stephanie feel a sense of belonging, she credited her school. Stephanie said, "The pharmacy school gives me a sense of belonging because it's such a smaller section compared to the whole rest of the school." She went on to say that if she went anywhere else on campus, she felt very out of place. However, she shared, "If I'm in the pharmacy buildings, those two buildings just feel like mine, and they feel like home. I feel my sense of belonging because I know every single person there; I know all the professors." She listed three significant organizations in which she was involved; two organizations were identity based, and one of the identities was one she did not hold. Stephanie shared, "I'm in . . . the Hispanic pharmacist association, even though I'm not Hispanic, but I just like to be involved because I can

speak Spanish.” For the identity-based group with which she identified, she stated it was nice to meet other people who identified as Asian and they were friendly and welcoming. She credited having friends in the organization and being able to dress up in cultural attire to attend an event as having a positive impact. She went on to say being in identity-based organizations contributed to her sense of belonging because these organizations made her feel welcomed in their spaces.

***Experiences That Did Not Contribute to Stephanie’s Sense of Belonging at the University***

Stephanie stated the size of the institution and the number of people attending her institution made it hard to feel like she belonged because everyone was like a stranger. When asked if she could recall a specific time when she felt as if she did not belong, she shared an impactful experience regarding a professor:

Actually, there is one professor in the pharmacy school who we had, and he’s like, an older professor, and he’s like, been at the school forever and ever, and he’s very like, politically incorrect. And so, he like, will say things in class that a lot of us have issues with. And I wrote like, a very detailed, um, like teacher review at the end of the year after finals. And then, when he was like, still there and still teaching, I was a little shocked because it’s like, everybody has been writing these complaints about him for years and years, and he still continues to be there. And when he makes like, so specifically, my year, I wrote that he made homophobic comments and racist comments, and then nothing happened, and it was never addressed. So, I think that was a little shocking to me because I feel like that wouldn’t have happened at my old school.

In wrapping up, Stephanie said she believed the campus had positive racial relationships among the student body and had not noticed any segregation.

### **Harrison**

Harrison was a Black and Latino mixed-race senior at the university. He was majoring in biological studies. He was born and raised in Brazil until the age of 12, which is when he moved to the United States. His father was Nigerian, and his mother was Brazilian. He stated he lived on campus and planned to graduate from the university. When asked why he selected the university, he had an interesting answer. He shared:

It wasn't my first choice. I was set to go to another state school [in an urban setting,] but during the African American male experience weekend, I was really sold on being somewhere that needed me as much as I needed them in that way. The university has a lot of diversity and inclusion and representation efforts going on, and one of the things that were highlighted to me was how much time and effort the university kind of puts into those programs.

Harrison explained he thought he would be more than a number because he believed the university needed him and his presence on campus would bring more value.

### ***Harrison's Experience of Being Biracial on Campus***

Harrison stated the experience of being biracial on campus was challenging but pushed him to grow and helped him learn how to navigate spaces in which he would have previously been uncomfortable. The experiences Harrison referred to as being challenging all revolved around trying to find community on a large campus. He shared there were so many pockets of people that existed, it was easy to go from one to another trying to find community. However, truly establishing a supportive community was

difficult with so many people with which to potentially interact. Since having those experiences, he expressed he felt like he was better off, and all those experiences helped him learn how to deal with different situations and environments. Citing the fact he was raised in a different country led to him having different experiences in a different environment, and Harrison's experiences did not always align with experiences of the more prominent race community on campus. Harrison also expressed because of his background and being raised in a different country, even in spaces with underrepresented students, he did not always feel like he belonged. Harrison stated:

For example, some people might think I'm not Black because I was not, you know, born and raised in the U.S. and I'm from Brazil. And then at the same time, I'm not Hispanic because, you know, we speak Portuguese in Brazil, so it's kind of like, I can't really identify with that group either. And then, sometimes even with the Brazilian population on campus, which is not that large, most of them are not of African descent. And so, of course, there's that barrier there. In addition to that, because I've been outside of Brazil for so long, a lot of things that, you know, they may relate to and kind of identity with, I may not have as much experience with.

Harrison mentioned another point that made it difficult to be biracial was the complexion of a biracial person. Harrison stated, "Sometimes, people think that you may not necessarily still experience certain things when you have a lighter complexion. That's not always the case, but people don't realize that." When asked how people respond when learning Harrison identified as biracial, he stated they were often surprised based on assumptions they made about him based off his complexion and appearance. Others

assumed he was monoracial because he had mannerisms and portrayed characteristics that could be perceived as aligning with Black culture and did not have a heavy accent. Overall, once he shared with people he was biracial, he was received positively.

### ***Harrison's Definition of Sense of Belonging***

Harrison defined a sense of belonging as: "It's [being] fairly comfortable in a space and feeling that you are wanted in the space you're in."

### ***Experiences That Contributed to Harrison's Sense of Belonging at the University***

When asked about what, if anything, made him feel a sense of belonging, Harrison credited the initiatives that first drew him to the institution. Harrison said, "Those initiatives that are set up to promote diversity on campus helped me get that sense of belonging because it made me feel wanted. Like I needed to be here." Even if people do not agree with the purpose of these organizations or even if they are only for show, he still felt a sense of belonging. Harrison shared, "I still get that sense of being wanted and I value that." Because of his involvement in an identity-based organization, he was able to connect with upper administration, and when at an event as part of another organization, he was recognized by name by an associate vice president on campus. Regarding that interaction, Harrison said, "[It] really made me feel welcomed and like I belonged." Overall, he credited institutional initiatives, professionals, and organizations for providing him support since he had been at the university.

*Experiences That Did Not Contribute to Harrison's Sense of Belonging at the University*

When describing the university, Harrison said there were many different pockets to engage in because of the size of the institution, which could make it both easy and difficult to find community. Harrison said:

There are different types of students, but different experiences, different backgrounds, and so that kind of makes things easier for you to find your people.

But because the campus is so big, sometimes it's also a little difficult to find those people as well, just because it's hard for you to interact with everyone.

Although interacting and engaging across campus to find community can be scary, he found it could also be rewarding. Harrison shared daily experiences with microaggressions, whether conscious or not, could begin to take their toll and not contribute to his sense of belonging at the university. When asked if he could recall a specific time when he felt as if he did not belong, he shared an experience from freshman year:

It was when I first started taking the harder science classes associated with my [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] major and being able to see my peers being able to answer questions in class and I wasn't able to made me feel like I shouldn't be here.

Overall, Harrison discussed the difficulties of finding community on a large campus and experiencing imposture syndrome.

**Jody**

Jody was a Native American (i.e., Cherokee) and White mixed-race senior studying history at the university. Although her family was from a Cherokee reservation in Oklahoma, 2 generations ago, in the 1940s, her family moved to the state. She lived off campus in an apartment near downtown and planned to graduate from the university.

When asked about why she selected the university, Jody stated:

I never thought I would come here. I always thought I would go out of state somewhere but ended up coming here to study history. Going here is convenient because it is relatively close to where I grew up, and I felt as though what I want to study and what I want to do would be the best environment to do so. Knowing some background about the university and its issues with diversity for minority students, I really wanted to come here and try to make that change and make a more inclusive and positive healthy environment for minority students like myself.

When describing the university, Jody said it was an interesting place and kind of at odds with itself. She said, "I've met several people who are like minded like me and progressive in the way that they view things and think. But we also still have a lot of sort of older traditional values at the university." She concluded it was a diverse but old-fashioned university.

In her overall reflection in the interview of her time at the university, Jody was hopeful for what the institution could do to better support biracial students. Jody concluded:

I hope the university community can understand that one person's positive experience does not speak for all biracial and minority students. Keep an open line of communication with other students to share their experiences and make a change so that other biracial and minority students can be encouraged to come here and feel completely safe and welcomed to find their sense of belonging.

### *Jody's Experience of Being Biracial on Campus*

Jody said her experience of being biracial on campus had been positive but left her feeling uneasy at points. Jody stated:

I am very, you know, White passing, and if you didn't know my racial background, you wouldn't suspect that I was biracial. On that front, I've had a very positive experience. No one reacts particularly negatively, but not positively either. I've never experienced any racism or discrimination based on my identity in that way. I haven't had any issues with professors or students.

She went on to say people had a neutral reaction when they found out she was biracial.

She shared:

A lot of time, they'll try to erase my other half, saying I'm just White, and they're like, "Well you don't look the way I think you should, so you're just White to me." Even though they're not blatantly racist or discriminatory, they're not accepting of that other part of me, which can feel negative and be hurtful to me.

When asked about friend groups, Jody stated she still believed she had not found a good group of friends who could understand her until recently. She indicated because of being White passing, she found it difficult to know where she fit in, stating, "My monoracial friends, whether fully White or a different race, it's difficult for them to

understand the experiences of a biracial person if you're not in that group of people.”

Jody also stated:

Being Native American, this is such a small demographic of people on campus.

It's been very hard for me to find people of similar cultural beliefs and values that

I can relate to and talk to about my experiences as a biracial person.

### ***Jody's Definition of Sense of Belonging***

Jody defined sense of belonging as:

Feeling comfortable in myself and my own identity and being able to share that

openly and honestly with the people around me. Not having a fear of judgment

and being able to walk out in the world and not have to be worried about what

people are gonna say or think about who I am and how I present myself. And, you

know, having the confidence and the courage to be able to do that.

### ***Experiences That Contributed to Jody's Sense of Belonging at the University***

When asked about what, if anything, made her feel a sense of belonging, Jody credited all the multicultural organizations on campus. She said:

Even if you're not Hispanic or Latino, you can still get involved with their student

organizations. If you're not African American, you can still go and be part of

these organizations, and they can help you find that sense of belonging within

yourself.

She continued by mentioning the people in multicultural organizations were accepting and helpful in finding her own identity, and they created a positive environment for her.

When asked about a specific experience with a multicultural organization that contributed

to her sense of belonging, she cited being part of the Native American Student Association. Jody stated:

Being here with all of these people who are like me really helped me find that sense of belonging. At one of our events, when we were giving out traditional Native dishes and people genuinely asking questions and seemed interested in what we were doing, it helped solidify that sense of belonging.

She highlighted being surrounded by like-minded people who wanted to learn about other cultures and share in them was a really positive experience.

### ***Experiences That Did Not Contribute to Jody's Sense of Belonging at the University***

Jody stated she had to take responsibility for finding her sense of belonging, and the lack of resources on campus did not contribute to her overall sense of belonging at the university. Jody said:

I feel as though if I hadn't found the organizations that I'm a part of for multicultural stuff, I don't think that I would feel as strong as a sense of belonging as I do. I really had to dig and dig to find these resources myself and they weren't laid out for me.

Jody also cited the fact there were historical markers on campus that seemed to glorify the people who founded the institution, and although they had done great things for the university, were not great people. Jody said:

I understand that on the one hand, that that is part of the university's history, and I don't think we should erase it, but I also don't think it needs to be advertised and glorified as much as it is. In one of the buildings on campus, I recall seeing a portrait of a man in a Confederate soldier's uniform, and I just feel like it's things

like that that discourage myself and other minority students from feeling a sense of belonging here.

Jody concluded by saying being surrounded by portraits and symbols that represent people who had hurt and oppressed underrepresented populations in the area could negatively impact the sense of belonging she and other students may have had.

When recalling a specific experience that did not contribute to her sense of belonging, Jody shared an impactful story:

When I first got there, I would overhear people and the way they would talk about Native Americans and other minorities on campus was really negative. I don't think there's one specific moment that I recall this happening that I can think of, but there have been a few here and there when people have said hurtful and prejudice things about Native Americans specifically.

Overall, Jody shared the university did not have a mechanism in place for helping biracial students find their place, and physical components of the environment, such as portraits and symbols of oppressive people, could actually cause harm to students.

### **Emily**

Emily was a Hispanic and White mixed-race junior studying public relations and English at the university. She was an in-state student and planned on graduating from the university. She selected the university because the state provided tuition assistance and it was the best option to attend.

She described her time at the university as one of growth. It was in the prior year when she felt like she belonged at the university, stating, "I've been able to kind of find my niche and my people here and feel comfortable in who I am." She went on to say that

if someone came on to campus and did not try to find those things for themselves, they would probably never feel like they belonged.

### ***Emily's Experience of Being Biracial on Campus***

Emily said her experience being biracial on campus had been confusing, especially in respect to where she grew up and how being biracial was not discussed and part of her identity was suppressed. Emily noted her living situation on campus the previous year also made it more difficult. She shared, "With my living situation last year, my roommate was Black, and she kind of made the journey of figuring out who I am harder." When asked how people responded when they found out Emily was biracial, they had one of two reactions. She said, "Either people say, 'I didn't think you were anything but White' or they go, 'Oh, I knew you were something else and I just couldn't put my finger on it.'" She concluded by saying with the added layers of the political climate and being at a predominantly White institution (PWI), she did not feel like she ever knew where she belonged. She said although she struggled the previous year at the university, she felt like she had found her people and was a lot more comfortable.

### ***Emily's Definition of Sense of Belonging***

Emily defined a sense of belonging as:

Feeling seen, heard, and accepted. It doesn't necessarily mean that I have to be with a group of people that share my identity, but instead being with a group of people that validate the experience, and work to understand it and kind of love me for where I am along my path and feel like I'm accepted.

***Experiences That Contributed to Emily's Sense of Belonging at the University***

When asked about what, if anything, made Emily feel a sense of belonging, she credited people she had recently surrounded herself with and made sure to include it was nothing the university actually did or assisted with. When asked about a specific memory or experience that impacted sense of belonging, she mentioned a student organization.

Emily shared:

The first time I really felt seen and heard was when we were doing interviews for this student organization that I'm part of, and I was able to express some of the experiences I've had with others that weren't positive. For the first time, I was heard and understood, and people seemed to understand that this was my experience and this is how it affected me instead of questioning who I am racially. I felt like I was given permission to feel this way and be confused and misunderstood.

***Experiences That Did Not Contribute to Emily's Sense of Belonging at the University***

When asked about what, if anything, did not contribute to Emily's sense of belonging, she said some groups of people on campus made her feel like she did not belong. Emily referenced not feeling like she was Hispanic enough to go to a Hispanic based organization, saying:

I think that it's like, my own mental block because I'm not fully one way or another, so I'm not gonna belong to any specific group. I feel like it's in an effort to save myself and not feel like I'm going to be looked down upon. I'm afraid that they're going to tell me how I feel about myself is really true.

Another example she brought up throughout the interview was in reference to her roommate from the previous year. Emily shared the following story:

I had a roommate last year that was Black, and she constantly talked in a not subtle way about how she didn't necessarily like White people, but at the same time, she didn't acknowledge that I was White and Hispanic. So, I just really didn't know where I fit in her opinion of me, and that kind of made me spiral into not knowing who I was in my own opinion. It didn't feel like she was necessarily doing something that didn't make me belong on campus, she just made me realize that I didn't really know who I was on campus or off.

In conclusion, Emily shared the sentiment of not being enough, the impact a peer had on making that sentiment feel realized, and the impact it had on her sense of belonging.

## **P**

P was a Hispanic and White mixed-race sophomore studying business at the university. He was an in-state student living in on-campus housing and planned on graduating from the university. He selected the university mainly because of the financial cost. P said, "[The university] was seen as the most affordable option for me at the time." He also wanted to make sure the Cuban side of his family would consider it a decent school.

When describing the university and P's experience, he said it was an interesting place, especially when he added on the fact he worked for housing. Because he worked in housing, P said, "I don't have a social life anymore. If I'm not in class, I'm doing stuff for housing, and if I'm not doing those things, I'm sleeping, so I'm always going 100% of the time." Although he had not really been able to build up a social life, P said, "Those

who I have gotten to meet have been accepting of what I've gone through growing up and have helped me embrace my identity more.”

*P's Experience of Being Biracial on Campus*

When talking about being biracial on campus, P said it was important he shared details about how he identified and his upbringing. P shared his mother was Cuban and immigrated in the 1970s but his father's family grew up in Alabama. Because P was raised by his father, half his culture was suppressed for most of his life. P mentioned:

Ever since I've gotten to college, I've been working to try and be involved in both aspects of my culture. A lot of my Hispanic identity was ignored growing up because my parents are divorced, and where I lived growing up with my father wasn't diverse and there wasn't a strong Hispanic population. Now that there are more Hispanic people around, I'm realizing that there was a lot of stuff that someone who was in touch with their Hispanic heritage would have gone through that I haven't experienced or had access to.

P said coming to a PWI, he did not anticipate being able to embrace his Hispanic culture like he had because the university did not have a large Hispanic population. P said even though he struggled with how he identified, he found support at the university, which allowed him to embrace his culture. He credited the ability to embrace his Hispanic heritage to his on-campus job with housing and cultural organizations on campus. When asked how people responded when they found out he was biracial, P shared he was White passing, nobody looking at him would know that he was half Hispanic, and people were genuinely shocked when he did something that did not fit their image of him. As part of his on-campus job with housing, P moved from a dorm on one side of campus to another.

With the move, over the prior year, he noticed a shift in the racial identities of people by which he was surrounded. P said:

There's definitely some sort of, I don't want to say racial segregation, but there's definitely places where people congregate. And I know the dorm I lived in last year and the job I had last year, a lot of people who are Hispanic tend to live there or work there, whereas now, it's not the same anymore.

### ***P's Definition of Sense of Belonging***

When defining sense of belonging, P said, "It's being able to be myself in all spaces."

### ***Experiences That Contributed to P's Sense of Belonging at the University***

When asked about what, if anything, made him feel a sense of belonging, P credited people with relatable experiences. He shared, "I've never met so many people who were bicultural or biracial before. Especially when the mix included Hispanic. It's not really something I grew up with because my area was predominantly White or Black only." When asked about a specific person who helped him, he mentioned a woman on the executive board of one of the housing organizations of which he was a part. She was the only other Hispanic person on the board, and she had recently gotten him back into listening to Spanish music again. P discussed listening to Spanish music, sharing:

I kind of stopped because I didn't know who to listen to because there were only a few select artists I would listen to growing up, and since I'm not always around my mom, who would listen to it with me, I never really got into them.

When asked about a specific experience that made him feel like he belonged, he mentioned being involved in the Residence Hall Association at the university. P said:

The housing organization I'm a part of allowed me to put on a Hispanic heritage event where I got to partner with [the Hispanic Student Organization]. We saw a turnout of 500 people and ordered local food. It's definitely been more eye opening since I've gotten to [the university] because I'm actually able to embrace my culture.

He went on to say housing was one of the entities on campus that helped him with his identity development and sense of belonging.

### ***Experiences That Did Not Contribute to P's Sense of Belonging at the University***

When asked about what, if anything, did not make him feel a sense of belonging, P referenced experiences before enrolling at this university that impacted him. He shared the following story:

Last year, I would be scared to walk down some of the streets at [the university] because growing up, my high school counselors told me to play into my identity of being half Hispanic if I wanted to get into [the university]. It made me feel like that was the only reason I would get in, and since that played a large role of how I was viewed at my high school, it got into my head. I was scared, because I felt like a fake. Like I'm not smart enough to be here and I don't belong. This mindset really got to me, and I'm still working on it now.

Another experience P mentioned that did not contribute to his sense of belonging was in relation to being part of culturally based organizations. P shared:

A lot of the people in this organization tend to be Mexican Americans and Central Americans, which I understand because they're the prominent groups at this university. Because of this, I believe I only know two Cuban students on this

entire campus, and there's not a lot of Cubans or Caribbeans in general. So yes, I feel like I would be accepted into [the Hispanic Student Association,] but something in the back of my head is like, "I don't know if I would be completely accepted." And I know I'm not the only one that feels this way because one of my other friends, who is fully Cuban, has said the same thing, and it's why she's not part of [the Hispanic Student Association].

P said even though he felt like he would be accepted, specifically in the Hispanic Student Association, even when being White passing, he felt weird being in those spaces because of how he looked.

### **Jake**

Jake was an Indian and White mixed-race junior studying health promotion at the university. He was from Mumbai but, at the time of study, lived on campus and planned to graduate from the university. When asked why he selected the university, Jake answered, "Because I would be close to my family, and it was a dream since high school to go here. I knew for a while that I wanted to go here, and the degree opportunities made me further interested."

### ***Jake's Experience of Being Biracial on Campus***

When talking about being biracial on campus, Jake cited having a very positive experience. Jake said, "I found a very inclusive group of people that I am able to be friends and connect with." He also shared the multicultural services and programs department provided him the opportunity to fully immerse himself into his culture because of the different organizations they advised. When asked to describe the university and his time there, Jake said, "The university is a lively place full of students

who want to make something for themselves. It's a challenging environment where students are held accountable but also an environment that's accepting of all cultures and identities." Jake cited finding a group of friends and a community of people who shared his racial identity as experiences in his daily life on campus that had impacted him thus far at the university. Overall, Jake had a very positive experience because of his friends and community of people.

### ***Jake's Definition of Sense of Belonging***

When defining sense of belonging, Jake said, "Sense of belonging means a place where people are able to fully express who they are and feel like they're a voice and their identity matters."

### ***Experiences That Contributed to Jake's Sense of Belonging at the University***

When asked about what, if anything, made him feel a sense of belonging, Jake shared, "Definitely the amount of multicultural organizations that we have on campus. Just knowing that there's a place you can go around campus that's specifically for you in the building [that houses the multicultural services and programs department]." When talking about a specific memory when he felt like he belonged, he mentioned opportunities when he dressed up in traditional cultural clothing and did traditional dances.

### ***Experiences That Did Not Contribute Jake's A Sense of Belonging at the University***

When asked about what, if anything, did not contribute to his sense of belonging, Jake could not think of anything.

**Naomi**

Naomi was a Black/African American and White mixed-race senior studying education at the university. She was originally from Florida but moved to the city where the university was located, and she lived off campus. Naomi planned to graduate from the university. When asked why she selected the university, she referred to the job prospects she would have upon graduating. The alumni she knew of from the program generally had jobs within 6 months after graduating, and she wanted to participate in a program that would prepare her for the future.

When asked if there was anything additional she wished to share about her experience, Naomi was hopeful, stating:

My outgoing personality to find community has helped me a lot in my time because I had to do the work to find the communities and do the work to make those connections. It didn't feel like the university gave those to me. So, I think that would be the only thing I would mention is I think it was my sense of belonging and how I felt at the university I think is more so on my work and not the university's work to make me feel that way.

***Naomi's Experience of Being Biracial on Campus***

When talking about being biracial on campus, Naomi said she felt like there was a lot of pressure to represent the identities she held in a good light. She said:

I think compared to my other classmates, I have noticed that I feel like I get reached out to more in terms of doing outreach to students of color, or minoritized identities. And I think I've also, whether it be pressure on myself or just my desire to have diversity and inclusion like more spread out, I think I've been more

intentional about how are we marketing my events that I work with to have diverse populations more so than I think other students have because they don't, I don't know if they see that benefit of high-impact practices or reaching communities that could benefit as much as I see it because of my lived experience.

### ***Naomi's Definition of Sense of Belonging***

Naomi defined sense of belonging as:

Feeling like you can be in any space and not feel othered or like you have to put on a different face. Like, I think being authentically you in the spaces you're in is like, your sense of belonging. And the moment you feel like eyes are on you or you have to represent something, or you can't just be your full self, I think that is where the sense of belonging becomes more like trying to fit in versus feeling that you fit in automatically.

### ***Experiences That Contributed to Naomi's Sense of Belonging at the University***

When asked about what, if anything, made her feel a sense of belonging, Naomi gave credit to professional staff members who worked at the university. She shared, "Specifically, the women of color have made me feel very supported. I think having women of color in spaces academically and professionally has been really empowering to me because now I feel like I can be in any space."

When asked if there was one specific memory when she felt she belonged, Naomi could not name just one; rather, she named a collection of them, which all focused around the concepts of friendship and community. Naomi said:

My 1st semester, we celebrated a bunch of birthdays, which went against the presumptions I came here with. I told myself I could live anywhere and that the people I would interact with would be peers, not the deep friendships I've formed. In the spring of 2022, I got invited to the wedding of someone in my program, and now I'm roommates with another one. And so, I think the community I've built has made me feel like I have the support and that sense of belonging.

Naomi cited her cohort in her program and the college her program was in had a strong Black student presence. She shared, "We've really kind of created our own unofficial club together for community."

***Experiences That Did Not Contribute to Naomi's Sense of Belonging at the University***

When asked about what, if anything, did not contribute to her sense of belonging, Naomi mentioned the environment of the campus and how it led her to question the values of the university. Naomi said:

I think specifically like, the environmental press on [the institution's] campus, I think struggles a lot because I think there's a lot of ways that I look around and I see the office I work in has two floors and is huge, and then our multicultural student programs is like, one room. I think this is a way that the university is kind of showing their values. I think there's a lot of good values that are espoused, but I don't know if they're enacted in the ways that they could be or as proudly as I think they should be.

When asked if there was a specific experience that had not contributed to her sense of belonging, Naomi mentioned large-scale campus events. With the university

being in the Southeastern Conference, a large part of the culture was centered around football. Naomi said:

At my first football game, I was like, “WHOA.” I didn’t know what was going on, and I felt very out of place there. When I was in the big crowds, it made it more noticeable to me that I’m part of the minority. I think the community I’ve made is diverse because I think as a person, I’m intentional about who I surround myself with. But I think when I get into spaces where there’s large gatherings, I often find myself like, wondering, “Why aren’t there more people that look like me in this space?”

Naomi also mentioned a racialized incident that happened on campus while she was there, and the response of the university did not contribute to her sense of belonging. Naomi shared the following story:

There was the instance with the NPHC [National Pan-Hellenic Council] markers recently installed on campus, and this happened in the spring the same week as Martin Luther King Day. Somebody drew graffiti on one of the Divine Nine markers, and there was an email sent out in the morning. We were literally in class, and we were like, “This isn’t enough.” I think that sometimes when you are in a place of power, it’s your job to advocate for those people who can’t advocate for themselves. And I don’t think in the graffiti incident specifically that I got a sense of leadership wanting to tell that community that they cared about them. I think it was like, “How are we covering our bases and making sure we don’t get sued?” It felt very legal and like they were thinking, “What’s the minimum we can do to make this good?” and not, “How can we support these identities and

these students?” And there were no resources or anything offered; it was all very legal. I didn’t like that and don’t think that was the right way to go about it. I think it’s a weird way. It brought us closer as minoritized identities in our own specific community, but I think that also made us divided with the rest of the campus community. I think sometimes it’s hard for us to be triggered and upset and know how to communicate that in an effective way that other identities can understand or empathize with. So, I think it’s kind of a lot of like, we’re angry and we feel our feelings, but there’s not really anywhere to go with it.

Overall, Naomi shared experiences that were pivotal as factors that did not contribute to her sense of belonging. All experiences related to the environment she found herself in at the university.

Participants in this study represented multiple biracial identities. Even though they all shared different stories and experiences, their interviews revealed multiple similarities and themes to the biracial student experience at the university. Their stories described experiences being biracial on campus. They defined sense of belonging and discussed what experiences, if any, did or did not contribute to their sense of belonging at the university.

### **Themes From Participant Interviews**

Being able to look across the experiences of individuals, see how what they shared captured the essence of being biracial, and being able to talk about it in a collective way are features of a phenomenological study. Rich data and themes described in the following sections connect the findings of this study and lead to subsequent suggestions for future practice and recommendations for future research.

In this section, I discuss themes that became apparent from interviews and include a discussion on how each theme connected to the research question. By categorizing the meaning units and transforming them into themes (Grossoehme, 2014), the themes were able to explain the phenomenon in question, even if they were never able to fully grasp the entirety of the experience (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The themes are the foundation to recognize the experiences of each participant in this study. In response to the research question of how biracial students experience belongingness at a predominantly White flagship university, three themes emerged: (a) Culture, (b) Resources, and (c) Student Life. Table 3 summarizes the themes that addressed the research question.

**Table 3**

*Themes From Research Question*

Research question	Theme number	Theme name
How do biracial students experience belongingness at a predominantly White flagship university?	1	Culture
	2	Resources
	3	Student Life

The themes listed in Table 3 came to light during the data analysis process when submerging myself in the data. An example of how the themes emerged from the interviews can be viewed in Table 1 in Chapter 3. Table 4 shows the themes, their categories, and a description of the categories.

**Table 4***Summary of Themes, Categories, and Descriptions*

Themes	Categories	Descriptions
Culture	Peer Support	Organizations participants joined or friend groups they formed
	Environment	Professionals, incidents, and physical spaces of campus
Resources	Student Resources	The ability of peers to serve as resources to one another
	Accessibility	Availability of provided campus resources to support students
Student Life	Representation	Participants' feelings around having to represent one of the identities they held or the ability to find others who held the same identity
	Peer Response	How peers responded when finding out they identified as biracial

Category descriptions are verbatim summaries of what participants shared in their interviews but done so in a concise and descriptive manner. As I dig into what each theme meant and represented in the following sections, quoted material from participants is used. Because transcendental phenomenology focuses on participants' descriptions of their experiences and a core element of this study was to center participants' voices, it is necessary to fully understand the themes.

**Theme 1: Culture**

All participants mentioned culture in terms of two categories: (a) Peer Support and (b) Campus Environment. Peer Support showed up through the organizations participants joined or friend groups they formed. Campus Environment included professionals on the campus who connected with students, how racialized incidents were handled on campus, and how physical spaces impacted them.

Peer support surfaced for participants when they talked about experiences that contributed to their sense of belonging on campus. Many of them mentioned peer support, whether that was in a group of friends or cultural organizations, as the main factor that contributed to their sense of belonging.

Stephanie talked about being able to be around other Asians students, and being able to dress in traditional attire and attend a cultural event with friends as a cool experience. Jake cited having found an inclusive group of friends with whom he could connect and be comfortable. Emily shared about the group of friends she found, saying:

And for the first time, I was heard and understood, and people accepted that this was my experiences, and this is how it affected me instead of kind of questioning who I am racially and permitted me feeling that kind of way and permitted being confused and misunderstood.

This quote from Emily highlighted how sense of belonging is a basic human need (Strayhorn, 2012)—which is the first core element of the theoretical framework driving this study—how she had been looking for it for quite some time at the university, and how the support of her peers in letting her be herself fulfilled her sense of belonging.

The most common element that did not contribute to a sense of belonging for participants was the perceived lack of understanding around their identities. Emily questioned if she was “enough” to join a cultural organization because she was only half Hispanic, and P felt the same way because he said he did not look or sound Hispanic. Jody shared a similar sentiment in saying she found it hard to find people of similar cultural beliefs and values to whom she could relate and talk about her experiences as a biracial person, but that being part of the Native American Student Association at the

university with people who did share at least one common identity really helped her find a sense of belonging.

When considering the environment, some participants shared they had interactions with professional staff members on campus that impacted their sense of belonging. Harrison could recall a distinct memory where an upper administrator at the university knew him by name because of his involvement on campus, and it made him feel welcomed and like he belonged. Naomi gave credit to all the female professionals of color with whom she was able to interact and engage because they made her feel supported. On the other side, not all interactions led to a positive sense of belonging because Stephanie recalled one professor in the pharmacy school who was politically incorrect and their lack of political correctness was a known issue; however, the university took no corrective action.

Multiple participants cited the same racialized incident that happened on campus but had opposite reactions to how the university handled it and how it contributed to their sense of belonging. Naomi stated she did not believe it was handled well and the university could have done more but she believed they were only looking out for themselves due to legal action that could take place. However, Jody thought the university handled it well and did a good job of making students who identified with the incident feel a bit more comfortable amid a horrible situation.

Some participants cited how the physical buildings on campus made them feel. For Stephanie, being in the pharmacy buildings on campus felt like home, which contributed to her sense of belonging positively. However, when venturing out to other parts of campus, Stephanie shared, “[The] largeness of it all and the amount of people

made it hard to feel like I belonged because everyone looks like a stranger.” Jody also cited how the status and plaques on campus glorified people who “may have done great things for the university but ultimately were not good people.” Further, she shared, “Seeing those things around can negatively impact the sense of belonging that myself and other students might have.” When negative environmental impacts occur for a student, they must invest more effort than their monoracial peers in finding support and community while on campus.

When multiple participants were able to pull vivid memories of how organizations and friend groups on campus had an impact on their experience or how the environment where they existed every day on campus was foundational to their experience, I knew the theme of Culture was important to the study. The theme of Culture links to the theoretical framework of this study because it aligns with the fourth core element regarding mattering. Sense of belonging is a consequence of mattering (Strayhorn, 2012). Mattering is the feeling that someone is valued and appreciated by others (Schlossberg, 1989). Experiencing mattering, depending on the groups with which biracial students identified, could have had varying levels of significance. The alignment of the experiences shared by participants with the theoretical framework of sense of belonging and its connection to the concept of mattering showed just how significant peer interactions were for biracial students as they explored their sense of belonging. It also showed interactions with professionals on campus were also significant to biracial students.

## **Theme 2: Resources**

The second theme revealed when addressing the research question was defined as Resources. The theme of Resources included two categories: (a) Student Resources and (b) Accessibility. Student Resources involved peers serving as resources to one another as it related to sharing knowledge or feeling accepted. A few participants shared interacting with other cultural groups on campus in which they did not have an identity supported them in finding their sense of belonging. Jody shared:

I really like all of the multicultural student organizations that we have on campus because even if you're not Hispanic or Latino, you can still be involved with their student organizations. Everyone in these organizations are so accepting and helpful in finding your own identity that it, they just create a very positive environment for me.

Stephanie shared a similar sentiment, saying, "I'm in . . . the Hispanic pharmacist association, even though I'm not Hispanic, but I just like to be involved because I can speak Spanish." Although a majority of participants talked about the positives of peers serving as a resource, Jody mentioned an incident where she overheard students on campus talking negatively about different minority groups on campus, but because she was White passing, they did not think about what they were saying, and it made her scared about opening up to people about being biracial.

Accessibility means the availability and administrative support of campus resources to support all students. Students mentioned the lack of support from the university as a whole surrounding providing equitable access to resources, mostly in physical manifestation to culturally based organizations. Naomi reflected:

I think specifically like, the environmental press on [the institution]’s campus, I think I struggle a lot because I think there’s a lot of ways that I look around and I see the office I work in has two floors and is huge and then our multicultural student programs is like, one room.

On the other hand, Harrison positively highlighted accessible resources by saying:

One of the things that were highlighted to me was that how much time and effort the university kind of puts into those [diversity and inclusion] programs. They help me get that sense of belonging because it makes me feel wanted on campus.

Harrison saw the university investing resources to make a program accessible to support students. Still, some participants believed there was a lack of accessible resources for students. Emily said, “I just wish that there were more resources for people, that were biracial, multiracial, and could like, find a place where they could be themselves and not have to fit into a group.”

Jody and Naomi shared a similar experience of having to find resources the university offered on their own and not feeling like the university assisted in the process of helping them find community. Jody and Naomi’s stories were an important reminder of the integral role the university played in providing resources to all students because it had a fundamental impact on helping students find belonging on campus. If students are finding their sense of belonging and having a positive experience, it will encourage positive outcomes (Strayhorn, 2012), which is the sixth core element of the sense of belonging theoretical framework. These positive outcomes could ultimately lead to more biracial students being recruited at the university due to the power of student narratives and their lasting impacts on institutions.

### **Theme 3: Student Life**

The final theme that emerged when addressing the research question was Student Life. The theme of Student Life included two categories: (a) Representation and (b) Peer Response. Representation included participants' feelings around having to represent one of the identities they held or the ability to find someone who shared an identity. Naomi described the feeling, saying:

I think there's a lot of pressure to like, to represent our identities and to represent them well. I think compared to my other classmates, I have noticed that I feel like I get reached out to more in terms of doing outreach to students of color or just minoritized identities.

Jody also mentioned not being able to find a group of people who shared one of her ethnic identities. She stated:

Being Native American, this is such a small demographic of people on campus.

It's been very hard for me to find people of similar cultural beliefs and values that I can relate to and talk to about my experiences as a biracial person.

The feeling of having to represent an entire group of people or the feeling of being the only one to hold an identity was lonely for participants and negatively impacted how they found belonging at this southeastern state flagship university. Although Jody and Naomi both discussed negative feelings regarding representation, five other participants mentioned it was a sense of pride to be able to represent one of the identities they held and the community they found with people who looked like them. P said, "There's people here that relate to my experiences. I've never met so many people who were bicultural or biracial before." All the shared participants' experiences exhibited how

sense of belonging was affected by the intersectionality of their identities (Strayhorn, 2012), which is the fifth core element of the theoretical framework. For Jody, because of the intersectionality of her identities and the lack of representation of one of those identities on campus, she was able to express how finding her sense of belonging had been more difficult. The same could be said for Naomi when she talked about having to be a representative of the identities she held and how that affected her.

The other part of the Student Life theme was Peer Response, or how peers responded when finding out participants identified as biracial. All participants talked about how peers responded to their biracial identity as having an impact on them. Stephanie and Jake both cited having positive experiences with being biracial on campus. Stephanie said, “They are usually surprised, and a lot of times people just ask because they just wanna know based on what I look like.” Jake said he found a group of people and a department that were supportive of his identities and allowed him to fully immerse himself. Harrison, Jody, and P all mentioned difficulties with being biracial students at this university, specifically around their complexions. Harrison explained if someone was a lighter complexion, others may believe they did not experience racism in the same way. Jody and P both stated they were White passing and found it difficult to be accepted or recognized for who they fully were.

Because participants talked about both negative and positive situations as they related to representation and the impact of how their peers responded to how they identified, I knew these categories were salient to the experience of being biracial at this university. Daily interactions and engagement points highlighted why Student Life was an important theme from this study.

## Summary

I began Chapter 4 by presenting the findings of the study. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to describe the factors, if any, that affected a biracial student's perception of sense of belonging at a southeastern state flagship university. This study included seven research participants. I described participants' demographics, which included gender and race/ethnicity. Next, I described each participant's experiences, including their answers regarding being biracial on campus, their definitions of a sense of belonging, experiences that contributed to their sense of belonging, and experiences that did not contribute to their sense of belonging. Through one-on-one interviews, three themes emerged based on participants' responses.

The research question of how biracial students experience belongingness at a predominantly white flagship university produced three themes: (a) Culture, (b) Resources, and (c) Student Life. Culture was split into two categories of Peer Support and Environment. Resources was also split into two categories of Student Resources and Accessibility. Finally, Student Life had two categories of Representation and Peer Response. A review of the themes in comparison to existing literature on biracial students and a sense of belonging at a PWI is discussed in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this phenomenological qualitative study, I explored the experiences of biracial students at a southeastern state flagship university. Underrepresented students may perceive predominantly White institutions (PWIs) as unsupportive, which can have a negative effect on a student's sense of belonging (Hussain & Jones, 2021). PWIs have a climate, symbols, and traditions that embody the racial history that shaped the campus (Bonilla-Silva, 2012). Symbols, climate, and traditions can create a racially oppressive environment, and walking on campus can have negative impacts on biracial students who see no reflection of themselves on campus (Bonilla-Silva, 2012). Individuals claiming two or more races are the fastest-growing racial identification group, and because little is known about how a campus environment influences a student's sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), education professionals need to ensure there are opportunities to aid these students.

When I began this study, I realized one of the factors why there had been a lack of research regarding biracial college students and their experiences on campus was because they were not recognized on campuses. The 2000 census was the first time people could pick more than one race (Lopez, 2003; Renn, 2000; Renn & Lunceford, 2004; Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004). Even after the opportunity existed to select more than one race, it took 9 years for the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) to release guidance on how universities should collect and report students' race and ethnicity information (Jaschik,

2006). The system proposed by the DOE was the first time students were allowed to pick multiple boxes and universities reported in a new category (Jaschik, 2006). Another factor was participants were still figuring out how they racially identified, and because this study required a specific racial identification, there could have been a lack of qualified participants. Seven biracial students at a predominantly White southeastern state flagship university participated in one-on-one interviews to describe their experiences. Using phenomenological qualitative research, I addressed the following research question through interviews that described the phenomenon of the experiences of each participant: How do biracial students experience belongingness at a predominantly White flagship university? The following section connects previous research and literature to the current study.

## **Discussion**

In this section, I provide an overview of the themes that developed from study participants' interviews. I compare the themes to existing literature on biracial students and a sense of belonging at a PWI. I became and continue to be interested in this topic because I recognized how sense of belonging is imperative to ensuring future generations, including my future children, will feel supported and seen on college campuses, because people identifying with two or more races are a fast-growing population.

### **Theme 1: Culture**

Based on the findings in the current study, biracial students stated the campus culture had a monumental impact on their sense of belonging, and the influence was either positive or negative, depending on the situation. When participants discussed

culture, they referred to the support they believed they received from their peers and the environment of their campus. This finding aligns with Jackson's (2016) findings, who found a student's sense of belonging is not only linked to how they identify with people around them, but also how they connect with the university or college as a whole.

Strayhorn (2012) said, "To excel, students must feel a sense of belonging in school (or college), and therefore educators must work to create conditions that foster belongingness among students" (p. 9). The need to feel a sense of belonging is especially apparent for biracial students because a college campus has a major impact; at a PWI, these students can feel marginalized or isolated (Maestas et al., 2007).

Meaningful relationships and involvement on campus have an impact on a biracial students' sense of belonging on campus (Freeman et al., 2007). Many participants mentioned peer support, specifically from cultural groups, as having a positive or negative impact on their sense of belonging. Stephanie and Jake mentioned being around others and dressing in cultural attire or attending a specific cultural event made them feel seen; however, Emily and P said they had negative experiences with cultural groups often related to if they looked enough. The concept of looking enough to truly belong to the minority groups with which they identify can be common for mixed-race students (DaCosta, 2007; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012). Thus, participants' shared experiences were in alignment with previous research and studies. Chaudhari (2016) showed having a link to racial or cultural groups on campus and the development of connection with the group is crucial to overall success for mixed-race students. Other meaningful peer support relationships participants mentioned were the friend groups they found or formed. For some, friend groups were inclusive and the first time they felt

accepted and permitted to be who they were. These findings not only confirm previous knowledge and understanding of the experience of biracial students, but also extend it. Cultural groups had an impact on students and their experience of belongingness. Further, friend groups they formed and their links to cultural groups were not the only significant peer relationships they could form to be successful.

How biracial students experience the campus environment is significant in shaping their sense of belonging. Bettez (2010) revealed racial politics in their environment was a factor that had a direct influence on how students experience belonging. Bettez aligned with what participants in this study shared about how their campus handled racialized incidents. The incident in question was when historical markers representing the Divine Nine organizations were vandalized. Naomi cited she did not believe the incident was handled well; however, Jody stated she believed the university did their part by handling it in a way that made students who held an underrepresented identity that the racialized incident was against more comfortable. Campus symbols are another impact from the campus environment that influences a biracial student's sense of belonging. Bonilla-Silva (2012) highlighted how PWIs have a history and symbols that can embody and signify Whiteness, and they create an environment that can be an oppressive racial ecology when biracial students are walking around campus. Bonilla-Silva paralleled Jody's experience in that they believed symbols on campus glorified people who were oppressive to others, and it negatively impacted them. Racialized incidents and oppressive symbols were parts of the campus environment that were major cultural impacts participants mentioned during the study of biracial students that influenced their sense of belonging.

## **Theme 2: Resources**

Resources was the second theme and included the categories of Student Resources and Accessibility, which were additional factors in impacting a biracial student's sense of belonging based on participants' experiences. Again, these factors had a positive or negative influence, depending on the situation at hand.

Student resources in this study involved peers serving as resources to one another by sharing knowledge or feeling accepted. The category of Student Resources was in congruence with AhnAllen et al. (2006), who stated the perceived sense of belonging can be something participants find in a cultural group in which they feel like they belong based on a shared experience, not just identity, without a formal invitation from the group to join. A few participants mentioned interacting with cultural groups they did not have a shared identity with on campus helped them find their sense of belonging because the people in the organizations were accepting. Based on the feeling of being accepted by others, participants shared other students served as a resource they could go to and helped them find their own identity. Although a few participants talked about the positives of peers serving as a resource, one participant mentioned while on campus one day, they overheard students on campus talking negatively about different minority groups on campus. However, because she was White passing, they did not think about what they were saying. Previous research has shown the impact when students negatively serve as a resource for other students because they are able to cite explicit examples of how they directly experienced racism on campus as either a target or an observer (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012). This experience of hearing off-hand racist comments from peers

contributed to negative feelings Jody had when it came to sharing her biracial identity with others on campus.

In certain instances, students served as a positive or negative resource for others by how they spoke about other populations on campus both in formal settings, such as group meetings, or in informal settings, such as walking around campus. Biracial students do not exist in a vacuum; like all college students, their sense of belonging must be constantly satisfied (Strayhorn, 2012). However, because belonging can be influenced by contextual changes in circumstances and conditions, biracial students are privy to increasing racial tensions present in society and experience the direct effects when acts are committed by their peers.

How biracial student participants viewed accessibility to resources on their campus had a lasting impact on their sense of belonging. To participants, accessibility meant how the university supported culturally based resources and the effort the university put into making students feel supported in knowing about those resources. Participants from this study had an array of experiences related to accessibility to campus resources. One participant stated because of their experience coming onto campus being highly impacted by culturally based organizations showcased for them, they thought the university did a great job in making students aware of culturally based resources on campus. Nishimura (1998) highlighted how cultural groups on campus serve as a good resource for students; however, already established groups will not always meet the needs of a growing biracial population because they can negate aspects of multiracial students' heritages. Two participants shared they knew about the existence of cultural organizations on campus, but they believed they had to find them, and the university did

not offer assistance in their acclimation processes onto campus. One of the participants went even further to say they wished there were more resources for people who identified as biracial and multiracial because resources that did exist did not always mean people could be themselves or feel like they fit in. Participants' stories were an important reminder of the integral role universities play in providing resources to all students because it has a fundamental impact on helping students find belonging on campus.

### **Theme 3: Student Life**

Based on the findings in this study, biracial students shared how everyday aspects of their lives as students on campus had a profound effect on their sense of belonging. When participants highlighted their daily lives, they often cited representation and peer response as being influential. Representation included participants feeling like they had to represent one of the identities they held or lacking the ability to find someone who shared an identity with them. Nishimura (1998) stated already established minority groups on campus will not always meet the needs of multiracial students because they can negate aspects of their heritage and make them feel a level of discomfort. This concept directly aligns with the experiences of one participant when they referenced feeling pressured to represent the identities they held, especially when compared to their peers. Feeling pressured manifested in them doing outreach to students who held similar identities, which led them to believe that even with minority groups on campus, because they were monoracial in nature, they could not always accurately represent what life was like as a multiracial student. The feeling of having to represent an entire group of people or the feeling of being the only one to hold an identity was lonely for participants and negatively impacted how they found belonging at this university. Although the previously

mentioned experience of Naomi discussed negative feelings regarding representation, five participants mentioned the fact it was a sense of pride to be able to represent one of the identities they held and the community they found with people who looked like them. The findings further aligned with Nishimura (1998) because the minority groups on campus did meet the needs of most participants and did not make them feel like they had to negotiate parts of their identity; instead, it made them feel like they could lean into all their racial identities fully, not just in half measures.

The other part of the Student Life theme was how peers responded when finding out participants identified as biracial. All participants talked about how peers responded to their biracial identity having an impact on them. Some participants referenced having a positive experience with peers being surprised by how they identified. However, for the other participants, it was a negative factor influencing their sense of belonging. This finding aligns with Kellogg and Liddell (2012), who found students who thought they had to choose only one aspect of their racial heritage with which to identify had to combat labeling that did not match their self-identification. What participants shared regarding the impact of how their peers responded to their biracial identity demonstrates college student sense of belonging is affected by the intersectionality of their identities (Strayhorn, 2012), which was a core element of the theoretical framework that drove this study. Three participants all mentioned difficulties with being biracial students at this university, specifically around their complexions. One participant shared because of their lighter complexion, people just assumed they identified as monoracial. When the participant shared they identified as biracial, they still had to battle perceptions of how others believed they experienced racism. Two other participants shared because they

were White passing, they found it difficult to be accepted or recognized for who they fully were.

Because participants talked about negative and positive situations as they related to representation and the impact of how peers responded to how they identified, I knew the categories were salient to the experience of being biracial at this university. Daily interactions and engagement points highlighted why Student Life was an important theme from this study.

### **Implications for Practice and Research**

Minority students seem to benefit more from a sense of belonging than their majority peers (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Belonging is linked to academic persistence, degree completion, and engagement with the college campus. Findings from this study might suggest the interactions students had with their campus culture, available resources, and different components in their everyday lives as students were all factors in how biracial students experienced belonging on their college campus. The link of daily interactions students had and the impact it had on belonging was demonstrated through multiple participants sharing their experiences at their institution. Biracial student participants implied how peer support and their campus environment shared the culture they experienced on campus. They also implied accessibility to different resources on campus and the integral role their peers served as a resource formed the resources that influenced their belonging. Finally, representation of people who looked like them and how their peers responded to their multiracial identities had a lasting effect on their sense of belonging.

Findings from this study should prompt professionals to think about the impact their work has on the sense of belonging of biracial students. It is important PWIs, like the one in this study, take time to assess available resources they have to support biracial students and make a conscious effort to help them foster a sense of belonging. Based on the literature available and results of this study, I recommend the following practical applications.

### **Recommendation for Practical Application**

This study yielded implications based on participants' experiences at a PWI and factors that influenced their sense of belonging. The implications and research have led to a few recommendations for future practice in supporting students as they find their sense of belonging and removing barriers that could hinder their experience.

A few participants mentioned the impact walking around campus had on them when they saw buildings, statues, and other forms of markers honoring people who had a role in the oppression of minoritized populations. According to Strayhorn (2012), sense of belonging takes on a heightened sense of importance for individuals who feel unwelcomed or unsupported in certain social contexts. Vaccaro and Newman (2016) stated students must be in an environment in which they can be their true selves to feel a sense of belonging. Some participants shared they felt like they could not be their true selves in their current campus environments. Although there are political implications when trying to change historical markers on campus, I recommend professionals consider ways of acknowledging the roles people have had in impacting other populations now represented on campus.

A few participants mentioned feeling as if they had to educate others about the experiences of biracial students or deal with others attempting to suppress one side of their identity. Biracial students have been on college campuses for years, but up until 2000, their voices had not been represented in literature, and they were an overlooked population (Jourdan, 2006; Talbot, 2008). As the mixed-race population continues to increase, the number of multiracial students entering higher education and campuses is also predicted to increase (Jaschik, 2006; Renn, 2009). Thus, it is important for student affairs professionals to consider how to emphasize education around minoritized groups in the student experience and how to highlight events and programs that appreciate and celebrate different cultural groups on campus. Feeling the need to suppress parts of themselves could lead to biracial students not making genuine connections with peers and professionals on campus. Freeman et al. (2007) and Strayhorn (2012) agreed positive relationships with campus professionals has a positive impact on a student's sense of belonging. As more biracial students enter higher education, it is important they have people around them with whom they can build genuine connections.

Several participants mentioned they thought minority identity-based organizations on campus played a large role in their sense of belonging on campus but thought there were entities on campus with more than double the physical space of the multicultural services and program department. Renn (1998) found the physical spaces on campus had an impact on a students' sense of belonging. King (2008) found there needs to be structure and spaces provided to support students and meet their unique needs, and professionals play a role in providing those spaces. About 15 years after King's study and 25 years after Renn's original study, at the time of the current study, the importance of

space on campus for students is still evident. Therefore, professionals should consider how space on campuses can be reallocated to provide these types of departments with adequate space that is visible and easy to find for students to be able to find people who look like them.

Although not mentioned by a participant but drawing from the identity I hold as a mother of a biracial child, I believe professionals on campus need to find a way to connect and engage with parents and supporters of biracial students. Parents should be armed with the knowledge of the transition their child is potentially facing in their identity development, learn how to interact with a new environment, academic challenges they will be presented with, social changes they will experience, and applicable ways they can support them.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

PWIs should not only look at ways to support biracial students and take an active role in fostering their sense of belonging, but also explore ways they can cocreate a sense of belonging. Based on the findings from this study and previous literature, I provide several suggestions for future research.

Davis (2020) had a total of 13 participants in their study and used Astin's involvement theory, but the current study had a total of seven participants and used Strayhorn's sense of belonging theory. Both studies were qualitative, so a future study could take ideas presented from both and build a qualitative study that could be replicated and would lead to a study more representative of the student experience. Future studies that look at different theoretical frameworks in conjunction, such as environmental

theory, involvement theory, or engagement theory, could provide a deep dive into the factors that influence a student's sense of belonging on a college campus.

Renn (1998) completed a study on biracial and multiracial students but recommended further studies of students of different ethnic combinations to add to the growing literature. Banks (2008) completed a similar study and focused on biracial students with one parent of African American heritage. Chaudhari (2016) conducted a study that included a heterogeneous racial identification mix of multiracial students, and the current study also had a heterogeneous racial identification mix of students. Based on the current study and other literature on this topic, further examination of other specific racial combinations of biracial students is still needed, warranted, and in alignment with Renn's initial recommendation. A focused study could look at other environmental factors that influence participants and how they experience belonging.

O'Meara et al. (2017) conducted a study about sense of belonging and its contributing factors on graduate education. The current study was limited to undergraduate students. Future studies could investigate a sense of belonging among graduate biracial students. This future study could expose completely different themes based on the experiences of those participants and that study could highlight the perceived access graduate students feel they have to available campus resources because the study institution primarily served and focused resources on undergraduate students.

This study was conducted at a single point and time in participants' experiences. A longitudinal study that explored the development of sense of belonging in conjunction with how students are experiencing it would provide a more holistic view of biracial students' sense of belonging.

Chaudhari (2016) focused on one public PWI in the eastern United States, Davis (2020) focused on one public PWI in the southeastern United States, and the current study focused on one public institution in the southeastern United States. Because this study was only conducted at a single PWI in the Southeast, this limitation limits the understanding of factors that can influence how a student experiences sense of belonging. Future researchers should examine different institutional types because exploring the type of institution would be useful for professionals who work with biracial students. In addition, different geographic regions should also be explored. Expanding the research in this way could shed light on different factors that influence how a student experiences belonging and the importance students place on those factors given the varying institutional campuses and geographic influences.

This study was limited in its data collection methods and methodological approach. A quantitative or mixed methods study could offer information about factors that influence sense of belonging for biracial students and could help distinguish if those factors are unique when in comparison to their monoracial peers. Data from future studies could enhance existing understanding of the experiences of multiracial students and provide new insights because a majority of existing data are based on monoracial students. A future study could also have more research participants, could allow for diversification beyond race, and would be able to bring balance in the representation of gender, classification, and educational pursuits (e.g., majors, minors, certifications). That study could be more representative of the multiracial population and result in the ability to generalize findings for education professionals.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to describe the factors, if any, that affected a biracial student's perception of sense of belonging at a southeastern state flagship university. This study helped answer the research question: How do biracial students experience belongingness at a predominantly White flagship university? This study yielded three themes regarding the experiences of biracial students at this predominantly White flagship university located in the Southeast. Through individual, one-on-one interviews, the themes of Culture, Resources, and Student Life were revealed. Culture included (a) Peer Support and (b) Campus Environment. Resources were comprised of (a) Student Resources and (b) Accessibility. Student Life consisted of (a) Representation and (b) Peer Response. This study highlighted how important belonging for biracial students is at a southeastern state flagship university.

Johnson et al. (2007) highlighted some of the identified facets of the college environment that have a profound effect on students' sense of belonging, including: (a) interactions with peers and faculty, (b) cocurricular involvement, (c) perceptions of campus racial climate, and (d) living on campus. All three of the themes found in the current study had these identified facets interwoven into their subcategories. Most participants defined a sense of belonging as being comfortable. Most cited a lack of understanding of their identities and the lack of university support as major contributors to their lack of sense of belonging. Nearly all participants were involved in campus cultural organizations or mentioned having a peer support system as a positive contributor to their sense of belonging. This study was successful in providing biracial students the opportunity to describe their experiences on campus.

These experiences can inform practices and systems on campuses and provide campus professionals with information about how to have an active role in fostering a sense of belonging for biracial students. I am fortunate study participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences with me to hopefully lead other biracial students to share their experiences in the future. Jody stated:

I hope the university community can understand that one person's positive experience does not speak for all biracial and minority students. Keep an open line of communication with other students to share their experiences and make a change so that other biracial and minority students can be encouraged to come here and feel completely safe and welcomed to find their sense of belonging.

Knowing factors that affect a biracial student's sense of belonging is pivotal to supporting this fast-growing population. Administrators and researchers at other similarly identified universities can follow the process for conducting this study to understand how their multiracial students perceive belonging on their campuses. As the population of biracial college students continues to grow, universities need to anticipate the diversification of their student body and be equipped to support all students, ensuring they all have a positive sense of belonging and believe their institutions are being intentional in the resources they provide. It is important professionals on campus work to ensure all students feel as though they belong and matter.

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## APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT GRAPHIC

## BIRACIAL/MULTIRACIAL STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE SOUTHEASTERN STATE FLAGSHIP UNIVERSITY

Participants Needed for Research Study

IRB Study Number: PROJECT00004198



Please consider being part of a dissertation study about Biracial/Multiracial students' experience at a Southeastern flagship university that is considered to be predominantly white conducted by Nicole McConnell, a Ed. D. Candidate in the Student Affairs Leadership Program at the University of Georgia.

### Participant Criteria

- At least 18 years or age or older.
- Racially identify as biracial/multiracial.
- Currently enrolled in classes at the University of Georgia.
- Have attended in-person classes at the Athens-campus of UGA.

### Participant Involvement

- **Part I:** Complete a brief online demographic survey.  
*Estimated Time: 10-15 mins.*
- **Part II:** Complete an individual interview. *Estimated Time: 60-90 mins.*

There is no incentive for completing the questionnaire. However, participants selected for Part II of the study will be compensated:

- A \$10 e-gift card to Amazon for participating in an individual interview.



**Access Online Survey:**

**<https://bit.ly/BSSBPWI>**

**At this time, you are only being asked to take the survey (Part I), and, if you consent to Part II then you will be asked to include your email address at the end of the survey, which I will use to contact selected volunteers for the next part of the study.**

This study is confidential and no identifying information will be used in the findings. For more information about the study, please contact Nicole McConnell at [REDACTED]@uga.edu. This dissertation study is supervised by Dr. Ginny Boss, email [REDACTED]@uga.edu. This project has been approved by the University of Georgia's Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects (Questions: irb@uga.edu or 706-542-3199)

## APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

My name is Nicole McConnell, and I am currently a doctoral student supervised by Dr. Ginny Boss in the Student Affairs Leadership program at the University of Georgia (UGA). The purpose of this research study is to understand how biracial students describe their experience at UGA. I am seeking participants who:

- Are at least 18 years of age or older
- Racially identify as biracial/multiracial
- Are currently enrolled in classes at UGA
- Have attended classes in person at the Athens campus of UGA

Participation involves:

- Completing a brief online demographic survey (10 minutes)
  - In the survey you will be asked to complete the Institutional Review Board (IRB) consent form, as approved by the IRB of UGA.
- If selected, participate in a 60–90-minute individual interview that can be held online via Zoom or in person.

There is no incentive for completing the online questionnaire. However, participants selected for the individual interview will be compensated with a \$10 e-gift card to Amazon. If you are interested in participating, please visit this link to complete the demographic survey: <https://bit.ly/XXXXXXXX>. For more information, please feel free to call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or send an email to XXXXX@uga.edu.

Again, thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Nicole McConnell

## APPENDIX C: EMAIL TO SELECTED PARTICIPANTS

Hello,

I am pleased to inform you that you have been selected to participate in this phenomenological research study related to how biracial/multiracial students describe their experience at the University of Georgia. I am excited to learn from you! As a participant in this study, I am asking you to complete the following task by Friday, February 11 by 3:00 p.m.:

- Please [click here](#) to book your interview time slot. In the notes section, please indicate if you are interested in a phone call, Zoom interview, or an in-person interview. Once your time is scheduled, you will be contacted via email.

Again, thank you so much for your willingness to take part in this study. I look forward to learning from you and with you, and to receiving your completed task by Friday, February 11 by 3:00 p.m. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Thanks,

Nicole McConnell

## APPENDIX D: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD CONSENT FORM

**UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA  
 CONSENT FORM  
 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF BIRACIAL STUDENTS' SENSE OF  
 BELONGING AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE SOUTHEASTERN STATE  
 FLAGSHIP UNIVERSITY  
 (ID: PROJECT00004198)**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

**Principal Investigator:**

*Ginny Boss,  
 Student Affairs Leadership  
 XXXXX@uga.edu*

**Co-Investigator:**

*Nicole McConnell,  
 Student Affairs Leadership  
 XXXXX@uga.edu*

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how biracial students describe their experience at the University of Georgia (UGA). You are being invited to be in this research study because you fit the following criteria for study participation:

- Are at least 18 years of age or older
- Racially identify as biracial/multiracial
- Are currently enrolled in classes at UGA
- Have attended classes in person at the Athens campus of UGA

### Study Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, you will:

- Provide information about your experiences of belonging at UGA
- Complete a brief demographic survey (10 minutes)
- Participate in 60–90-minute interview with the researcher that can be held in person, virtually, or via phone that have the audio recorded only

**Voluntary Participation.** Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. The decision to refuse or withdraw will not affect any benefits you are otherwise entitled to or other activities that are otherwise conducted.

**Study Benefits.** Your responses may help us understand the roles that entities on campus hold in how biracial students' perceive their sense of belonging on campus. All findings may lead to critical examinations of how to best serve biracial students.

**Incentives.** Each participant will be provided with a \$10 gift card for their participation in the interviews. No information will be shared outside the research, simply participating will earn the participant the gift card.

**Risk & Discomforts.** This study will be asking participants about their experiences on campus, and any campus entities that hold a role in the shaping of that experience. The risks and discomforts associated with this study are as follows:

- There are questions that may make you uncomfortable. You can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them.
- Social impacts such as embarrassment or stigmatization in leadership roles held on campus.
- Audio recording of interviews will be used in this study to ensure an accurate account of interviews. Recordings will be kept until they are transcribed.

**Privacy & Confidentiality.** This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed. I will take steps to protect your privacy, but there is a small risk that your information could be accidentally disclosed to people not connected to the research. I will only keep information that could identify your preferred method of contact. To reduce further risk of participant identification, I will:

- Ask participants to select a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.
- Not use or disclose any information provided to me prior to receiving official study consent.
- Only use the information collected in the Demographic Questionnaire.
- All data associated with this study will be kept in a locked location, available only to the primary investigator.
- Original audio recordings will be destroyed upon the verification of the accuracy of transcripts.

The information will be used or shared after the identifiers have been removed to inform future researchers and/or future studies without additional consent.

**If You Have Questions.** Please feel free to ask questions about this research at any time. You can contact the Co-Investigator, Mrs. Nicole McConnell, at XXX-XXX-XXXX, XXXXX@uga.edu. Nicole McConnell is conducting this research study under the direction of the Primary Investigator, Dr. Ginny Boss, and you may contact her at XXXXX@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.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form and have had all of your questions answered.

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Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
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Name of Participant	Signature	Date
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**Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.**

## APPENDIX E: DEMOGRAPHICS SURVEY

## QUALTRICS LINK:

[https://ugeorgia.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_03z3mYVbKbXfJXM](https://ugeorgia.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_03z3mYVbKbXfJXM)

Thank you for your interest in participating in the study titled **Biracial Students' Sense of Belonging at a Predominantly White Southeastern State Flagship University**. The purpose of this survey is to help the researcher identify eligible individuals to participate in this research study. All information provided in this survey will be treated confidentially.

**Q1: Please complete the following demographic survey used to determine the eligibility of study participants.**

**Q2: How old are you?**

- Under 18
- 18–24 years old
- 25–34 years old
- 35–44 years old
- 45+ years old

**Q3: Which of the following best describes you?**

- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native American or Alaskan Native
- White or Caucasian
- Biracial or Multiracial
- Other:

**Q4: What best describes your enrollment status?**

- Full time (At least 12 hours for an undergraduate/professional student or at least 9 hours for a graduate students)
- Part time (At least 6 hours for an undergraduate/professional student or at least 5 hours for a graduate students)

**Q5: When did you attend classes in person on the Athens campus of UGA? (Please check all that apply)**

- Pre-COVID-19 pandemic (Prior to April of 2020)
- During COVID-19 pandemic (April 2020–June 2021)
- Post-COVID-19 pandemic (July 2021–currently)
- I have never attended class in person on the Athens campus of UGA

**Q6: The purpose of this study is to understand how biracial students describe their experience at the University of Georgia. Would you be interested in participating in this study?**

- Yes
- No

**Q7: (Display logic: Only if Q6 – yes is selected) Please provide your first and last name, email address, and phone number where you can be reached:**

Because you have selected to participate if selected on a prescreening, please review and sign the following consent form as some of the information on the demographic survey you just completed can be used prior to the interviews.

## APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Topic:** Biracial students' sense of belonging at a PWI

**Time of Interview:** TBD

**Date:** TBD

**Participants:** Biracial students who meet the criteria and attend the University of Georgia

**SCRIPT**

Introduction (10 minutes)

**Thank you** – Thank you for your participation in this interview.

**Introduce Interviewer** – My name is Nicole McConnell. I am the assistant director for student activities in the Engagement, Leadership, and Service department at the University of Georgia (UGA). I am also a doctoral student in the Student Affairs Leadership program at UGA.

**Purpose** – The purpose of today's interview is to discuss your experience on the UGA campus and how that has impacted your sense of belonging at this institution.

**Data Collection Procedure** – I will ask you a series of questions. Please feel free to respond to those questions and to add any additional information. I will be audio recording this interview to aid in the transcription of our conversation. After our interview is complete, the audio recordings will be transcribed using a cloud-based software tool. The audio recording will be destroyed upon the completion of transcription and the transcription will use a pseudonym of your choice in place of your name.

**Key Points** – Before we begin, there are a few key points of interest we will discuss pertaining to your consent to participate in this study.

This is a reminder of an oral confirmation of the informed consent you have given to be a participant of this research. Do you consent to participate in this study?

The purpose of this study is to understand how biracial students describe their experience at UGA. Your identity will not be linked to your responses. Pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant and only I will have access to the key code that contains the pseudonym/name match of all participants. This will protect your confidentiality.

As mentioned in your signed informed consent form, your participation in this interview is voluntary and you have the right to discontinue at any time. During this interview, you can choose to leave or not answer any questions asked about how biracial students

experience a sense of belonging at UGA should you feel uncomfortable at any time during our interview.

Your signed informed consent form also mentioned your interview sessions will be audio recorded. No identifiable information like your name or personal characteristics will appear in the transcript for this interview or the findings of this research study. Only your pseudonym will be used in the transcript. Once I verify the accuracy of the transcript, I will delete the audio recordings.

**Pause:** Do you have any questions about informed consent?

**Verbal verification:** If you have no questions about your informed consent, please confirm that you have read your informed consent form, verified your signed form and have received a copy for your records on INTERVIEW DATE, and give permission to proceed with this audio-recorded interview.

### **INTERVIEW GUIDELINES (5 minutes)**

You are being interviewed because you have something of value to discuss about the experiences of biracial students on a predominantly White campus like UGA. There are no correct or incorrect responses so feel free to discuss your perspective as you see fit. Feel free to be as open and honest as possible. Please stop me if you need me to clarify a question or if you need to pause.

**Please inform me if you need any accommodations.**

**Do you have any questions at this time?**

### **ACTUAL INTERVIEW (45–60 minutes)**

**OK, let's get started!**

1. Please provide your preferred pseudo name.
2. Also, I'd like to confirm the information collected in your demographic questionnaire.
3. Tell me about yourself. How would you describe yourself?
4. Where are you originally from?
5. Where did you live this past year (on campus, off campus, at home, etc.?)
6. How do you identify yourself? (race/ethnicity).
7. Why did you select [university]?
8. Do you plan to graduate from [university]?
9. How would you describe [university]?
10. How would you describe your time at [university]?
11. What is it like being a biracial student at [university]?
12. What does sense of belonging mean to you? How would you define sense of belonging?
13. What, if anything, about [university] makes you feel a sense of belonging?

14. Tell me about a time, if any, when you felt like you belonged at [university].
15. What, if anything, about [university] does not make you feel a sense of belonging?
16. Tell me about a time, if any, when you felt as if you did not belong at [university.]
17. Is there anything else you would like to share?