“SEE US. HEAR US. MAKE ROOM FOR US.”:

EXPLORING BLACK STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS' SENSE OF BELONGING IN A RACE-BASED EMPLOYEE AFFINITY GROUP

by

NICOLE ALISON PHILLIPS

(Under the Direction of Darris Means)

ABSTRACT

Narratives of isolation and marginalization are consistent elements of the experiences of Black people in higher education, regardless of positions and roles (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019; Chesler & Crowfoot, 1989; Stewart, 2018-2019). The purpose of this narrative study is to explore how participation in Black affinity groups influenced Black student affairs professionals’ sense of belonging at a predominantly white institution (PWI) through the interpretive framework of a transformative paradigm. Nine participants participated in 60-minute, semi-structured interviews. Participants provided perspectives of their engagement experiences in the University of Georgia’s (UGA) Black Faculty & Staff Organization (BFSO). Findings from this inquiry were summarized in five research themes: BFSO discovery, engagement, belonging, maximizing experiences, and lessons for PWI leaders. Highlights from this study reveal degrees of connection, mattering experiences, visibility, optimizing the organization’s potential, and insights for the needs and retention of Black student affairs professionals. Across varying degrees of engagement and criticisms, all participants believed that organizations like BFSO are necessary at PWI’s. The research findings confirm and extend previous literature related to Black student affairs professionals, and employee racial affinity groups, and the sense of belonging

theory. Future implications for research, theory, and practice serve to guide current and future researchers and institutional leaders for retaining Black student affairs professionals.

INDEX WORDS: Affinity, Belonging, Diversity, Employee, Equity, Inclusion, Mattering, Narrative, Race, Retention, Transformative, Staff, Student Affairs,

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the founders and leaders of the Black Faculty & Staff Organization at the University of Georgia, and organizations like it, as well as to all Black student affairs professionals. This research is intended to honor who we are and how we serve each other as well as the institutions that employ us. In the words of Galatians 6:9, KJV, "And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not." I hope this research inspires you and motivates you to gather and to shine!

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I am especially grateful to each of the nine participants in this study for their choice to engage in this research endeavor. Your stories, which at times affirmed and contradicted my assumptions, enhanced the integrity of the findings of this study. My most prominent hope is that you will someday look back on this dissertation and see how your contributions served to enlighten leaders, and yet inspire advocacy for so many other colleagues.

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I do believe everything happens in its rightful season. Writing this dissertation on the topic I've chosen is timely and historic in its own right. I hope it serves current and future scholars, practitioners, students, and anyone interested in new insights and perspectives on equity and inclusion.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"What happens in (Persons of Color) PoC spaces? Anything we want—and this is the beauty of them. We can be sources for our own nourishment and resilience. Why wouldn't an ally be in support of this?" (Blackwell, 2018, para. 50). Black people's ability to navigate majority-oriented spaces follows many of us through our educational and professional experiences. When I chose to pursue a career in student affairs, I did so with the hopes that my career experiences working in higher education would be as affirming as my personal life experiences of growing up in multicultural neighborhoods where I've lived most of my life. I often reflect on the length of my student affairs career, juxtaposed to the cyclical progression of racism in the context of larger society. My reflections always lead me to the realization that student affairs' aspirational commitment to supporting the inclusion and advancement of all persons, particularly at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), is situational at best for students, and strained for student affairs professionals holding marginalized social identities. Therefore, it is essential for leaders at PWIs to further examine their commitment to care, not just for students and faculty, but for staff and administrators, to realize their professed mission of supporting and cultivating diverse, equitable, and inclusive environments for all members of their respective campus communities. One way to achieve this is to recognize and support the need for spaces cultivating nourishment and resilience for minoritized persons at institutions that were never designed to serve them.

As an undergraduate student, student affairs resonated as a career field that would allow me to show up as my full authentic self. My commitment to student affairs would

eventually lead to one of the most fulfilling career positions of my life, serving as the Assistant Director of Multicultural Student Retention Services at Kennesaw State University (KSU) in 2003. My supervisor, Dr. Jerome Ratchford, the first Black man who ever supervised me, a now-retired KSU vice president of student affairs, hired me into this role. Upon hire, Dr. Ratchford connected me to the KSU Black Faculty and Staff affinity group because of the scope and significance of my role. Being a part of this group was the most career-affirming experience I've had since working in higher education. It was through my engagement with this group that I was able to expand my network with colleagues holding various positions throughout the university – deans, vice presidents, faculty, and other administrators. I was positioned to engage regularly with institutional leaders, including the President, Provost, Deans, and Trustees on occasion. I developed agency with faculty who were interested in my ideas. I was identified as talented, which led to many invitations to collaborate on their initiatives; in turn, they supported me by attending student events, advising student organizations, and participating in my mentoring programs. My interactions with faculty expanded my awareness of the issues facing Faculty of Color preparing for tenure and promotion.

My professional agency began to expand beyond the Black faculty and staff group. I was invited to participate in spaces where many student affairs professionals were not considered or invited at that time. I was included in a book discussion group led by a former KSU provost, invited to participate in a learning seminar for faculty in France to study the birthplace and life of James Baldwin, and asked to author a chapter of a text devoted to the applications of James Baldwin's philosophies on race in my practices with retaining Students of Color. These experiences illuminated various perspectives and complexities of higher education. It was through this group that I got a better sense of my purpose in student affairs, particularly in the context of the University. While this group is currently not functioning to its full capacity, I

remember those days fondly and I am grateful for all the exposure, mentoring, and lessons that came about as a result of my connections with this group. My participation and connections made with the Black Faculty and Staff Group at Kennesaw State University created opportunities to connect with colleagues of Color. These connections continue to serve as an affirming and rewarding aspect of my career development. I hope that this study will reveal similar and new insights into the power of affinity groups to do the same for Black student affairs professionals.

Problem Statement

Although the role that racial affinity groups play in the retention of students has been researched and discussed, there is a dearth of literature that speaks directly to the role that racial employee affinity groups play in cultivating a sense of belonging for Black student affairs professionals. College campus events reflect our society (National Urban League, 1989). The passing of historic legislation – *Morrill Act* of 1862 (7 U.S.C. ch. 13 § 301 et seq.) and 1890 (26 Stat. 417, 7 U.S.C. 321 eq seq.), *Brown .v Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), Title IV of the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964 (Pub.L. 88-352, 78 Stat. 241), the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Pub.L. 89-329) – increased access to college for many diverse student populations (Kaplin & Lee, 2014; Lake, 2011). As a result of these various pieces of legislation, the professed intentions of inclusive practices and actions on college campuses appeared to suggest that campus leaders were committed to holding space for everyone, regardless of differences. Symbolic gestures such as the presence of diversity, equity, and inclusion statements of colleges and universities served to inspire an immediate sense of hope and comfort, particularly for historically marginalized campus populations (Davis & Harrison, 2013; Lake, 2011). However, the increased intervention of conservative political figures in education cast shadows of doubt and skepticism on the intentions of social justice perspectives and practices employed by universities (GPB, 2018;

Sturgis, 2018). Their inquiries and accusations of universities promoting liberal agendas increased challenges of supporting the needs of students holding marginalized identities.

Despite all the attempts at making PWIs more inclusive multicultural environments, the multiple accounts of oppressive experiences reported by Persons of Color call into question the effectiveness of interventions and the commitment of PWI leaders toward cultivating and sustaining inclusive campus environments for all members of their respective communities. Studies published over the last 30 years suggested that the impact of whiteness on Black student affairs professionals requires deeper exploration if higher education institutions intend to retain Black professionals and talents (Phelps-Ward & Kenney, 2018-2019). Narratives of isolation and marginalization remain consistent narratives of the experiences of Black people in higher education, regardless of positions and roles (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019; Chesler & Crowfoot, 1989; Stewart, 2018-2019). The notion of meritocracy as a reliable means of achieving career and educational advancement (Lu, 2011), juxtaposed to the unwavering presence of microaggressions and longstanding inequities at PWIs, continues to perpetuate exclusion and isolation for People of Color in higher education. The need to combat isolation is what often forces Persons of Color to seek support in spaces that have been historically proven to be safe for them (Tatum, 1992, 2017). Limited access to mentoring served as a barrier toward advancement for Black student affairs professionals (Howard-Hamilton & Williams, 1996; Jackson, 2001). Additionally, the absence of support groups for Black student affairs professionals provoked feelings of isolation (Howard-Hamilton & Williams, 1996; Steele, 2018). Turner's (2002) study stated that People of Color felt restricted in their capacity to be authentic at work due to fears of enduring stereotype threat – the fear reinforcing negative perceptions associated with a group of people (Walton & Cohen, 2007)

The unspoken, yet additional expectations for the presence of Black student affairs professionals to cultivate the retention and progression of Black students at PWIs is more significant now than ever (Steele, 2018). Increasing support of conservative government politicians for the abusive practices of free speech exhibited by their like-minded, value-adjacent collegiate student groups often manifests in hate speech at the expense of marginalized collegiate populations (Fischer, 2019). Regardless of their positions, Staff of Color must also manage both external and self-imposed expectations for supporting Students of Color. As a result, a unique set of tensions emerges for Black student affairs professionals while serving students and their institutional leadership, which is also known as emotional labor or tax (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019; Benitez et al., 2017; Phelps-Ward & Kenney, 2018-2019; Stewart, 2018-2019). While senior student affairs officers expect staff members to support students, they must also be aware of the unique demands facing Staff of Color.

The presence of workplace racial affinity groups serves to provide necessary support during complex times while regularly sustaining safe and affirming employment experiences (Blackwell, 2018; Hewlett et al., 2016; Li, 2018; Obear & martinez, 2013). Salemi (2015) listed benefits that affinity groups can have on one's career: networking, volunteering on projects to bolster job skills, establishing stronger connections between colleagues who may not know each other well, and creating opportunities for opportunities to learn new concepts. These groups also serve as vital points of connection for persons of historically marginalized identities to authentically engage with colleagues and peers who share similar life experiences (Blitz & Kohl, 2012; Douglas, 2008). Additionally, the provision for these spaces promotes the actualization of institutional commitment to cultivating environments of inclusion and anti-racism in career spaces (Goforth, 2018; Li, 2018). While affinity group spaces exist for students of shared social

identities exist on university campuses throughout the country, the presence of racial affinity groups for employees of Color in higher education is still an emerging phenomenon.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this narrative study is to explore how participation in Black affinity groups impacts Black student affairs professionals' sense of belonging at a predominantly white institution. Research questions guiding this inquiry consist of the following:

- What are the experiences of Black student affairs professionals who participate in a racial affinity group at a PWI?
- How, if at all, does a racial affinity group facilitate a sense of belonging at a PWI for Black student affairs professionals?
- What lessons does an employee racial affinity group offer to predominantly white campus leaders about Black student affairs professionals?

This study will expand the application of Strayhorn's (2012) theory of a sense of belonging to student affairs professionals. Studying how Black student affairs professionals engaging in racial affinity groups experience belonging will also provide insights into better ways to cultivate Black talent at PWIs and in the student affairs profession.

Overview of the Study

Research Paradigm

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore how participation in a Black affinity group influences Black student affairs professionals' sense of belonging at a PWI through the interpretive framework of a transformative research paradigm. The transformative paradigm is most closely aligned with researchers partnering with participants from historically marginalized and culturally diverse populations to advocate for inclusive practices rooted in social justice perspectives (Mertens, 2010; Mertens, 2007; Sweetman et al., 2010). Providing Black student

affairs practitioners with the opportunity to share their stories through interviews is a collaborative approach to co-constructing knowledge, a significant characteristic associated with a transformative paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The ultimate goal of this study is to ignite sustainable changes in PWI higher education infrastructures by identifying the role if any, Black affinity groups have in promoting conditions that support a sense of belonging for Black student affairs professionals. This push for the reform of institutional practices makes the use of the transformative research paradigm both necessary and relevant to this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Sweetman et al., 2010).

Theoretical Conceptual Framework

Strayhorn's (2012) Sense of Belonging is the chosen theoretical framework for this study. The concept of a sense of belonging has long been established as a basic human need (Maslow, 1954), which plays a vital role in a person's mental health (Hagerty et al., 1992; Hagerty & Patusky, 1995). Strayhorn (2012) defined the concept of belonging in the context of collegiate experiences as students' feeling connected and valued by their campus communities, and he provided seven core elements to his application of a sense of belonging for students. According to Strayhorn (2012), a sense of belonging (1) is a basic human need; (2) is determined to be strong enough to drive human behavior; (3) is a contextual experience that is influenced by times and people, thus will vary; (4) is a natural consequence of mattering; (5) is the intersection between students' social identities and their experiences of a sense of belonging; (6) is capable of stimulating other positive outcomes; and (7) has to be constantly cultivated because belonging is vulnerable to changes in contextual circumstances and condition. Since a sense of belonging is a basic human need, and both staff and students share humanity, it stands to reason that staff experiencing a sense of belonging has as much significance as students feeling a sense of belonging at their academic institutions. The purpose of using this theoretical framework is to

illustrate to campus leaders the necessity of expanding their considerations of sense of belonging to include the university personnel who directly serve students.

Research Methods

I utilized a narrative study research design to explore the relationship between campus-based, employee racial affinity groups, and the sense of belonging experienced by Black student affairs professionals at a PWI through the interpretive framework of a transformative paradigm. I chose narrative inquiry for this study because it allowed me to honor the lived experiences of participants as a source of knowledge and understanding (Clandinin, 2016). I collected study data from interviews with student affairs professionals and used Josselson's (2011) four-step approach to narrative data analysis to holistically and categorically organize, examine, and synthesize a comprehensive narrative of participants' experiences.

Operational Definitions

Many references are made to the Black racial identity of student affairs professionals, as well as to affinity groups throughout this dissertation. The term "Black" is being used to describe persons of African descent, inclusive of those who migrated to Latin American, the Caribbean, North America, and other parts of the diaspora. Responses to Black people's shared geographic origins and phenotypical features have resulted in shared experiences of culture, and subjection to racial oppression. Additionally, references to Persons of Color throughout the literature also encompass professionals who also possess a Black racial identity.

Since this study is being offered through a transformative framework, I committed to upholding participants' voices and narratives that emerged in the critical paradigm by capitalizing references to Black people and People of Color. Conversely, since white voices have historically been positioned as dominant in narratives across all academic disciplines, for this study, the term white will be presented in lowercase. My choice to do so is intended to

disrupt white privilege, and to acknowledge the experiences of racially marginalized people. Hurtado (1989) and Wildman (1996) directly addressed the intentional capitalization of labels describing marginalized identified persons as a means of centering and empowering these voices as sources of knowledge. Conversely, the use of lowercase for the labels of privileged identities (white, men, heterosexual) is intended to lessen the impact of privilege and dominance perpetuated at the expense of Persons of Color and other marginalized social identities. By implementing this practice, I intended to position and liberate the voices of the oppressed as they contributed to the formulation of knowledge (Brown, 2004).

Throughout the literature, affinity groups are referred to by a variety of terms, including employee resource groups (ERGs), networking groups, constituency groups, and caucus groups. VanAken, et al. (1994) defined groups through the lens of their affinity group model, suggesting that peer affinity groups are comprised of employees with like titles and positions, possess formalized roles for members of the group, have an explicit charter inclusive of a mission statement, and are managed by employees. Social identity-based affinity groups are defined by Douglas (2008) as communities that form based on shared similarities, experiences, and aspirations of employees within an organization. Blitz and Kohl (2012) explained the concept of racial affinity groups as "processes where people of the same racial group meet regularly to discuss dynamics of institutional racism, oppression, and privilege within their organization" (p. 481). The contextual definition utilized for this study is a composite of those offered by Blitz and Kohl (2012), Goode and Dixon (2016), Li (2018), and Hewlett et. al (2016) -- affinity groups are a resource provided for and led by employees of shared identities and interests, which provide an opportunity for voices, support, and development of personal and professional connections.

Finally, the term "student affairs professionals" is used to describe staff, administrators, and personnel who serve students in capacities that are historically associated with functional student affairs practices. Student affairs professional associations acknowledge a broad array of student affairs functional areas (NASPA, n.d.). These functional areas will vary depending on the type of higher education institution and its organizational structure. The most traditional areas associated with student affairs practices include housing and residence life, student activities, student conduct, orientation, leadership development, volunteer services, community service/service-learning, fraternity and sorority life, orientation, student affairs assessment, wellness programs, intramural and recreational services, counseling services, and support services for students with disabilities, Students of Color, LGBTQIA students, veterans, women, and adult and commuter students (NASPA, n.d.).

Significance of the Study

The presence of Black student affairs professionals at PWIs in today's climate, both on and beyond campus, necessitates special consideration for strategies to preserve and retain the talent and resources we have to offer. Consideration of the potential for race-based[1] employee affinity groups to help institutions grow and retain diverse talent in student affairs and higher education is necessary. Aside from their potential to sustain a sense of belonging for Black student affairs professionals, the presence of affinity groups can also serve as a vehicle to cultivate ongoing career skill development and to expand Black student affairs professionals' comprehension of higher education at PWIs.

[1] As the author of this critical inquiry study, I acknowledge that the term race or derivatives of the word thereof, is problematic. I intentionally chose this term to represent the breadth of identities based on phenotypical features because of its recognizability.

This study intends to add knowledge to the body of scholarship addressing a sense of belonging, multicultural organizational development, and integrated staffing practices for Black student affairs professionals. Studying how Black student affairs professionals engaged in racial affinity groups experience belonging will provide insights into better ways to cultivate Black talent at PWIs and in the student affairs profession. Most of all, this study is expected to extend provisions of support to Practitioners of Color. Moreover, if offering space for affinity groups supports or helps retain Students of Color, why would we not be open to exploring whether the same dynamics can benefit our staff who support them? Finally, this study is intended to lead to further studies of organizational development, campus climate assessments from a staffing perspective in our institutional practices.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this narrative inquiry research study is to explore how and why employee racial affinity groups facilitate a sense of belonging for Black student affairs professionals at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). The demands to support students in a diversity-conflicted society, as well as longstanding, unresolved oppression in higher education, serves as a premise for why this particular study is necessary. Based on my previous experiences, I am interested in learning more about the experiences of Black student affairs professionals engaged in a campus employee racial affinity group. Previous studies based on a sense of belonging, racial affinity groups, and Black faculty and students in higher education serve as catalysts for further inquiry on this subject matter.

Conveying the significance of this study will require the use of a transformative research paradigm, a critical approach to research that centers the voices of the persons serving our institutions. The significance of this study is to inspire new practices and encourage additional support mechanisms for Black student affairs at their respective institutions. The following

chapter will provide an overview of the existing literature on Black student affairs professionals, racial affinity groups, and how Strayhorn's (2012) Sense of Belonging theory relates to this study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this narrative study is to explore how participation in a Black affinity group influences Black student affairs professionals' sense of belonging at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). This chapter is devoted to providing literature and research context of the experiences of Black people in higher education, with a specific focus on the origins and current conditions of Black student affairs professionals. Second, the history, structure, and benefits of race-based affinity groups will provide readers with a context of how these groups aid institutional advancements towards inclusion while providing safe spaces in predominantly white settings. The following section will consist of an overview of Strayhorn's (2012) Sense of Belonging theoretical model and its applications to Black student affairs professionals and organizational cultures and employment practices. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a summary of the direction in which the literature has guided this study.

Black People in Higher Education

The narratives of Black people at PWIs of higher education are often shared from a critical perspective of how oppression influences our experiences. While Black faculty, students, and professionals face unique challenges due to their respective positions at PWIs, the common thread through their experiences was having to navigate racism and various forms of microaggression and bias (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019; Holmes, 2003). Much of the literature about Black people at PWIs in higher education focuses on student and faculty experiences (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). There is comparatively far less literature regarding the history and experiences of Black staff and administrators in student affairs.

The literature of Black students' experiences focuses on barriers to social and academic success (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Hawkins & Larabee, 2009). The research on Black faculty experiences centers around peer engagement, cross-racial engagement with students, and tenure and promotion (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019; Grapin & Pereiras, 2019; Patton & Catching, 2009; Romero, 2017). Not surprisingly, student affairs Professionals of Color are similarly challenged by various elements of oppression, particularly racism, in campus environments (Hawkins & Larabee, 2009; Michael & Conger, 2009; Steele, 2018; Stewart, 2018-2019; Townsend, 2019). Additionally, institutional leaderships' focus on the notion of meritocracy as a reliable means of achieving career and educational advancement (Lu, 2011), coupled with unchecked microaggressions in campus environments, perpetuate a culture of exclusion for persons of marginalized social identities (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015; Grapin & Pereiras, 2019; Leudke, 2017). These oppressive factors often force Persons of Color to seek support in spaces that have been historically proven to not be safe for them (Tatum, 1992; 2017).

These common accounts of oppression at PWIs highlight the necessity to address and remedy support for Black people at PWIs (Benitez et al., 2017; Gomez & Ocasio, 2015; Henry, 2010; Holmes, 2003; Johnson et al., 2014; Steele, 2018). The failure of institutional leaders to cultivate positive methods of retaining Black personnel, and others who serve Black students, will potentially jeopardize the ability of PWIs to retain Black students. As this study focuses on the experiences of Black professionals in student affairs, the historical and current state of Black staff affairs professionals will be further examined.

Historical Account of Black Student Affairs Administrators

The integration of Black student affairs professionals into higher education is a fairly recent phenomenon due to the limited history of the integration of Black people at PWIs. Since

Black people were formerly denied employment access to administrative positions at PWIs, their focus on serving in higher education concentrated on obtaining positions at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). According to Hevel (2016), Lucy Diggs Slowe served as the first Black woman student affairs professional. While serving at Howard University as the Dean of Women (1922-1937), with an enrollment population of 2,000 Black students, she was appointed to support students in several administrative capacities. Her duties included services and programs that are commonly associated with modern functions of student affairs and student services (i.e., advising women student government leaders, managing housing, career counseling, distributing scholarships to students in need, and helping students to find on-campus jobs). Like many Black student affairs professionals today, Lucy Diggs Slowe engaged her professional association, the National Association of Deans of Women to educate her colleagues on the impact of racism and sexism on Black students.

Beyond Lucy Diggs Slowe, the published history of Black student affairs professionals is extremely limited. While similar positions of deans of women and deans of men were held by Black people at HBCUs, the representation of Black people in higher education-related associations was as restrictive as access to employment at PWIs (Belk, 2006). According to Belk (2006), the formulation of the National Association of Deans of Women and Advisors of the Colored Schools in 1929, and the National Association of Personnel Deans of Men in Negro Educational Institutions in 1935, provided opportunities for Black student affairs professionals to establish networks with other professionals beyond their campuses. By 1954, both organizations merged into the National Association of Personnel Workers, which eventually became the National Association of Student Affairs Professionals in 1993 (Belk, 2006).

Wolfe and Dilworth (2015) reported that by 1965, there were still very few Black people in higher education administration and management roles at PWIs, despite the increasing

enrollment of Black students at these institutions due to the Civil Rights Movement and ruling of Brown v Board of Education. Wolfe and Dilworth (2015) stated that the introduction of federal affirmative action guidelines required higher education employers who were either a recipient of federal contracts worth $50,000 and/or had 50 or more employees to develop equitable hiring strategies and pay to support a diverse workforce. Kayes (2006) stated that as Black student affairs professionals are hired into PWIs, the pressure to stay employed largely depends upon their ability to fit into PWI culture. While this is a most recent assertion, it's fairly reasonable to imagine the ability to assimilate into white culture has always been a significant condition for Black student affairs professionals to successfully gain access to student affairs positions at PWIs.

Black Student Affairs Professionals Today

The majority of literature on Black student affairs professionals focused on the experiences of women. An earlier assessment of Women of Color in student affairs revealed the needs for targeted orientations to acquaint administrators of Color to cultural resources on campus; mentoring for career advancement; and access to support groups to share perspectives, common challenges, and ideas to alleviate the stresses of being in predominantly white environments (Howard-Hamilton & Williams, 1996). At the time of the study, feelings of isolation and discomfort were highlighted as a part of the experiences of women of Color in their student affairs work environments. Over time, similar phenomena would still consistently emerge throughout literature.

More recent studies and writings revealed similar experiences of participants in previous studies (Holmes, 2003; Henry, 2010; Gomez & Ocasio, 2015; Turner, 2002; Townsend, 2019). Women faculty and staff of Color in Turner's (2002) study reported sacrificing some of their authenticity to protect themselves from stereotype threat when engaging with colleagues at

work. Similarly, Holmes (2003) reported that Black woman student affairs administrators felt that their race and gender significantly impacted their experiences at their respective institutions. While they reported experiencing a feeling similar to participants in other studies, Black women also created self-imposed regulations to minimize the chances of negatively being stereotyped by their work colleagues.

Gomez and Ocasio (2015) interviewed Staff of Color in higher education. Similar to their faculty peers, throughout their inquiries, Gomez and Ocasio (2015) learned that Staff of Color in higher education experienced feelings of their abilities and judgments being more frequently questioned by white students, peers, and supervisors. The participants in Gomez and Ocasico's (2015) study reported the necessity to learn how to "work the system" (p. 690) as a means to manage their professional success in predominantly white environments. However, Gomez and Ocasio (2015) previously stated, the struggles are different based on the positions that they hold. Additional factors, such as student affairs professionals' campus environment, limited visibility, support (or lack thereof), and ability to navigate their institution will also influence the rewards and challenges experienced by Black student affairs professionals (Steele, 2018).

Participants in Townsend's (2019) study shared critical responses and suggestions for their institutions to consider improving the experiences of Black women student affairs administrators. Aside from feelings commonly expressed in previous studies, including a lack of respect, isolation, feeling overburdened and low satisfaction culminated into feelings of environmental toxicity which strongly influenced the retention of staff members of Color at PWIs, Townsend's (2019) study participants stated the need for more positively equitable treatment, review of practices and policies to facilitate diverse career ascension, and more intentional efforts toward listening and supporting their needs.

Phelps-Ward and Kenney (2018-2019) studied the concept of whiteness and the ways that Black entry-level professionals were forced to cope with its oppressive impacts, such as producing feelings of isolation and discrimination. Their recommendations for organizational shifts to address these feelings included (a) examining how one's behaviors, policies, and decisions impact colleagues of marginalized and minoritized social identities; (b) facilitating the provision of secure spaces for marginalized identity staff members to share their perspectives, and (c) challenging ideologies that continue to foster majority mindsets that are counterintuitive to the development of inclusive and equitable work environments.

Taking a deeper dive into how to sustain an inclusive campus environment starts with being aware of the perceptions and support needs of campus community members who directly serve students. Henry's (2010) exploration into the experiences of Black women in student affairs revealed the necessity for establishing supportive networks and foundations between African American administrators. Networking was identified as a useful method for facilitating the adjustment of new student affairs staff members to their divisions at adjusting to their PWIs of employment.

Jackson (2001) proposed that higher educational institutions can better retain Black student affairs professionals at their institutions by increasing their investments in professional growth opportunities through increased funding and mentoring experiences. Jackson and Flowers (2003) followed these initial recommendations with four specific strategies to retain Black student affairs professionals: (a) promoting a fairness philosophy throughout the campus environment; (b) cultivating mentoring experiences; (c) championing the success of Black student affairs professionals, and; (d) providing salary compensation to Black student affairs administrators based on their contributions at their institutions. Jackson and Flowers' (2003)

study recognized the way that Black student affairs administrators are uniquely poised to serve their institutions beyond fulfilling their basic job descriptions.

Race-Based Employee Affinity Groups

Although the use of affinity groups is practiced in higher education, the majority of literature on the topic of employee affinity groups was written from non-educational, organizational perspectives. The presence of race-based affinity groups has been observed to be both profitable for businesses, healthy for organizations, and safe for marginalized social group identities to have a secure space to engage themselves authentically (Blackwell, 2018; Blitz & Kohl, 2012; Douglas, 2008). The provision of these spaces was found to alleviate the pressures of persons of marginalized social identities of having to assimilate to majority leadership standards in the workplace (Blackwell 2018; Hewlett et al., 2016), while also promoting affirmative spaces and inclusion in the workplace (Goforth, 2018; Li, 2018), and boosting one's career growth and opportunities (Salemi, 2015; VanAken et al., 1994).

However, affinity groups, in the scope of higher education, are primarily focused on the vital support they provide to students and faculty at universities (Benitez et al., 2017; Chesler & Crowfoot, 1989; Garcia 2002; Gates et al.,1997; Henry, 2010; Pope, 1993). The benefits associated with having student affinity groups on campuses are similar to those identified for non-academic work organizations and employees. The benefits of having affinity groups in higher education workplaces included the provision of opportunities for cohesion, belonging, providing occasional relief from experiences of stereotype threat (Benitez et al. 2017; Chesler & Crowfoot, 19897), and mentoring (Gates et al., 1997). Affinity groups were also identified as beneficial for providing spaces where white people can have a space to work with each other to process their role in racism, both in and outside of higher education (Blitz & Kohl, 2012; Michael & Conger, 2009; Obear & martinez, 2013).

Historical Function of Affinity Groups

Repeated accounts of affinity groups serving as a point of advocacy across industries for minoritized populations is a prominent and common theme found throughout literature. According to Douglas (2008), Xerox, based in Rochester, NY, was among the few companies in the 1960s to begin employee forums based on race as a result of racial conflicts in their organization. Over time, other companies began to follow suit, evolving into providing affinity groups based on race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

The rise in employee caucus groups for women, immigrants, and Persons of Color occurred around the 1960s and ’70s, close to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. These groups served as checks and balances for predominantly white male leadership (Douglas, 2008; Garcia, 2002). While Douglas’ (2008) perspective stemmed from the context of the corporate industry, Garcia’s perspective focused more on the history of affinity groups in the labor industry. Before their existence, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) served labor workers of Color and other similar groups for their advocacy needs at work (Garcia, 2002). Shortly after the passing of the Civil Rights Act, labor unions saw the formation of Black, Latinx, immigrants, and women’s caucus groups. These groups sought to advocate for better union conditions, protections, and representation afforded to white male laborers. Occasionally, in the absence of groups that specifically existed to meet needs tied to their own social identities, some people with minoritized identities and a few select white laborers joined other labor caucus groups that appeared to align more closely with their needs (Garcia, 2002). For example, while many Black laborers were members of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), this organization also reported having some white and members of Arabic descent. Additionally, Garcia (2002) mentioned Latinx, specifically Chicano(a) persons, forming the Mexican American Union Council (also known as the “Chicano

Caucus") in 1971. Garcia (2002) also reported the organization of undocumented immigrant laborers by trade union leaders as far back as the 1950s in southern California.

Affinity Group Structures

Affinity groups are primarily run by employees who chose to volunteer to lead and administer them. Douglas (2008) suggested that affinity groups evolve into four phases: organizational awareness, employee affiliation with their employers, points of access connection between leadership and employees, and employee advancement. The average size of the groups documented in the literature consistently suggested 12 members as an optimal size (Blitz & Kohl, 2012; Douglas, 2008). VanAken et al. (1994) provided a template for structuring a high-functioning affinity group. Their model outlined the need for group members to have specific responsibilities to sustain the vitality of the group. Managed by employees, these specific responsibilities include establishing and conducting meetings anywhere, stating a clear mission and charter, and establishing a conclave for group facilitators to exchange ideas and information between the different groups.

Benefits of Racial Affinity Groups in Higher Education

Blackwell (2018) spoke to the need of People of Color to have space in the absence of white colleagues, as opportunities for Persons of Color to "breathe." Social identity affinity groups can provide a sense of ownership to marginalized groups by empowering them to be vocal within the organization. Creating a space exclusively for members of shared social identities to gather and to engage in leadership development opportunities increases collegial communication, forces the examination of diversity in the workplace, and allows for the retention of diverse talent. It is also essential to driving organizations toward achieving equity and social justice for all of their members. Social identity-based caucuses and affinity resource

groups also provide an opportunity for authentic counter-storytelling engagement in the absence of white privilege (Obear & martinez, 2013).

Obear and martinez (2013) described race caucusing as a "high impact strategy to create social change" (p. 79). Outcomes cited in their work included the increased abilities of higher education administrators and student affairs practitioners to cultivate and sustain inclusive spaces for peers and students on campus. Obear and martinez (2013) also mentioned the power of providing a space for racialized persons to engage in authentic reflection of self and to explore internalized and external oppression in a secure environment within the campus community. Finally, they proposed race caucuses as an initiative toward achieving multicultural competence.

Similar to Michael and Conger (2009) and Blitz and Kohl (2012), Obear and martinez (2013) advocated for the formulation of white affinity groups to cultivate anti-racism in ways that are not as caustic to People of Color. Participants in such groups were free to engage in practices such as Privilege Identity Exploration (PIE) (Watt, 2007), which allowed white peers to acknowledge and examine how their privilege and power perpetuates racism. By working collectively to disrupt these narratives, white people in anti-racist affinity group spaces may engage in effective advocacy and allyship for Persons of Color (Obear & martinez, 2013). Each of the aforementioned authors stated that white affinity groups allowed their participants to recognize attitudes that perpetuate racism and strengthen participants' willingness to overcome these attitudes.

Criticisms of Racial Affinity Groups

While most of the literature reviewed for this study provided affirmative perspectives on the benefits of race caucusing for historically marginalized persons, some perceived drawbacks to allowing race-based affinity groups in non-educational work environments. Goode and Dixon (2015) provided arguments for and against the need for race-based employee resource groups

(ERG's). Their arguments consisted of two opposing views; one argument focused on the objections of white men who perceived such groups as being unwelcoming. Second, Goode and Dixon (2015) suggested that the presence of these groups may mistakenly signal to company leaders the departure of any previously existing diversity problems that were present before the affinity groups' formation. Criticisms of social identity affinity groups being perceived as separatist or self-segregating were also associated with discussions about the merits of starting groups like this (Blackwell, 2018; Metzler, 2008). Metzler (2008) provided an account of the implementation of an amendment in the state of Arizona prohibiting state universities and community colleagues from supporting race-based organizations on their campuses. The critique of this amendment illuminated the necessity for Persons of Color to connect for the sake of sustaining peer support and emphasized the use of the term "self-segregation" as being problematic to campus diversity support efforts. To Metzler's point, criticisms such as those offered about racial affinity groups are evidence of how leaders' fears and lack of comprehension for the need to sustain a diverse workforce continue to perpetuate racism and white supremacy in the workplace. Unfortunately, higher education is not immune to the same vulnerabilities, particularly if institutions fail to recognize how these safe spaces provide much-needed support to sustain campus-wide diversity.

Sense of Belonging – A Theoretical Perspective

As institutional leaders commit to preserving diversity as both a value and a description of their student populations, so must leaders extend the same consideration for their employees holding marginalized identities. To this end, Strayhorn's (2012) model of sense of belonging is the theoretical perspective through which this study inquiry is being examined. Strayhorn (2012) provided the following definition and explanation of significance for the theory of a sense of belonging for students:

> In terms of college, a 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. 17)

This theoretical perspective is commonly applied to examining students' connections to their institutions and environments. Considering that the need to feel connected to something beyond ones' self applies to all human beings in various contexts, then it stands to reason that employees are more likely to thrive when they experience positive connections to their work institutions. The reported experiences of minoritized populations at PWIs and the predispositions of PWI environments warrant further examination of how Black student affairs professionals experience connections to their employing institutions.

Strayhorn (2012) identified seven core elements to the application of a sense of belonging to students. Each of the seven elements has relevant applications for considering the needs of Black student affairs professionals and others working in higher education to experience a sense of belonging. As the first core element of this theoretical model, Strayhorn (2012), like Maslow (1954), proposed that a sense of belonging is a basic human need, which is vital to a person's mental health (Hagerty et al., 1992; Hagerty & Patusky, 1995).

Second, a sense of belonging is strong enough to drive human behavior (Strayhorn, 2012). For the same reasons that students choose which institutions they will attend to achieve their educational goals, consideration must also be given to the idea that Black student affairs professionals choose where they will apply for work and where they will accept job offers. Leaders hoping to retain Black student affairs professionals must provide support mechanisms to

cultivate their team members to perform in ways that yield personal, institutional, and students' success.

Third, the contexts of time and population contribute to the heightened importance of a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). This element is at the core of this particular study of how and why participation in a Black employee affinity group may influence Black student affairs professionals' sense of belonging at their institution. A new, first-year student or a recent post-graduate professional staff member, for example, may have a more urgent need to connect quickly to their institution than someone who has been at the same institution for a longer time with others of common interests or social identities. However, this need is informed by one's subjective experiences, which are often unknown by others.

Fourth, a sense of belonging is a natural consequence of mattering (Strayhorn, 2012). Mattering is the feeling that one has value and is appreciated by others (Schlossberg, 1985). Evidence of mattering is described as having five dimensions: positive attention, importance or significance, dependence or reciprocity, appreciation, and feelings of others rooting for our success (Schlossberg, 1985). This speaks to the value of recognizing the contributions and talents of diverse members of the campus community. Imagine the lack of equity of such recognition and reward across various departments (academic and non-academic) and racial identities of staff within an institution. Experiencing mattering, depending on how a staff member is situated within their organization, as well as their social identity, can be nearly elusive when there is a lack of intention from campus managers to contemplate and address the factors that influence employee's experiences on their campuses.

The fifth element of this theoretical model is the intersection between students' social identities and their experiences of a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). It could be that a supervisor (dean of students) and a staff member (director of student activities) who both hold

common identities develop a dynamic working relationship that results in positive career gains for the staff member. However, when the supervisor retires and is replaced by a new person of a different social identity and a vastly different style of leadership than the former supervisor, the staff member may lose the sense of belonging the staff member once experienced. There may be a hesitancy on behalf of the staff member to acknowledge the impact of the differences between the past and current supervisor. Tatum (2017) reminds us that "we may be living in a Color-silent society, where we have learned to avoid talking about racial difference. But even if we refrain from mentioning race, the evidence is clear: we still notice racial categories, and our behaviors are guided by what we notice" (p. 51). The nuance described here prompted a need for inquiry regarding the consideration campus leaders to give to situational factors that may affect a sense of belonging for Black student affairs professionals. Examining the differences across race is one of those factors that should not be ignored because it's present – if not for the supervisor, then definitely for the staff member.

The sixth elemental consideration offered by Strayhorn (2012) is that a strong sense of belonging can stimulate other positive outcomes. If students are pleased with their academic and involvement experiences at their respective universities, they will likely inform others and play a major role in recruiting other students to our campuses, campus jobs, and co-curricular opportunities. The same could be said for Black student affairs professionals. When attending professional conferences and network settings, multiple narratives are shared among colleagues regarding their professional experiences. These narratives have the power to shape peer perceptions of our institutions, which can have a long-term impact on the hiring and retention trends on our campuses.

Finally, a sense of belonging must be consistently cultivated because belonging can be influenced by changes in contextual circumstances and conditions (Strayhorn, 2012). Racial

tensions become increasingly present in our society and begin to manifest more in college and university environments. Black student affairs professionals are forced to grapple with how we manage our feelings around the impact of exposure to repeated news of the disproportionate amount of COVID-19 deaths in Black communities due to health care disparities, and unresolved murders of Black civilians at the hands of law enforcement. When these issues arise Black student affairs professionals assess the sociopolitical climate and our campuses' institutional nuances to determine whether it is safe to express concerns of heightened stress and anxiety experienced during this time. The provision of support from institutional leaders for Black employees to safely address concerns can go a long way. Therefore affinity groups serve as a safe means for continuing the positive cultivation of relationships between Black student affairs professionals and their institutions.

Aside from Strayhorn, a sense of belonging has also been identified as crucial to the retention of Black students (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015; Chavrous, 2000) and Black faculty, administrators, and staff within student affairs throughout higher education (Anthym & Tuittgra, 2019; Benitez et al., 2017; Chesler & Crowfoot, 1989; Phelps-Ward & Kenney, 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Stewart (2018-2019) offered four forms of Black ideology to address the impact of anti-Black and inclusive rhetoric on Black student affairs professionals – Black belonging, Black safety, Black validation, and Black reward. Each of these concepts is achievable when space is cultivated for these ideologies to thrive. Until our PWI campuses transform into more inclusive and affirming environments for all of their members, consideration of the capacity of Black employee affinity groups must remain a significant option for consideration.

Chapter Summary

As college campuses continue to be a microcosm of our society (National Urban League, 1989), there is a need for spaces where people with shared identities have the means to process experiences, to inform their campuses of what their needs are, and to provide support to one another, particularly in predominantly white institutions of higher education. Although the role that affinity groups play in the retention of students has been researched and discussed, there is a dearth of literature that speaks directly to the existence of affinity groups among employees in higher education or student affairs. As a result, this study will focus on discovering how Black student affairs professionals experience a sense of belonging as members of racial identity-based affinity groups at their work institutions.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between a campus-based employee racial affinity group and the sense of belonging experienced by Black student affairs professionals at a PWI. This chapter is dedicated to outlining detailed aspects of my process for conducting a narrative inquiry study. First, I will provide a statement of my positionality and subjectivity, and the way this informs my research approach. I will then explain the axiological, ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions of the transformative research paradigm that I've chosen for conducting my inquiry. This section will be followed by a detailed description of the research design, research site, and participant sampling and recruitment plan. Next, I will discuss how I collected study data from interviews with student affairs professionals and used Josselson's (2011) four-step approach to narrative data analysis to holistically and categorically organize, examine, and synthesize a comprehensive narrative of participants' experiences. Finally, a brief discussion on how I established and ensured trustworthiness in the form of credibility, reliability, and ethical responsibility will mark the conclusion of this chapter. Throughout this chapter, I will identify specific research goals that will provide context for shaping the methodology portion of this study.

Positionality, Subjectivity, and Reflexivity Statement

My interest in studying the influence of racial affinity group membership on the employment experiences of Black student affairs professionals at predominantly white universities (PWIs) was inspired by my own 23 years of career experience in student affairs. As I stated previously, I'm a Black cisgender heterosexual woman of Caribbean ancestry. I was

socialized from childhood to exercise caution at work, particularly with white colleagues. I was taught to be overtly professional and mannerable in predominantly white environments. I learned to keep my personal life to myself, invest very little into having friends at work, keep a positive attitude, and avoid office gossip or discussions about politics and religion. Most importantly, I learned that to succeed at work, I had to work twice as hard to be considered half as good as white colleagues, without bragging about what I accomplished. These lessons inadvertently grew into adopting self-protecting behaviors – I avoided sharing personal information with co-workers, minimized social interactions beyond work, and avoided rumors at work. I particularly struggled with co-workers who appeared to be bragging about how much they did or how hard they worked to make things happen.

My career pursuit with a focus on multicultural programming and services in student affairs was inspired by my own undergraduate experiences of support I received from my institution's equal opportunity program office. When I was hired at Kennesaw State University by an African American male supervisor to direct services for Students of Color, I was quickly connected to the campus' Black faculty caucus group. My engagement in the caucus allowed me to network with colleagues holding various campus positions and social identities throughout and beyond the campus. My campus network expanded vertically, into the community alumni, business owners, campus partners, and up through the president and provost at the university. Eventually, faculty from the caucus, as well as others connected to them, invited me to collaborate with their initiatives. I was a participant in many faculty-focused book discussions and was asked to collaborate on several grant proposals. The highlight of my experiences was being asked to join a faculty-based initiative to integrate the teachings of James Baldwin into the course curriculum and co-curricular learning experience for students, including a month-long study abroad educational experience to study his life in France. Years later, I was invited to write

a textbook chapter about Baldwin's philosophies and their connections to retaining Students of Color at predominantly white institutions.

Whereas many student affairs colleagues often felt that their work was dismissed by faculty or disconnected from campus leadership, my connections to this group poised me to have an empowering and rewarding narrative of being a valued and respected member of the campus community. Faculty supported my work through their attendance at our events, advisory committee participation, and student mentoring. I developed reciprocal relationships with faculty which challenged my beliefs about how faculty are simply aloof and uninterested in the work of student affairs professionals. My networks with deans, vice presidents, and powerful community members informed and expanded my perspective of higher education in ways that I had not previously considered. My connection to this group gave me a clearer perspective of my purpose in student affairs, particularly in the context of being a university employee. The collective experiences I gained from this connection cultivated feelings of belonging and mattering at my institution and served as a source for mentorship and sponsorship. This empowering journey increased my confidence and allowed me to develop a sense of agency that is not often afforded to student affairs colleagues, let alone Black colleagues in mid-management positions. I also recognize that while we all shared a marginalized racial identity, my privileged identities in the context of my institution and the affinity group may have also provided me with more affirming experiences than others. As I began to explore this phenomenon, I kept this in mind so that I can anticipate varied experiences among some of the participants in my study.

Research Paradigm

I explored the influence of UGA's Black Faculty and Staff Organization (BFSO) on the sense of belonging experienced by Black student affairs professionals at a PWI through the interpretive framework of a transformative paradigm. I selected this paradigm because its

framework is most closely aligned with engaging participants from historically marginalized and culturally diverse populations while focusing on expanding social justice perspectives to advocate for inclusive practices (Mertens, 2010; Mertens, 2007; Sweetman et al., 2010). Social identity-based caucuses and affinity resource groups provide an opportunity for authentic counter-storytelling engagement in the absence of the presence of white privilege (Obear & martinez, 2013). Creswell and Poth (2018) found that providing opportunities for self-determining experiences is a characteristic associated with a transformative research design. I explored the resolution to the research questions posed in Chapter 1 through the axiological, epistemological, ontological, and methodological contextual assumptions of the transformative study paradigm.

Axiological

The axiological assumption of the transformative paradigm is defined by the nature of beliefs about what constitutes ethical and moral behavior (Mertens, 2012; Mertens, 2010; Mertens, 2007). An axiological assumption of the transformative paradigm facilitates respect for values indigenous to a population of people, therefore allowing for opportunities to challenge antithetical values that are problematic and oppressive (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I am advocating for a transformative axiological perspective that centers the voices of study participants as informed sources to inspire an ethical duty among campus leaders to support their Black student affairs staff members. I hope that this study will prompt a moral obligation of institutional leaders to do all they possibly can to aid the retention and sense of belonging of Black student affairs professionals.

Ontological

An ontological philosophical perspective in transformative research, by definition, refers to the nature of socially constructed realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mertens, 2010; Mertens,

2007). In this context, the ontological assumption of this transformative paradigm is based on the reality of being a Black person at a PWI, often outnumbered in our offices, departments, and divisions, and having the need to connect with others having similar experiences to establish a sense of belonging at ones' institution. My position as the researcher will require me to accept that Black student affairs professionals have a variety of contextual realities. My understanding of this is essential to honoring the diversity that exists within Black communities on various campuses. There is no guarantee that all study participants may experience their racial affinity spaces as an environment that cultivates a sense of belonging for them. Extending consideration of this, and various experiences that influence how each of us internalizes reality around us, is essential to conducting an authentic study that has ontological validity.

Epistemological

An epistemological perspective in a transformative qualitative study requires interaction between the researcher and participants to develop the co-construction of knowledge, as well as building trust with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mertens, 2007). Epistemology occurs when the researcher uncovers and translates the stories of participants' experiences within the context of the study (Mertens, 2007). The realities that emerge from the interviews are formulated to co-construct knowledge that can be used to advocate for improvements in institutional support provided to Black student affairs professionals, which is at the core of the transformative research paradigm. The narrative inquiry research design facilitated this approach to conducting this study. Participants were invited to offer feedback after interviews and to offer feedback on the findings for the study.

Methodological

A methodological assumption of the transformative paradigm refers to the most appropriate method of systematic inquiry to authentically capture the realities of the research

participants (Mertens, 2007). My methodological belief for a transformative research paradigm encompassed a qualitative methodology that allows Black student affairs professionals to share their stories of engagement in campus-based racial affinity groups at PWIs through interviews. My development of trusting relationships with research participants is paramount to the success of this study. I will make it a priority for them to know who I am, what the study entails, how to reach me, and how their voices (if they choose) will be included in the study.

Finally, I engaged research participants in the development of appropriate guidelines and conditions for conducting the study (Mertens, 2012). I searched for participants' accounts of their origins, experiences, and perspectives concerning their participation in BFSO. My efforts to establish trusting relationships with participants resulted in participants authentically sharing their accounts of engaging in BFSO. The accounts they shared were both consistent with, and varied from, my own experiences. Overall, as I hoped, the participants' narratives served to co-construct knowledge that can be used to transform practices, policies, and theoretical applications of a sense of belonging.

Research Design

Though initially designed to be a case research study, due to the conditions of the global pandemic, COVID-19, this study was switched to narrative inquiry to allow me to capture and analyze data solely from the narratives of study participants. A narrative study requires the investigator to understand, organize, and retell an event or phenomenon (Josselson, 2011). I chose narrative inquiry for this study because it allowed me to honor the lived experiences of participants as a source of knowledge and understanding (Clandinin, 2016). Conducting a narrative inquiry research study also honors the methodological and epistemological approaches to engaging study participants in the co-creation of knowledge and the advancement of change. Clandinin (2016) described narrative inquiry as an approach to understanding human

experiences, which serve as a source of knowledge and understanding. Narrative inquiry requires a collaborative relationship between the researcher and the study participant to share an account of social engagements with social environments (Clandinin, 2016). According to Connelly and Clandinin (2000), narrative inquiry is centered in Dewey's (1938) pragmatist philosophy of experience being comprised of two criteria – interaction (human beings being understood as individuals, in and out of social contexts) and continuity (experiences continuously evolving from experiences). BFSO constitutes the social environment of this study. I relied on study participants' narratives of their interactions with BFSO to determine whether a sense of belonging occurs as a result of their experiences within the context of this organization.

Research Site and Participant Recruitment

As previously stated, this study began as a case study research design. While there were no observations of events and limited access to documents, I was able to obtain a diversity of perspectives from participants on the shared phenomena of participation in BFSO. As such, this transformative narrative inquiry of Black faculty and staff affinity groups was conducted at the University of Georgia (UGA). Aside from being the first chartered university in the United States, UGA is a predominantly white, NCAA Division I, four-year research extensive institution of higher education. UGA is also the first and largest land-grant university in the state of Georgia. The University is comprised of 17 colleges and schools and offers 394 majors, including graduate degrees in law, pharmacy, and veterinary medicine. As of fall 2020, UGA's enrollment was 39,147 students (graduate and undergraduate), representing 122 countries from around the world (UGA by the Numbers, https://www.uga.edu/facts.php). According to UGA's Office of Institutional Research (OIR), in fall 2020, the institution had 11,653 employees. Black employees comprise 12.6% (1,469) of all UGA employees, making them the largest population of non-white employed people at the institution. Black UGA employees comprise 45.4% (635)

of all campus-wide service/maintenance positions (1,400), 14.9% (146) clerical/secretarial positions, and 10.5% (243) of all technical/paraprofessional/professional positions on campus. Black people comprise 5.5% (155) of all faculty on campus and 4.9% (11) of all executive-level administrative positions. Executive-level administrative positions are defined by the University System of Georgia's Human Resources as institutional or division-level management positions. Therefore, chances are that Black employees at UGA are more likely to hold a service/ maintenance position than to hold any other non-labor-focused position on campus. Conversely, less than 5% of the highest levels of campus leadership positions are held by a Black person.

The UGA's Black Faculty and Staff Organization was founded in 1982. BFSO began as a grassroots effort of Black faculty and staff to address the low percentages of representation of Black people in the student body, faculty positions, and administrative leadership positions (Presidents, VP's, or Deans), and to respond to the unwelcoming climate for present Black campus members at UGA. BFSO is a non-profit association whose purpose is fulfilled by sustaining a network of Black faculty, staff, and students; assisting UGA with recruiting, retaining, and advocating for the needs of Black faculty, staff, and students; serving as a primary source of contact on matters of the values and issues of UGA Black faculty and staff; and, assisting UGA to reach its institutional goals (BFSO Bylaws, 2016). Aside from providing workshops on topics on the needs of their constituents, BFSO is most known for their annual scholarship luncheon where they honor academic achievements, contributions of Black faculty and staff, honor the founders of BFSO, and various other aspects of Black history at UGA. The organization is also known for engaging service to the local Athens community. BFSO also hosts a list serve and social media presence to share information to all who participate in the organization's networks.

The access to participants for a narrative research study depends upon the researcher's ability to form and cultivate initial relationships with persons who can help to provide access to participants necessary for gathering data for this study (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013; Jones, et al., 2014). However, the researcher must also continue to cultivate the relationship with participants that will allow for the co-construction of knowledge between the investigator and the participants (Jones, et al., 2014). The affinity group leaders served as my initial contact for this study. I relied upon the affinity group leaders to assist me in connecting with Black student affairs professionals who identified themselves as participants in the Black Faculty & Staff Organization (BFSO), UGA's employee racial affinity group organization for Black faculty and staff. Upon the approval and support of the leadership of the BFSO, I distributed an electronic message requesting volunteers to participate in the study (Appendix A.1.). I created an ad for social media that was posted on the Black Faculty and Staff Organization (BFSO) Facebook and other media sites such as Instagram, GroupMe, and Twitter to recruit participants (Appendix A.2.). I used purposeful sampling to recruit 6 to 10 participants. However, when nine participants contacted me and proved to be eligible to participate in the study, I chose all of them, hoping that more narratives would be useful in developing a collective story about how participants experienced a sense of belonging through their engagement in BFSO (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposeful sample techniques are used when researchers are attempting to find participants to meet a specific form of criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2014). When I was notified of a staff member who was interested in participating in the study, I sent them a pre-screening questionnaire (Appendix C) for completion to determine whether the staff member met the preferred criterion for study participation. The study participation criterion was as follows: Black employees working in positions that have been historically affiliated with the functions servings students outside of the classroom at UGA who have participated in some capacity with BFSO.

Upon receipt of a completed form indicating that staff members met all the criteria for the study, and an expressed willingness to participate in the study, I scheduled interview slots with each of them and began conducting interviews.

Data Collection Plan

As eligible participants were identified, each person was asked to consent to participate in a 60 to 90-minute, semi-structured interview (by phone or virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions) focused on how their affiliation with BFSO influenced their employment experiences and sense of belonging. Semi-structured interview formats permitted participants to engage in a conversational dialogue by providing space for participants to express their thoughts and feelings about their experiences (Morse & Field, 1995). The content of this protocol was influenced by theories focusing on a sense of belonging (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995; Strayhorn, 2012). Hagerty and Patusky (1995) created the 26-item sense of belonging inventory (SOBI) to measure belongingness perceptions of community college students, depression patients, and Catholic nuns. Items from this inventory included perceptions of fit, acceptance, value, mattering, participation, and inclusion. Pulling varying elements from this inventory and Strayhorn's (2012) model served as a means of obtaining a holistic perspective of participant's insights on belonging experiences. The interview protocol is located in Appendix G of this proposal.

Each participant who expressed interest in the study received an IRB consent form. The form outlined study participation criteria, study benefits, incentives, and notification of the ability to cease participation at any time (Appendix E). Participants were also notified of the risks involved with participating in the study by way of the IRB form and before their interview participation. The interview protocol included a verbalized reminder to participants of the plans for collecting and securing data, as well as plans for protecting their identity (Appendix G).

Signed consent forms were submitted via email. Participants' verbal consent for study participation was recorded upon my verbal review and confirmation of the procedures and measures taken to secure their identities and the data collected from the study. Audio recording and notetaking were used to collect data from interviews and to generate transcriptions. At the start of each interview, participants were asked to provide a preferred pseudonym to conceal and protect their true identities throughout the study. All recorded audio files and transcripts were stored in a password-protected online drive. Upon conclusion of all interviews, each participant was provided with a $20 gift card for their participation in the study.

Data Analysis

I began my data analysis by taking a holistic approach to looking at the data and utilizing categorical techniques to organize the data into five themes. My approach to data analysis was patterned after Josselson's (2011) approach to narrative analysis. Josselson's (2011) approach is presented in four steps: (a) read through all data, (b) thoroughly read through all data multiple times, (c) capture the whole narrative and look at its parts, and (d) dialoguing themes with theoretical literature (Jones, et al. 2014). The details of how I applied each step of Josselson's (2011) approach to narrative analysis are listed below.

Step 1: Reading Through Data

After each interview, each audio file was labeled with the participant's pseudonym and sent to a third party for transcription. As each transcription was completed, I simultaneously read and listened to the corresponding audio file to confirm accuracy and consistency between what the participants said and the transcribers' interpretation of audio data. The use of this technique to review transcripts minimized the potential for blind spots as I reviewed the data (Miles et al., 2020). As I read through transcripts and participant profiles, I highlighted and took notes for

content related to the research questions. Doing so allowed me to get comfortable with the content of the data and what was being conveyed by participants.

Step 2: Rereading Data Multiple Times

Throughout this process, I re-read transcripts and notes for singular and multiple narratives that may emerge from each transcript. As I read, I looked for indications of a sense of belonging and transformative epistemology to further the construction of knowledge produced from this study. When looking for belonging indicators, I searched for narrative elements indicating connections that participants made with colleagues and others through their participation in BFSO; conversely, I listened for participants' experiences of feeling disconnected, noting how structures and systematic racism threaten Black student affairs professionals' sense of mattering at work. Furthermore, as I reviewed participants' recommendations for maximizing BFSO and proposed lessons for PWI leaders, I saw the emergence of critical perspectives that can be referenced to recommend socially just practices that would better serve the leadership of Black student affairs professionals.

Step 3: Capturing the Whole Narrative and Examining Its Parts

As I reread the data multiple times, I used the Outlook OneDrive to organize all audio files and documents (transcripts and other notes) collected and generated for the study. My next step was to engage in narrative data analysis, which entailed pulling apart and examining the data gathered from participants. My ultimate goal as the researcher/storyteller was to discover themes among the narratives that confirm and contradict each other as I sought to obtain an understanding of the belonging experiences of Black student affairs professionals in this study (Josselson, 2011).

Josselson (2011) defines holistic analysis of narrative study as a process by which "the life story, as represented in the narrative, is considered as a whole and sections of the text are

interpreted with respect to the other parts" (p. 226). I first created participant profiles. Participants' profiles included their information collected from the pre-screening (Appendix C), demographic questionnaires (Appendix F), the interviews, and the notes I developed as I read each of their profiles. Each participant's profile was used as a unit of analysis to address the research questions. As I read each profile, I took note of each person's experiences with the organization. I took note of their responses to question seven, which was written specifically to determine what elements of mattering each of them experienced as a result of their engagement in BFSO. I also noted their responses to the final question which inquired about the lessons they wanted to share with PWI leaders about Black student affairs professionals. Developing the profiles and engaging this method of holistic analysis ultimately expanded my understanding of each participants' stories related to BFSO without conflating their experiences.

Upon the completion of examining each participants' narratives, I moved on to the next phase of data analysis. Josselson (2011) described categorical analysis as a process where the researcher/storyteller "abstracts sections or words belonging to a category, using coding strategies, and compares these to similar texts from other narratives" (p. 226). I used categorical analysis to review my notes and to begin clustering repeated points of data into meaningful themes and patterns to address the research questions identified for this study. I created another Excel spreadsheet that included all nine participant profiles on one spreadsheet. Much like the participant profiles, I situated the demographic labels and interview questions in one column, matching each element of every profile in rows to their corresponding column label in the spreadsheet. I then entered the corresponding responses from each participants' transcript onto the spreadsheet. Once all the profiles containing research data were listed side-by-side in the newer Excel document, I read in search of commonly highlighted and corresponding and inconsistent narratives. Viewing the data in this format allowed me to better read all participant

responses in rows across the entire document, comparing and searching for common and diverging themes.

As I located consistent ideas throughout the spreadsheet, I began grouping and synthesizing common concepts; I also utilized direct interpretation to capture infrequent data elements (statements) that stood alone but held enough profound significance for further consideration. For example, as I read the transcripts about the ongoing engagement experiences, I determined that participants either remained passively (email, listserv, social media) or actively (meeting and event attendance, leadership involvement) engaged in the organization. Therefore, the theme of Sustained Engagement Experiences evolved as an overall description of the ongoing engagement experiences of BFSO study participants. Additionally, throughout the interviews, participants provided evaluative perspectives of BFSO experiences. I felt obligated to present participants' perspectives of these limitations to expose elements of the experience that could potentially jeopardize participants' sense of belonging with the organization, which became a theme in the study. Ultimately, I was able to derive five narrative themes from this process of categorical analysis.

Throughout this study, I kept a reflective journal primarily to manage my positionality, and to remain accountable for discerning my thoughts from actual data provided by the participants' narratives (Linder, 2015). I also utilized memoing for tracking my reflections on the data as I read through participant profiles and transcripts. While Jones and colleagues (2014) presented memo writing as a practice for grounded theory research, I found that utilizing this technique also helped me to preserve my positionality by minimizing my predisposition to project my thoughts onto participants' narratives.

Step 4: Dialoguing Themes with Theoretical Literature

Upon the completion of my analysis, I utilized the narrative approach of restorying the experiences shared by participants. In so doing, as the researcher, I also became the narrator. Restorying is the process by which a researcher takes an active role in retelling or "restorying" participant's narratives into a comprehensible framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones, et al., 2014). For this study, restorying consisted of examining each participant's narratives, organizing the research data into five themes, and presenting the data in the form of interpreted narratives and participants' direct quotes of their BFSO experiences and the lessons they offered for institutional leaders. The restorying of data is presented in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

Trustworthiness

A significant challenge facing the qualitative research design is the perception of its lack of academic rigor in the science community (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flyvberg, 2011; Yin, 2018). While this critique is one that historically follows qualitative research in comparison to quantitative research (Johnson & Christensen, 2016), considerations are compounded by Patton et al.'s (2016) concerns raised about the validity of critical theories informed by the experiences persons holding marginalized identities. The concerns are centered around providing reliable, quantifiable data of the subjective experiences shared by marginalized identified persons. Borrowing Brown's (2018) conception of trustworthiness as being comprised of credibility and ethical responsibility, I've addressed each of these elements and the specific practices associated with them.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative study research constitutes data truthfulness and the researcher's interpretation and representation of that data (Cope, 2014). A significant feature of credibility is the extent to which a researcher can establish trust with research participants (Mills et al., 2010). Cope (2014) recommended that researchers establish credibility by demonstrating their

engagement in their research, sharing their methods of observation, and maintaining an audit trail. The best example of the audit trail emerged in my review of Linder's (2015) and Darawsheh's (2014) accounts of keeping reflective journals. Each researcher kept reflective journals of their experiences as a means of creating self-imposed accountability for reflecting on their interactions with participants in their respective studies. Therefore, I kept a reflective journal of my thoughts and ideas as I was reading through transcripts and drafting ideas and thoughts throughout the study.

I employed member checking to ensure that the voices of the participants are centered on the data. Specifically, member checking is the process by which data is shared with participants to verify the researcher's interpretation of what was shared during the research inquiry (Johnson & Christensen, 2016). My approach to member checking was to distribute copies of the transcriptions to each of the study participants and to request their confirmation and clarity of the expression of ideas and thoughts shared in their respective interviews. Additionally, I summarized my findings and shared the summary of these findings with participants to verify that what was shared with me during our conversations was understood and accurately reflects their perspectives as I got closer to drafting my findings and recommendations for future research. Seven of the nine participants responded with an affirmative agreement that their perspectives were accurately captured and shared in the study findings.

Ethical Responsibility

Ethics, in the scope of research, are the moral codes for conducting studies that involve human subjects (Mills et al., 2010). There are multiple aspects of ethical duty that are owed to research study participants. As previously stated, all study participants who were notified of their eligibility to participate in the study received a copy of the IRB consent form and were asked to complete and return a signed copy of their consent forms to me before I conducted their

interviews. At the time of each interview, all participants were provided with a verbal overview of their rights and protections under IRB, along with my specific intentions regarding how I would protect their identities and store data. Upon completion of the review of their rights as study participants, each participant was asked to provide verbal confirmation of their intent and willingness to participate in the study. Once they responded in agreement to participate, the interviews commenced. As discussed in the data collection section, all study participants retained copies of their signed IRB consent forms and a copy of the approved IRB proposal before the start of the interview. A copy of the completed study was provided to study participants upon request. Participants were also offered the opportunity to cease their participation in the study at any point in time. Borrowing from examples of previous researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Johnson & Christensen, 2016; Yin, 2018), making provisions for participant confidentiality is a key component to gathering reliable and honest data.

Each participant was assigned a fictitious name of their choosing to conceal their identity. These names were used throughout transcripts and served as labels for files as needed. Considering the limited size of the Black faculty and staff community at BFSO, and the potentially small amount of participants connected to BFSO, I was concerned that presenting a composite profile of the participants might make them identifiable. This concern led me to the decision to omit the inclusion of a composite profile of each participant in this study.

Chapter Summary

As the research investigator for this study, choosing narrative inquiry through a transformative paradigm to conduct and analyze this study situates both myself and the study participants as co-narrators on the topic of sense of belonging experiences of Black student affairs professionals participating in an employee racial affinity group at a PWI (Jones, et al., 2014). The co-narration of this phenomenon is designed to raise awareness of equity and

inclusion while de-escalating oppression in an environment that was never historically designed to accommodate the diverse demographic of today's college campuses. My use of categorical and holistic data analysis of participants' narratives resulted in the emergence of five themes that address the research questions posed at the beginning of this chapter.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore how participation in a Black employee affinity group influences Black student affairs professionals' sense of belonging at a predominantly white institution. The research questions that guided this study are:

- What are the experiences of Black student affairs professionals who participate in a racial affinity group at a PWI?
- How, if at all, does a racial affinity group spaces facilitate a sense of belonging at a PWI for Black student affairs professionals?
- What lessons do an employee racial affinity group offer to predominantly white campus leaders about Black student affairs professionals?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine self-identified Black student affairs professionals at the University of Georgia (UGA) to understand their experiences with the Black Faculty and Staff Organization (BFSO), an employee racial affinity group at the institution (see Table 1). Each participant was asked to provide a pseudonym for the study as an effort to conceal their identity. Of the nine participants for the study, three are men, and the remaining six are women. All but one participant identified as being born in the United States. Based on the types of positions they held, it was clear that each participant held a professional or administrative position. Their ages ranged from 26 to 60 years, and they had been at UGA as few as eight months to as many as thirteen years. Participants also varied in their level of education. Most held master's degrees; at least two participants were working toward the completion of terminal degrees.

Table 1

Study Participant Demographic Information

Participant Names	Gender Pronouns	Highest Level of Education	Age	Country of Origin	Length of Time in Current Position	Length of Time Working with Students	Length of Time w/BFSO	Level of Connection & Engagement w/BFSO
Ashley	She/her/hers	Bachelor Degree	31-40	Kenyan	1 year 6 months	9 years 1 month	Less than 1 year	BFSO Member, Email/Listserv
James	He/him/his	Master Degree	26-30	US - American	8 months; previous job 5 Years and 7 months (all at UGA)	10 years 6 months (presently)	1 - 5 years	BFSO Leader/Officer, BFSO Member, Email/Listserv, Social Media, Event Attendance, Meeting Attendance
Jedi	She/her/hers	Bachelor Degree	51-60	US - American	13 years	13 years	10 or more years	Email/Listserv
Jeffrey	He/him/his	Master Degree	26-30	US - American	1 yr. and 3 months	6 years 10 months	1 - 5 years	Email/Listserv, Event Attendance
Joyce	She/her/hers	Master Degree	31-40	US - American	3 yrs. and 7 months	10 yrs. and 3 months	1 - 5 years	Email/Listserv
Kaila	She/her/hers	Doctoral Degree	31-40	US - American	6 years, 2 months	17 years, 2 months	10 or more years	Email/Listserv, Event Attendance
Marcus	He/him/his	Master Degree	26-30	US - American	3 years 5 months	8 years 5 months	Less than 1 year	Meeting Attendance
Panther86	She/her/hers	Doctoral Degree	31-40	US - American	1 year 5 months	10 years 2 months	1 - 5 years	BFSO Member
Tania	She/her/hers	Master Degree	31-40	US - American	1 year 10 months	8 years	1 - 5 years	Email/Listserv

I employed Strayhorn's (2012) Sense of Belonging theoretical model to understand how Black student affairs professionals potentially experienced a sense of belonging through engagement in the UGA Black Faculty and Staff Organization (BFSO). While this model has historically been used to explore a sense of belonging through multiple collegiate student populations, there are few, if any, studies demonstrating the application of Strayhorn's (2012)

Sense of Belonging to non-student populations. Using Strayhorn's (2012) Sense of Belonging and holistic and categorical analysis, the five themes I identified from the narrative data about Black student affairs professionals' participation in BFSO are Discovery, Engagement, Belonging, Evaluation, and Lessons. These themes provide insights into the experiences of Black student affairs professionals' sense of belonging in and outside of the context of their Black faculty and staff organization. Participants shared accounts of how they came into contact with BFSO, their experiences of connection and belonging in and outside of BFSO, how BFSO can be shaped to better suit their needs and reflections on ways in which leaders at their predominantly white institutions can improve their support of Black talent at their respective institutions. I will expand on each of the themes and their associated subthemes in this chapter.

Table 2

Overview of Themes and Study Themes

Themes	Subthemes
Discovery Experiences	Electronic Correspondences
	In-Person Recommendations
	First BFSO Event Attendance
Engagement Experiences	Passive Engagement
	Active Engagement
Belonging in BFSO	Mattering
	Community ("Being a member of BFSO is like…")
Maximizing BFSO Experiences	Less engagement = More skepticism
	Accessibility
	Staff Position Status
Lessons from BFSO for PWI Leaders	Visibility & Validation for Black student affairs professionals
	Honoring Black Connections
	Addressing the Impact of Racism

Discovering BFSO

The theme of *Discovery* emerged from participants' narratives of their initial experiences with BFSO. When asked about how they learned about BFSO, participants most notably mentioned that they learned about it in one of three ways: electronic correspondence (email and

listserv), in-person recommendations, and event attendance. Each of these subthemes is further explained below.

Electronic Correspondence

Five participants reported receiving an email message about BFSO upon being hired or being automatically added to the BFSO listserv upon being hired. Ashley, who had worked at UGA for less than one year, attributed receiving her first BFSO email to "very good HR practices" of pulling and sharing information on newly hired staff. Kaila, the participant who had been at UGA the longest, also attributed the initial receipt of correspondences from BFSO to the HR hiring process: "When they're hired, you maybe identify your race or ethnicity. I think they pool the information and then you get added to the Listserv, but I'm not entirely sure, but I think that is what happened." Tania indicated that her first correspondence came in the form of an email that may have also likely been a newsletter: "I believe I just received that email, one day, so I believe I just got, like, I don't know if I got added to the listserv, I just think I just received the email …maybe it was just their newsletter." Overall, the usage of electronic messaging appears to be the quickest and most effective way of informing new Black staff of BFSO's presence on campus.

In-Person Recommendations

Participants also revealed learning about BFSO either through casual in-person contacts with other Black colleagues. Joyce and Panther learned about BFSO through word-of-mouth. Joyce, who came to UGA as a graduate student, learned about the BFSO via a colleague in the university's Office of Diversity and Inclusion. Panther revealed that upon her arrival to UGA, she learned that she was the only Black professional staff member working in her building. The other staff she encountered were on the custodial or maintenance staff for the university, and a Black custodial staff member shared information with her about BFSO:

> So, when I got into the building, the only Black people that I saw in my college were custodians, and my building has about seven floors. And so, I was trying to get to know all the Black people that I could know, just to figure out how to navigate UGA. And so, someone was like, "Did you get that BFSO email about a meeting?" I said, "No, I don't even know what BFSO is. What is it? How do they meet needs, etc.?" So, someone told me about it and then I reached out and figured out when they would meet, and then I paid dues and I started attending the programs that they have.

As oral traditions have been a significant part of sharing information among persons of African descent (Hamlet, 2011; Jackson & Cothran, 2003), word-of-mouth communication about BFSO is a powerful means for expanding collegial awareness of the existence of this organization among Black colleagues on campus. The power of mutual interests also served as a means to lead Black student affairs professionals to learn more about BFSO through their work departments.

First BFSO Event Attendance

In some instances, the initial encounter with BFSO was facilitated through participants' direct departmental communication of, and attendance to, BFSO's ongoing traditional campus-wide events like the annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) Breakfast and annual Founder's Scholarship Luncheon. Jeffrey, for example, learned that his department had purchased tickets for the MLK breakfast shortly after being informed of BFSO; he was, therefore, able to attend the event with department colleagues. James, Jedi, Ashley, and Joyce provided accounts of how their awareness of the BFSO scholarship led to their engagement in BFSO. James' work department sponsored a table for the Founder's Scholarship Luncheon:

> I would go since I was a part of the office of diversity affairs in my college. That was actually the first time I heard of BFSO. That was probably the first event where I also got to see a lot of Black staff and faculty members attend as well as other administrators attend. So that would be six years ago since the first time I heard about BFSO.

James' encounter with BFSO led him to become a highly engaged member of the organization. At the time of our interview, he had already held positions on the organization's executive board and was continuing to engage with the planning of their events. The sharing of his initial encounter with BFSO speaks to the gravity of the need for Black student affairs professionals to make meaningful connections with other Black colleagues. This encounter also serves to demonstrate the potential that first encounters have concerning developing and sustaining a sense of belonging.

Discovering BFSO Summary

The factors of electronic communication, in-person correspondence, initiatives, and events facilitated the beginnings of participants' connections to BFSO. These initial connections to BFSO extended into sustained engagement practices for each study participant. However, how each participant's engagement is sustained over time is often reflective of their initial encounters with BFSO. The theme of *Discovery* of BFSO illustrates an awareness of the immediate potential for belonging that this organization has for Black student affairs professionals looking to connect with other Black colleagues at a PWI. The following theme, focusing on engagement in BFSO, will provide more insights into how staff continues to maintain a connection to the organization.

BFSO Engagement Experiences

After their initial encounters, staff maintained either active or passive engagement in the organization. The type and level of engagement in BFSO were influenced by factors such as academic interests, job duties, office location, and work schedule flexibility. Details about each participants' contexts provided a deeper understanding of the level and frequency of passive or active engagement opportunities chosen to sustain their connections to BFSO.

Passive Engagement

Sustained forms of passive engagement for participants consisted primarily of electronic correspondence. Jedi and Ashley relied upon email to sustain connections due to their limited proximity to the Athens campus. Jedi shared that working off-campus kept her from being able to attend most campus-based events. Additionally, her status as a non-exempt employee required her to be more present in the office, thus minimizing her ability to be more flexible about getting away to attend events and meetings sponsored by BFSO. Jedi also reported that instead of attending some events, she shared information that she received about BFSO with others in the local community to empower them to take advantage of events and resources offered by the organization. Most of all, Jedi continued to relay that she relied heavily upon being able to utilize email correspondences to seek answers to questions. She recalled her experience of reaching out to BFSO about their annual scholarship awarded to Black UGA students: "I had a question about the scholarships, and it was a really quick response, like, oh, my question was important or mattered, and that it was appreciated that I was inquiring about the scholarship process." Throughout the interview, Jedi maintained an affirmative perspective of the reliability of the organization's potential to be responsive to her inquiries and their ability to support her as needed.

Some participants whose positions were primarily located on the main campus chose to remain connected to BFSO primarily via email correspondence. The convenience of time spent viewing and responding to emails proved to be more manageable for study participants who were either working and in-school, had family obligations, or worked remotely. Their narratives revealed more dimensions for primarily relying on email to stay engaged with BFSO. Panther perceived that sustaining the passive electronic connection was useful for staying informed of matters affecting the Black community of UGA. She specifically discussed how receiving information about forums and discussions held for students and others in the campus community regarding the disproportionate murders of Black people at the hands of law enforcement in the summer of 2020 helped her become more aware of what was going on, and the impact that these events were having upon others on campus.

As Joyce's primary connection to UGA began as a graduate doctoral student, her primary affiliation with others on campus was through the campus' Graduate and Professional Scholars (GAPS) organization. While she is still actively pursuing her doctoral degree, she recognized the need to remain connected to BFSO, even if only in a passive manner: "I guess that I feel like I need more support on that (graduate student) end and versus being a staff member. While Joyce's connection remained passive, she, like other participants, recognized the significance of having such an organization on campus.

Active Engagement

Most participants discussed their active engagement through being members, serving as leaders, attending events, and participating in the annual BFSO scholarship luncheon and award ceremony. Ashley, James, and Panther identified themselves as members of BFSO. James, who served BFSO as an officer, spoke about his engagement through his leadership role. James's motivation for getting involved with BFSO was due to his desire to apply the skills and

experiences he obtained through program development and conference attendance. "I wanted to be a part of the committee to add some breath into the programming…I wanted to give back and contribute. So, I ran as an officer and I was able to be an officer for two years." He was the only participant serving BFSO in a leadership capacity and he is the most immersed in BFSO.

Marcus and Jeffrey indicated in the survey that their engagements in BFSO extended beyond email and were inclusive of attendance at meetings and events. Marcus provided a narrative of a rewarding experience he had with attending a BFSO-sponsored event at a winery in downtown Athens. He described the feelings of knowing that colleagues who were older taking time from their obligations to sit with him, encourage him, and provide him with much-needed wisdom and insights. He described this occasion as "a time where I felt valued that there was a value amongst us as a group." Jeffrey was also able to share his perception of attending BFSO events and the feelings that resonated for him while he was in attendance.

> Every event that I've gone to, it's just been so communal. And when you go to a Black family cookout, there's always people you've never seen before like, "Who are you?" And so that's the same with the Black community staff events here on campus. You meet so many people that you don't know, you find out in some way that you are connected to them. This is really that connection, that communal connection that's created from attending events.

Throughout my interview with Marcus, I learned that his in-person engagements of BFSO meetings and events greatly influenced his sense of connection to other Black colleagues.

Active engagement in BFSO did not always require in-person attendance to events. As previously stated, all study participants somehow encountered and engaged in the BFSO scholarship experience. For example, Joyce, Jedi, and Ashley described their support of the annual BFSO scholarship luncheon and award ceremony by way of paying organizational dues,

nominating students as scholarship recipients, and assisting with the selection of scholarship recipients. While not a stimulating factor for engagement for every study participant, the BFSO scholarship emerged at some point in each interview. Joyce, for example, who started at UGA as a graduate student, admitted to having recommended another member of her graduate degree program to be a scholarship recipient. Jedi also saw her participation in the scholarship process as an added dimension to connecting with the organization. Citing that she had nominated students for scholarship recipients and paid dues for BFSO, Jedi saw her contributions as expanding the awareness of UGA resources to the local Athens community. Ashley also expressed feelings of appreciation every time she pays her membership dues, knowing that a portion of the dues goes toward the scholarship fund: "So that's pretty much it, as far as trying to participate, especially with this scholarship nomination process, as far as the scholarship judging process, I thought I would be able to help with that." While not explicitly stated, it appeared that supporting the scholarship served as a way for staff to engage BFSO in aiding the retention of students at UGA. However, participating in the scholarship process (by way of paying dues, making nominations, assisting with selection, or attending events) demonstrated a commitment to supporting BFSO in its efforts to serve the campus community, while providing a vehicle for staff to experience connection and belonging to the organization itself.

BFSO Engagement Experiences Summary

Regardless of the type of engagement, participants' narratives indicated their investment in being connected to BFSO. BFSO serves as a core entity in connecting Black employees on campus with each other and with students. However, the methods of preserving connections through and beyond BFSO set the stage for sustaining belonging and connections among Black student affairs professionals. The following section provides insight into how each participant experienced some form of connection or belonging associated with their participation in BFSO.

Belonging Through BFSO

The theme of *Belonging Through BFSO* highlights the feelings, experiences, and sentiments that demonstrate how BFSO facilitates a sense of belonging for Black student affairs professionals who participated in this study. Participants shared stories of how they perceived their connection to others (and UGA) through BFSO. While the level and quality of engagement varied, each participant described how BFSO sustained connection for each of them. Participants' narratives also spoke of BFSO in metaphors that reflect the nuances of kinship and community. This section is devoted to exploring participants' perceptions of their belonging experiences. The subthemes that emerged in this section focus on mattering and community.

Mattering

A set of questions specifically addressing participant's experiences of belonging through their engagement in BFSO was constructed around the five dimensions of mattering that comprise the fourth core element of Strayhorn's (2012) model. According to Strayhorn (2012), "sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of mattering" (p. 21). Strayhorn (2012) referred to Schlossberg's (1989) five dimensions of mattering (importance, attention, dependence, appreciation, and ego extension) to define his fourth core element. Each participant was asked to share an account of either witnessing or experiencing each of the dimensions of mattering through BFSO. While their accounts varied on different dimensions, there was enough evidence to suggest that each participant experienced some aspect of mattering concerning their BFSO experiences. For this study, the sub-themes in this section will focus on experiences of being a new employee at UGA, attending BFSO activities, connecting beyond BFSO events, and synergy.

Being New at UGA

Several participants shared accounts of receiving attention from members of BFSO upon their respective arrivals to UGA. Both Tania and Panther mentioned how several members of BFSO reached out to each of them to welcome them to the campus community. For Tania, outreach from BFSO participants occurred in an exchange of mutually shared stories about their experiences at UGA and her previous experiences. The fact that this outreach occurred early on upon her arrival at UGA also held significance for her:

> Again, "recognizing that you're new to the community. Let us introduce who we are. Here's what we do. Here's our motto…you can actually be a part of this even though…we don't know you, but you are a part of this if that makes sense." Like you're coming in and it's not like a secret club. [BFSO] reached out to [me] and I didn't have to search and find them.

Tania's perspective on the experience of feeling appreciated by BFSO focused on her and others' choices to maintain an ongoing connection with the organization. She also gave credence to the resources that the organization has to offer and was appreciative of the connection.

Upon her initial attendance at a BFSO event, Panther experienced being recognized as someone who had the potential to offer more to colleagues than her predecessor. Panther shared details of her initial connection to BFSO:

> I think from the first time I went to a program, of course, I was a new face. And so, a lot of people came up to me and asked me who I was, what college I worked in, and proceeded to tell me other members that were in my college that were involved and engaged. So, from the time I was a member, I feel like I was instantly embraced with just positive experiences from everyone.

Panther also shared an account of other Black colleagues attempting to find her due to the leadership position of her department: "And they were like, 'Yeah, you're one of the few Black

directors on the whole campus.' And I'm like, 'How did find me?' 'Oh, someone from BFSO told me I should reach out.'" The connections that were made by word-of-mouth served to mutually benefit both Panther as well as those whom she could potentially help. Panther's account serves as a reminder of the benefits of connecting with new student affairs staff upon their arrival to the campus community.

Jeffrey spoke of an annual event held at the beginning of the year sponsored by BFSO to recognize new faculty and staff within their first year of employment at UGA: "I do feel seen at those events, definitely by campus partners, people who are allies…I do think they value equality in UGA's campus." For Jeffrey, attending BFSO events was an opportunity to have visibility, which contributed to feelings of importance for him through his BFSO affiliation. Jeffrey also shared that receiving encouragement from others at BFSO events and on a more personable level left him feeling empowered. It is evident from the responses that BFSO facilitated memorable and meaningful points of entry for Black staff into the UGA campus environment.

BFSO Recognition of Contributions & Achievements

Ashley and Kaila each shared their reflections of feeling important as a result of attending BFSO sponsored activities. Ashley perceived BFSO as offering much more than scholarships to others which contributed to her feelings of significance and importance while attending the Founder's Scholarship event. "Because I know not everything BFSO is strictly that (scholarship event). They share everything." Ashley's comment indicated a broader sense of appreciation for the presence of Black student achievement, which was something that appeared to resonate with her, hence her feelings of significance, Kaila similarly stated that there was value in recognizing the good work of Black colleagues and students through BFSO's recognition events and expressed

appreciation of the affirmative occasion: “I mean, I think I appreciate and recognize the good work that Black faculty and staff do across campus and the impact that they make.”

Based on the responses from each of the participants, it appeared that the recognition of excellence among students as well as faculty and some staff on campus signaled the importance of Black staff. James, the study participant most involved in BFSO, provided his perspective of experiencing importance through the organization. He shared a historical account of how BFSO brought significance to the presence of Black people at UGA. According to James, the BFSO history is recounted for attendees each year during the Founders’ Scholarship Luncheon:

> So, we talk all the time about our history, every single founder's luncheon, which is so important because, in the 1980s, BFSO was the only existing bubble about Blackness or Black identity. We always talk about its significance and how thanks to those huge Presidents who pushed especially Dr. Maurice Daniels is one of the big founders who really pushed for a multicultural services office, which is still now in existence. It's the oldest \ multicultural office on campus and African Institute. So, the significance is so important because Black staff members and faculty members didn't have anybody else to talk to. Didn't have a network. And by finally circling themselves in the 1980s, it opened the doors for so many other offices in institutions and degree programs to finally represent Black students, Black identity, and have it actually represented on campus, so I would definitely say that that is super significant. We go through that history every single year so that all those folks who were there from the community and they're from the university can remember that it started with BFSO so many years ago.

While James' response does not reflect how he experiences feelings of importance, it does shed light on the significance of the organization itself and how it is poised to provide belonging experiences and a sense of community for Black staff, faculty, and students at UGA through the recognition of talents, contributions, and achievement. The annual review of the history of BFSO served as a matter of preserving the legacy of the organization itself, and also honoring its role in bringing the significance of Black faculty and staff to light.

Belonging Beyond BFSO Events

Beyond the formalities of BFSO campus events, study participants had much to say about the feelings associated with mattering that they experienced as a result of their participation in BFSO. As an active leader in BFSO and self-proclaimed younger organization member, James expressed feeling validated and appreciated for his contributions to the organization. James admitted that his desire to get involved in the organization led him to nominate himself to be an officer. He specifically shared how his experiences of contributing ideas and efforts to achieve successful organizational events resulted in him feeling appreciated by event attendees and members of BFSO: "It was really nice to have people come up and say, 'You did a phenomenal job!' 'This was great!' 'Way to go!'… way to create a space…and it does feel good." James also believed that as one of few Black men on campus and in BFSO, he often experienced colleagues and mentors rooting for his success. He shared their reactions to his admission of wanting to catch up to those who most inspire him to succeed: "And I will always tell them 'I just want to catch up halfway to your level'. They're like, 'No, I envisioned for you to go beyond what I can do.'" James perceived this push as positive support toward the achievement of his goals. James closed his thoughts on this topic by expressing pride in his ability to leave his mark on the organization. He also hoped that others would come behind him to extend the momentum of his efforts and make their own contributions to BFSO.

Marcus provided an example of experiencing encouragement was about his service to the campus' Race and Ethnicity and Community Task Force. He described the positive reactions from other BFSO colleagues after being featured in a newsletter. Like James, Marcus expressed how the encouragement of these other colleagues positively impacted his perspective on his achievement.

As previously stated, Panther shared an account of how, through her connection to BFSO, colleagues perceived her as someone who would be able to better serve the campus than her predecessor, whom she was told struggled with people and communication skills. Panther learned about the perception of her office and her predecessor when she joined BFSO. Hearing comments like "Oh, they got you over there. I know things are going to get done or I've been hearing that the office has changed as you have started leading it" signaled to her that her colleagues perceived her presence in the role with perspectives of hope and encouragement for improved relations with her office.

By sheer virtue of their connection to BFSO, study participants were able to form relationships that manifest into positive and affirmative experiences of belonging. These experiences also extended into the development of ongoing partnerships based on reciprocity and manifesting into synergistic engagements.

Synergy

The notion of dependence was explored through the inquiry of participants being asked to describe how they experienced networking, partnerships, and reciprocity between themselves and other colleagues as a result of their connection to BFSO. There was evidence of synergistic experiences between participants' connections to BFSO and the actual job responsibilities they held regarding their work with students. Participants' experiences indicated that there were enough varied avenues for networking that extended beyond BFSO.

Panther's account of reciprocity demonstrated the ongoing synergistic connection between her job duties and her connection to BFSO. Her job position requires her to place educators throughout school districts. Panther described that on many occasions, she was asked to help identify students of varying social identities. Her connection to BFSO led to the development of additional partnerships with school coordinators and allowed her to expand her agency with the placement of student teachers. Ultimately her connection to BFSO served to benefit her and others whom she was trying to serve.

Marcus, Tania, Ashley, and James hold positions that require establishing and maintaining connections with a variety of campus partners, including staff, alumni, and external entities. Each provided details of how they were able to utilize their respective connection to BFSO to share information on upcoming events, to fill internship positions, and to connect students with alumni employers. Each admitted that reaching out to BFSO helped them to expand their capacity to reach Black students and employers, which resulted in mutual gains for all parties involved. The sharing and trading of information regarding students of various marginalized identities, particularly Black students and alumni, helped to better fulfill the missions of their respective departments.

Jeffrey described having a good network within BFSO and across campus: "I have a strong network of Black men who definitely, I feel like have my back. One helped me get my job here this year and is now assistant to the president and yeah, I feel super connected." Jeffrey was able to reflect on his education he received from his graduate program in student affairs and identified the synergy between his academic awareness and his experience with BFSO. In his discussion, he stated how the *1937 Personnel Point of View* (ACE, 1937) mentions the work of student affairs and the need for cultivating meaningful partnerships. Jeffrey believed that the connections he made through his

affiliation with BFSO helped him to better fulfill his mission as a student affairs professional.

Community

The idea of kinship was a common reference of most participants to explain their connection to BFSO. When asked what being a part of BFSO is like, participants often referred to BFSO as a family; others mentioned the idea of being connected to something bigger. Participants also saw the need for Black faculty and staff connecting in safe spaces for both themselves and others. Essentially, their sentiments of the connection to BFSO were an indication that BFSO provided a sense of community that allowed each of them to feel supported and connected to each other and to the campus community.

Family

The idea of BFSO as a family connection resonated with several participants. According to Marcus, being a member of BFSO is like having distant cousins. He described "distant cousins" as people he knew, but with whom he didn't have much time to maintain the level of contact he'd prefer to maintain personal connections. However, as Marcus described, regardless of the barriers of time and other circumstances, connecting with colleagues feels familial: "And I don't think that a lot of us live around each other, which is why the distant cousin part…when we get together, it's gonna be a time." Marcus went on to elaborate on how this familial connection did not hinder his ability to see what BFSO colleagues offered to each other in terms of support and good work being done on campus. He expressed his appreciation for BFSO being a space of "our own" where he and others can feel free to be authentic, valued, and appreciated.

For Jeffrey, attending a BFSO event was like attending a family cookout. He further elaborated on the sense of comfort that he experienced with his interactions:

> And I say that because in Black culture, cookouts area time with the community being together, if not celebrating something specific, just celebrating in life. There's good food, there's laughing, just being in community. And I think that's important. I think if you look out through our history, I speak about this a lot, being in community with each other, that's how Black people were able to survive so many of the harsh things that we've experienced in our culture, especially here in America and stuff.

James perceived BFSO gatherings as having both a spiritual and familial vibe. He asserted that the ability of Black people to connect in the work environment increased our ability to manage environments that are not as welcoming. He also described BFSO as being a family reunion. According to James, BFSO was the first place he met other Black faculty and staff. He described the vibe at the start of meetings to be one where people greeted and caught up with each other informally – lots of hugging, shaking hands, and chatter. These intimate interactions resonated as dynamics he experienced at family reunions. While these interactions may have caused delays to starting some meetings and events on time, these moments were cherished among attendees that over time, they become a welcome norm of the BFSO collective experiences.

Both Jedi and Panther shared how the family metaphor helped to minimize their feelings of loneliness. For each of them, the likening of BFSO to family was significant due to their limited contacts with other Black colleagues at work. According to Jedi, the notion of BFSO being akin to a family entity meant that if she experienced challenges at work, she had a group of people to quickly connect with to provide her with guidance and resources to navigate any challenges she may face. Aside from the feeling of connecting to what appears to be “family” at work, the implication for the collective engagement to have a soulful impact bears significance when contemplating how we view one another at work.

Something Bigger

Respondents revealed, directly and indirectly, that BFSO was an entity bigger than themselves; the perceived magnitude of the organization facilitates the necessity to experience a connection to others in the campus community. Tania described her affiliation with BFSO was like "having our own personal community amongst their larger community." For Ashley and Jedi, two of the participants in the study who work at a remote location from the main campus, BFSO still provided a meaningful sense of connecting to the campus. Being a part of BFSO made UGA more accessible for Ashley, who came from a small non-profit agency. She described being a part of BFSO as being included in the "bigger picture" of UGA. Ashley also stated that each time she receives an email from BFSO, "I'm just reminded that I'm not alone."

Jedi described how being a member of BFSO was a means of having a better connection to what is occurring on campus. The significance of Jedi's statement is further explained when she provided context regarding her position and work environment:

> I'm considered a program assistant, so we're kind of on the lower, very lowest tier of the hierarchy, I guess you can say. So, lots of time the information doesn't get to us or we're not included. To have that connection with BFSO was very, very important, because with the division I work in, up until about a year ago, the program assistants weren't even included on the listserv, so we missed a lot of information and we're not even encouraged or given information about tuition assistance and how we could go back and get a degree…We're the ones that are out when it's late and it's snowing and almost a hundred degrees working in the field while others are teleworking from home and doing selfies on Facebook.

Jedi disclosed that she was the only Black staff member in her office and was labeled as being "sensitive" due to her concern over a situation that she described as a racial microaggression. For

Jedi, being connected to BFSO provided her with the security of knowing that she could access an entity bigger and beyond herself that could represent her interests and provide her with support or assistance as needed. She described BFSO as being "backup" if she needed to contact someone to process situations at work that may be deemed as racist or discriminatory. Similarly, Panther likened being a part of BFSO to "finding people with similar ideas and experiences in a predominantly white institution where you don't often feel heard, trusted or respected."

Belonging Through BFSO Summary

Essentially, the data presented under the theme of *Belonging and Connection* reveals that participants experienced varying components of mattering, hence belonging. Their experiences of feeling valued and having others rooting for one's success are indicators that BFSO facilitates mattering. Therefore, it is safe to assume that BFSO serves as a viable conduit for Black student affairs professionals to experience a sense of belonging, as well as to connect with other Black colleagues in meaningful and affirming ways. The next theme will explore insights that study participants held about how BFSO could potentially maximize their engagement experiences.

Maximizing Staff Experiences with BFSO

While most participants were able to speak to the value of BFSO, they also provided evaluative perspectives on ways that BFSO could be maximized to serve more staff in more meaningful ways. Their perspectives indicated variances in their level and quality of engagement and revealed perceived inequities of staff access to BFSO and its resources. First, the less engaged a participant was in BFSO, the more likely they were to question the purpose behind the organization's practices. Second, insights regarding the accessibility of the organization were shared based on a variety of factors. Each of the subthemes is explored in detail.

Less Engagement = More Skepticism

Less engaged participants were more skeptical about what they were gaining out of BFSO or whether it was BFSO's mission to provide them with certain things. For example, Kaila, who is not an official member of BFSO, admitted that BFSO was a worthwhile organization. In the earlier parts of our interview, she stated that she had attended events in the past and described herself as being connected to the organization. Later on in the interview, Kaila also described herself as having a lack of involvement with BFSO over the ten years that she's been connected to the organization. Kaila questioned the value and gains for herself based on the gaps in time between signature events. "I feel like it's just a lot of emails that get sent that just seem disconnected and don't create that ongoing connection needed between some of these signature events." While posing this question, Kaila also admitted that she created her own way of making her connection to BFSO work for her by supporting signature programs and nominating others for awards. However, for Kaila, the periods between events appeared to equate to gaps in engagement experiences with BFSO.

Joyce arrived at UGA as a graduate student. As such, her primary affiliation was with Graduate and Professional Scholars (GAPS). When asked how BFSO helps her to navigate the climate at UGA, Joyce pondered whether it was a part of BFSO's mission to do so: "I feel like I was able to do that with the GAPS when I first came here. And I also do that when I meet other Black women in my similar position. But in terms of BFSO itself, No." Although she remained connected to BFSO by way of the organizational listserv, Joyce, perceiving a lack of ongoing activity between larger BFSO events, which she never attended, also expressed skepticism about the collection of dues for BFSO. While she was aware of the scholarship, there was no indication in Joyce's response to suggest that she connected paying dues with funding the scholarship. "So, I don't give them any money. And I know they had announcements for positions you know, to be

on the Executive Board, but I'm like I don't really see them doing too much in terms of, you know, activities."

Kaila and Joyce's observations were quite telling of how being connected to an organization and not being engaged can affect an understanding of the organization's goals and purpose. Having more clarity of BFSO's mission would have likely helped both participants and members to better serve as advocates for the organization. Increased knowledge and awareness of the organization's mission can also position the organization to grow and sustain the needs of all constituents.

Accessibility

Since some study participants were not paying members of BFSO, I felt it was important to look at factors that kept them from making the full commitment to becoming members. While most staff in this study maintained that BFSO had value for them and that BFSO was necessary, they were also able to identify several factors that inhibited their accessibility to the organization. These factors included locations for meetings and events, the organization's lack of visibility, communication frequency and timeliness, limited in-person interactions, professional development, and disparities experienced by staff in relation to faculty as well as employment status within staff positions.

Location

Jedi, Ashley, and Panther were the most vocal about how their locations impacted their ability to attend BFSO activities. Some of these location challenges were further impacted by the type of jobs and positions they had. According to Panther, there had not been as many BFSO meetings. The meetings that occurred were not close to the location of her college. An effort for Panther to attend BFSO events required her to rearrange her schedule to avoid having to drive around to find parking. She also explained how challenging it was to have to obtain parking

passes for various parts of campus, which also hindered her desire to drive to all the different meeting locations.

Ashley's location is an hour and a half from Athens. Her concerns were paired with observations about the limited timeliness with which she had been notified of BFSO events. She made a brief mention of the pandemic stating that once an all-clear was issued from the CDC, that she would be looking forward to attending more events again, provided that she received proper notification from the organization about their activities.

BFSO Visibility and Notoriety

Throughout the interviews, participants stated their appreciation for being seen as a result of their connections within BFSO. They also discussed BFSO's advocacy and influence. A third of the participants in this study wanted to see an increase in the visibility and awareness of the organization. Marcus saw that increased visibility of the organization would expand others' awareness of it, and hopefully attract more people to get involved, especially those who were new to UGA.

Panther believed that BFSO needed to be more visible, particularly among new faculty and staff. When noting the efforts made to reach out to new employees, she suggested that a newsletter publication containing information on the mission and values of BFSO would be useful to new employees. Much like Panther, Kaila suggested that regular communication from BFSO would benefit the organization by making it more visible on campus. She believed that informing the campus of what BFSO does, and providing a guide to new campus employees would be sufficient visibility for the organization:

> Maybe even doing that regularly, like here's what you get out of the BFSO would be helpful. I don't like to add more to people's work, but I don't know if they do or not. Again, I'm not following them, but if they have some type of presence online,

> do they regularly share their story in different ways? How are they sharing their stories beyond just them? What do you get out of being a part of this organization, except for emails here and there?

For Kaila, increased visibility of BFSO extended the narrative of the gains and benefits that one may obtain by being a part of the organization.

Study participants expressing their desire for BFSO to increase visibility indicates their awareness of what this organization has to offer, as well as its potential to assist more people. Despite the desire to see BFSO as a more visible entity on campus, it is important to note that of the nine participants, only two had informed their supervisors of their connection to, and participation with BFSO. Advocating for more exposure for BFSO also serves as an indicator that there is greater visibility need beyond what the leaders of the organization may even be aware of. Exploring ways of effectively utilizing various forms of communication can also assist with capturing the attention of other future and current BFSO participants.

Communication Frequency & Timeliness

The participants in this study also shared their desire to see improvements in the timeliness and frequency of communication from BFSO. For some, the lack of timeliness of communication kept them from being able to properly prepare to attend an event held on the Athens campus. Jedi discussed how more timely communication could provide her with more opportunities to plan to attend BFSO events in purpose.

> I think if the notices about events or programs were sent in a little more timely manner, sometimes if I had one more notice other than a day or two before...I got a notice or a flyer about something the next day and I felt, wow, if I had known, I'd love to have gone to this, but I can't. It's just not enough turnaround time. So, I did email back and say, "Is it possible," and of course I was professional, "Is it

possible to get a little more notice?" And the reply was, "We sent it out as soon as we got it."

While it was seemingly understandable that BFSO didn't always receive timely communication of campus events, Jedi also expressed concern that BFSO's failure to distribute timely communication about events hurts the organization.

In the earlier part of her interview, Kaila also commented on her observations about communication from BFSO. She stated that being a part of BFSO was like "receiving a lot of disconnected information". Her suggestion was for BFSO to employ practices to ensure more timely and meaningful connections with participants and members of the organization: "They have a listserv and there was one point where I asked to be taken off the 1istserv because I just felt like I was getting a lot of emails that just came sporadically, didn't have a lot of contexts." Kaila went on to suggest that the leaders of BFSO establish a system of regular, consistent communication. She also recommended utilizing a website and outlining the benefits of being in BFSO, particularly for Black employees who are newer to UGA.

Kaila's commentary serves as a reminder that it takes more than a web-based presence to demonstrate the nature and purpose of any organization. It is unclear whether the conditions of COVID-19 influenced how the virtual communication practices of the organization were executed. However, there is evidence to suggest that there is room to expand and enhance the quality of BFSO's existing communication practices to both increase awareness of the organization and its values, as well as to efficiently inform members of engagement opportunities in a strategic and timely manner.

Personable (In-Person) Interactions

As previously stated, conducting this study with colleagues during pandemic restrictions may shape how participants received the quality and content of both communications and in-

person interactions with BFSO. However, the insights offered by participants demonstrate a desire for participants to have more in-person connections rather than virtual engagements. Jeffrey, for example, offered the idea of having a conference-style event that would allow for breakout sessions to discuss the issues occurring around campus: “I think that's something like a caucus, a Black caucus when we're all together. Let's talk about some of these issues…why not have people to moderate that is briefed on the things that have transpired on campus within a certain timeframe?” Tania also expressed her desire to engage in in-person meeting opportunities with BFSO leaders. She saw this as an opportunity to have meaningful conversations with the leaders:

> I guess I'm more “meet and greet”. Like, just like where you can meet and not necessarily be a huge event or something like that. But just even if you could just meet the committee or meet, you know, whoever is designing a newsletter or something like that, just to meet them. Maybe in a smaller setting, just so you are introduced before you go to a bigger event or just, I guess, having a conversation with me to say, you know, are you even able to attend anything, if not but just so you know this community out here exists.

In-person contact, for both Jeffrey and Tania, appeared to provide opportunities to increase personal awareness of BFSO, as well as network for each participant who offered this reflection. The anticipation of future opportunities to discuss challenges, to connect with organizational leaders appeared to be a source of hope for participants. No mention was made of any attempts for BFSO virtual engagement.

Professional Development

Most participants alluded to the need for the professional development of some form, including mentoring. To understand additional gains that staff had from their participation in

BFSO, I asked about their professional development experiences. Six of the nine participants reported that they had not experienced formal professional development through BFSO. They talked about their experiences in and outside of BFSO. James, who is an officer in BFSO advocated for more support for staff throughout his interview. As stated previously in this section, he shared his desire for the organization to offer more development opportunities for staff who may not have access to resources, and who may be experiencing challenges with supervisors and colleagues in the workplace.

> So, I think when I was an officer, we had one that entire year, which did get some turnout and those who did turn out were mid-level and higher, and they said, "Hey, in order to reach more students, the staff we have we may have to reconsider the location. We may have to go to those staff members who really need to be at these meetings." So, I really think that BFSO is super supportive for graduate students for undergrads, but I want to see more expansion of how we build ourselves as staff members.

For James, offering professional development opportunities through BFSO was important. While James' response was evaluative of a larger vision of professional development, he was able to identify how he developed as a result of his engagement in BFSO. According to James, being an officer and attending meetings helped him to learn how to navigate as an administrator on his campus. He also reported learning the value of collective advocacy with BFSO, which manifests in conversations with faculty and providing unified messages from the organization when necessary. James also attributed his time with BFSO to developing his ability to communicate more clearly with various audiences at the university, including executive administrators, staff, and campus partners. The development experiences he described were

practical and applicable to his current position and empowered him to want to offer more to other staff.

Joyce described her participation in BFSO as a representation of a personal holistic, self-development, rather than professional development, where she could meet other people of similar backgrounds. Acknowledging the small Black population at UGA, Joyce felt as though connecting with other Black colleagues, learning about their experiences and their positions was meaningful. Her critique of professional development offerings by BFSO was that they appeared to be limited. According to Joyce, BFSO was "not really an avenue that I look for in terms of professional development." However, this didn't prevent her from offering suggestions on how BFSO could better provide professional development opportunities for staff. Joyce's recommendations regarding the offering of professional development to staff members were to have someone in BFSO focused primarily on staff development. She also stated that HR offered viable opportunities for her to enhance her professional development.

Other topic offerings that were mentioned throughout the interviews were focused on financial planning, credit management, and hypertension awareness, topics that seemingly plague the African American population. Kaila also mentioned that BFSO offered a session on retirement through BFSO: "So, I realize it's a different form of professional development, but I thought that was sort of a unique thing too." Those who did not experience professional development through BFSO reported doing so through their departments. The responses of participants regarding professional development opportunities leave the impression that there is still room and potential for the organization to provide these meaningful opportunities either directly or in partnership with HR, and with other entities throughout the university.

Staff Position Status

This study focused on the extent to which an organization whose charge is to serve both faculty and staff truly provides a sense of belonging to staff in student affairs. It is difficult to consider staff support without questioning whether the experiences for faculty are different. Two significant observations emerged for staff positions juxtaposed to faculty counterparts. First, there is the question of the extent to which faculty are provided more intentional support than staff. Second, some inquiry emerged regarding the accessibility to BFSO by essential labor-oriented positions, and for non-director level positions.

Faculty v Staff

One of the most memorable quotes in this study came from Joyce. Throughout her interview, Joyce's perspectives were full of speculation regarding the intent and mission of BFSO. When sharing her perspective regarding who stands to gain the most from BFSO, and its commitment toward supporting staff, this is what she said: "It's definitely the F before the S...I'd be curious to know how faculty that are Black is involved in the organization, versus staff. Is it's different for them? Are they more connected?" Joyce's speculations are consistent with her previous statements regarding the intent and mission of BFSO. Having been initially connected to UGA as a graduate student and member of Graduate and Professional Scholars (GAPS), Joyce was candid regarding her uncertainty of the commitment of faculty to BFSO, stating at one point in time that their service to the organization may be guided by a need to fulfill service commitments to secure tenure.

James, who is more directly involved with BFSO, shared his thoughts and perceptions of the organization's prioritization of faculty over staff. He also expressed a desire for colleagues who are unable to attend meetings to benefit from what BFSO has to offer. James' perspective was similar to Joyce's perspective:

> I think usually the S in any acronym is always forgotten with your staff. So, I really think I want to see more development for staff members who don't know, who don't have access to resources, who don't have support when they're going through issues with their superiors and the workplaces. And I do think once again the new scholarship that will award some of our staff members for being the unsung heroes, that's a positive first step.

The "scholarship" James is referring to is the emergence of a new recognition award for staff and their efforts to serve and lead at UGA. The idea of this being a new form of recognition also signals a potential disparity between the organization's support of staff versus faculty.

Ironically, the participants who shared perspectives regarding the prioritization of faculty were on opposite spectrums of involvement with BFSO; regardless of the level of their engagement, both shared the same concern for the disparity in priority of treatment between staff and faculty who participate in the organization. However, it's worth mentioning that any disparity that exists is more of a reflection of academic culture than the organization itself. The idea of faculty being more essential to the educational environment comes with clout and privilege. While BFSO is intended to support the needs of Black employees at UGA, the perspective offered by staff participating in this study is that BFSO is not immune to taking on the nuances of reinforcing the hierarchy of valuing faculty over staff.

Administrative v Essential Staff

At times throughout the study, I learned that all staff was not able to equally access the BFSO. For example, most of the staff I spoke with held non-exemption statuses at the university. While it's unclear whether some staff were hourly wage earners, it was evident that none of the staff who participated in this study were the essential staff – i.e. grounds crew, facilities maintenance, dining, or other labor-focused positions. The following section goes a bit deeper

regarding the accessibility of BFSO by essential labor-oriented positions and for non-director level positions.

Upon her arrival, Panther, a director-level staff member, was the only non-custodial Black staff member working in her building. She learned of BFSO through the custodial staff who work in the same building as she. Having an awareness of the specific needs for support of essential staff, she shared the following concern during our interview:

> I had also heard when I started, that BFSO did not want to accept membership from custodians. I don't know how true that is or not. But that was also a break in some people's ideas or feelings about continuing with the organization, which is where they only allow certain Black people in these roles to be a part of this organization. If that's not true, which I'm hoping is not, that working on changing that stigma as well, I think would be helpful.

It was evident in our conversation that Panther equated the perception of limited access to BFSO to be as detrimental to the maintenance staff as it would be to any other Black staff member who would be limited in their ability to access the organization. Her proximity to custodial staff would have likely influenced her awareness and concern of the possible exclusion of essential staff from the much-needed advocacy offered by BFSO.

Jedi, being a coordinator-level employee, disclosed her concerns about how staff at her position level are often not provided the same considerations as employees at the director level. A portion of her job responsibilities requires her to attend various training sessions. According to Jedi, the people she often sees at those sessions are either African American or Latinx program assistants:

> Usually, we get to visit for training, maybe once or twice a year. Unfortunately, I work in a grant program, so lots of times, if there's a special luncheon or

> something, they'll say that we're not approved to go, or if we go, we would have to take personal time to go. So, we're not really encouraged to participate in things, so we kind of get left out. So, they'll have different things, programs, or ice cream socials, those types of things, so we don't get a chance to go and bond with other departments on campus and that type of thing.

Jedi continued to describe her role as a program assistant as being "out in the field while other people are taking two and three-hour lunchtimes, or leaving early, or coming in at nine". She also referred to her and other program coordinator positions as being "at the bottom" in terms of position status. Jedi's perception of her position further indicated that some staff positions are predisposed to be excluded from opportunities for growth and development. Jedi did not share experiencing any disparities in treatment through her affiliation or engagement in BFSO. It is evident by Jedi's account that her ability to access in-person events was primarily due to the essential nature of her position and the restrictions placed on her by department leaders. Jedi's perspective of limitations due to her position also impacted her ability to see beyond her position as Program Coordinator in the context of her work position. However, the implications from Jedi's and Panther's observations have significance to BFSO. Jedi's perspective as an essential worker suggests that staff at some levels are not provided with equitable access or flexibility to attend BFSO events due to the nature of their jobs, as well as the perception held by managers regarding the need for essential staff to be "on" all the time. Panther's perspective speaks directly to concerns that BFSO may marginalize labor staff by omission.

The comments on the aforementioned topic bear further consideration for members of BFSO who wish to advocate for staff colleagues at all levels. Exploring the disparities of engagement in BFSO that exist based on staff employment status at the university is essential to the organization's growth and integrity, whose purpose is to provide support to Black employees.

Failing to intentionally acknowledge and combat the disparities within the staff population may have further implications for the organization's growth, support, and ability to truly support and serve all Black UGA employees.

Maximizing Staff Experiences with BFSO Summary

Participants' perspectives on how maximizing their BFSO experiences illuminate the need for leaders of similar organizations like BFSO to stay aware of the needs and perceptions of its membership. No organization can reasonably fulfill the needs of each person whom they are designed to serve. However, the necessity for BFSO and organizations like it to fully serve both its faculty and staff require intentional consideration of practices that will either bridge or alienate the very people they are designed to serve. Regardless of any perceptions of BFSO's strengths and shortcomings, the value and lessons to be gleaned from these organizations serve to poise university leaders, particularly at PWI's, to better cultivate and retain professional staff talent at their respective universities.

Lessons from BFSO Student Affairs Participants to PWI Leaders

The final research question centered on lessons learned by campus leaders from Black student affairs professionals' experiences in BFSO. Each participant's reaction reflected their experiences with BFSO. While respondents varied on their level and quality of engagement in BFSO, various aspects of each persons' narrative revealed that access to racially-based employee affinity groups like BFSO is necessary for Black staff to feel supported at PWIs. Groups like BFSO offer visibility and validation to Black student affairs professionals, honor connections between Black colleagues, and facilitate opportunities for Black student affairs professionals to collectively address racism.

Visibility & Validation for Black Student Affairs Professionals

Visibility speaks to others' ability to perceive multiple dimensions of a person – job competencies, values, and the unique ways we show up in homogenous environments. Being seen and accepted is a pure form of validation. Participants' responses indicated that BFSO provides a space where they can see each other for their talents, work, and contributions to the campus environment. Since BFSO does facilitate visibility for many Black colleagues, it is imperative to discuss the influence that being seen has on honoring one's existence and all that each person has to offer.

Although participants had a lot to share about being recognized around BFSO events and throughout campus, they also shared narratives of not feeling valued in their departments. Tania, James, and Jeffrey shared their frustrations of not being seen. Each discussed the importance of being recognized and valued, wanting Black student affairs professionals to be seen for more than just representing diversity among university employees.

Tania first discussed the impact of feeling underestimated. She discussed how, in predominantly white spaces, Black student affairs professionals are often undervalued, and having to prove themselves constantly. Tania also suggested that Black colleagues navigate the discomfort without having to be forced to appease white colleagues to obtain comfort at work. James discussed how bias in hiring minimizes the dimensions through which Black colleagues are considered capable of offering to our organization. He discussed wanting to be seen as capable of doing much more than just diversity-focused work. According to James, if Black student affairs professionals are supported at PWIs (i.e. being welcomed, included, and valued), we can offer unique insights to white colleagues.

Jeffrey plainly stated how not being seen is detrimental as he discussed the racist implications of our limited visibility in white spaces:

> I think that I might've spoken about this earlier, but visibility is so important. And it's one of those things that if someone works here or this white person doesn't feel seen in this environment, that they would think, "Well, that's not normal." Because they don't know the detriment of what that implies and how that impacts the individual. Of course, it's not like you're hanging a noose in the Black person's yard or closing them down; but to me, to not see Black people, is still a form of racism. Because if you don't see me, that means you probably don't hear me, you don't recognize my voice as a person. My voice is how I'm able to express and articulate how I feel, my thoughts…And by ignoring me, not recognizing my voice, in so many ways, you're dehumanizing. And to not see me as human, when I am human, I'm breathing, that is a form of racism. So yeah, it might be low-level, but it's still a form of racism. That's what I would encourage historically white institutions to realize that…because of systemic issues, that put us in the minority, that we are here. See us, hear us, and create spaces for us.

Jeffrey's powerful statement resonated as a primary reason how the presence of BFSO serves as a crucial acknowledgment of the need to support not only students but the staff who are often sought out and expected to provide support to Students of Color at UGA.

Panther also shared her perspective of how the presence of BFSO illuminates the diversity of presence that Black people hold on predominantly white campuses:

> And there's nothing wrong with being a custodian or any of that because my father had to do that for some time when I was younger, so I understand it. But when you're in a building of seven floors and it's less than 10 Black people in a staff or faculty role that you see, but you see all these other people in these other positions, it can kind of mess with your mind and make you feel alone.

Panther further stated concern that the potential short-sightedness of white colleagues could lead to the likelihood of being both disrespected and making assumptions about one's level of education: “It's just many levels of complexity with race around that, so I'm glad that BFSO exists to just to bring some normalcy to my experience at UGA.”

Panther, Tania, James, and Jeffrey’s perspectives reiterate how BFSO serves as a safe space where Black colleagues can be themselves and see each other beyond the veil of racism that often clouds the judgments of white colleagues. For Black student affairs professionals, being visible extends beyond the simple concept of being physically perceived as a representation of diversity. Extending trust and the benefit of the doubt also comprise what it means to be seen as equal to our white counterparts and valued for all that we bring to the table.

Honoring Black Connections

Participants discussed how BFSO offered a space where Black colleagues connect without having to bear any feelings of guilt or scrutiny. BFSO is a point of connection for Black colleagues throughout the university. Therefore, the manner and ways in which Black student affairs choose to connect, and our desire to stay connected, is natural and should be honored and accepted. As Marcus stated, BFSO allowed for conversations with colleagues to serve as a manner of professional development, with the exchange of insights and ideas provided among colleagues. He also described connection opportunities as being fun and meaningful in the absence of the pretense of having to be “professional” or formal with one another:

> We have never in our lives been told that the way that we should communicate with our people should feel natural. This whole idea of professionalism is just really blown out of the water at this point in our lives. This is what it should look like when you work with people that look like you. It should not be a surprise. You

> should feel comfortable to feel happy. You should feel heard, you know. There's not a lot of space in our work where we get to enjoy that.

Marcus went on to suggest that Black colleagues can also form closer relationships with each other. He suggested that Black colleagues maximize our time as much as possible in our workspaces by continuing to build relationships with each other whenever possible.

Panther also felt as though BFSO offered a place for Black people to express ideas in a safe environment. She described BFSO as being necessary and mattering "because many things happen on a patriarchal traditional campus." According to Panther, there is no space for Black people to express thoughts or ideas without being perceived as complaining: "And I think in this social justice climate, I think it's even more important to have this type of organization. We can come together and think about these things and talk about them in an open, safe environment."

For Kaila, the idea of any organization like BFSO being present at PWI's was important in the event they were needed to offer support to individuals. She also believed that student affairs professionals could learn about ways to retain faculty and staff through their association with this organization. Most importantly, in Kaila's opinion, people must be made aware that organizations like BFSO exist on college campuses. Kaila further states how organizations like BFSO add to the contextual landscape of PWIs. She concluded her remarks on this topic with the following statements:

> So, I think these types of organizations are very critical. I think as things are changing on campuses, maybe thinking about how they adapt to this new climate to be able to support Black student affairs professionals. I think another lesson that can be learned from student affairs professionals at a predominantly white institution is that we do need these spaces that are just for us.

Although Kaila previously described herself as less involved with BFSO, her perspective of the necessity of BFSO also explains her sustained connection with the organization throughout her employment at UGA.

Honoring the need for connections between Black colleagues is essential to cultivating a productive and nurturing environment for Black staff. It was previously stated that Black staff members tend to find one another with or without BFSO. However, a formalized campus group like BFSO symbolizes an institutional awareness of the need for Black employees' safe spaces.

Addressing the Impact of Racism

The impact of racist incidents of 2020 constantly resonated as a part of participants' lived experiences. We witnessed the outbreak of COVID-19, resulting in higher hospitalizations and death rates for People of Color, not to mention the backlash to the Asian communities who were blamed for the origins and spread of the disease. Law enforcement officers (current and former) murdered Ahmaud Arbery, Breona Taylor, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, Jacob Blake, and Jonathan Price. Aside from law enforcement murders, there were numerous reports of Black people experiencing intimidation and false accusations from white people who were empowered to engage in racist behavior due to the political climate of the country (Chavez, 2020). How these incidents resonated continuously was evident throughout the interviews of the participants in this study. It's also worth noting that while BFSO was not always credited as directly helping participants to navigate racial climate on campus (and ongoing societal issues), but participants unanimously suggested that the presence of such organizations on campus provide a safe space for Black student affairs professionals and other Black employees to process what's going on around us. Jedi previously disclosed that she was the only Black person in her office. For Jedi, receiving messages from BFSO of support and encouragement during

summer 2020 made a difference to her: “I remember getting emails saying, ‘We're all working together, standing together, united’. Those things were good to hear. In my work environment there's no one to go and say, ‘Hey, did you hear about this?’, or ‘We got each other.’”

Ashley stated that BFSO was a resource for her, particularly in June, during the Black Lives Matter protests, and shortly after, there were increased discussions about the need for anti-racism work. She described her increasing frustration with the institution’s slow and minimal communication regarding their intentions to take a position and addressing the issues that were happening in the country: “So, if something happens on a Tuesday at the beginning of the month, this institution doesn't respond to a month later. And this was not, in my opinion, the time or place to take so long to respond.” She also mentioned a meeting of all Black staff in her division allowing participants to share their frustrations about everything that was going on. Much like Jedi, Ashley expressed appreciation for knowing that she was not alone in her struggle to make sense of what was going on. Describing herself as being new to her position, Ashley stated “There are others who are struggling through this and I can reach out to them to find comfort, to vent, to ask questions.” Knowing that she had others with whom to check in made a difference in her sense of belonging at UGA.

Joyce also discussed the value of BFSO in relation to the connections it offers to other Black professionals. She deemed this connection necessary given the current racial tensions. Joyce also recognized that while not all Black people share similar thoughts and perspectives, it was good to know that BFSO was present as a point of connection for those who needed it: “I think it's just very important to me to find other people that have been here and just figure out how to navigate it, the campus climate what it was like racially.”

Although Jeffrey appreciated BFSO bringing up difficult topics, at times, like Ashley, he struggled with what appeared to be limited or restrained responses from the University regarding

racist incidents. He expressed skepticism about the university's response to issues including racial harassment: "I think it's just a matter of PR and not wanting the chief diversity officer to say something critical yet true about, the culture here on campus that is related to [racism]…"

These reflective narratives on the impact of racism on Black student affairs professionals reveal the need for institutional leadership to keep open lines of communication with staff as much as they would with students. The presence of BFSO allows for a safe space for Black colleagues to begin having those discussions. The extension of discussion to action is the necessary bridge that organizations like BFSO provide to staff.

BFSO Lessons Summary

Participants revealed insightful perspectives on how visibility, Black connections, and addressing racism influence the experiences of Black student affairs professionals on their campus. Being seen for who we are and what we bring to our institutions served as a means of validating our talents and contributions emerged as a means of experiencing respect and value. Being aware of and supporting the needs of Black colleagues to connect plays a powerful role in empowering Black student affairs professionals to extend belonging to other students. Finally, institutional efforts to facilitate discussion on, and to address racism on campus and in society demonstrated value, and social justice commitment to Black student affairs professionals. These three lessons, if understood and embraced by leaders at PWIs, can make a significant difference in the retention of Black student affairs staff as well as students.

Chapter Summary

The five themes that emerged from the data collected for this study served to address each of the research questions associated with this study. The experiences of Black student affairs professionals who participate and employee racial affinity groups that predominantly

white institutions are highlighted in *Discovery, Engagement*, and *Maximizing BFSO Experiences*. *Discovery* revealed that electronic correspondences, in-person recommendations, and initial event attendance served as initial points of contact with BFSO for study participants. Their *Engagement* experiences, passive or active, characterized how they participated in BFSO. We learned that the extent to which each participant engaged, their ability to access events and information, as well as their position status influenced their perspectives on how the BFSO experience could be maximized to better serve Black student affairs professionals. The theme of *Belonging* addressed the ways that BFSO facilitated a sense of belonging for Black student affairs professionals who participated in this study. While, their accounts of being new at UGA, attending events, connecting beyond events, and synergistic relationships revealed their mattering experiences, their expressed sentiments of BFSO feeling like "family" and something bigger to which they connected represented a sense of community demonstrated how they experienced a sense of belonging through BFSO. Finally, subthemes of validation and visibility, addressing the impact of racism, and honoring Black connections comprised the final theme of *Lessons* that study participants wished to extend to PWI campus leaders.

The following chapter consists of a discussion of the research finding juxtaposed to the literature reviewed for the study. Implications and recommendations for future research, practice, and theoretical applications are offered for further consideration. Concluding thoughts on this study will also serve as a matter of reflection for future considerations about the retention of Black student affairs staff.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this narrative study was to understand how participation in a Black affinity group influences Black student affairs professionals' sense of belonging at a predominantly white institution. The research questions that are guiding this study focused on the experiences of Black student affairs professionals in BFSO, lessons learned about Black student affairs professionals and their experiences of belonging through BFSO engagement. I utilized Strayhorn's (2012) Sense of Belonging theoretical framework to examine these experiences. The five themes identified from the narrative data are discovery, engagement, belonging, maximizing BFSO experiences, and lessons for PWI's.

Discussion

My research findings confirm and extend previous literature related to Black student affairs professionals, employee racial affinity groups, and the sense of belonging theory. I have categorized my research findings into three key discussion points: Black student affairs professionals, race-based affinity group in higher education confirming, and extending a sense of belonging theory.

Extending Literature on Black Student Affairs Professionals

As previously stated in Chapter 2, the literature on Black people in higher education is typically focused on faculty and students (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019; Bentley-Edwards & Chapman Hilliard, 2015; Grapin & Pereiras, 2019; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Hawkins & Larabee, 2009; Patton & Catching, 2009; Romero, 2017; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). The visibility of staff in literature has been minimal in comparison. Recognizing that most studies focus on the experiences and needs of faculty and students means that staff is often overlooked.

The existing literature on Black staff highlights how oppression in campus environments influences Black staff's ability to thrive in the profession (Hawkins & Larabee, 2009; Michael & Conger, 2009; Steele, 2018; Stewart, 2018-2019; Townsend, 2019), such as subjection to prejudiced judgments by white colleagues (Gomes & Ocasio, 2015) and sacrificing authenticity to fit to maintain employment preservation (Kayes, 2006; Turner, 2002). As I previously stated, taking a transformative approach to conducting this study allowed me to engage the narratives of Black student affairs professionals in a manner that would lead to the expansion of social justice perspectives that can be used to advocate for inclusive practices (Mertens, 2010; Mertens, 2007; Sweetman et al., 2010). The manifestation of the transformative paradigm approach in this study is the illumination of the possibility of PWI leaders engaging strategies offered by organizations such as BFSO to cultivate empowering spaces for Black student affairs professionals.

The impact of racism profoundly resonates with Black student affairs professionals. We feel it every time significant and small events, through the telling and retelling of stories. As African descendants with cultural roots in collective survival (Carson, 2009; Hunter & Joseph, 2010), what happens to one Black person often feels like it's happening to all of us. We take it personally. These experiences connect us. They are an extension of our reality that is hard to ignore even at work, but we are expected to do so nonetheless. The presence of BFSO (and organizations like it) provides a setting where Black joy, resistance to oppression (Lu & Steele, 2019; Packnett, 2017) is possible – where the absence of racial bias leads to resilience and affirmative engagement experiences between Black student affairs professionals and other colleagues with shared racial identities holding different positions throughout the university. This paradigm extends the notion that Black student affairs professionals can thrive at PWI's if connected with their campus' racial employee affinity groups by highlighting the specific

practices associated with BFSO engagement. These practices include providing notification of events and resources pertaining to Black employees, acknowledging new staff upon arrival to the University, highlighting narratives of new staff in campus newsletters (the positions they hold, duties they are hired to execute, and their background and skill set that qualifies them to hold their positions), and providing support against oppressive systems. These inclusive practices are examples of useful strategies that leaders at PWIs can employ. For study participants like Tania, being notified of BFSO upon arrival to UGA was an acknowledgment of their being new to the campus and a recognition that there would likely be additional needs for connections to others with shared experiences. Also, being inherently trusted and recognized as being a reliable person in her new director held significance for Panther. The outcomes shared in this study are intended to urge PWI leaders to work toward establishing environments where the authenticity of being Black in the work environment doesn't equate to having to be guarded and worried about stereotypes threat, thus allowing individuals to be seen for who they are and all that one has to offer.

Extending Literature on Race-Based Employee Affinity Groups in Higher Education

As previously stated, most of the literature uncovered regarding social identity-based employee affinity groups were focused primarily upon their existence in corporate, non-educational environments. Aside from mentioning that affinity groups in corporate settings have been profitable for businesses, and good for organizational health, the literature focused on the benefits of these groups to personnel holding marginalized social identities (Blackwell, 2018; Blitz & Kohl, 2012; Douglas, 2008; Garcia, 2002; Goforth, 2018; Hewlett et al., 2016; Li, 2018; Salemi, 2015; VanAken et al., 1994). There was very little, if any, research to discuss the benefits of these organizations for staff in higher education.

The research findings in this study confirmed that BFSO was able to provide similar benefits to each study participant as those benefits identified in the business-focused literature on racial affinity groups. These benefits included the provision of secure space for authentic engagement (Blackwell, 2018; Blitz & Kohl, 2012; Douglas, 2008), the alleviation of pressures of persons of marginalized social identities of needing to assimilate to majority leadership standards in the workplace (Blackwell 2018; Hewlett et al., 2016), affirmative and inclusive spaces at work (Goforth, 2018; Li, 2018), and a boost to one's career growth and opportunities (Salemi, 2015; VanAken et al., 1994). The benefits of having affinity groups in higher education workplaces included the provision of opportunities for cohesion, belonging, providing occasional relief from experiences of stereotype threat (Benitez et al. 2017; Chesler & Crowfoot, 1989). Per most study participants, being a part of BFSO was like being with family, or at a cook-out – a place breeding familiarity, with little to no formality, qualification, or explanation. Their expression denoted a space of freedom to be authentic at work; where the purest act of resistance from the oppression of having to put on airs at work is to be in a space to be the truest form of self. BFSO creates room for the phenomenon of being seen as naturally liberated, Black, and excellent all at once. The opportunity to have such affirming occurrences at work has great potential for sustaining employee confidence and motivation, which can also serve for great gains for the institution.

Confirming and Extending Sense of Belonging Theory

The findings of this study confirm and extend the application of Strayhorn's (2012) theory of a sense of belonging from college students to student affairs professionals. Strayhorn's (2012) theory of a sense of belonging, outlines seven dimensions of belonging, based on his research of college students. According to Strayhorn, mattering is consequential to having a sense of belonging. Throughout the study, participants' narratives indicated how BFSO

engagement made them feel as though they mattered just by being who they are. BFSO is an example of a contextual experience influenced by times and people that has to be constantly cultivated to secure belonging experiences for Black student affairs professionals. Based on participants' narratives, BFSO meetings and events could better facilitate connections by offering in-person connection opportunities. However, the onset of COVID made in-person meetings nearly impossible. Despite this, each participant, at some point throughout their interviews, acknowledged that having a BFSO on campus was a necessary part of creating connections for Black student affairs professionals. As stated in the findings, terms such as "family," "cookout," "something bigger," and "having (my) back" suggested that BFSO served as context participants felt relevant, seen, and connected to each other. The acknowledgment of faculty and staff who are new to UGA, the celebration of one another's contributions and achievements, and the annual review of the organization's history during the scholarship luncheon affirmed not only the necessity of the organization but also the significance it holds in connecting and supporting the presence of Black colleagues on campus.

BFSO offers a much-needed sense of visibility and connection to Black student affairs professionals and serves as an affirming entity of the significance of the presence of Black employees on campus. BFSO also provides visibility to the collective power and amplifies the voices of Black faculty and staff on campus. Therefore, whereas this theoretical framework was designed to measure a sense of belonging as a student experience, a sense of belonging can now be extended to examine higher education professionals' experiences at their campuses.

Implications

The interpretation of findings in this research study of the influence of BFSO on the sense of belonging has implications for practice, theory, and research. The following section provides detailed insights into various implications for each.

Practice

Practice implications extend to both affinity group organizations and managers of staff at all levels. Townsend (2019) called for a review of practices and services, including listening and supporting the needs of Black student affairs professionals. The results of this study indicate a set of practice implications for leaders of institutions, student affairs, and racial affinity groups concerning the needs of Black student affairs professionals.

Institutional leaders who are committed to sustaining diverse enrollment at their institutions must focus on employing and investing in practices that will cultivate and nurture staff at all levels, particularly those who have the most interactions with students. Institutional recognition of and provisions for the existence and success of employee-based racial affinity groups elevates the institution's professed commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion from being aspirational to actionable. Cultivating relationships with group members and affiliates is crucial to the achievement of diversity goals and institutional attrition rates. Having an awareness and understanding of the challenges and needs faced by Black student affairs professionals also confirms the credibility of the institution with its marginalized social identity group members.

Student affairs division leaders must support Black staff members' connection to affinity group space as a means of establishing a safe space while expanding connections with others beyond their immediate departments or units. Supervisors, for example, may encourage staff to work on committees external to the department and division when possible. Such practices will allow staff to develop networking connections, and to strengthen competencies that will poise staff to better provide holistic support to students. To do this effectively, leaders must become fully aware of the different entities that exist at their universities so that they can help staff to identify those connections. Beyond networking connections, understanding what BFSO offers to Black student affairs professionals is vital to achieving the holistic engagement of Black student

affairs professionals. These groups offer awareness of our total existence (talents, experiences, and capacities), our contribution to student retention, a place to voice thoughts and ideas, acknowledgment of our contributions to others' success, authentic engagement opportunities, connections leading to job promotions, synergistic working relationships, and a commitment to eliminating racism.

Student affairs leaders and managers may employ the support of their chief diversity officers (CDO) and human resource partners to coordinate targeted retention efforts for Black student affairs professionals. Additionally, working closely with the campus CDO to develop a division-wide social identity-based affinity group, and divisional diversity, equity, and inclusion council as a means for senior student affairs officers to empower staff of marginalized identities. Charging such groups within their division to keep the division leadership and CDO to maintain a pulse on the racial climate of the society and its impact on staff in the division as well as students is a meaningful step in the direction toward demonstrating value for the diversity of staff in one's division. Such committees can be charged with holding space for staff who may, at times, need support to manage their feelings and concerns about matters extending beyond campus that seem to hit home for many of us.

Leaders of associations like BFSO must be aware of various nuances to which they may be vulnerable. First, it is important for leaders to critically evaluate the actual number of members they have versus the number of Black colleagues who claim to participate in the organization but are not members. Second, leaders must be willing to ask critical questions about the level and quality of engagement and be prepared to explore engagement may differ for staff versus faculty or administrators. Third, leaders must also center the messaging of the mission and goals in all organizational communication to current and potential members. Fourth, the organization would benefit from having representation in various types of staff positions to poise

its collective to have a more comprehensive awareness of the needs of all Black staff at UGA; doing so creates more access to the organization for staff at all levels. Finally, leadership must diversify workshop delivery methods (in-person and online) and content and be willing to be flexible when planning the times, dates, and locations for events. Providing advanced notification to build relationships with current and potential constituents, to engage as many staff as possible will also enhance the relationship between the organization and its constituents.

Study participants talked about the value and challenges of receiving enough access to professional development. Additionally, some participants mentioned how holding some job positions (i.e., grounds, facilities maintenance, dining, and in some cases program coordinators) created limitations for some front-line staff to participate in BFSO. The provision of opportunities for professional development is a collective responsibility to be shared by the institution, student affairs leaders, Black affinity group leaders, and the staff who desire and need them. Such provisions make for a stronger team of student affairs professionals, as well as to the institutions who entrust them with serving students.

Theory

Findings from this study prove that Strayhorn's (2012) Sense of Belonging theory can apply to non-students. Belonging is not an automatic by-product of having an arbitrary level of affiliation with BFSO. Participants' abilities to experience a sense of belonging through BFSO were contingent upon the quality of one's engagement in the organization as well as the weight of significance they placed on the organization itself. The difference between those who reported experiencing more or less connection is correlated to the level of involvement with the organization itself. The more involved one is, the more likely they will experience all the connections of mattering and belonging. Although some of the less involved participants were a bit more skeptical about certain aspects of their BFSO experience, they still admitted that their

connection to BFSO provided them feelings of importance and collective value. The idea of having an entity on campus that represented the racial identities and positions of Black employees at UGA was enough for each participant to claim a form of connection and to advocate for the necessity for such an organization to remain present on campus. To this end, the sense of belonging theory is extended to suggest that a sense of belonging occurs when one can identify and claim a connection to an entity larger than themselves that represents ones' social identities in a given context. Another extension of this theory is that of sense of belonging is strengthened and deepened when individuals feel they are is positively regarded, unconditionally accepted, and valued within a context that closely resonates with who they are.

Research

The four recommendations I'd suggest for future research are based on the study findings. First, this research focused on one organization at one university. A consideration for future study is for future researchers to expand their participant sampling beyond one university by selecting Black participants from various institutional types and sizes throughout the country who are engaged in organizations like BFSO on their respective campuses. Researchers can then interview participants and explore narratives that indicate trends among Black student affairs professionals who are engaged in their respective racial affinity group organizations. The significance of such a study would help to reveal the similarities and differences between Black student affairs professionals' experiences. It would also allow for the examination of trends and factors at different types of institutions and structures of Black employee affinity group organizations that are more or less likely to cultivate a sense of belonging among participants at their respective institutions.

Second, examining various aspects of employee racial affinity group organizations for correlations to any of Strayhorn's (2012) Sense of Belonging would allow researchers to identify

how such organizations facilitate belonging. As previously stated, specific questions were posed to participants to determine whether they experienced some form of mattering through BFSO. Isolating each dimension of theory and formulating inquiries to identify specific elements that exist in an organization, or emotions invoked as a result of their experiences provides a deeper understanding of the elements an organization like BFSO possesses that cultivate a sense of belonging for its members. Furthermore, extending this theory in environmental and organizational development research to determine elements that are present that cultivate emotions and experience attributing to a sense of belonging also has significant research implications.

Third, if organizations like BFSO have significance and meaning for Black colleagues, how possible or likely is it that similar organizations can provide meaningful points of connection for university employees of other historically marginalized groups? Extending the research to determine how other social identity-based employee affinity groups provide a sense of belonging for student affairs professionals holding various social identities – Latinx, gender (including trans identities and experiences), veterans, international, LGBTQ[2], and persons with disabilities -- at various institutions are also worth further inquiry. Such research could prompt college leaders to invest in providing more opportunities for affinity group spaces for student affairs professionals at their respective institutions.

Finally, future researchers may either elect to deconstruct various dimensions of sense of belonging theory and formulate qualitative and quantitative inquiries to identify the extent to

[2] As the author of this critical inquiry study, I acknowledge that the acronym LGBTQ itself is not encompassing of all sexualities and genders expressed and experienced by people. I intentionally chose this term to represent the breadth of genders and sexualities because of its recognizability.

which organizations such as BFSO possess qualities that invoke feelings and experiences correlated to cultivating a sense of belonging for their members. The development of quantitative instruments to measure the extent of variables that influence a sense of belonging, coupled with a narrative and qualitative inquiry, can manifest in a robust mixed-method study to add further dimensions for consideration for studies to follow. Capturing quantitative data that can be measured for frequencies and average responses and comparing such data to qualitative narratives can provide a better understanding of comparisons of sense of belonging across different populations within and beyond institutions.

Conclusion

This study was an examination into the inquiry of whether and how participation in a Black affinity group influenced Black student affairs professionals' sense of belonging at a predominantly white institution. Utlizing Strayhorn's (2012) Sense of Belonging theoretical framework, the research questions that guided this study focused on the experiences of Black student affairs professionals in BFSO, lessons learned about Black student affairs professionals, and their experiences of belonging through BFSO engagement. Highlights from this study reveal varying degrees of connection and meaningful experience by each of the nine participants; at times, there were criticisms and rebukes some participants had about the organization. Regardless of their level of engagement and critiques of their experiences, all participants believed that organizations like BFSO were important to have at PWIs.

Throughout my dissertation, I have repeatedly mentioned the idea that colleges are a microcosm of society. As such, institutions of higher education are incapable of providing immunity to the challenges of the world; the year 2020 proved to be the best example of this. Being expected to serve students and meet deadlines in the context of racism is nothing new for Black people. However, in 2020, news of the deaths of Black people caused by a rogue global

pandemic, the high frequency of incidents of police brutality and other hate crimes, voter suppression, and growing support for racist rhetoric under the guise of the first amendment, made responding to questions like "How are you?" more laborious to respond to than normal.

In the context of today, advocating for spaces for reprieve and community experiences for Black-identified staff, especially in predominantly white spaces, is vital. Allowing room at work for Black colleagues to lean on one another for support is a marker of inclusive excellence. It conveys both an awareness of the unique challenges facing us and the support that the institution holds for the diversity of its campus population.

Within Black affinity group spaces, there is also work to be done to ensure that staff at all levels can have access to the benefits offered by racial employee affinity groups. Front-line workers (custodial, facilities, and dining staff) hold some of the lowest-paying positions on college campuses. Failure to providing them access to the benefits of groups like BFSO further marginalizes this already marginalized group of people. Whether it's leaders of these organizations working in tandem with human resources to reach out to managers of front-lined workers to encourage their connections or offering tiered membership dues based on levels of wage earnings, Black employee affinity groups have room to expand their support of all staff members on their respective campuses. The intentionality of leaders of these organizations to do so is imperative.

I hope to see more Black student affairs professionals find ways to actively engage in Black employee affinity groups at either the institutional or divisional level. I hope that by doing so, colleagues will experience the illumination of collective brilliance and talent that we bring to everything we encounter. I hope that we see affinity groups as holding enough power to transform our institutions, thus extending our influence as agents for inclusive change. I also hope that our engagement in these groups will highlight the significance that staff in general

possess, akin to that of faculty and students, for propelling our institutions toward successful outcomes and high-quality academic experiences. I hope that other Black student affairs professionals can also have meaningful experiences of connecting with Black colleagues and other members of the campus community. Most of all, I hope that a sense of belonging for Black student affairs professionals and all others holding marginalized identities becomes normative regardless of one's choice to affiliate with an affinity group. After all, our fullest potential to serve our institutions is contingent upon our sense of belonging to them.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Materials

A.1. Recruitment Email

Hello,

My name is Nicole Phillips, and I am both the associate director of Student Advocacy at Kennesaw State University and a doctoral student at the University of Georgia. For my dissertation, I will be exploring how Black student affairs professionals experience a sense of belonging through their participation in the UGA Black Faculty & Staff Organization. I am seeking case study participants who:

- *Racially identify as Black*
- *Work in any functional area of campus affiliated with professionals who serve students (including, but not limited to, academic advising, community service/service-learning, counseling services, dining hall staff, fraternity and sorority life,, housing and residence life, intramural and recreational services, leadership development, orientation, student affairs assessment, student conduct, volunteer services student activities, wellness programs, and support services for students with disabilities, Students of Color, and LGBTQIA students, veterans, women, and adult and commuter students).*
- *Have participated in some capacity in the UGA Black Faculty & Staff Organization.*
- *Complete a demographic survey (15 minutes)*
- *Participate in 60-90-minute interviews with each participant that can be held online or over-the-phone.*

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Georgia. If you are interested in participating, please visit this link to complete the interest form https://ugeorgia.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cSyTevOpIgEqMgB*. For more information, please contact Nicole Phillips at 770-639-5434 or nicole.phillips@uga.edu or Dr. Darris Means at 412-648-2230 or darris.means@pitt.edu .*

A.2. Recruitment Graphic for Social Media

Appendix B

Pre-Screening Questionnaire (a form to fill out)

https://ugeorgia.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cSyTevOpIgEqMgB

Thank you for your interest in participating in the study titled **Exploring How Black Employee Affinity Groups Impact Black Student Affairs Professionals' Sense of Belonging at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)**. The purpose of this survey is to help the researcher to identify eligible individuals to participate in this research study. All information provided in this survey will be treated confidentially.

Q1 Please complete the following pre-screening survey used to determine eligibility of study participants.

Q2 Please describe your affiliation with the UGA BFSO (select all that apply):

- ❑ Listserv
- ❑ Meeting Attendance
- ❑ Event Attendance
- ❑ Member
- ❑ Leader/Officer

Q3 How many years have you participated with the Black Faculty & Staff Organization?

- ❑ Less than 1 year
- ❑ 1 - 3 years
- ❑ 3 - 5 years
- ❑ 5 or more years

Q4 The purpose of this study is to explore the sense of belonging experienced by Black student affairs professionals have participated with UGA's BSFO. Would you be interested in participating in this study?

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

Q5 If yes, please provide your first and last name, email address, and phone number where you can be reached:

Appendix C

Email to Selected Participants

Hello

I am pleased to inform you that you have been selected to participate in this case study related to how Black student affairs professionals experience a sense of belonging. I am excited to learn from you! As a participant in this study, I am asking you to complete the following three tasks by ***DATE AND TIME****:*

- *I am including in this email the IRB consent form (as approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Georgia). Please send back a signed copy of the IRB Form (scanned and emailed or faxed).*
- *I am requesting the completion of a demographic survey that will provide me with some information prior to our interview. Since I am only allowed to use the information collected from the demographic survey with your consent, some of the questions posed here may be similar to what was previously asked in the pre-screening questionnaire. The link to this survey is* https://ugeorgia.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8kr6wUAi7Ikg5bT.
- *You will also be asked to indicate your preference for a phone or virtual/online interview. Please be sure to indicate your preference in the survey*
- *Please complete this doodle <insert link> to let me know a time and date that would work best for me to call you for an interview.*

Again, thank you so much for your willingness to take part in this study. I look forward to learning from and with you, and to receiving your completed tasks by ***DATE AND TIME****. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.*

Appendix D

Institutional Review Board Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM
A CASE STUDY ON BLACK STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS FINDING A SENSE OF BELONGING THROUGH CAMPUS RACE-BASED EMPLOYEE AFFINITY GROUPS
(ID: PROJECT00002372)

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: *Darris Means,*
Student Affairs Leadership
darris.means@pitts.edu

Co-Investigator: *Nicole Phillips*
Student Affairs Leaders
nicole.phillips@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study
I am doing this research study to learn more about how Black student affairs professionals experience a sense of belonging at a predominately white institution (PWI). You are being invited to be in this research study because you fit the following criteria for study participation:

- Racially identify as Black
- Work in any functional area of campus affiliated with professionals who serve students (including, but not limited to, academic advising, community service/service-learning, counseling services, dining hall staff, fraternity and sorority life,, housing and residence life, intramural and recreational services, leadership development, orientation, student affairs assessment, student conduct, volunteer services student activities, wellness programs, and support services for students with disabilities, Students of Color, and LGBTQIA students, veterans, women, and adult and commuter students).
- Have participated in some capacity in the UGA Black Faculty & Staff Organization.
- Complete a brief demographic survey (15 minutes)
- Participate in 60-90-minute virtual interviews with each participant that can be held in-person, virtually, or via phone.

Study Procedures
If you agree to participate in this study:

- I will ask you to provide information about your experiences of belonging at work.
- I will ask you to respond to a demographic survey and interview questions. It will take about 60-90 minutes.
- I will follow up in 2 months by **February 15, 2021**.

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. Your decision to participate will have no impact in your participation in the Black Faculty & Staff Organizational programs.

Study Benefits. Your responses may help us understand the role that employee racial affinity groups play in providing a sense of belonging for Black student affairs professionals. All findings may lead to critical examinations of how to best serve and retain Black student affairs professionals.

Incentives. Each participant will be provided with a $20 gift card for their participation in the interviews.

Risks & Discomforts. This study will be asking participants about their work experiences, as well as their affiliation experiences with the Black Faculty & Staff Organization. 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, stigmatization or economic impacts such as employability.
- Audio recording of interviews will be used in this study in order 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 anonymity.
- Not use or disclose any information provided to me prior to receiving official study consent.
- Only use the information collected in the Demographic Questionnaire.
- Ask participants to discuss positions/people using position titles as opposed to given names.
- All data associated with this study will 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, describe this possibility.

If You Have Questions. Please feel free to ask questions about this research at any time. You can contact the Co-Investigator, Ms. Nicole Phillips, at 770-639-5434, Nicole.Phillips@uga.edu. Nicole Phillips is conducting this research study under the direction of the Primary Investigator, Dr. Darris Means, you may contact him at 412-648-2230. 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.

Nicole A. Phillips		
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.

Appendix E

Demographic Questionnaire (a form to fill out)

https://ugeorgia.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8kr6wUAi7Ikg5bT

Q1 Thank you for your interest in participating in the study titled *Exploring How Black Employee Affinity Groups Impact Black Student Affairs Professionals' Sense of Belonging at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)*. The purpose of this survey is to collect demographic information of the study participants. By doing so, this provides more time for the researcher and participants to focus on your lived experiences. Please complete the following survey to the best of your ability. All information provided in this survey will be treated confidentially.

Q2 Please list your First Name and Last Initial.

Q3 Preferred Gender Pronouns (Please select all that apply.)

- ❑ She/her/hers
- ❑ He/him/his
- ❑ They/their/them
- ❑ Xe/xer/xim
- ❑ Ze/zer/zim
- ❑ Other

Q4 What is your highest level of education/degree earned?

- ❑ High School Diploma
- ❑ Associates Degree
- ❑ Bachelors Degree
- ❑ Masters Degree
- ❑ Doctoral Degree
- ❑ Other

Q5 Please select your age range.

- ❑ 18-25
- ❑ 26-30
- ❑ 31-40
- ❑ 41-50
- ❑ 51-60
- ❑ 61 or above

Q6 What is your Nationality (birth country)?

Q7 Please indicate (in months and years) how long you have been working in your current position?
8 Please indicate (in months and years) the length of time you have worked in a capacity of serving students.

Q9 Which of the following best describes your functional area of work with students? (Please select all that apply.)
Academic Advising
Admissions
Alumni Programs
Campus/Student Activities
Campus Safety/University Police Department
Career Services
Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement
Clinical/Student Health
College/Student Union
Community Service/Service Learning
Commuter Student Services
Counseling & Psychological Services
Dean of Students Office
Disability Support Service
Enrollment Management Financial Aid
Fraternity & Sorority/Greek Affairs
Graduate and Professional Student Services
Intercollegiate Athletics
International Student Services
LGBT Student Services
Learning Assistance/Academic Support Services
Multicultural Services
Nontraditional-Student/Adult Learners Services
On-Campus Dining
On-Campus Housing
Orientation Recreational Sports
Registrar
Spiritual Life/Campus Ministry
Student Affairs
Student Affairs Assessment & Research
Student Affairs Fundraising and Development
Student Affairs Research
Student Conduct (Academic Integrity)
Student Conduct (Behavioral Case Management)
Student Media
TRIO / Educational Opportunity
Veterans' Services
Wellness Programs
Women's Center

Q10 Please describe your affiliation with the Black Faculty & Staff Organization (BFSO). Please select all that apply.
- ❑ BFSO Leader/Officer
- ❑ BFSO Member
- ❑ Connected via Email or Listserv
- ❑ Connected via Social Media
- ❑ Event Attendance
- ❑ Meeting Attendance

Q11 How long have you participated with BFSO?
- ❑ Less than 1 year
- ❑ 1 - 5 years
- ❑ 5 - 10 years
- ❑ 10 or more years

Q12 Please indicate your preferred method of study participation.
- ❑ Phone
- ❑ Online (Zoom, Teams, Skype, or FaceTime)
- ❑ In-Person

Appendix F

Belonging Interview Protocol

Topic: How Black student affairs professionals experience a sense of belonging at a PWI

Time of Interview: TBD

Date: TBD

Participants: BFSO Participants who hold positions that are historically connected to student affairs and students services work.

SCRIPT

INTRODUCTION (10 minutes)

Thank you - Thank you for your participation in this interview.

Introduce Interviewer- My name is Nicole Phillips. I am the associate director of Student Advocacy through the office of the Dean of Students at Kennesaw State University. I am also a doctoral student in the Student Affairs Leadership program at the University of Georgia.

Purpose – The purpose of today's interview is to discuss whether or how Black student affairs and student services professionals experience a sense of belonging through the BFSO.

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 explore how Black student affairs professionals experience a sense of belonging through the BFSO.

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 anonymity.

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 Black student affairs professionals experience a sense of belonging through the BFSO 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, forwarded 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 Black student affairs professionals participating in BFSO.

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 use position names rather than a person's given name. This will help me to better understand how the person fits into the organizational dynamics of your campus.

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 (your origins, your career path that led you to where you are right now).
4. How did you first learn about BFSO?
5. Please complete the following sentence: "*Being a participant in BFSO is like…"* _____*."*
6. Please describe your experience of connection to UGA (if any) through your engagement in:
   - Your work department?
   - BFSO?
7. Please tell me about a time when you experienced or witnessed (if at all) any the following with BFSO:
   - Positive attention *(recognition and affirmation)*
   - Importance or significance *(value…)*
   - Networking or partnership *(dependence or reciprocity)*
   - Appreciation *(expressions of gratitude and acknowledgment of contributions)*
   - Feelings of others' rooting for your success *(encouragement)*
   - Professional development

8. For the purposes of this study, a student affairs professional is used to describe staff, administrators, and personnel who serve students in capacities that are historically associated with functional student affairs practices. What, if any, additional benefits or positive aspects have you experienced as a result of your affiliation with the BSFO, particularly as a student-affairs professional?

9. What changes, if any, would you like to see to BFSO?

10. Please share an instance or two of how, if at all, your participation in BFSO aided your ability to navigating the climate at UGA?

11. Is your supervisor aware of your involvement with BFSO? If so, what type of support or feedback have you received from them as a result of your participation?

12. (For BFSO Leaders) Please describe how the presence of the BFSO shaped the landscape of UGA.

13. Independent of BFSO, how do you connect with other Black student affairs professionals (and other Black employees) across campus?

14. What lessons can be learned from Black student affairs professionals' experiences of connections to their institutions?

15. Is there anything else you would like to share?